

Retrospective Peak-Experiences Among Chinese Young Adults in Hong Kong

EDWARD HOFFMAN, MAN YEE HO,
SYLVIA XIAOHUA CHEN, AND FERNANDO A. ORTIZ



An investigation of early peak-experiences among 116 Hong Kong college students, all born in Hong Kong or mainland China, generated 161 retrospective reports. The most frequent peak-experiences involved interpersonal joy, followed by those of external achievement and materialism. Implications of the findings for fostering Chinese youth development from a strength-based perspective are discussed.

Keywords: peak-experiences, Abraham Maslow, Hong Kong youth, humanistic psychology, positive psychology



Abraham Maslow, whose writings helped to lay the theoretical foundations of the humanistic psychology movement, regarded peak-experiences as a key facet of higher human functioning. Maslow (1959, 1964) characterized such experiences as comprising intense feelings of happiness and personal fulfillment, and often, perceptions of greater oneness with the world. Initially comparing the accounts of peak-experiences that he obtained from college students and colleagues to the ecstatic accounts of history's great spiritual teachers and sages, Maslow (1971) later reported that peak-experiences varied considerably in both their immediate intensity and their enduring impact on the individual. Maslow (1970, 1971, 1996) regarded peak-experiences as generally having powerful effects for personality growth, creativity, and learning. For precisely this reason, he regarded peak-experiences as the foundation for a new approach to counseling that is centered on strengthening and actualizing individual potentialities. In addition, he believed that peak-experiences, although cross-cultural, have been interpreted within the framework of particular cultural or personal belief systems (Schneider, Bugental, & Pierson, 2002).

Edward Hoffman, Department of Psychology, Yeshiva University; Man Yee Ho, Department of Psychology, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong, China; Sylvia Xiaohua Chen, Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China; Fernando A. Ortiz, Counseling Center, Gonzaga University. Man Yee Ho is now at Department of Special Education and Counselling, Hong Kong Institute of Education, Tai Po, Hong Kong, China. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Edward Hoffman, Department of Psychology, Yeshiva University, 500 West 185th Street, New York, NY 10033 (e-mail: elhoffma@yu.edu).

PEAK-EXPERIENCES AS A CROSS-CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

Hoffman and Ortiz (2009) showed that early peak-experiences (i.e., those occurring before the age of 14 years) can be elicited in cross-cultural studies using retrospective recall methodologies. They reviewed the existing literature and categorized self-report youthful peak-experiences into the following types: (a) interpersonal joy, such as celebrating a birthday with family members or friends; (b) uplifting experience involving nature, such as a summer mountain hike; (c) external achievement, such as winning a school spelling bee; (d) developmental landmark, such as traveling abroad for the first time; (e) materialism, that is, receiving a personally valued gift; (f) skill mastery, such as learning to ride a bicycle; (g) aesthetic bliss, such as listening to live orchestral music; (h) recovery from accident or illness; (i) peak moment during intense and personalized prayer; (j) exalted perception in a formal religious setting; (k) spontaneous moment of bliss; (l) profound musing, such as about self-identity or life-and-death; (m) uncanny perception (e.g., visions, bodily kinesthetics); and (n) unforgettable dream. Eight types of early peak-experience were found to be salient in Canada, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Singapore, and Venezuela, suggesting that youthful peak-experiences are widely experienced rather than being unique to specific cultures.

One of the most common ways of characterizing differences in cultures is to examine individualism and collectivism. Hofstede (2001) observed that salient differences have been found between Eastern and Western cultures regarding individualism/collectivism. Many Eastern cultures (e.g., Hong Kong and Korean) tend to be rated high on collectivism, whereas numerous Western cultures (e.g., U.S. and Canadian) tend to be rated high on individualism. According to Hofstede and other researchers (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003; P. B. Smith, Dugan, Peterson, & Leung, 1998), Hong Kong is a highly collectivist culture. In such cultures, the importance of the collective is emphasized much more than is individuality, and ingroup goals and loyalty are valued more than is self-expression. As Koch and Koch (2007) noted, the finding that collectivism and individualism influence people's behaviors is quite robust.

Because of Hong Kong's strong collectivist orientation, it seems reasonable to assume that experiences of intense happiness among its population would be associated with group rather than individualist activities. Although no published research appears to have been conducted on this issue, several relevant investigations have explored culturally related personality strengths among Hong Kong and mainland Chinese persons. Hong Kong was a British colony between 1842 and 1997; however, its culture shares major similarities with that of mainland China, such as filial piety, thrift, and respect for teachers (Bond & King, 1985). Because of the influence of Confucianism, family values, family relationship, and filial piety are highly emphasized in both Hong Kong and mainland China (S. X. Chen, Bond, & Tang, 2007). The psychologically healthy family is regarded as one that is characterized by harmony, affection, mutual trust, support, compatibility, equity in marriage, and the ability to

adapt to change (Xu, Xie, Liu, Xia, & Dalin, 2007). In addition, Hong Kong parents consider family-related attributes, positive conduct-related attributes, and attributes concerning harmonious social relations and personal maturity as characteristics of the "ideal child" (Shek & Chan, 1999). Researchers have also identified indigenous personality traits, including social harmony and family orientation, as salient predictors of life satisfaction among Hong Kong and mainland Chinese persons (S. X. Chen, Cheung, Bond, & Leung, 2006; M. Y. Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2008; Koch & Koch, 2007).

Besides the values of family and social harmony, educational achievement also appears to be prized among Chinese youth. A study with Chinese students showed that academic success and college attainment were their primary goals (Violato & Kwok, 1995). This emphasis on academic achievement can be attributed to Confucian values, because in Confucianism, education is revered as a way of developing moral character and fulfilling personal, social, and occupational life goals (U. Kim & Park, 2003). In sum, strong family ties and support, social harmony, and academic achievement seem to be major values among Chinese adolescents.

PRESENT STUDY

The objectives of this study were twofold. First, we sought to use descriptive retrospective recall to examine peak-experiences among Chinese persons in Hong Kong to extend the study of peak-experiences beyond cultures that have already been studied. Second, we attempted to identify the types of peak-experiences reported by these Chinese participants and interpret them by referencing these specific cultural values in Chinese culture. We believed that our findings would provide additional evidence for the universality of the peak-experience construct and the validity of the subcategories. On the basis of our literature review and conceptualization, our specific hypotheses were the following:

Hypothesis 1: Chinese persons will report similar categories of early peak-experiences as found in other previously studied cultures.

Hypothesis 2: Among all the categories of peak-experiences, the frequency count for the category of interpersonal joy will be highest among Chinese persons.

Hypothesis 3: Among the specific types of interpersonal joy, the frequency count for family togetherness will be highest among Chinese persons.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at two universities in Hong Kong and were all volunteers who received a small remuneration for their time. A total of 116 undergraduate students

from all levels provided complete data. Regarding college majors, the sample comprised four main fields of study: nursing (42%), social work (21%), radiology (11%), and psychology (10%). Smaller percentages were represented for accounting, architecture, business, and physics. The sample was ethnically homogenous; 78% of participants were born in Hong Kong, and 22% were born in China. The mean age was 21.2 years (range = 19–35 years) for female participants and 21.7 years (range = 19–31 years) for male participants. Most of the participants lived at home with their parents, and some lived in university dormitories.

Measure of Peak-Experience

The peak-experiences questionnaire designed by Hoffman (2003) was translated into traditional Chinese and then back-translated into English by bilingual research assistants. The third author then checked the equivalence of meanings and finalized the questionnaire to achieve full agreement with its original formulation. It contained three items. The first item was similar to Maslow's (1959) instructions to college students and posed the question, "Think of the most wonderful or joyful experience of your life up through the age of 14. Describe this experience and how you felt." The second item asked participants to rate how much this experience subsequently affected their life or view of life. A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very intensely*). The third item asked participants to describe how the experience actually influenced or affected them.

Procedure

We visited the university classrooms, briefly described the questionnaire, and indicated to participants that there was no time limit for completing the questionnaire. Most participants completed the questionnaire anonymously in 20 minutes after class; a smaller number completed it in a similar time in quiet rooms on campus. All participants (70 women, 46 men) provided usable questionnaires. Consistent with the results of previous studies (Hoffman, 2003; Hoffman, Iversen, & Ortiz, 2010; Hoffman & Muramoto, 2007), some students reported more than one youthful peak-experience. Hence, there were 161 usable reports (104 by women, 57 by men) generated by the sample. The narratives were subsequently independently translated into English by bilingual research assistants.

Data Analysis

To code the responses to the first question, we used the detailed coding system developed by Hoffman and Ortiz (2009) and validated by studies in Brazil (Hoffman, Resende, & Ho, 2012), Mexico (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2010), and Norway (Hoffman et al., 2010). In general, the system consists of a

classification scheme to organize the reported peak-experiences into 14 distinct categories as described earlier (e.g., interpersonal joy). It also derived more specific facet categories subsumed in the general peak-experience categories (e.g., family togetherness and peer camaraderie subsumed under interpersonal joy). To maximally understand the reports, the first and second authors read the responses independently many times to interpret meanings, identify peak-experience themes among the narratives and the type of impact described in Question 3, and organize these peak-experience themes according to the coding scheme; the second author also relied on the independent scoring of two Hong Kong graduate assistants.

The following comprehensive guidelines were used to analyze the participants' self-reported accounts: (a) any self-report might receive several theme codes; (b) to classify a specific peak-experience, one should try to understand the whole set of retrospective statements made by the participants, not just isolated sentences or pieces of information; and (c) for any peak-experience category, one should try to clarify both general and facet categories. The second and third authors then engaged in thorough discussions, comparing and revising the tentative classifications. Eventually, we reached consensus on the master typology scheme that consisted of the 14 peak-experience categories.

On the basis of participants' responses, we also established a new category of youthful peak-experience called serenity, which is the quality of intense equanimity, peacefulness, and freedom from worry or stress. Minor coding disagreements (eight protocols) were attributed to ambiguously worded reports and were resolved by discussion between us to produce 100% agreement. This coding discussion and revision process was necessary to achieve inter-subjectivity, hence ensuring acceptable reliability and validity for our study. As formulated by Wan, Chiu, Peng, and Tam (2007), intersubjectivity involves a consensus assessment approach among people within a culture regarding its prototypical values. From this perspective, to examine a construct such as peak-experience that was developed in Western culture but studied in a non-Western context, one should include cultural informants in the analysis and interpretation of qualitative results. The second author was born and raised in Hong Kong, and both the second and third authors are Chinese and quite familiar with Hong Kong culture. The classification and interpretation of the self-reported peak-experiences was an iterative process of ongoing consultation with the informants, who were able to clarify the cultural meaning of Hong Kong festivals, life-cycle events, and locales reported in the narratives.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the varying types of childhood peak-experiences found in this Hong Kong sample and provides an example of each. As predicted, self-reported peak-experiences could be elicited through retrospective recall; the types of peak-experiences described by Hong Kong young adults were consistent with those from other cultures, thus lending support to our first

TABLE 1
Superordinate (or General) Types of Hong Kong Peak-Experiences

Category of Peak-Experience	Example
Interpersonal joy	Celebrating Chinese New Year with immediate family and relatives
External achievement	Winning the championship in an interschool oratory contest
Developmental landmark	Traveling to Europe for the first time
Nature encounter	Sitting on big tree trunks in the countryside and viewing scenery
Aesthetic bliss	Seeing special decorations and buildings at the China Folk Village
Skill mastery	Learning to swim in the pool one summer
Materialism	Receiving balloons and gifts for my birthday
Serenity	Feeling carefree about homework and examinations
Recovery from accident or illness	Falling off the park swings and being given soup by my mother

hypothesis. Taken together, these results attest to the content similarity of childhood peak-experiences shared by various cultures, suggesting that this aspect of the self-actualization theory (Maslow, 1959, 1970) not only is a Western phenomenon but also is applicable to non-Western cultural contexts.

We conducted a series of chi-square tests to examine gender differences in peak-experience categories. Female participants reported peak-experiences involving interpersonal joy more frequently than did male participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 115) = 12.61, p < .05$. The gender differences in the report of other peak-experience categories (i.e., developmental landmark, external achievement, materialism, aesthetic bliss, nature encounter, serenity, and skill mastery) were not statistically significant.

Table 2 shows the percentage frequencies of each peak-experience. Participants reported a wide variety of peak-experiences. Consistent with our

TABLE 2
Frequency of Peak-Experiences by Gender

Category	Total (<i>N</i> = 161)	Reports			
		Women (<i>n</i> = 104)	%	Men (<i>n</i> = 57)	%
Interpersonal joy	101	75	72.1	26	45.6
External achievement	20	10	9.6	10	17.5
Materialism	14	8	7.7	6	10.5
Developmental landmark	9	3	2.9	6	10.5
Nature encounter	5	2	1.9	3	5.3
Serenity	5	1	1.0	4	7.0
Aesthetic bliss	3	3	2.9	0	0.0
Skill mastery	2	1	1.0	1	1.8
Recovery from accident or illness	2	1	1.0	1	1.8

Note. For each gender, the percentage refers to the percentage of reports that pertained to the specific category. Thus, interpersonal joy composed 72.1% of the women's peak-experience reports and 45.6% of the men's peak-experience reports.

findings from other collectivistic cultures, it is clear that peak-experiences of interpersonal joy were reported most frequently (62.7%), thus confirming our second hypothesis. This category was particularly meaningful across genders, although women reported interpersonal joy more frequently than did men. The second most frequently reported peak-experience category overall was external achievement, with men reporting it more frequently than did women. Materialism was the third category, which was followed in overall frequency by developmental landmark; the latter was reported more often by men than by women. Relatively small percentages of participants reported an early peak-experience involving the five categories of nature encounter, serenity, aesthetic bliss, skill mastery, or recovery from accident or illness. There were no reported peak-experiences in the six categories of personalized prayer, formal religious activity, spontaneous moment of bliss, profound musing, uncanny perception, or unforgettable dream.

To examine our third hypothesis, we further distinguished interpersonal joy by establishing subcategories, thereby tapping different types of interpersonal relationships, such as family, peers, and nonfamily adults (e.g., teachers; see Table 3). The results showed that family togetherness was reported most frequently by women (62.7%) and was the second most frequently reported subcategory reported by men (30.8%), who instead identified peer camaraderie as their most frequent (53.8%) interpersonal peak-experience. For women, peer camaraderie was their second most frequent (30.7%) interpersonal peak-experience. Overall, each of the other five subcategories was reported by a relatively small percentage (below 3%) of participants who identified an early peak-experience involving interpersonal joy.

We performed chi-square tests to examine gender differences in peak-experience subcategories. Female participants reported the peak-experience

TABLE 3
Frequency of Specific Types of Interpersonal Joy

Subcategory	Total	Women (n = 75)		Men (n = 26)	
		n	%	n	%
Family togetherness	55	47	62.7	8	30.8
Peer camaraderie	37	23	30.7	14	53.8
Birth of younger family member	1	0	0.0	1	3.8
Intense friendship	2	2	2.7	0	0.0
Romantic bliss	1	0	0.0	1	3.8
Caregiving to a nonfamily member	2	2	2.7	0	0.0
Receiving care from a nonfamily member	3	1	1.3	2	7.7

Note. For each gender, the percentage refers to the percentage of reports of interpersonal joy that pertained to the specific subcategory. Thus, family togetherness composed 62.7% of the women's reports of interpersonal joy and 30.8% of the men's reports of interpersonal joy.

of interpersonal joy involving family togetherness more frequently than did male participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 115) = 10.27, p < .01$. The gender differences in the report of other peak-experience subcategories involving interpersonal joy (e.g., peer camaraderie) were not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of our study was to extend cross-cultural research on youthful peak-experiences to a previously less investigated culture, namely, Hong Kong, and to determine whether that culture's particular characteristics would influence the types of peak-experiences recalled by young adults. That is, researchers (M. Y. Ho et al., 2008; Violato & Kwok, 1995; Xu et al., 2007) have consistently described Hong Kong culture as prizing family connectedness and achievement as important sources of youthful life satisfaction. We specifically hypothesized that previously identified categories of early peak-experience would be applicable to Chinese persons raised in Hong Kong, that peak-experiences of interpersonal joy would be recalled most frequently, and that the subcategory of family togetherness would comprise the most frequent subcategory of such peak-experiences. All three hypotheses were supported by our data. Not only do these findings shed light on Chinese personality from a positive, strength-based perspective, but they also have relevance for counseling from this vantage point.

Specifically, there has been a paradigm shift in counseling psychology from the deficit medical model, which focuses on what is going poorly in one's life, to strength-based counseling, which builds on the best in one's life to repair the worst (E. J. Smith, 2006). Our findings reveal the strength areas that counselors can focus on while working with Chinese clients in Asian and Western countries. For example, recalling positive experiences involving interpersonal joy may help Chinese clients tap into assets of social support, especially family resources; thinking about past successes involving external achievement may help them identify skills and strategies for addressing problems and facing challenges in the present. These aspects are conducive to strength development for Chinese persons across the life span.

The concept of early peak-experience clearly resonated among the participants in our study; indeed, a sizable minority reported more than one such episode. Because college students in cultures as culturally divergent from the United States as Brazil (Hoffman et al., 2012), Japan (Hoffman & Muramoto, 2007), Norway (Hoffman et al., 2010), and now Hong Kong readily described a youthful peak-experience, the concept definitely appears to be cross-culturally applicable or "species-wide," to use Maslow's potent phrase (Maslow, 1971, p. 313). When Chinese individuals are counseled from a strength-based perspective, therefore, it certainly appears that it is meaningful for counselors to inquire about the most wonderful experience of their early life. Such an inquiry would help clients better pinpoint their core

interests, areas of happiness, and sources of intrinsic motivation, all of which are vital for personal growth.

It is important to note that peak-experiences involving the category of interpersonal joy were reported most frequently by participants in our study. This finding is consistent not only with Western research on the strong collectivism of Hong Kong culture (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003; Hofstede, 2001; P. B. Smith et al., 1998), but also with studies highlighting indigenous Chinese constructs. Such constructs as interpersonal relatedness (Cheung et al., 1996), filial piety (D. Y. F. Ho, 1996; Hwang, 1999), *ren qing* or mutual obligation (Liu, Friedman, & Chi, 2005), *hexie* or harmony (Weatherly, 2002), and *guanxi* or social capital (Fan, 2000) are relevant in this regard. Although each of the aforementioned studies has unique aspects, all affirm that the maintenance and nurturance of close relationships is a vital constituent of strength-based Chinese psychology.

For example, *ren qing* (*ren* refers to human being, *qing* refers to sentiment and emotion) is a fundamental Chinese cultural value. That is, in Chinese philosophy, *ren qing* denotes a human being's common emotional response and obligatory affective component, which serve to define one's responsibility toward others (Chang & Holt, 1991). Similarly, the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (Cheung et al., 1996) defines *ren qing* as "relationship orientation," encompassing adherence to cultural norms of interaction based on reciprocity and affection. Because of such deep-rooted cultural values, eliciting individuals' early memories of affiliative happiness would be productive from a strength-based counseling perspective.

What specifically might these involve? Our findings suggest that for Chinese women, these memories will most likely encompass the subcategory of family togetherness and, to a lesser extent, those centering on peer camaraderie. In view of the high rate of reported depression among Hong Kong college women (Song et al., 2008), this information provides a valuable platform that counselors can use to help clients connect with positive, life-affirming experiences from their past. For example, one female participant observed, precisely from this point of view, "This experience with my parents makes me realize what happiness is. It was not material things that my parents gave me, but spending their time and using their heart to make me happy. They helped me feel that someone cared about me." For Hong Kong men, moments of interpersonal joy involving primarily peer camaraderie, and secondarily, family togetherness, appeared to be most salient. Again, such information offers a concrete way for counselors to accentuate strengths and virtues instead of weakness and pathology.

For both genders in our sample, external achievement was the second most frequently reported category of early peak-experiences. Typically, these involved academic success in the form of top grades, awards, praise from teachers, or marked scholastic improvement. As one participant recalled, "With my hard work and studying, my class rank in primary school jumped from the bottom few to the top three. This experience made

me feel that everything is possible. As long as one works hard toward the goal, one will finally get results." This finding is consistent with previous research on life satisfaction and goals of Chinese youth (U. Kim & Park, 2003; Violato & Kwok, 1995) and indicates a second platform relevant for strength-based counseling. In this regard, it is striking to note that our participants' emphasis on interpersonal joy and external attainment as youthful peak-experiences is extremely consistent with Shek and Chan's (1999) findings regarding Hong Kong parents' perceptions of the ideal child. Although this convergence may be attributable to the response bias of social desirability, intergenerational stability in cultural values seems to be the more likely explanation. Some U.S. social scientists (Falk & Falk, 2005; Keeter & Taylor, 2009) have highlighted what they described as a generation gap in values between youth and their parents; we found no such phenomenon in our study with Hong Kong students.

Furthermore, the third most frequently reported category of youthful peak-experiences for both genders was materialism, which tied with the category involving developmental landmarks for men. Usually, these materialism peak-experiences had a strong interpersonal element, such as receiving birthday or graduation gifts from family members and friends. Even though a few participants emphasized the market value or attractiveness of the gift, most focused more on the sentiment behind it, that is, affection for and recognition and affirmation of the recipient. For instance, one participant recalled, "When I started primary school, my mum bought me new clothes. My family was poor at the time, and she worked very hard to earn money. This experience made me cherish my mum and become determined to give her a happy life, without worry." Once more, the dimension of interpersonal connection seems vital in understanding peak-experiences of Hong Kong youth and, by extrapolation, peak-experiences that are rooted in Chinese culture.

Finally, a new youthful peak-experience category—serenity—emerged in Hong Kong but not in the other cultures we have studied (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2010, 2012); the serenity category involved the qualities of peacefulness and being free from worry. This finding is consistent with observations by Y. C. Ho (1990) that Chinese culture has been influenced by the "contentedness and carefree" elements of Taoism, which still contribute to mental health among Chinese persons today, because the central theme of Taoism is to desire nothing and to be carefree. The emergence of serenity as a retrospective peak-experience category in our study also makes sense in light of research indicating that Chinese college students experience a high level of stress (H. Chen, Wong, Ran, & Gilson, 2009) and that such stress is greater than that experienced by their counterparts in either Japan or South Korea (K. I. Kim, Won, Liu, Liu, & Kitanshi, 1997). Hence, Chinese college students may be more likely than others to gaze back fondly and longingly on calm, worry-free episodes of childhood. For example, one participant remarked, "Because of my carefree experience in the past, I felt so happy. I am now seeking this same kind of carefree life."

Thus, the peak-experience of serenity may have important implications for mental health intervention and services delivered to Chinese youth. For example, rather than encourage emotionally distressed college students to recall exciting or exuberant experiences from their past to highlight personal strengths, counselors might usefully focus on episodes of calmness and tranquility. Empirical research has documented that Americans from European backgrounds value high-arousal positive affect (e.g., excitement) whereas Hong Kong Chinese individuals value low-arousal positive affect (e.g., calmness) and that Asian Americans' affect valuation was between these two groups (Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006). Moreover, the discrepancy between what individuals want to feel and how they actually feel was found to correlate with depression across all three groups. In support of our findings on serenity, counselors working with Chinese American and Hong Kong Chinese individuals might attend to cultural influences on their ideal affect versus actual affect, thereby helping clients build emotional resilience through culturally sensitive and responsive techniques.

CONCLUSION

There are several limitations of this study. First, it is unclear the extent to which the peak-experience reports we obtained were influenced by social desirability. It is certainly possible, for example, that youthful peak-experiences involving romantic bliss, aesthetics, or an unforgettable dream were recalled but not reported because such experiences are less venerated in Hong Kong or wider Chinese culture than are those involving family togetherness or academic achievement. Second, the majority of respondents were majoring in the helping professions of nursing and social work; their tendency to recall early peak-experiences involving interpersonal joy, therefore, may not be generalizable to students majoring in less interpersonally oriented fields like engineering or computer technology. Finally, in the absence of any previous or corroborative studies on peak-experiences among Hong Kong or mainland Chinese persons, we interpret these findings cautiously, especially in generalizing to other Asian groups.

Despite these limitations, the present study has provided additional information regarding the existence and significance of early peak-experiences in a Chinese context and has highlighted their implications for strength-based counseling and positive psychology. It would be advantageous to conduct more empirically focused efforts, using both an emic (culture-specific) and etic (culture-general) approach to investigating peak-experiences cross-culturally in other Asian cultures. One may begin with the etic approach that adopts the universalist assumption to study cultural similarities in basic psychological processes, and then use the emic approach to identify cultural differences and distinctiveness in human behavior (S. X. Chen, 2010). Such research will enable a more comprehensive assessment of the

salience of peak-experiences in non-Western samples and their potential usefulness for counseling adolescents, young adults, and families.

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