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# THE ROLE OF YUAN IN CHINESE SOCIAL LIFE: A CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Cultural conceptions of why and how various interpersonal relationships are formed and dissolved present themselves as a great ground for study. In Chinese culture, the belief in *yuan* may be identified as such a conception. As we shall see, *yuan* is an exceedingly rich base in which a host of traditional Chinese beliefs about interpersonal relationships are embodied.

The word *yuan* has several meanings, among which are "reason" or "cause"; other meanings are "affinity" and "predestined relationship." *Yuan* may also be taken to mean the cause of a predestined relationship. Many terms about *yuan* are formed in combination with other words; however, sometimes, they are shortened to the single word *yuan*. For example, *yuan* may stand for the term *yuanfen* (affinity, luck, or condition by which people are brought together), depending on the context.

Numerous terms, idioms, and popular sayings pertaining to *yuan* may be found in both literary writings and everyday speech (for examples of the latter, see Table 10.2 below)—which bears testimony to how deeply rooted the belief in *yuan* is, in Chinese culture. Expressions about lover and marital relationships are especially common. Various examples are: *yinyuan* (matrimonial *yuan*), *jin yu liangyuan* (a good *yuan* of gold and jade), and *meng yuan* (dream *yuan*). The saying, "Yinyuan is originally predestined in a former life; without yinyuan, one ought not impose oneself," expresses the traditional view toward marriage. Some expressions are merely descriptive

of personal qualities. An example is *renyuan* (personal appeal or popularity); a person is described as having or not having *renyuan*.

The extent to which the concept of *yuan* has permeated the mass culture is also revealed in popular literature ever since the Tang dynasty (618–907 A. D.). Legendary tales, romantic stories, unofficial historical records, and even handcopied books (see Hsin-sing Bookstore 1981) provide useful materials for its analysis. *Yuan* can be found here and there in the writings of the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties. By the time of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, it had become a preoccupation in literary works, and was even regarded by many as being excessive. Quite a few novels even adopted the word *yuan* in their titles—as in *Jin Yu Yuan* (Yuan of Gold and Jade), *Zaisheng Yuan* (Yuan of the Reborn), and *Xing Shi Yinyuan Chuan* (Tales of Yinyuan to Awake the World).

### Buddhist Influences and Predestination

The concept of *yuan* is rooted in the beliefs of predestination and fatalism in traditional Chinese society. Thus, the formation of interpersonal relationships is held to be predestined and therefore unalterable. *Yuan* is said to predetermine whether a relationship will be characterized by attraction or repulsion—which is why some relationships are harmonious and fortunate, whereas others are awkward and even disastrous. Close relationships—such as those between father and son, or husband and wife—are supposed to result from *yuan*; and so are superficial acquaintanceships—such as those formed following a casual meeting. Indeed, *yuan* is said to exert its influence in virtually all interpersonal relationships, in folk legends as well as in real life. In this way, belief in *yuan* offers a convenient cultural explanation for the formation of interpersonal relationships on the basis of predestined affinity or enmity.

Chinese beliefs in predestination—in which the concept of *yuan* flourishes—have been strongly influenced by Buddhism. Historically, the notion of *yuan* gained currency after the Tang dynasty when Buddhism was officially introduced into China. Its origin may be traced to the secularization of the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* (Su 1982; Yu 1982), which embodies the belief in reincarnation. According to this doctrine, one's condition in the present life is the result of deeds performed in previous lives, and deeds performed in the present life will affect one's lives to come. In the mass culture, the Buddhist belief of *yinguo* (cause and effect) is widely held. A good deed will be rewarded, and a bad deed will be punished—in the next life, if not the present one. Such a reward or punishment is often realized through the formation of good or bad interpersonal relationships in another life. But the work of *yinguo* is unknown to the persons involved; to them, their relationships are predetermined by invisible fate.

Buddhist influences on *yuan* beliefs may be seen further in that quite a

few terms pertaining to yuan are Buddhist—for example: *yuangi* (genesis, or origin), *yinyuan* (principal and subsidiary causes), *jieyuan* (to form or to tie the knot of yuan), *huayuan* (begging alms), and *suyuan* (worldly yuan). *Yuangi* expresses the belief that the genesis of all things must have causes. The interaction between *yin* (principal cause) and *yuan* (subsidiary cause) gives rise to their formation and transformations. As applied to the world of people, yuan is the basis on which interpersonal relationships are formed (*jieyuan*) and dissolved. Buddhism holds that all phenomena exist in relationships and are transient in nature; individual entities do not exist. This implies a lack of permanence of interpersonal relationships. They last as long as yuan remains; they dissolve when yuan is extinguished. *Suyuan* refers to one's attachment to the mundane world; a person whose *suyuan* is not yet extinguished is not ready for *huayuan* (that is, the monastic life). These Buddhist beliefs have exerted a strong influence on Chinese views toward life.

### Categories of Yuan

Yuan may be classified into various categories, according to the duration, quality, or nature of relationship formed. In terms of duration, yuan encompasses two different kinds: *yuanfen*, and *jiyuan* (yuan of opportunity or chance). The former is the yuan of permanent influence, and the latter is the yuan of temporary interaction. *Yuanfen* is thought to determine all lasting relationships between interdependent persons—such as those involving family members or relatives, friends, colleagues, teachers and pupils, lords and vassals. *Jiyuan*, in contrast, is said to exist when two or more persons (probably unacquainted previously) find themselves in the same situation—for instance: on board the same boat, lodging in the same inn, sitting at the same table, taking an examination in the same room, or undergoing a similar misfortune. *Jiyuan* also predetermines coincidental events—for instance: playing a game of chess together, meeting a countryman in a foreign land, trading with a particular merchant, and seeing a particular physician (on *yiyuan*—yuan between physician and patient—see Lee 1982). Even a single encounter may not be insignificant: “Yuan of (having had) a face-to-face meeting” refers to the yuan with a person whom one has met only once.

Yuan can also be categorized in terms of the quality of relationship formed. In the case of *yuanfen*, enduring relationships formed on the basis of *liangyuan* (good yuan) will be enduring, harmonious, and mutually satisfying. Examples are: a happy matrimonial union, a kind father and a filial son, and two friends faithful to each other. Those formed on the basis of *nieyuan* (evil yuan) will be incomplete, painful, or even disastrous. Examples would be the antitheses of those that exemplify *liangyuan*: a disastrous marriage, an uncompromising father and a defiant son, and two friends

plotting against each other. There is a saying that expresses nieyuan well: "Without yuan in a previous life, there would be no enmity in this life." Extreme cases of liangyuan or nieyuan are relatively infrequent. The majority of cases are simply ordinary relationships yielding both sweet and bitter experiences.

Similarly, in the case of jiyuan, congenial or fortunate interpersonal encounters are said to be formed on the basis of *shanyuan* (good-natured yuan). Examples are: being rescued by someone from a dangerous situation, meeting a benefactor in a time of need, and finding good fortune from being acquainted with a stranger. Antagonistic or unfortunate encounters are determined on the basis of *xiongyuan* (ominous yuan). These result in some misfortune or even disaster to the person concerned. Between these two extremes are the ordinary encounters of everyday life.

### Origins of Yuan

The diverse origins of yuan may be revealed in an analysis of the traditional popular literature. Five major origins are identified.

1. *Lesser gods are punished and sent down to earth where they undergo ordeals.* Included under this category are deities, spirits, constellation rulers, pages and handmaids to the gods, and even celestial plants and animals. They are subjected to temporary ordeals for violating divine laws, desiring worldly pleasures, or succumbing to sensual indulgences. While on earth, they assume human form and become related with someone as a child (through birth), a spouse (through marriage), or a close friend. The affinities formed by such inexorable fate result mainly in permanent relationships—be they good or bad.

The example most often cited is the story of Jia Pao-yu and some "uncommon ladies" in the *Hong Lou Meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber) by Cao Xue-gin of the Qing Dynasty. The hero, Pao-yu, is said to have come from one of the stones left by the goddess Nuwa, who tempered them to mend the heavenly arc. Brought by two godlike figures to the material world, the stone is reincarnated as a mortal to undergo the ordeals of love. Pao-yu's counterpart, Lin Tai-yu, is said to have been originally a goddess from the "miragelike great void."

Another example is the story of Golden Boy and Jade Girl in *Qi Shi Fu Qi* (Man and Wife of Seven Existences) by an unknown author. One day when Yu Huang the Great (Jade Emperor) was entertaining the deities, Golden Boy accidentally broke a cup while toasting. At the sight of such a scene, Jade Girl burst out laughing. Yu Huang was angry and decreed that they both be sent to the secular world, where they would undergo the ordeal of being husband and wife as a form of punishment.

2. *Demons and fairies undergo metamorphosis.* The traditional Chinese have a strong belief in animism—that every element in this world is governed by

spirits. Through persistent self-cultivation, the elements (most often animals or plants) can someday attain the immortal state of demons or fairies. If a human happens to have done a favor for or to have trespassed on them while they were still in their elemental state, these demigods may transform themselves into the likeness of a human being and try to establish a relationship with this person in order to repay their indebtedness or to avenge themselves.

Take, for example, the story “Young Master Lee Saved the Life of a Snake and Thus Won the Heart of a Lady,” mentioned in Volume 34 of Feng Meng-long’s *Yushi Mingyan* (Famous Sayings on Life)—which circulated during the Ming dynasty. The hero of the story, Lee Yuan, was a successful scholar who was awarded the title of *jie yuan* during the reign of Emperor Shen-zong of the Song dynasty. A stroke of kindness urged him to rescue a snake, which happened to be a dragon-princess whose father was the head of the western sea gods. To show his gratitude, the father married his daughter to Lee. The marriage lasted for three years, after which the dragon-princess returned to her father.

A good affinity will result—either lasting *liangyuan* or temporary *shanyuan*—if the purpose of the metamorphosis is to repay a debt of gratitude. But lasting bad affinity (*nieyuan*) or an unfortunate occurrence (*xiongyuan*) will result if it is a case of vengeance.

3. *A person undergoes reincarnation or transmigration.* Following the secularization of Taoist and Buddhist thoughts, the Chinese have been deeply influenced by the belief in reincarnation, or the transmigration of life. One may be destined to form a certain relationship with another person in one’s next life, either to repay a debt of gratitude or to seek vengeance.

The following passage translated by the present authors from Ji Xiaolan’s *Yuewei Caotang Biji* (Notes from the Yuewei Thatched Cottage)—written during the Qing dynasty—may be taken as an illustrative example.

During the last years of the reign of Chong-zhen [Ming dynasty], there was a big drought followed by a rampage of grasshoppers in the provinces of Henan and Shandong. Even grass roots and trees’ barks were all swallowed up as food for survival. As a last resort, human flesh was also taken as food. The officials could do nothing to stop this practice. Women and little children were traded for flesh in the market. The butchers bought and slaughtered them as hogs or sheep. One day a trader surnamed Zhou returned home from Dongchang. It was late afternoon when he passed by a meat shop. The butcher told him that all the meat had been sold and asked him to wait for a while. Zhou saw two women being carried to the kitchen. He heard the butcher yelling inside, saying that the customer could not be kept waiting for long and that a leg could be taken first. Zhou rushed inside and tried to stop the butchering. He heard a long howl: One arm was chopped off from the shoulder of one of the women. She wriggled and twitched on the ground. The other woman trembled all over and was as pale as dead. Seeing Zhou, they both cried out for help. One asked him to give her immediate death. The other begged for rescue. Zhou’s

heart was stirred and he bought them with a great sum. Since one of them had scant hope for survival, he pierced her through the heart and ended her life. He brought the other home and, because he had no heir, married her as his concubine. Soon he begot a baby boy born with a red string around his right arm. The string wound around his shoulder just like the way the other woman's arm had been chopped off before. The family line of Zhou carried on for three more generations and then ceased. Everyone said that Zhou was doomed to have no heir, but that the family line was prolonged for three more generations because of his good deed.

A reincarnation meant to repay a debt of gratitude may result in a long-term good affinity (*liangyuan*) or a short-term fortunate occurrence (*shanyuan*). Conversely, a reincarnation meant as a vengeance may result in a long-term evil affinity (*nieyuan*) or a short-term unfortunate occurrence (*xiongyuan*).

4. *Retribution is dispensed for a person's record of moral behavior.* Acts of favor or harm toward another party may issue simply from a person's momentary stroke of kindness or viciousness. However, there are people who perform cumulative acts of goodness (such as building bridges, giving alms, and relieving wild animals from captivity); and there are others who perform cumulative acts of evil (such as browbeating others, stealing, killing animals, and being unfilial to parents) during their lifetime(s). Such acts are not merely directed at specific persons at a given time and place; they reflect a person's moral character. Influenced by the Buddhist doctrine of *yinguo*, people believe that good deeds beget good results, and evil deeds beget bad results. The gods know what people have done, and will reward or punish them accordingly. A person with a good moral record will be blessed with good and fortunate interpersonal relationships, and one with a bad record will be doomed to have bad and unfortunate relationships.

A strange tale by Pu Song-ling of the Qing dynasty (and translated by the present authors) may serve as an example.

Jin Yongnian, a resident of Lijin, had passed the age of 82 but still had no heirs. His wife was 78 years old then. They had given up the hope of having any children. Unexpectedly, one night he dreamed that a god had told him, "You were doomed to have no heirs, but because of your fairness in your trading business, I will endow you with a boy." Jin awoke from the dream and told his wife what the god had said to him. His wife said that it was wishful thinking for them, not having much time to live in this world, to have any children. Yet later, the old wife felt a convulsion in her womb. And after ten months' pregnancy, she did give birth to a son.

The relationship formed with the child in this story is a reward for the old man's record of good moral behavior. Again, a reward may be the formation of a long-term good affinity (*liangyuan*) or a short-term fortunate occurrence (*shanyuan*); and a punishment may be a long-term undesirable affinity (*nieyuan*) or a short-term unfortunate occurrence (*xiongyuan*).

5. *Relationships are decreed by inexplicable fate.* The origins of yuan listed above hardly apply to the majority of cases. They are the result of extraordinary efforts or unusual encounters experienced by only a privileged few. For most people, yuan is determined by an unknown and inexplicable fate, operating like an invisible hand to direct the formation of interpersonal relationships, both permanent and temporary.

Marital relationships—for instance—are determined by fate, and are thus unalterable. In Chinese folklore, fate pertaining to marriage is personified as the Old Man under the Moonlight holding the Book of Marriage in his hands. The Old Man takes a red silk string out of his pocket and ties the feet of a man and a woman together. Their marital fate (*yinyuan*) is thus sealed.

## ANALYSIS

### Functions of Yuan

Why is yuan so important in the social life of the Chinese people? What functions does it play in social relations and interpersonal interactions? To answer these questions, we must first understand some characteristics of Chinese society. Since ancient times, the primary economy has been subsistence agriculture, which evolved from a primitive form of farming to a complex and sophisticated system. To be successful, this agricultural system requires not only a tremendous amount of time and labor, but also a stable social structure. This is one factor that has contributed to the formation of clan-centered collectivism in Chinese society. According to Yang (1981a, 1981b, 1982b), the most pervasive psychosocial characteristic of Chinese collectivism is “social orientation”—a concept similar to Wilson’s (1974) “relationship orientation.” Social orientation consists of two main components: group orientation, and other orientation. The former refers to the emphasis put on maintaining solidarity and harmony in social interaction, particularly within the primary group: the family and clan. The latter refers to the concern regarding impression management—and, hence, sensitivity to others’ opinions about oneself.

Yuan is important in Chinese social life because it helps to maintain harmony in interpersonal relationships and group solidarity. From a social psychological point of view, to ascribe the formation or outcome of a relationship to yuan is an attributional process, as defined by Weiner et al. (1971). According to Weiner’s (1979) conceptual scheme, yuan would be an external and stable causal factor. Attributing the formation or outcome of a relationship to such a factor performs the function of protecting not only oneself, but also others directly or indirectly involved in the relationship. In a collectivist society like China (see Ho 1979), most of one’s significant relationships are formed—even arranged—on the basis of one’s

family or clan membership. This allows little room for the exercise of personal choice. An external attribution makes an unfortunate life fraught with misery in interpersonal relationships more bearable—for yuan is an impersonal force over which one has no control. If relationships are predetermined, there is no escape and little one can do but accept them. An attribution to yuan thus strengthens the durability of interpersonal relationships—especially close ones in the family or clan—regardless of how unhappy they may be. Furthermore, it serves to avoid conflict by making it less likely that persons caught in an unhappy relationship will blame the significant others (such as parents) who have played a role in influencing or arranging its formation.

External attributions to yuan thus function as mechanisms of social and ego defense. Attributing a successful relationship to yuan—rather than to character or effort—lessens the likelihood of arousing jealousy in others who have not fared so well in their interpersonal relationships; it also serves to protect their face by not placing them in a less favorable light. Harmony may thus be preserved. This is particularly important in the case of marital success within the setting of families and clans. A happily married couple would typically say that they have better yuan—implying that they themselves are not necessarily better persons. The yuan attribution serves as a social defense by defusing potential conflicts. In turn, this defensive function reinforces the couple's tendency to attribute their success to yuan.

Attributing an unsuccessful relationship to yuan has both social defense and ego defense functions. The social defense refers to avoiding external conflict with others, by not blaming those who have played a part in influencing or even arranging the relationship and—more importantly—by not focusing on the other party in the relationship as being responsible for one's misery. The ego defense refers to avoiding internal conflicts by removing the need for feelings of anger, guilt, or shame—which would be aroused in the case of an internal attribution (Weiner 1979; Yang 1982a). A yuan attribution serves to protect the esteem of the parties involved in the relationship and of those closely associated with them, as well.

A yuan attribution can also serve as a rationalization for lack of an expected relationship. For example, a woman who has passed the proper age for marriage might say to herself and others that she has not yet met the man with whom she has yinyuan or simply that she does not have the yuan for marriage at all. Again, this would help to protect her and her family from losing face.

Maintaining harmony and group solidarity can be considered to be a positive social function. Clearly, however, yuan attributions have negative functions, as well. As a rationalization, a yuan attribution is maladaptive to the extent that personal responsibility in unfavorable outcomes is not recognized. As an external attribution, it does not encourage people to seek



solutions to their interpersonal problems or to take measures to change their lot. A person who attributes his or her state of interpersonal affairs to yuan would see it as a part of fate—predestined and unalterable. Given such a fatalistic attitude, a passive coping mechanism might be the only resource (see Hwang 1978). This is why acceptance, forbearance, and resignation have been so highly regarded as virtues in traditional Chinese society. Yet, it must also be said that these virtues give a person strength to tolerate what would otherwise be intolerable.

In terms of personality functioning, attributions are closely related to locus of control. People who make yuan attributions are likely to be those who have an external locus of control—that is, they believe that rewards and happenings are dependent on external forces (such as other people) and that making an effort to control their world would be a basically futile endeavor. In the psychological literature, one can hardly avoid the impression that external locus of control is bad. The typical empirical finding is that people with an external locus of control are less adaptive and less mentally healthy than those with an internal locus of control. A major criticism of the psychological literature on this point may be made, however. Researchers have not taken into consideration the extent to which a person's belief in locus of control is based on his or her particular social reality (see Furby 1979). One may argue that, given a situation where rewards and happenings are indeed dependent on external forces, a belief in external locus of control is an accurate perception, and may even be adaptive.

Thus, external attributions are quite accurate in accounting for the formation of interpersonal relationships in traditional Chinese society. Yuan attributions derive support from social reality. They may be viewed as imaginative elaborations of external attributions, enriched by Buddhist beliefs. Deeply ingrained in the Chinese mind, they strengthen further and consolidate the practice of arranged interpersonal relationships. In this way, social practice and yuan attributions reinforce each other.

### **Yuan Attributions in Interpersonal Interaction**

Yuan attributions play an important role in interpersonal interaction. First, their effects are not limited to stages at the time of and subsequent to the initial meeting of the parties involved in an interpersonal relationship. Rather, yuan attributions begin to operate even before the first meeting. Often, through introductory descriptions and comments made by intermediaries (such as matchmakers and mutual friends), one or both of the parties concerned may already feel that they have yuan (or no yuan) and are spiritually attached to (or repulsed by) the other party, even before they meet. This sense of telepathic yuan is traditionally called *shenjiao* (spiritual interaction). The feeling of having yuan would help to reduce anxiety and increase the likelihood of mutual acceptance during the first encounter. On

the other hand, the feeling of having no yuan would make a person reluctant or even unwilling to pursue a relationship with another—thus hindering its development from the very beginning. Thus, shenjiao operates as a pre-event attribution. So far, pre-event causal attributions have been neglected by western investigators. Their studies (for example: Harvey, Ickes, and Kidd 1978; and Jones et al. 1972) have been limited to attributions after the initial event.

Second, yuan can function either as a catalyst or as an inhibitor during the early stages of the acquaintance process. Attributing a good initial impression to yuan gives a person reassurance that a good relationship will result; in turn, this reassurance leads to a quantum increase in attraction and positive feelings toward the other party. The attribution may even lead to the belief that the relationship being formed is inevitable and must therefore be accepted in any case. This would result in an acceleration in the development of the relationship. On the other hand, attributing a poor initial impression to a lack of yuan would have an opposite effect, even to the extent of preventing a relationship from being formed.

It is clear that yuan attribution plays a crucial role in influencing how an interpersonal relationship will develop. It introduces a discontinuous element into the process of acquaintanceship: a quantum increase or decrease in affective intensity. This is not accounted for in western theories of interpersonal attraction (for example: Byrne 1972; Lott and Lott 1973; and Newcomb 1961), which tend to conceptualize acquaintanceships as a continuous process.

Third—closely related to the roles described above—yuan attribution may operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It predisposes the interacting parties as to how they perceive and react to each other even at their first encounter; it acts further as a catalyst or inhibitor to affective intensity and mutual acceptance during the early stages of the acquaintanceship process. The outcome of the relationship is thus strongly influenced; in turn, if it conforms to expectations based on yuan, this strengthens the parties' original attributions. In fact, attributing a failure even to initially form expected relationships to yuan may likewise operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **Conflicts between Yuan Attributions and Outcome**

In reality, the outcome of a relationship does not depend on the effect of yuan attributions alone, and does not always conform to expectations based on yuan. Yuan attributions do not always result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Life is full of unexpected events—be they in agreement or conflict with one's wishes. External factors that may be purely incidental or beyond the control of the parties involved often lead to outcomes contrary to expectations based on yuan. This is especially so in traditional Chinese society

where important relationships are arranged by elders, typically without one's consent or even reference to one's wishes. However, even in the absence of adverse external factors, the outcome may still be contrary to one's wishes, depending on the other party's reactions—over which, again, one has no direct control.

When the outcome of a relationship does not conform to one's expectations based on yuan, the original yuan attribution has to be modified or even altered completely. Thus, a person's initial good impression of the other party may be attributed to yuan; but if it does not lead to the expected formation of a good relationship, that person would have to say that he or she does not have yuan with the other party, after all.

An interesting question arises: What happens when the yuan attributions of two interacting parties conflict with each other? This would be the case if person A's feeling that he or she has yuan with person B is not reciprocated. Most likely, one of the parties would have to modify his or her original attribution—depending on the outcome of the relationship. If the outcome is positive, then person A's original attribution would be strengthened, and that of person B would be modified. If it is negative, then the opposite would result. In any case, a yuan attribution operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy to the extent that it influences the outcome of a relationship.

In the case of lovers, they may be said ultimately to have yinyuan with each other only if the following conditions are met: (1) They have the opportunity to meet each other at the right time and place, by chance or otherwise; (2) the attraction is mutual and enduring; (3) opportunities for pursuing the relationship exist; and (4) adverse external factors that prevent them from pursuing the relationship leading to marriage (for example: opposition by the parents of one or both parties, sabotage by a third party, and unexpected illness) are absent, or are overcome if present. In the story, *Liang Shan-bai and Zhu Ying-tai* (Butterfly Lovers), the hero Liang Shan-bai and the heroine Zhu Ying-tai were prevented from marriage because of adverse external factors, even though all the other conditions were met. They are said to have had no yinyuan.

Interpersonal relationships are fraught with uncertainties and contradictions. Clearly, they do not develop in a simple, linear fashion; and their outcomes often conflict with people's initial yuan attributions.

## EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF CONTEMPORARY YUAN CONCEPTIONS

To explore contemporary conceptions of yuan, surveys were conducted in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Data were collected from three samples: 543 students (275 males and 268 females) from four different universities in Taiwan (Sample 1); 248 students (142 males and 106 females) from National Taiwan University (Sample 2); and 160 students (79 males and 81

females) from the University of Hong Kong (Sample 3). Three different questionnaires were used—one for each of the three samples. In addition, a content analysis of popular songs in Hong Kong was conducted.<sup>1</sup> For the sake of convenience of presentation, a thematic grouping of the data collected is given in the following sections.

### Conceptions of Yuan and Yuanfen

Two open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire given to Sample 1: (1) "*Yuan* and *yuanfen* are supposed to concern relations between people. What do you think *yuan* or *yuanfen* is?" and (2) "What do you think is the main factor determining whether or not there is *yuan* or *yuanfen* between two persons?" From the responses, at least four different—but interrelated—conceptions can be differentiated. *Yuan* or *yuanfen* is conceived as: (1) fate or an unexplainable force that can contribute to the formation of interpersonal relationships; (2) unexplainable coincidence, luck, or opportunity that can contribute to the formation of interpersonal relationships; (3) a subjective feeling, emotion, or "psychic-electric sense" that leads to harmonious, congenial, and understanding relationships; and (4) simply a description of harmonious, congenial, and understanding relationships.

These four conceptions of *yuan* were then presented as the alternatives in a multiple-choice question included in the questionnaire given to Sample 2. The results are presented in Table 10.1. A chi-square test shows that the sex variable was not associated with the response pattern,  $\chi^2(3, N = 248) = .67, p > .05$ .

**Table 10.1**  
Percentages of Four Conceptions of *Yuan* Among University Students

Conception	Sample 2		Sample 3
1. Fate or unexplainable force	13	10 11	48
2. Unexplainable coincidence, luck, or opportunity	45	49 47	37
3. Subjective feeling, emotion, or "psychic-electric sense"	27	27 27	4
4. Harmonious, congenial, and understanding relationship	15	14 15	—
Relationship involving people, events, or objects	—	— —	11

*Note:* Sample 2 = 248 university students (142 males and 106 females) in Taiwan. The first column gives the percentages for males; the second column gives the percentages for females; and the third column gives the percentages for the entire sample. Sample 3 = 160 university students in Hong Kong. Percentages were calculated on the basis of 150 responses given by these students.

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

A similar, but open-ended, question was included in the questionnaire given to Sample 3: "What do you think *yuan* is?" A total of 150 responses were categorized into one of the same four conceptions differentiated above. These percentages are also given in Table 10.1.

Additionally, all of the subjects' responses were reexamined, using a different set of categories. A total of 92 responses subscribing to the following categories of notions about *yuan* were counted: changeable, unpredictable, or uncontrollable (57, or 62 percent); abstract, incomprehensible, or unexplainable (28 or 30 percent); may console people (4, or 4 percent); and, may go away instantly if not grasped (3, or 3 percent).

### Belief or Disbelief in Yuan

Subjects in Sample 1 were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with seven popular Chinese sayings pertaining to *yuan*. The results are presented in Table 10.2. It may be observed that the overall level of agreement is fairly high, exceeding 50 percent except in the case of the item about old enemies. Percentages of agreement to items 4, 5, and 6 were considerably lower than those to items 1, 2, and 3. One probable reason is that items 4, 5, and 6 suggest predestined reincarnation, which is not well accepted by the educated in present day Taiwan.

Additionally, five hypothetical situations involving love or marriage were presented to the subjects in Sample 1. Each subject was asked to indicate whether or not *yuan* was at work—treating the situations as if he or she were involved. The percentages of these *yuan* attributions are also presented in Table 10.2. It may be observed that *yuan* attributions are more frequent for happy and successful relationships than for unhappy and unsuccessful relationships. Not surprisingly, love at first sight is attributed to *yuan* by an overwhelming percentage of subjects.

A multiple-choice question, "In your opinion, does *yuan* or does it not exist between persons?", was included in the questionnaire given to Sample 2. The responses were: certainly—39 percent; somewhat certainly—35 percent; probably—23 percent; and certainly does not—3 percent. A chi-square test shows that males and females did not differ in their response patterns,  $\chi^2 (3, N = 248) = .92, p > .05$ .

A similar multiple-choice question, "Do you believe that there is such a thing as *yuanfen*?", was included in the questionnaire given to Sample 3. Responses were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (extreme disbelief) to 7 (extreme belief), with 4 omitted. The overall mean was 5.13—with 81 percent of the subjects indicating various degrees of belief, and 19 percent indicating various degrees of disbelief in *yuanfen*; 49 percent scored 6 on the 7-point scale, by far the most frequent. The mean for females ( $M = 5.42$ ) was significantly greater than the mean for males ( $M = 4.84$ ),  $t(158) = 2.13, p < .05, d = .34, \omega^2 = .02$ . The  $d$  statistic shows that the

**Table 10.2**  
**Percentages of Agreements with Yuan Attributions**

<b>In Popular Chinese Sayings</b>	
1. Meetings and unions have their basis in yuan.	90
2. With yuan, people a thousand miles apart come to meet; without yuan, people face-to-face make no acquaintance.	88
3. A single thread leads to the yuan of lovers a thousand miles apart.	81
4. A single day of marriage, a hundred lives of matrimonial yuan.	56
5. Resting together on the same pillow results from a thousand (previous) lives of cultivation.	56
6. Sharing the same boat results from a hundred (previous) lives of cultivation.	54
7. You would not meet again and again unless you are old enemies.	43
<b>In Hypothetical Situations</b>	
1. A young couple fall in love at first sight. They think that yuanfen is the reason why they are so attracted to each other.	92
2. Miss Wang, already 35 years of age, is still single. She thinks that this is because yuanfen has not yet arrived—that is, she has not yet met the person with whom she has yuanfen.	72
3. A middle-aged couple has been married for more than 20 years. They are content with their marriage and feel that they are fortunate. They think that their happy marriage is due to the good yuanfen between them.	72
4. A middle-aged couple has been married for more than 20 years. They have been quarreling and fighting with each other, and are very dissatisfied with their marriage. To them, marriage brings only suffering. They think that their unhappy marriage is due to the lack of good marital yuanfen between them.	44
5. A young couple has been married for five years. During this period, they have been fighting, quarreling, insulting, and hurting each other. Finally, they agree to a divorce. They think that the reason why they have to be divorced is that they simply do not have marital yuanfen between them.	47

*Note:*  $N = 543$  university students in Taiwan (Sample 1).

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

means were approximately one-third of a standard deviation apart, and the  $\omega^2$  statistic shows that 2 percent of the population variance was accounted for by the sex variable. These estimates of effect size may be considered quite small. And thus it is not surprising that no sex difference was found for Sample 2.

### Relationships involving Yuan

Subjects in Sample 1 were asked to indicate if they thought that yuan or yuanfen is involved in each of 10 important interpersonal relationships. Similarly, subjects in Sample 3 were asked if they thought that yuanfen may or may not be used to explain each of 14 relationships involving people, objects, or events. For both samples, the relationships were then ranked according to yuan attributions, as indicated by the percentage of subjects expressing belief that yuan or yuanfen is involved or may be used as an explanation. The rankings are presented in Table 10.3. It may be observed that there is a high degree of correspondence between the two rankings. In both instances: (1) relationships based on consanguinity (such as parent-child and sibling relationships) rank lower than those not based on consanguinity; (2) among nonconsanguine relationships, yuan attributions appear to be related with degree of intimacy; and (3) heterosexual (boy-girl) relationships rank first.

Additionally, subjects in Sample 3 who expressed various degrees of belief in yuanfen (129, or 81 percent; see the preceding section) were asked to give an example of what they thought can be explained by this concept. A total of 180 relationships involving people, objects, or events were identified in the 129 examples given; these were grouped into 16 categories and were ranked according to their relative frequencies (expressed in terms of percentages—see column 3 of Table 10.3). It may be observed that relationships not based on consanguinity tend to be mentioned more frequently than consanguine relationships; friendships were mentioned the most frequently by far. Outcomes were specified in 61 (47 percent) of the 129 examples given; of these, 52 (40 percent) were good outcomes (examples ending with a happy or successful relationship), and 9 (7 percent) were bad outcomes (examples ending with an unsatisfactory relationship).

It should be noted that yuan is indeed attributed to relationships with things other than people—that is, animals, objects, and events. As expected, however, yuan attributions are less frequent in the case of noninterpersonal relationships than in that of interpersonal relationships.

### Individual Modernity

As stated before, the concept of yuan is rooted in traditional Chinese beliefs (particularly, predestination and fatalism), and yuan attributions are

**Table 10.3**

**Ranking of Relationships, Objects, and Events According to Yuan Attributions and Examples of Yuanfen**

Rank	Taiwan students	Hong Kong students	
1	Friend—opposite sex (84)	Intimate boy/girl friend (86)	Friend (31)
2	Husband/wife (82)	Friend (83)	Intimate boy/girl friend (14)
3	Classmate (81)	Husband/wife (81)	Husband/wife (11)
4	Friend—same sex (80)	Classmate (74)	Meeting someone (11)
5	Colleague (68)	Colleague (65)	An event (8)
6	Neighbor (61)	Unknown fellow passenger (54)	Classmate (4)
7	Parent-in-law/son-in-law (48)	Parent (49)	Parent (4)
8	Parent-in-law daughter-in-law (48)	Friendly animal (47)	Person met on a journey (3)
9	Sibling (39)	Sibling (47)	Sibling (3)
10	Parent/child (36)	Relative (39)	Relative (2)
11	—	Work/job (32)	Neighbor (2)
12	—	Pet (29)	Work/job (2)
13	—	An event—e.g., a school activity (23)	Colleague (2)
			Pet (1)
			An animal (1)
			An object (1)
		An object—e.g., a gift (20)	—

*Note:* The left column gives the ranking of 10 interpersonal relationships according to yuan attributions by 543 university students in Taiwan (Sample 1). The middle column gives the ranking of 14 relationships involving people, objects, or events according to yuan attributions by 160 university students in Hong Kong (Sample 3). The right column gives the ranking of 16 categories into which 180 relationships involving people, objects, and events were grouped—based on examples of yuanfen given by 129 university students in Hong Kong (from Sample 3). Numbers within parentheses are percentages.

*Source:* Compiled by the authors.

external attributions that help to maintain harmony in a collectivist society. One would therefore expect yuan beliefs or attributions to be negatively related with the psychological construct of individual modernity. A standardized scale for measuring Chinese individual modernity (Yang and Hchu 1974) was administered to subjects in Sample 1. The results show that subjects high in individual modernity are less inclined to attribute the formation or dissolution of relationships to yuan.



## Content Analysis of Popular Songs

The claim might be made that popular songs reflect the very current pulse of the culture—particularly the youth culture—within which they flourish. To this extent, popular songs constitute a rich source of cultural production for analysis. The target we selected for analysis was the Commercial Radio Hong Kong's annual list of top music records, covering a period of five years (1980–84). A total of 1,008 songs in 92 records were scrutinized. Of these, 91 (9 percent) songs were found to contain the word *yuan*; altogether, 122 lyrical expressions in which *yuan* appeared were counted in these 91 songs. The meaning of *yuan* in each of these expressions could be understood in the context of the whole song. The results show that, not surprisingly, heterosexual love themes figure most prominently, appearing in more than half (52 percent) of the expressions. Ideas of meeting or getting acquainted (8 percent), staying together (16 percent), and separation (35 percent) are also quite frequent. Significantly, the idea of fate or destination (18 percent) appears less frequently than opportunity or predisposition to have *yuanfen* (34 percent).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The idea of *yuan* is still very much alive in contemporary Chinese culture. Its continued importance in social life is evident in the mass culture as well as in individual minds. The data show that, to various degrees, the belief in *yuan* remains strong among university students in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Those who express outright disbelief are clearly in the minority. Furthermore, university students represent the elite in both Taiwan and Hong Kong; one would expect an even stronger belief in *yuan* among the less educated.

*Yuan* attributions are still very common; they encompass a very wide domain indeed—extending not only to interpersonal relationships, but also to relationships with animals, objects, and events. Love at first sight and—more generally—heterosexual love relationships receive the most frequent *yuan* attributions. Relationships with positive outcomes are more frequently attributed to *yuan* than those with negative outcomes. The majority of university students do not rationalize negative outcomes through *yuan* attributions—implying that there may be a greater readiness for assuming responsibility.

As one would expect, the strength of *yuan* beliefs and attributions interacts with the conceptions about *yuan*. For instance, prevalence of belief decreases for conceptions that entail ideas of reincarnation. This can be seen from two results: (1) Popular sayings that suggest predestined reincarnation receive lower percentages of agreement from the subjects (see Table 10.2); and (2) consanguine relationships rank lower than noncon-

sanguine relationships in yuan attributions (see Table 10.3). More generally, the association between yuan and Buddhist beliefs appears to have been much weakened.

Contemporary conceptions of yuan clearly differ to a large extent from past conceptions rooted in predestination and fatalism. Furthermore, a qualitative examination of the subjects' answers reveals that even fatalistic conceptions have lost the fantastic or even superstitious elements characteristic of past conceptions (as described earlier in the chapter). Nevertheless, the notion that yuan is something over which people have no control remains strong. Perhaps most worthy of note is that, even among university students, a minority continue to endorse the conception of yuan as fate or unexplainable force.

In conclusion, we see that, as beliefs in predestination and fatalism have waned, so have yuan conceptions rooted in these beliefs. One would expect a corresponding decrease in the importance of yuan in helping to maintain harmony and solidarity in Chinese social processes. However, continuity with past conceptions is still quite visible, even among the highly educated. What is clear is that the direction of change points toward a greater departure from past conceptions. At the psychological level, this is manifest in weaker yuan beliefs and attributions, corresponding to stronger individual modernity.

## NOTE

1. The data on Sample 3 as well as the lyrics of the popular songs were collected and coded by A. C. M. Wong, N. C. W. Lam, and L. C. Man.

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