

# Proverb preferences across cultures: Dialecticality or poeticality?

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Peng and Nisbett (1999) claimed that members of Asian cultures show a greater preference than Euro-Americans for proverbs expressing paradox (so-called dialectical proverbs; e.g., *Too humble is half proud*). The present research sought to replicate this claim with the same set of stimuli used in Peng and Nisbett's Experiment 2 and a new set of dialectical and nondialectical proverbs that were screened to be comparably pleasing in phrasing. Whereas the proverbs were rated as more familiar and (in Set 1) more poetic by Chinese than by American participants, no group differences were found in relation to proverb dialecticality. Both the Chinese and Americans in our study rated the dialectical proverbs from Peng and Nisbett's study as more likable, higher in wisdom, and higher in poeticality than the nondialectical proverbs. For Set 2, both groups found the dialectical proverbs to be as likable, wise, and poetic as the nondialectical proverbs. When poeticality was covaried out, dialectical proverbs were liked better than nondialectical proverbs across both stimulus sets by the Chinese and the Americans alike, and when wisdom was covaried out, the effect of dialecticality was reduced in both sets and groups. Our findings indicate that caution should be taken in ascribing differences in proverb preferences solely to cultural differences in reasoning.

In recent years, several cross-cultural studies have examined differences in perception, thinking, and self-concept between members of East Asian and Euro-American ethnocultural groups, in response to the notion that socially shared practices, norms, and values guide the construction of meaning (for reviews, see Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004; Nisbett, 2003). A pervasive theme in this research is that differences in ontological and epistemological aspects of Asian and Euro-American traditions engender specific cognitive differences: East Asian traditions are thought to foster holistic or relational thinking, whereas Euro-American traditions are thought to foster analytic or linear thinking (Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004; Nisbett & Norenzayan, 2002; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).

The two intellectual traditions are thought to differ particularly in their manner of responding to contradiction or paradox. According to Peng and Nisbett (1999, p. 742), "Chinese deal with contradiction through . . . finding a 'middle way' by which truth can be found in each of two competing propositions," whereas "Westerners respond to propositions that have the appearance of contradiction by differentiation—deciding which of two propositions is correct." In a series of five experiments, Peng and Nisbett examined East–West differences in thinking about contradiction. Their first two experiments, on cultural dif-

ferences in proverb preferences, are the impetus for the present study.

Proverbs are succinct, memorable expressions that encapsulate the folk wisdom of a culture regarding ways of handling life's predicaments (Honeck, 1997; Leung et al., 2002; Norrick, 1989; Seitel, 1969; White, 1987). They reframe reality by casting adverse circumstances in a positive light or by providing helpful warnings about difficult situations (Tracy, Greco, Felix, & Kilburg, 2003). Peng and Nisbett (1999) argued that cultural differences in proverb preferences may reveal the reasoning valued in a culture, and on this basis they claimed that dialectical proverbs would appeal more to Asians than to Americans.

In their first experiment, Peng and Nisbett (1999) compiled all of the dialectical proverbs from an American proverb collection (totaling 3%) and an equivalent number of such proverbs from a Chinese collection (totaling 12%), and also selected an equal number of nondialectical proverbs from these sources. The proverbs were presented to Chinese and Euro-American college students who rated them on likability, familiarity, frequency of use, and ease of comprehension. A composite preference measure (averaging across the four measures) was used in the analyses. Chinese participants showed a higher composite preference for dialectical than for nondialectical Chinese proverbs, whereas the Americans showed no difference in their ratings of the two types. In the second experiment, using Yiddish dialectical and nondialectical proverbs, Peng and Nisbett again found a preference for dialectical proverbs among Chinese participants only; Chinese participants also rated dialectical proverbs higher in their overall appeal than did the Americans. These findings were taken as support for the claim that Asian intellectual

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traditions foster reasoning that tolerates contradiction to a greater degree.

This claim has not gone unchallenged. It has been pointed out that formal logic in Western traditions and dialectical thinking in Asian traditions need not be viewed as incongruent (Chan, 2000); that dialectical thinking is not, in fact, uniquely Eastern (Ho, 2000); and that an apparent preference for dialectical proverbs does not in itself imply that the Chinese reject the law of noncontradiction (Huss, 2004). Furthermore, the fact that many Western languages contain examples of proverbs expressing contradictory points of view on the same phenomenon (e.g., *Absence makes the heart grow fonder* vs. *Out of sight, out of mind*) suggests that some tolerance for multiple ways of casting reality exists even in Western traditions (see also Furnham, 1987; Teigen, 1986).

In view of these challenges, it is important to reevaluate the issue of proverb preferences across cultures, to determine whether Peng and Nisbett's (1999) finding that Asians prefer dialectical proverbs more than Americans do is in fact replicable. This was the principal aim of the present research. A second aim was to explore variables that may undergird dialecticality in influencing proverb appeal. Two variables were examined: perceptions of proverbs' content (wisdom) and form (poeticity). To the extent that the use of paradox in proverb construction may lead to new insights (Norrick, 1989), dialectical proverbs might be perceived, all other things being equal, to be higher in wisdom than nondialectical proverbs. Alternatively, dialectical proverbs could be appealing because of the way in which they are phrased; Gibbs and Kearney (1994) have suggested that phrases containing implicit opposition (*living corpse*) are judged to be more poetic than those with explicit opposition.

Indeed, several studies have pointed out the importance of phrasing in judging proverbial expressions. For example, aphorisms that rhyme (e.g., *What sobriety conceals, alcohol reveals*) are judged to be more accurate descriptions of human behavior than are nonrhyming aphorisms (e.g., *What sobriety conceals, alcohol unmasks*; McGlone & Tofiqbakhsh, 2000). Similarly, novel expressions that echo the form of a common expression while introducing a new shade of meaning (e.g., *weapons of mass distraction* for *weapons of mass destruction*) are rated as more pleasurable (Giora et al., 2004) or more humorous (Vaid, Choi, Chen, & Martinez, 2005) than those that involve a more marked modification of the form. Given that phrasing matters, it is important at the least to control for poeticity of phrasing when studying the effect of dialecticality in proverb preferences.

### The Present Study: Hypotheses

Our study examined proverb liking ratings of Chinese and Euro-American college students for the same set of dialectical and nondialectical proverbs used in the original study by Peng and Nisbett (1999, Experiment 2) and a new set of dialectical and nondialectical stimuli pretested

to be equally pleasing in their phrasing. In addition to rating how much they liked the proverbs, participants rated the proverbs on poeticity, wisdom, and familiarity.

Across groups, positive correlations were expected between ratings of proverb poeticity and proverb liking (for dialectical and nondialectical proverbs alike), and between ratings of proverb wisdom and dialectical proverb liking.

Based on Peng and Nisbett's (1999, Experiment 2) results, we would expect Chinese participants to show higher liking ratings for dialectical than for nondialectical proverbs, as well as higher liking and familiarity ratings for dialectical proverbs relative to the American participants. Alternatively, if proverb phrasing underlies the effect attributed by Peng and Nisbett to dialecticality, in our Set 1 (in which phrasing was not controlled) a preference for dialectical over nondialectical proverbs might be accompanied by higher poeticity ratings for dialectical than for nondialectical proverbs, but in Set 2 (with phrasing controlled) no preference would be found for dialectical proverbs in liking or in poeticity. More generally, when proverb poeticity was covaried out, we expected that both groups would like dialectical more than nondialectical proverbs. Finally, dialectical proverbs should be rated as higher in wisdom than nondialectical proverbs, and when wisdom is covaried out, dialectical proverbs should be liked to the same extent as nondialectical proverbs.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants were 34 Euro-American college students (18 female), recruited from a psychology department subject pool, and 19 Asian (7 female) graduate students, recruited through informal networks at a large university in the United States. The Asian participants, who ranged in age from 18 to 32 years, were predominantly from Taiwan and China (with some from Hong Kong). They had lived in the U.S. for an average of 3.7 years and were demographically comparable to the Asian sample tested by Peng and Nisbett (1999). The Asian participants had studied English for an average of 15 years; their mean TOEFL score was 570, and their mean self-rating on reading in English was 4.58 on a 7-point scale, in which 7 indicated *like a native speaker*.

### Materials

Stimuli were subdivided into two sets. Set 1 consisted of the 16 Yiddish proverbs (8 dialectical, 8 nondialectical) previously selected by Peng and Nisbett (1999, Experiment 2; listed in Peng, 1997). Set 2 contained 20 proverbs (10 dialectical, 10 nondialectical) selected using a pretest procedure described below. All proverbs were presented in English.

**Pretesting of Set 2 Proverbs.** Set 2 proverbs were culled from a pool of 80 proverbs compiled from two different proverb compendia of American, British, Russian, Greek, French, Latin, and Turkish proverbs (Davidoff, 1946; Langnas, 1960). Five judges (two American and three Asian) first independently rated the proverbs on dialecticality using a 7-point scale, with 1 indicating *not at all dialectical* and 7 *very dialectical*. Proverbs with a mean rating greater than 5 were classified as dialectical, and those rated below 5 were classified as nondialectical. The dialectical and nondialectical proverbs were next rated by the judges on poeticity on another 7-point scale, in which 1 indicated *not at all poetic* and 7 *very poetic*. A set

of 10 dialectal and 10 nondialectal proverbs matched on poeticality (mean rating of 5.08) were chosen as stimuli for Set 2. See the Appendix for the complete list of stimuli.

**Procedure**

Participants rated each proverb on liking, poeticality, wisdom, and familiarity on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*). Liking judgments were solicited first, and familiarity judgments were solicited last; the order of the wisdom and poeticality judgments was counterbalanced across participants. A fixed random presentation order was used, in booklet format, with the constraint that Set 1 stimuli preceded Set 2 stimuli.

**Data Analyses**

For each stimulus set, the liking, wisdom, poeticality, and familiarity ratings were analyzed in separate 2 × 2 ANOVAs ( $F_1$  by participants,  $F_2$  by items) as a function of group (Chinese vs. American) and proverb type (dialectal vs. nondialectal). In addition, ANCOVAs were performed on the liking ratings, with wisdom and poeticality as covariates. Finally, correlational analyses for wisdom and liking and for poeticality and liking were performed by group, proverb type, and stimulus set.

**RESULTS**

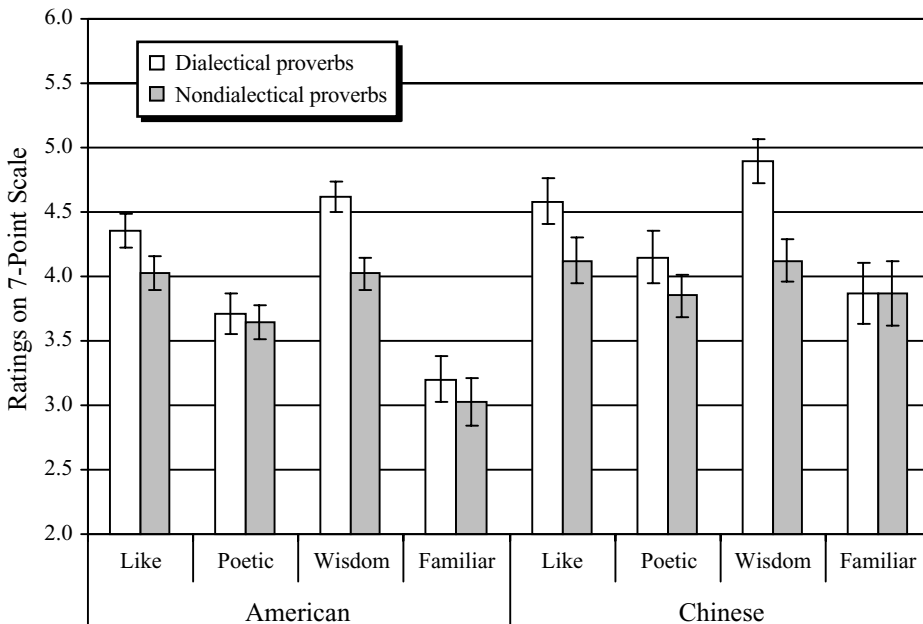
**ANOVA Results: Effects of Group and Proverb Dialecticality**

See Figure 1 for a summary of mean ratings per group and proverb type on each of the measures for Set 1, and Figure 2 for a summary of mean ratings for Set 2 stimuli. Effect size values are provided below for each finding. Following Cohen (1998), effect sizes larger than .138 are considered large, those above .059 are considered medium, and those above .010 are considered small.

**Liking.** Dialectal proverbs in Set 1 (Peng & Nisbett’s, 1999, Experiment 2 proverb stimuli) were liked more than their nondialectal counterparts, but this effect was limited to the analysis by participants [ $F_1(1,51) = 21.52, p < .001, \omega^2 = .162; F_2(1,14) = 1.60, p > .1, \omega^2 = .019$ ]. Crucially, there was no main effect of group [ $F_1(1,51) < 1; F_2(1,14) = 2.88, p > .1, \omega^2 = .057$ ], nor a group × proverb type interaction ( $F_s < 1$ ). For Set 2, dialectal proverbs were not liked any more than nondialectal proverbs by either Chinese or Americans ( $F_s < 1$ ).

**Familiarity.** Chinese participants rated proverbs (whether dialectal or nondialectal) as significantly higher in familiarity than did the Americans [Set 1 stimuli:  $F_1(1,51) = 7.14, p = .01, \omega^2 = .055; F_2(1,14) = 15.80, p < .001, \omega^2 = .316$ ; Set 2 stimuli:  $F_1(1,51) = 4.43, p < .05, \omega^2 = .031; F_2(1,18) = 10.11, p < .01, \omega^2 = .185$ ]. In addition, dialectal proverbs in Set 2 were judged to be more familiar than the nondialectal proverbs [ $F_1(1,51) = 37.93, p < .001, \omega^2 = .258; F_2(1,18) = 6.98, p < .05, \omega^2 = .130$ ]. Importantly, in contrast with Peng and Nisbett’s (1999) claim, there was no group × proverb type interaction for either set ( $F_s < 1$ ).

**Wisdom.** As hypothesized, dialectal proverbs were judged as higher in wisdom than nondialectal proverbs, and this was the case for both Asians and Americans. In Set 1, there was a main effect of proverb type [ $F_1(1,51) = 31.74, p < .001, \omega^2 = .225; F_2(1,14) = 5.11, p < .05, \omega^2 = .114$ ], no group effect [ $F_1(1,51) = 1.24, p > .1, \omega^2 = .002; F_2(1,14) = 2.68, p > .1, \omega^2 = .051$ ], and no interaction effect ( $F_s < 1$ ). For Set 2, in which dialectal and nondialectal proverbs were matched on phrasing appeal,



**Figure 1.** Mean proverb preferences (and standard errors) for dialectal and nondialectal proverbs by Chinese and Americans for the Set 1 stimuli (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*).

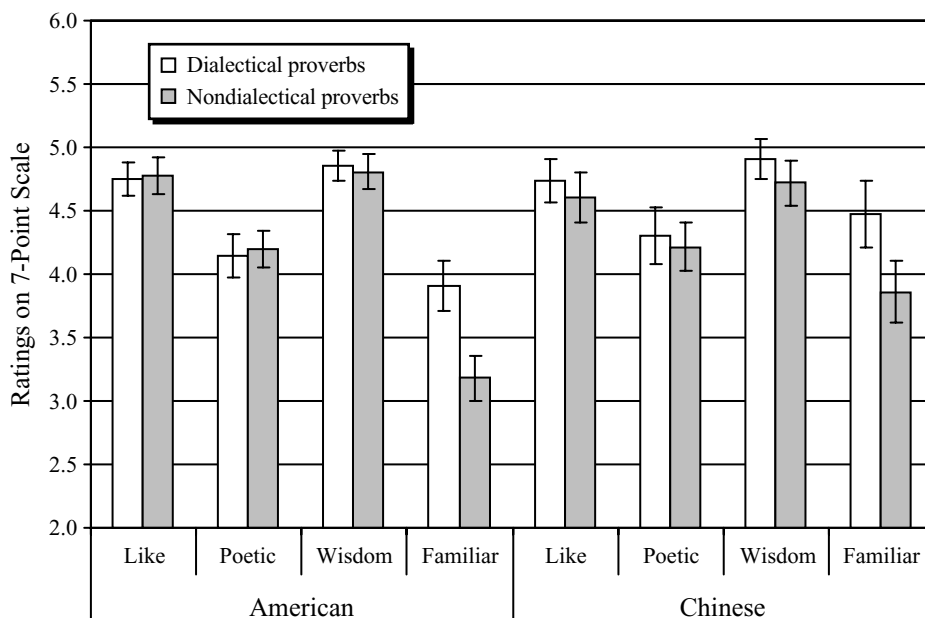


Figure 2. Mean proverb preferences (and standard errors) for dialectical and nondialectical proverbs by Chinese and Americans for the Set 2 stimuli (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*).

dialectical proverbs were *not* judged to be wiser than nondialectical proverbs [ $F_1(1,51) = 1.47, p > .1, \omega^2 = .004; F_2(1,18) < 1$ ]. Again, there was no main effect nor an interaction for group ( $F_s < 1$ ). It would appear that proverb poeticity partially influences judgments of wisdom.

**Poeticity.** We had hypothesized that Peng and Nisbett's (1999) dialectical proverbs would be judged higher in poeticity than their nondialectical proverbs. This hypothesis was somewhat supported in the by-participants analysis [ $F_1(1,51) = 3.83, p = .056, \omega^2 = .026; F_2(1,14) < 1$ ]. There was no group effect [ $F_1(1,51) = 2.20, p > .1, \omega^2 = .011; F_2(1,14) = 6.83, p < .05, \omega^2 = .146$ ], though, nor any interaction [ $F_1(1,51) = 1.57, p > .1, \omega^2 = .005; F_2(1,14) = 1.01, p > .1, \omega^2 = .0001$ ]. For Set 2 items, since the proverbs were pretested to be matched in poeticity, no difference was expected between dialectical and nondialectical proverbs in perceived poeticity, and none was found; nor was any main effect or interaction found involving group ( $F_s < 1$ ).

#### ANCOVA: Liking Ratings

If proverb liking is influenced by poeticity and wisdom, we would expect that covarying these attributes should have an impact on dialectical versus nondialectical liking ratings.

For the original Peng and Nisbett (1999) stimulus set (i.e., without controlling for these variables), a significant proverb type effect was present; for the new stimulus set, no significant proverb type effect was present. After controlling for poeticity, the proverb type effect remained significant in Set 1 [ $F(1,49) = 8.76, p = .005$ ], and in Set 2, covarying poeticity resulted in a significant effect

of proverb type emerging [ $F(1,49) = 10.82, p = .002$ ]. The group effect and the interaction of type and group remained nonsignificant in both sets ( $F_s < 1$ ). This suggests that once poeticity is covaried out, dialectical proverbs are liked better than nondialectical proverbs, by Americans as well as Asians.

When wisdom was controlled, the proverb type effect in Set 1 was reduced in significance [ $F(1,49) = 3.19, p = .08$ ], and in Set 2 it was not significant ( $F < 1$ ). The group effect and interaction remained nonsignificant ( $F_s < 1$  for both sets). This suggests that once wisdom is covaried out, dialectical proverbs are not liked significantly better than nondialectical proverbs, by either group.

Controlling for both wisdom and poeticity, the type effect was again nonsignificant [ $F(1,47) = 2.63, p = .11$ , in Set 1, and  $F < 1$  in Set 2]. The group effect and interaction remained nonsignificant (both  $F_s < 1$ ). This suggests that once both wisdom and poeticity are covaried out, dialectical proverbs are not liked any better than nondialectical proverbs.

#### Correlational Analyses: Liking and Wisdom, and Liking and Poeticity

**Asians: Dialectical proverbs.** Chinese participants' appreciation of dialectical proverbs was strongly linked to their perception of wisdom in the proverbs (like–wisdom: Set 1 stimuli, Pearson's  $r = .43, p = .068$ ; Set 2 stimuli,  $r = .65, p < .01$ ) rather than poeticity (like–poetic: Set 1,  $r = .10, n.s.$ ; Set 2,  $r = .36, n.s.$ ).

**Asians: Nondialectical proverbs.** Chinese participants' appreciation of the nondialectical proverbs (particularly in Set 2) was driven more by their perceptions of

poeticity in the proverbs (Set 1,  $r = .65, p < .01$ ; Set 2,  $r = .58, p < .01$ ) than of wisdom (Set 1,  $r = .60, p < .01$ ; Set 2,  $r = .21, p > .05$ ).

**Americans: Dialectical proverbs.** For the ratings of dialectical proverbs, the like-poeticity correlation was significant for the American participants across both stimulus sets (Set 1,  $r = .49, p < .01$ ; Set 2,  $r = .60, p < .001$ ), as were the like-wisdom correlations (Set 1,  $r = .72, p < .001$ ; Set 2,  $r = .80, p < .001$ ). This suggests that the dialectical proverb preferences of the American participants were driven by their perceptions of poeticity and wisdom in the proverbs.

**Americans: Nondialectical proverbs.** For the ratings of nondialectical proverbs, the like-poeticity correlation was significant for the American participants with both stimulus sets (Set 1,  $r = .50, p < .01$ ; Set 2,  $r = .60, p < .001$ ), as was the like-wisdom correlation (Set 1,  $r = .66, p < .001$ ; Set 2,  $r = .64, p < .001$ ). These results suggest that the American participants' nondialectical proverb preferences were also driven by both their perceptions of poeticity and wisdom in the proverbs.

## DISCUSSION

Our study was designed to determine whether the finding by Peng and Nisbett (1999, Experiment 2) that Asians prefer dialectical over nondialectical proverbs more than Americans do is replicable. Our results indicate that it is not; the failure to replicate Peng and Nisbett's finding is all the more noteworthy given that our dialectical and nondialectical stimulus sets included the same items used in Peng and Nisbett's Experiment 2.

Specifically, our results showed that whereas for both Asians and Americans, dialectical proverbs in Set 1 (the stimuli used by Peng & Nisbett, 1999, Experiment 2) were liked better than nondialectical proverbs (in the by-participants analysis), for Set 2 stimuli, neither group preferred dialectical over nondialectical proverbs (in either the by-participants or the by-items analysis). Furthermore, an examination of effect sizes revealed that the lack of group difference in liking of dialectical proverbs was not likely due to insufficient power.

A second goal of this study was to examine the contribution of poeticity and wisdom judgments in relation to proverb dialecticality effects in proverb liking. Since Peng and Nisbett (1999) had not controlled for poeticity, the effects they attributed to dialecticality may in part have reflected differences between the dialectical and nondialectical proverbs in poeticity. This account is supported by the finding that our participants rated Set 1 dialectical proverbs as higher in poeticity than their nondialectical counterparts. Furthermore, when poeticity was covaried out, dialecticality emerged as significant in both Sets 1 and 2. That dialecticality is strongly associated with wisdom is suggested by our finding that when wisdom was covaried out, dialectical proverbs were not liked better than nondialectical proverbs.

Although our study found no evidence for cultural differences associated with a selective preference for proverb dialecticality, we did uncover two interesting group differences in overall proverb judgments. Chinese participants rated the proverbs as more familiar than did Americans. This effect was fairly robust, since it was observed in both stimulus sets and in the by-participants and by-items analyses, and it suggests a strong cultural salience for proverbs among Asians. The other group difference was more tenuous but no less interesting: For the Set 1 by-items analysis, Chinese participants rated the proverbs as significantly more poetic than did the Americans. This finding suggests that at least part of the source of the group  $\times$  proverb type interaction observed by Peng and Nisbett (1999) may have been a greater overall sensitivity on the part of the Chinese participants to the phrasing of the proverbs, rather than a preference for dialecticality per se. Since Peng and Nisbett did not solicit poeticity judgments, this observation must remain speculative. However, additional hints of possible cultural difference in the weighting of aesthetic versus cognitive criteria in proverb liking may be found in the results of our correlational analyses. Here we observed that Asians' degree of liking of dialectical proverbs was influenced more by the proverbs' judged wisdom than by their poeticity; however, Asians' liking of nondialectical proverbs was influenced more by the proverbs' poeticity than by wisdom. For Americans, both wisdom and poeticity ratings were positively correlated with liking for both dialectical and nondialectical proverbs.

Whereas further research is needed to understand better what goes into poeticity and wisdom judgments, an important outcome of our study is the consistent absence of a group  $\times$  dialecticality interaction in proverb judgments. This failure to replicate the finding of such an interaction by Peng and Nisbett (1999, Experiment 2) calls the latter finding into question and weakens the claim that cultural differences in proverb preferences reflect an overall preference for dialectical reasoning among members of Asian cultures. Our study found no support for such a cultural difference in reasoning style. A more general implication of our research is that cultural differences in reasoning style should not be readily assumed, even if the task ostensibly relates to reasoning, since in some cases factors other than reasoning style may provide a more parsimonious explanation.

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**APPENDIX**  
**List of Proverb Stimuli**

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**Set 1: Dialectical**

A man is stronger than iron and weaker than a fly.  
 Better an eloquent silence than an eloquent speech.  
 Too humble is half proud.  
 Every uphill has its downhill.  
 Half a truth is still a whole lie.  
 There is a new question to every answer.  
 Beware of your friends, not your enemies.  
 Too much honor is half a shame.

**Set 1: Nondialectical**

If things don't get better, they surely will get worse.  
 "For example" is no proof.  
 One against all is certain to fall.  
 A wounded spirit is hard to heal.  
 If there is room for question, something might be wrong.  
 You can never catch up with a fool in his folly.  
 A man should live if only to satisfy his curiosity.  
 What we speak of by day we dream of by night.

**Set 2: Dialectical**

The more something changes, the more it remains the same.  
 The courteous learn their courtesy from the discourteous.  
 There is nothing permanent except change.  
 No answer is also an answer.  
 Every advantage has its disadvantage.  
 He who asks everybody for advice remains without advice in the end.  
 The easiest way to dignity is humility.  
 To do two things at once is to do neither.  
 Everybody's business is nobody's business.  
 The best defense is a good offense.

**Set 2: Nondialectical**

Will is the cause of woe.  
 An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.  
 Sorrow will pay no debt.  
 Good material is half the work.  
 An idle person is the devil's playfellow.  
 One good head is better than a thousand strong hands.  
 Fate leads the willing and drags the unwilling.  
 Better lose the anchor than the whole ship.  
 A fishing rod is a stick with a hook at one end and a fool at the other.  
 He who weeps from the heart can provoke a blind man to tears.

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