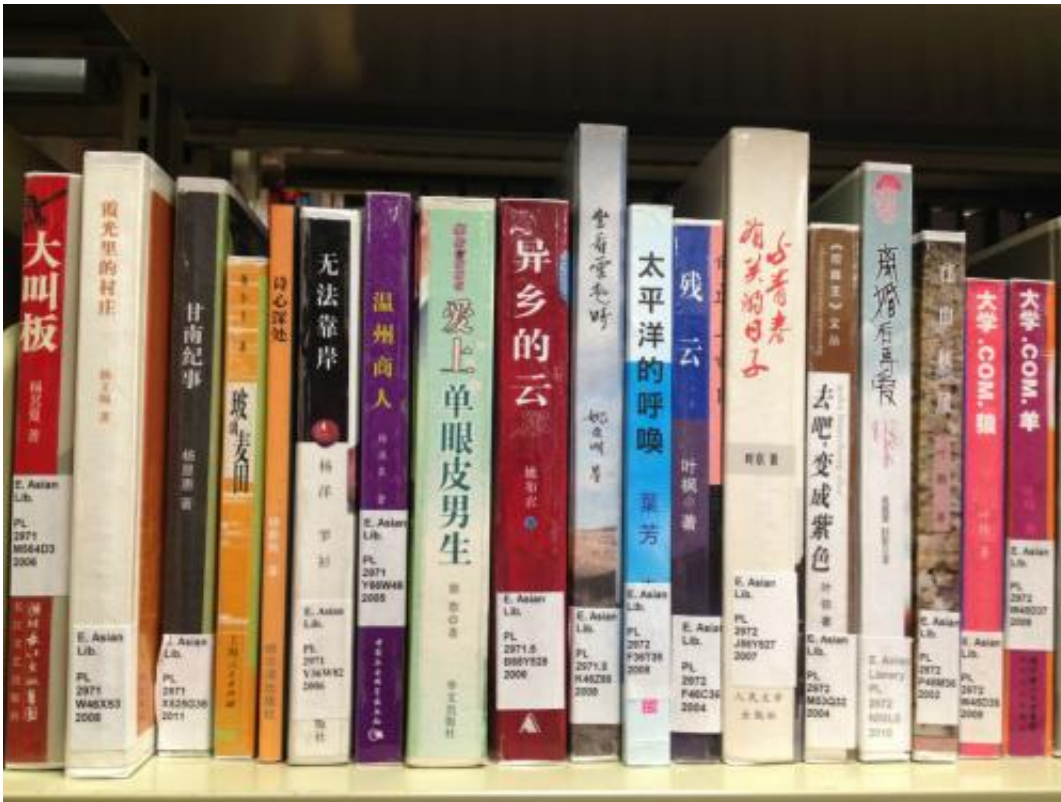


# Words used in Chinese books illuminate how a nation's values changed during reforms

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A new analysis of words used in Chinese-language books reveals China's changing values. Credit: Chan Zhou

As China has undergone rapid economic and social change in recent decades, an increase of individualistic values has been reflected in the word choices of Chinese authors.

Rong Zeng, a graduate student at China's Beijing Normal University and a visiting researcher at UCLA, and Patricia Greenfield, a UCLA distinguished professor of psychology, analyzed the words used in 277,189 Chinese-language books published between 1970 and 2008. Their findings are published in the February issue of the *International Journal of Psychology*.

The researchers chose 16 words that they determined represent a cross-section of values in Chinese culture, and then used the Google Ngram Viewer, a free online tool, to determine how frequently they were included in the texts.

"We found evidence of rising individualism in concert with growing urbanism, increasing wealth and higher levels of formal education," Greenfield said.

Among the study's results:

- Use of the word "communal" rose sharply during the Cultural Revolution, especially from 1970 to 1976; it decreased during the 1980s. (China launched [economic reforms](#) in 1978, and they continue to this day.)
- The word "autonomy" was used just one-third as frequently as "obedience" in 1970. In 2008, the ratio had flipped and "autonomy" appeared three times as much as "obedience."
- The increase in use of words like "choose," "compete," "private," "autonomy" and "innovation" demonstrated a growing prevalence of individualistic values coinciding with sharp rises in urban population, household consumption and education levels.
- Words reflecting communal values, such as "help" and "sacrifice," declined in frequency.

The study did find that use of certain words reflecting communal values,

such as "obliged" and "give," increased throughout the period—but at a much lower rate than words reflecting contrasting individualistic values.

In sharp contrast, a previous study by Greenfield analyzing American books found that the use of the words "obliged" and "give" declined substantially from 1800 to 2000 as U.S. society shifted from being predominantly rural to predominantly urban.

Drawing on Greenfield's theory of [social change](#) and human development, the authors hypothesized that the use of specific words in Chinese literature would wax and wane as a reflection of psychological adaptation to sociocultural change. The data supported their hypothesis.

"Focusing on the period from 1970 to 2008, our study shows what may be one of the steepest turning points in the long, zigzag course of China's social and value development," Zeng and Greenfield wrote. "Economic reforms led Chinese society in a direction that encourages individual achievement, materialism and entrepreneurship. This great transition brings dramatic changes to Chinese society and presents great challenges to traditional Chinese values and lifestyles."

For the research, Zeng and Greenfield used Google's Ngram Viewer, which can count word frequencies from thousands of books in the Google Books database in a matter of seconds.

The study took into account important linguistic differences between Chinese and English. For example, to avoid overly broad meanings, Zeng analyzed only two-character words. (The most frequently used words in Chinese are composed of either one or two characters.) And to help find the most appropriate translations, Zeng consulted the Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, the Oxford Chinese Dictionary and the Modern Chinese Dictionary.

In addition, Zeng consulted two native Chinese speakers from different demographic profiles: a 26-year-old man with a law degree and a 58-year-old woman with a college degree in biology. They judged each of the selected words on its usage contexts, importance and underlying meanings expressed in Chinese society. Independently, both agreed that all of the [words](#) the researchers chose are commonly used to represent important Chinese values.

Greenfield said socio-demographic shifts driving cultural and psychological change are global; in the future, she plans to conduct similar studies of Spanish, French and Russian books.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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