

Dr. Jun Wang, Assistant Professor
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University

Linda Co, MS Candidate

Introduction

Dr. Jun Wang is from Nanjing, China—a city filled with deep history and rich cultures. She describes her home town as “a very beautiful, green city surrounded by lakes, mountains, and rivers that has been a city in China for over 2000 years.” Some of her favorite memories of Nanjing include boating in the city lake, hiking on the city mountains, and trekking the Nanjing City Wall to learn about the beautiful roots of Nanjing. She received her baccalaureate degree in Applied Psychology at Nanjing Normal University, Master’s in Developmental and Educational Psychology at Zhe Jiang University, and Ph.D. in Applied Developmental Science at Colorado State University. She conducted program evaluations on youth serving organizations focused on character development for her postdoctoral training at Tufts University in Boston.

Upbringing

During Dr. Wang’s adolescent years, she became interested in psychology when she was actively exploring her identity. She found psychological books and articles to be very inspiring. In addition, a psychiatrist named Dr. Jason Seaver in one of her favorite American TV shows, “Growing Pains,” inspired her to follow the life wisdom and career path as he did. Therefore, she majored in psychology in college and was amazed to find the relevance of psychology in every aspect of life and society.

Her research interest in motivation developed in her senior year, when she served as a volunteer teacher in a very remote rural village in north-western China. Although the area was very poor and lacked resources and opportunities for youth, she was very touched by the local children’s strong motivation to learn, thrive, and fulfill their potential. She became very interested in understanding what makes people motivated even in the face of challenge and why individuals differ in their motivation. Dr. Wang did her Master’s to study young children’s motivation and pursued her Ph.D. in the U.S. to study it further. As her research on motivation continues, she realized that in real world settings, children are often simultaneously influenced by multiple approach and avoidance motives and have to deal with internal and external demands at multiple levels. For children to stay focused with developmentally adaptive and contextually appropriate goals, the ability to coordinate among complex demands and to regulate one’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are critical. She started to incorporate the examination of regulatory processes into her research. As she extended her research from childhood to adolescence, she recognized that, in addition to motivation and regulation, children need to have the correct direction in life so that they can use their strengths to benefit themselves and the environment. “We want youth to use their motivation and regulation in a healthy, adaptive, and moral way to become contributing members of the society.” Thus, character development became another important topic in her research.

Research Agenda

Dr. Wang's main research interest is studying the socio-emotional development of children from different sociocultural backgrounds. She seeks to understand how youth programs can help promote socio-emotional competencies including mastery motivation, and emotional and behavioral regulation. Her upbringing to study psychology and children's motivation, emotional, and behavioral regulation during challenges led her to incorporate character development into her research agenda in recent years. Through her research, she wants to understand how youth programs can be more inclusive and diverse and increase cultural competencies of youth practitioners to make programs more culturally appropriate. Dr. Wang is currently studying:

- motivation, emotional and behavioral regulation in children when they face challenges
- how cultural specific youth programs impact developmental process of cultural identities in children in the context of both heritage culture and the mainstream culture (multicultural society context)

Doctoral dissertation

During her doctoral program, Dr. Wang wanted to understand the functions of emotion and the behavior strategies between youth from different cultural backgrounds in the same context. She wrote her dissertation on a cross-cultural comparison study between American and Chinese preschoolers' emotional and behavioral regulation in socially challenging contexts. The study consisted of presenting children in both groups with an alluring toy followed by a set of instructions. When asked to resist the temptation of touching the toy, American children used physical distractions to direct themselves away from challenges. In contrast, Chinese children used more self-soothing strategies to comfort themselves to cope with their emotional challenges. While waiting for a new toy to arrive, American children displayed more anger while waiting, compared to Chinese children who showed more composure. When the toy was taken away and a less attractive toy was given, American children were more joyful while Chinese children displayed more anger. In a way, American children were more expressive in their emotions and had a more proactive approach to change the context of their surroundings. Chinese youths tried to find things within themselves to cope with their emotional challenges that eventually led to an accumulation of anger. Accumulated anger may eventually reach a threshold if emotions are not regulated accordingly. The study revealed how children express or handle their emotions is a combination between their current situation, cultural rules and norms, and expectations they have developed through their developmental history of being socialized.

Completed Research

One of Dr. Wang's completed research projects involved working in the Character and Merit Project (CAMP) with Boy Scouts of America to understand inclusivity among different ethnic youth groups and character development between scouts and those who did not traditionally participate. CAMP was geared towards bringing the Boy Scouts experience to underserved youth. Scout Reach revealed positive program impacts for nontraditional participants. Nontraditional scouts included those who did not have resources to join the scouts program and may not have had a very stable place in their community for regular scouting activities. The Scout Reach program offered waived fees, required fewer obligations from working parents, and worked with schools to secure a meeting space for scouting activities. Data

collected to understand how scouting programs work differently for different minority youth groups revealed the following:

- **Cultural Barriers:** Youths in the Scout Reach program may not have a complete understanding of what scouting is like compared to traditional scouts who could rely on their fathers' or grandfathers' knowledge, often founded in actual scouting experiences.
- **Lack of Resources:** Many youths in this program, especially black children, were missing a positive male figure in their lives. There is an additional challenge with working mothers and children may not have transportation or resources to go to after school programs.
- **Inclusivity:** participants in the Scout Reach program valued their experiences and learned a lot from their scout leaders. The recurring themes that differed from Caucasian kids emphasized the following:
 - more attention to tolerance, being more open and acceptable to people who are different from themselves
 - making positive changes in the community, including making it more clean and safe for kids in their community

Scout Reach youth leaders often feel a greater responsibility to be a role model for these youths to compensate for the missing role models in the youths' lives. Leaders often times emphasized values in introducing these kids to successful people with the same racial background to demonstrate their capabilities, competence, and success in society in all different disciplines.

Research in Progress

Dr. Wang is currently working with Dr. Darlene Locke in trying to understand how intercultural exchange programs can help promote cultural competencies and global citizenship among participating foreign youths and host families. The goal of this project is to endorse more mutual understanding, respect, and interactions among different cultural groups. During summer 2019, she collected data from Korean and Japanese international students who came to homestay for school. They are currently analyzing data collected before and after the homestay program. They want to know more about youths' understanding of host culture and how their own global mindedness developed as they engaged in different cultural activities on a daily basis with the host family. Drs. Wang and Locke are hoping to assess what some of the barriers to intercultural communication are, if any, and the factors that can help resolve stereotypes and challenges in navigating cultural differences.

Words of Wisdom

“Development is a life-long process. Whenever we are captivated by a momentary emotion, success, failure, or challenge, we may find it helpful to zoom out and view everything from a developmental, historical, societal, or universal angle. We should actively solve the problems. We should also relax and sleep tight. No fear. No regret. Do your best and keep moving forward. Be patient with every process.”