

# The Protestant Work Ethic in Mainland China

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**ABSTRACT :** In an attempt to provide a cross-cultural examination and documentation of the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) in Chinese society, we examined the differences of PWE across ten demographic variables including gender, age, education, work experience, position, religious affiliation, party affiliation, income, type of work organization, and place of residence from a random sample of 1703 participants from all walks of life and from several provinces in China. We employed Mirels and Garrett's (1971) PWE Scale to measure the PWE and a One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to analyze the PWE scores. The results revealed that people having a graduate education, occupying senior positions, being with a monthly income  $\geq$ RMB5001, being Communist Party members, and living in South-East and North-East China expressed the strongest adherence to PWE. No significant difference on PWE existed in the categories of gender, age, work experience, type of work and religious affiliation.

**Key words:** Protestant work ethic, demographic variables, work values, culture

## I. Introduction

Beit-Hallahmi (1979) stated that the "Protestant Work Ethic" is an orientation towards work which emphasizes dedication to hard work, deferment of immediate rewards, conservation of resources, the saving of surplus wealth, and the avoidance of idleness and waste in any form. The term "Protestant Work Ethic" is not a value held only by Western countries; in fact, components of PWE could be found in many different cultures.

Parts of the traditional Chinese work ethics are similar to the PWE. For example, Chinese work ethics consist of trying to acquire life skills and education, conspicuous consumption being tabooed, working hard, not spending more than necessary, being patient, and persevering (Hofsteds, 1988). These work values are included in both the principles of Confucian teaching and in the ideology of the Communist Party. Currently, Confucian, Communist and Capitalist ideologies are jointly re-shaping and transforming Chinese behavior and practice (Wang, et al., 2005). The coexistence of multiple cultural values makes it more reasonable to measure the PWE in China as its values are not contrary to the work ethics of the Chinese people. Moreover, some evidence indicated that PWE seemed to be stronger committed among non-Protestant cultures (Niles, 1999; Engel, 1988; Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984).

The PWE is "no longer Protestant" (Ma, 1986) and it is possible that PWE is now more a reflection of culture than of religious values or nationality (Cokley, 2007). Many PWE studies had been conducted in different cultures, such as New Zealand (Poulton & Ng, 1988; Furnham, et al., 1993), East African Quaker (Munroe & Munroe, 1983),

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Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans (Gonsalves & Bernard, 1983), White males in South Africa (Blues & Barling, 1983; Furnham, et al., 1993), Great Britain (Furnham, 1984a, 1984b; Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984; Furnham, et al., 1993), the United States (Greenberg, 1977; Tang, 1989; Furnham, et al., 1993), Japan (Dator, 1966; Engel, 1988), Australia (Ray, 1982; Furnham, et al., 1993; Niles, 1994), Sri Lanka (Niles, 1994), Irish and Turkish (Arslan, 2001), India (Furnham & Rajamanickam, 1992; Furnham, et al., 1993), Malaysia (Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984) Israel (Furnham, et al., 1993), West Indies (Furnham, et al., 1993), Zimbabwe (Furnham, et al., 1993), Greece (Furnham, et al., 1993), and Germany (Furnham, et al., 1993). Moreover the PWE has been examined in Taiwan (Ma, 1986; Ma & Smith, 1985; Tang, 1990; Tang & Baumeister, 1984), and Hong Kong (Ma, 1987; Furnham, et al., 1993). However, few researchers have investigated the PWE in Mainland China. This study attempted to provide an examination and documentation of the PWE in Mainland China in the modern, developed era.

So far, PWE was found to be both related and not related to age and gender, (Niles, 1994; Aldag & Brief, 1975; Buchholz, 1978; Furnham, 1982; Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984; Ma, 1986; Goodale, 1973; Mirels and Garrett, 1971; MacDonald, 1972); socio-economic status (Ma, 1986; Beit-Hallahmi, 1979). PWE was also shown to have both positive and negative correlation with education (Ma, 1986; Aldag & Brief, 1975; Buchholz, 1977; MacDonald, 1972; Wollack, et al., 1971; Goodale, 1973; Furnham, 1982), party affiliation (Furnham, 1983b; Tang, 1992; Beit, Hallahmi, 1979), religious affiliation (Wollack, et al., 1971; Tang, 1992), income (Furnham, 1984b; Tang, 1989; Tang, 1992), social class (Cokley, 2007; Ma, 1986) and race (Cokley, 2007). Thus, there is no simple, consistent pattern in the relationship between demographic variables and adherence to the PWE.

In the present study, we tried to determine if various demographic factors, such as gender, age, work experience, education, position, religious affiliation, party affiliation, income, type of work organization, and place of residence are affected by the PWE.

### **II. Method**

#### **Samples and Procedures**

Participants, who were all volunteers, completed a questionnaire both in groups and individually at their place of study, work or home. They were not required to identify themselves by name on the questionnaire. The questionnaires took between 30 to 45 minutes to complete.

A 3-page questionnaire was distributed to about 1800 subjects who were recruited personally from among students and faculty of Shanxi University; leading office cadres attending training courses which were held in Shanxi Province in July, September and October of 2010; MBA students in Shanxi University; members of the China Democratic National Construction in Shanxi; 1994 graduates of the Business school of Shanxi University; employees and managers from banks, government, industry; people from different provinces such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hebei, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Anhui, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei, Yunnan, Guangdong, Inner Mongolia, and Shanxi. We attempted to distribute the questionnaire to people from all walks of life. In total, we distributed 1800 questionnaires. Although 1730 questionnaires were returned, only 1703 were accepted as part of this study; 27 were discarded due to missing data. The anonymity of respondents was assured.

The participants included 916 men and 780 women. 7 participants did not indicate gender. 521 participants identified themselves as less than 25 years of age, 419 were 25-34 years of age, 393 were 36-44, and the remaining 364 were  $\geq 45$  years old. 6 participants failed to indicate their age. 296 participants identified themselves as having no

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work experience, 375 having worked for less than 5 years, 205 for 5-9 years, 166 for 10-14 years, 185 for 15-19 years, 311 for 20-29 years, and the remainder 157 for  $\geq 30$  years. 8 people failed to indicate their work experience. 689 participants identified themselves as junior college education or less, 835 undergraduates, and 135 graduates. 44 people failed to indicate their education status. 112 participants identified themselves as occupying senior management positions at work, 410 middle management and 725 junior management or lower. 81 participants identified themselves as Buddhists, 12 Catholics, 65 Protestants and 1,318 non-religious. 572 participants identified themselves as Communist Party members, 71 members of Democratic parties, and 731 without any party affiliation. 329 participants failed to indicate their political affiliation. 1,374 participants identified their monthly income as  $\leq$ RMB1000, 700 making RMB1001-3000, 344 making RMB3001-5000, and 129  $\geq$ RMB5001. 335 participants worked in state-owned enterprises, 162 in private enterprises, 24 in foreign joint ventures, 131 self-employed, 292 in public institutions (including schools), and 142 "other". 250 participants live in North-East China, 164 in South-East China, 793 in North-Midwest China, and 156 in South-Midwest China.

### **III. Demographic and Dummy Code Sheet**

In the present study, the demographic variables examined were gender, age, education, work experience, position, religious affiliation, party affiliation, income, type of work organization, and place of residence.

Dummy coding was used for some of the demographic variables: gender (male=1, female=0); age (17-24=1, 25-34=2, 35-44=3,  $\geq 45$ =4); education (diploma and lower=1, undergraduate=2, graduate=3); work experience (no work experience=0, 0<5 years=1, 5-9 years=2, 10-14 years=3, 15-19 years=4, 20-30 years=5,  $\geq 30$  years=6); position (upper=1, middle=2, lower=3); religious affiliation (Buddhist=1, Catholic=2, Protestant=3, no affiliation=4); party affiliation (Communist Party=1, Democratic party=2, no party affiliation=3); income ( $\leq$ RMB1000=1, RMB1001-3000=2, RMB3001-5000=3,  $\geq$ RMB5001=4); type of work organization (SOE=1, private enterprise=2, foreign joint ventures=3, self-employed=4, public institution including school=5, others=6); and place of residence (North-East=1, South-East=2, North-Midwest=3, South-Midwest=4).

### **IV. Instrument**

In our study, the Mirels-Garrett (1971) Protestant Work Ethics Scale was used to measure the PWE. A questionnaire was translated into Chinese by four psychologists fluent in both Chinese and English and then translated back to English by another independent group to ensure accuracy of translation. The PWE Scale was first tested in a small group to make sure that the questions were understood and whether the people, who were thought to be very involved with their work, had higher PWE scores. Minor revisions were then made to the questionnaire to enhance understandability. The final form of this questionnaire was thus regarded as possessing a satisfactory degree of cross-language equivalence.

The PWE Scale consisted of 19 items, with higher scores reflecting strong adherence to the PWE and lower scores little adherence to the PWE.

Participants responded using a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly). Item 9 ("People should have more leisure time to spend in relaxation"), Item 13 ("Hard work offers little guarantee of success"), and Item 15 ("Life would be more meaningful if we had more leisure time") were reverse-scored. Responses for the 19 items were summed to produce a total PWE. Even though the PWE Scale was initially developed in America

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in 1971, none of the original items was outdated or irrelevant for use in today's modern China.

A very interesting and unexpected result emerged from the results of this study. Conducting the reliability analysis with the help of computers, our study yielded a Cronbach's alpha of only 0.60(mean=60.43, SD=6.91). It appeared that some items produced internal inconsistency, resulting in a low coefficient for the PWE Scale. In order to test which items should be deleted, two methods were employed. One method was the Item-Total Statistics. We used the Item-Total Statistics to test which item's "Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted" was more over 0.60 (Xue, 2010). According to this method, the "Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted" of item 9, 13 and 15 were 0.64, 0.63 and 0.64 respectively. Reliability estimates for the PWE improved from 0.60 to 0.70 (mean=50.71, SD=7.12) after deleting item 9, 13, and 15. These three items in original PWE scale were all reverse-scored. It was unexpected result. Maybe it just reflected cultural differentiation between West countries and Chinese. We hope to explore this matter further in a future study.

The other method was to use Correlation Analyses to test it. The PWE scores were correlated with 19 items on the scale. The result indicated that nearly all of the correlations were significant and positive; except items 9, 13 and 15. The PWE score had the most significant and highest positive correlation with Item 6 ( $r=0.481, p<0.01$ ). Other items also show significant and higher positive correlation (the lowest one was  $r=0.32, p<0.01$ ). However, the correlation between the PWE score and Item 9 was modestly positive but not significant ( $r=0.003, p>0.05$ ). The same correlation was modestly negative and not significant for Item 15 ( $r=-0.005, p>0.05$ ). The relationship for Item 13 was significant but only of modest magnitude ( $r=0.08, p<0.01$ ). Why did these three items have low correlation with the PWE score? They might be influenced by the Chinese culture. We hope to explore this matter further in a future study.

### **V. Result**

To analyze the data, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Tukey-HSD post hoc comparisons were used. Total PWE Scale was always the dependent variable. The independent variables included gender, age, education, work experience, position, religious affiliation, party affiliation, income, type of work organization, and place of residence.

An ANOVA with gender, age, work experience, religious affiliation, and type of work organization as the independent variables indicated no significant differences among these variables groups. Their means and standard deviation scores are presented in Table 1. However, the ANOVA, using education, position, party affiliation, income, and place of residence as the independent variables revealed significant differences among these variables groups. Their means and standard deviation scores are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 1.

Means and Deviations on the PWE by gender, age, work experience, religious affiliation, and type of work organization

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
<hr/>		
Gender		
Female	52.54	6.675
Male	52.37	7.840
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Age		
17-24	52.74	6.843
25-34	54.62	7.027
35-44	52.08	6.777
≥45	52.18	7.971
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Work experience		
Not employed	53.33	6.428
0<5 years	52.45	7.522
5-9	53.25	6.701
10-14	52.30	6.918
15-19	52.44	6.618
20-29	51.90	7.485
≥30	51.31	8.700
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Religious affiliation		
Buddhist	52.98	6.928
Catholic	54.08	6.735
Protestant	53.40	9.195
No affiliation	52.19	6.953
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Place of work organization		
SOE	52.75	7.623
Private-enterprise	51.47	7.815
Foreign-invested ventures	51.25	6.395
Self-employed business	53.47	7.222
Public institution	51.75	7.461
Others	51.80	7.23
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TABLE 2.

Means and Deviations on the PWE by education, position, party affiliation, income, and place of residence

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Education		
≤diploma	51.56	7.209
Undergraduate	52.97	6.840
Graduate	53.12	8.073
Position		
Upper	54.50	8.898
Middle	52.49	7.028
Lower	51.70	6.924
Party affiliation		
Communist	52.69	7.485
Democratic parties	52.48	7.705
No party affiliation	51.70	7.031
Income		
≤ RMB 1000	51.52	6.379
RMB 1001-3000	51.85	7.302
RMB 3001-5000	52.98	7.366
≥RMB5001	53.61	8.345
Place of residence		
North-East	53.18	8.028
South-East	53.93	7.206
North-Midwest	52.08	7.158
South-Midwest	50.85	6.135

Education: The results indicated that people who identified themselves as undergraduates had significantly higher scores than people who identified themselves as no higher than diplomas,  $F(2,1656)= 8.132$ ,  $p<.0001$ . Table 2 contains the means and standard deviations. The people who identified themselves as graduates exhibited the highest scores on the PWE Scale. However, these scores, although higher, did not differ significantly from either the scores of the people who have no more than a diploma or those who are undergraduates. A Tukey-HSD post hoc comparison procedure revealed that higher levels of education achieved higher scores on the PWE Scale.

Position: We conducted an ANOVA by using the three major groupings of position as the independent variable. The finding showed significant differences among the groups,  $F(2,1244)= 8.610$ ,  $p<.0001$ . Table 2 contains the means and standard deviations. We then performed a follow-up Tukey-HSD post hoc comparison procedure. The two levels of position groups (middle and lower) did not differ significantly from each other, but the upper position group did have

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significantly higher scores than the other 2 levels. This result indicated that people with higher work positions tended to adhere more closely to the PWE.

Political affiliation: We conducted an ANOVA by using political affiliation as the independent variable. Again we found significant differences,  $F(2, 1371)=3.070$ ,  $p<.05$ . Table 2 contains the means and standard deviations. A Tukey-HSD post hoc comparison procedure indicated that only the Communist group has significantly higher PWE scores than the no party affiliation group. The groups of Communist and Democratic parties did not differ significantly from each other. People endorsing the Democratic parties had higher mean scores on the PWE Scale than people without party affiliation, but there was no significant difference between them. Communists had the highest mean scores on the PWE score among all three party affiliations.

Income: An ANOVA with monthly income as the independent variable revealed that there were significant differences among the groups,  $F(3,1403)= 4.14$ ,  $p<.05$ . Table 2 contains the means and standard deviation. People with a monthly income  $\geq$ RMB5001 showed significantly higher PWE scores than those with a monthly income  $\leq$ RMB1000. There was no other significant difference among other groups. However, the trend appears to indicate that monthly income positively affected people's adherence to the PWE.

Place of residence: We conducted an ANOVA using residence as the independent variable. We found significant differences,  $F(3,1359)=6.301$ ,  $p<.0001$ . Table 2 contains the means and standard deviations. A Tukey-HSD post hoc comparison procedure indicated that people in South-East China had significantly higher scores than those in North-Midwest and in South-Midwest China. Also the people in the North-East had significantly higher scores than those in the South-Midwest. The lowest mean scores belonged to the people in the South-Midwest, increased by 1.13 points for the people in the North-Midwest, and increased by 1.10 points for the people in the North-East, then reached the peak mean score of 53.93 for the people in the South-East.

## **VI. Discussion and Conclusions**

We explored differences in the PWE scores across a number of demographic variables including gender, age, education, work experience, position, religious affiliation, party affiliation, income, type of work organization, and place of residence.

Concerning gender, age, work experience, religious affiliation and type of work organization, the results indicated that no significant difference on PWE existed among the groups, while the remainder of the variables showed significant differences on PWE among their categories.

As for gender, a number of studies in the past 20 years reported that females are more likely to exhibit better work ethics than their male counterparts (Petty & Hill, 1994; Hill, 1997; Hall, 1991; Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984; Wollack, et al., 1971). This present study, however, did not find significant differences on the PWE between females (Mean=52.54, Std. Deviation=6.675) and males (Mean=52.37, Std. Deviation=7.480). This result was consistent with those of Tang (1989, 1992), Buchholz (1978), Goodale (1973), Ma (1986), and Mirels & Garrett (1971), who also found that females did not adhere closer to the PWE than their male counterparts.

Considering age, no significant difference on PWE among age category was noted in our study. This result was contrary to those of Buschholz (1978), Tang & Tzeng (1992), Petty (1995), Aldag and Brief (1975), Goodale (1973). However, this finding was in accordance with those of Buchholz (1977), Furnham (1982), Ma (1986), MacDonald

(1972).

Concerning people's type of work organization, no previous research was found to have studied this relationship with PWE. In our study, no significant difference on PWE values existed in this category, although the highest mean PWE score belonged to the self-employed business people (Mean=53.47, Std. Deviation=7.222). This result fits well with the Chinese economic reality. Self-employed business people have provided many job opportunities for the Chinese people. It is now considered as a key economic contributor in today's China. However, self-employed business people face all kinds of difficulty in their survival and struggle to succeed, especially in areas such as securing capital and getting attention from government departments. Therefore, almost all self-employed business people have to work diligently and subscribe to the values of the PWE.

As for religious affiliation, the finding showed no significant difference existed in this group. According to the mean PWE scores, Catholics subscribe to PWE values more than the other groups (Mean=54.08, Std. Deviation=6.735). Unfortunately, the sample size was very small (Frequency=12, Valid percent=0.8%) and a caution concerning this finding was warranted. In addition, Protestants showed higher mean PWE scores (Mean=53.40) than Buddhists (Mean=52.98) and those with no affiliation (Mean=52.19). However, no significant difference on PWE was found.

As for work years, no significant difference on PWE was found. However, people who were not employed showed higher mean PWE scores (Mean=53.33) than other groups. Also people who had worked 5-9 years tended to subscribe to PWE values (Mean=53.25). The cause of this difference was far from clear. One possible reason for the non-employed group is that most of them were still students in university and had to study hard for their future. This might have enhanced their beliefs in PWE. For those who have worked about 5-9 years, the explanation might be that these people were at the stage in preparing for advancement in their career. Thus their values are more closely associated with the PWE than their counterparts.

The findings indicated that there were significant differences on PWE among positions, party affiliation, income, and place of residence.

The results appeared to be contrary with the notion that higher educated people have lower PWE (Wentworth, 1997; Furnham, 1982; Ma, 1986). The finding reported significant difference on PWE among people of different educational levels and higher educated people have higher mean PWE scores. This finding seemed to be accordant with those of Baron & Kenny's (1986) and Goodale's (1973). According to Baron & Kenny's (1986), challenging or interesting work for higher educated people was a means of self-expression and self-fulfillment, and not just for survival. This in turn led to higher adherence to PWE values. Another possible explanation stems from the Confucian teaching. Most Chinese are deeply influenced by the well-known proverb: "He who excels in study can follow an official career." This value system motivated students to try their best to achieve the highest achievement in their life. The higher the educational level one achieved, the harder he would work. Therefore, those with higher levels of education tended to subscribe to PWE values. Likewise, undergraduates scored significantly higher than those who identified themselves as having no higher than diplomas. A possible explanation was also found in the traditional Chinese custom. In the eyes of the Chinese people, it is vitally important to attend university in one's life. This situation is expressed in a metaphor: "Carp leap over the dragon gate", which means one should endeavor to succeed in the civil service examination. Therefore, people who had identified themselves as undergraduates believed in "no pain, no gain", which compared well with the PWE.

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The PWE score also showed significant difference among the various position categories. The result revealed that people in higher-level positions tended to subscribe to PWE values. It seemed to be contrary to the results of the study of Ma (1986). A possible interpretation of this finding may be that higher job positions carry with it higher job responsibilities. Furthermore, Chinese organizational structures tend to be one of centralization, resulting in top managers needing to work harder and defer self-gratification. As a result, they may be developing work attitudes which are consistent with the PWE values.

As for party affiliation, several researches with Western cultural background had given it careful consideration (Furnham, 1983a, 1984b; MacDonale, 1971, 1972; Beit-Hallahmi, 1979; Wentworth & Robert, 1997; Tang & Tzeng, 1992), but researchers with Chinese cultural background seldom gave this variable due consideration. Our study indicated that the Communist group had significantly higher PWE scores than those who had no party affiliation. One possible explanation is that Communists claimed themselves as representatives who were advanced in society. They were supposed to work hard and have a disdain for indolence and leisure time. The attitudes of Communists towards work are consistent with the values of the PWE. As a result, Communists tended to have stronger PWE scores than the others. This finding is consistent with some extant studies which suggest that Chinese Communist members strongly identify with job involvement(Zhang et al., 2012; Zhang, 2014).

Contrary to the findings of Furnham (1984b) and Tang & Tzeng (1992), our study found significant difference on PWE among income groups. People with monthly income  $\geq$ RMB5001 showed significantly higher PWE scores than those  $\leq$  RMB1000. This result was possibly related to other variables such as education and position. In China, higher income is connected with higher position and higher education. Therefore, the same reasons that explain why people with higher position tended to subscribe to the PWE values may also apply here.

As for the last variable – place of residence, our study indicated that people in the South-East had significantly higher scores than those in the North-Midwest and the South-Midwest. Also people in the North-East had significantly higher scores than those in the South-Midwest. The data implied that the more economically developed a location is, the higher the PWE scores of the people who live there. The South-Eastern part of China is a highly developed area, while the Midwest region is still in its developing stage, economically speaking. While the finding seemed to support the notion that PWE values were the cause of economic success (Weber, 1958), we believe the cause of a region or a country's economic success was almost certain to be bound by more than one simple factor, such as a PWE value system.

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