

# Chinese culture and coaching in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

Coaching is a Western concept introduced into the Hong Kong Chinese society almost two decades ago. Confucianism, the underlying Chinese cultural principles, and Hofstede's five dimensions of culture (1980, 1997, 2001) are examined to determine the cultural characteristics of Hong Kong. This mixed methods study analyzes data collected via a focus group and a small scale survey to investigate how Hong Kong Chinese coaches and coachees feel about the compatibility of coaching with their Chinese cultural heritage. The findings will provide insights into the training of coaches in Hong Kong and lay the ground work for further research in multicultural coaching.

**Key words:** Coaching; Confucianism; Hofstede dimensions of culture; Hong Kong Chinese;

## Introduction

Coaching has largely been driven by Western thinking and business practice. It is only recently that coaching has started to gain a strong presence in Asia (Abbott, 2010). In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong International Coaching Community (HKICC) was registered in 2002 by a group of coaches who were mainly English speaking people, educated in the West. The International Coach Federation (ICF), formed in 1995, defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.” Coaching has become more popular in Hong Kong with the development of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community, which was originally the Hong Kong Coaching Community (registered as a society and accepting founding members in 2002). Most of the professional coaches are trained to coach in English, which is the second language to most of the people in Hong Kong who are mainly (98%) of Chinese ethnic origin. However, they are a unique group of Chinese who have been highly influenced by Western customs and traditions because of the 155 years of British rule but also very Chinese in thoughts and behaviour due to their original Chinese heritage.

This paper attempts to discuss the cultural characteristics of Hong Kong people and match their cultural inclination with the Western technique of coaching. The basic cultural values of the Chinese people, identified by Confucianism and the five Cultural Dimensions of Hofstede (1980, 1997, 2001) are examined to determine if the Western technique of coaching is being accepted by the local Chinese coaches and their clients. This mixed methods study comprises a review of Chinese cultural characteristics and some underlying principles of coaching. Empirical data is collected via a focus group and a survey to investigate if the Chinese cultural characteristics and the Hong Kong identity are compatible with the principles of coaching. Conclusions will be drawn from the findings which provide valuable insights for further understanding of cross-cultural coaching, especially in the Far East.

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## **The Chinese Culture**

Almost 98% of the population of Hong Kong is Chinese. Confucianism is “the essence of Chinese traditional culture” (Ng, 2013) and comprises the teachings of Confucius on practical ethics or pragmatic rules for daily life derived from the lessons of Chinese history (Hofstede & Bond, 1994). It is seen as the correct observation of human relationships within a hierarchical society. Here, the stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people; the ‘wu lun’ or five basic relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and between friend and friend. These relationships are based on mutual complementary obligations: a junior owes a senior respect and obedience (Hofstede & Bond, 1994). Each individual has to perform his or her role in such a way that he or she should say precisely what he or she is supposed to say. Harmony in society is founded on the maintenance of everybody’s ‘face’, in the sense of dignity, self-respect, and prestige. It is important to save one’s own ‘face’ by behaving with dignity and give others’ face by behaving with respect to others. Most Chinese people in Hong Kong, though educated in the western schools, are greatly influenced by this Confucian heritage (Wei & Li, 1995).

## **The Hong Kong Chinese Cultural Identity**

The Chinese people in Hong Kong were ruled by the British for 155 years and the majority were educated in the English language. Western culture was given a higher priority in Hong Kong than traditional Chinese culture (Wang, 2014). Despite being regarded as a Confucian society by western writers (Hofstede, 2001; Bond, 1986; Redding, 1990; Kirkbride & Tang, 1992; Scollon & Scollon, 1994) Hong Kong has been described by local writers as being “modern western but with underlying Chineseness, it is Chinese with a surface of English-speaking internationalism” (Wei & Li, 1995:17).

“The Chinese population are beginning to assert their identity as Hong Kong Chinese, not the least to stress their distinctiveness from the Chinese from China and the Chinese in Taiwan.”(1995:54)

In a survey conducted in 2007 by the University of Hong Kong's Popular Opinion Programme, (Fung & Wu, 2007), 23.4 per cent of the respondents considered themselves “Hongkongers”, and when the same survey was conducted in 2013, “Hongkonger” was the preferred designation for 38 per cent of the respondents (Cheung, 2013). 26.4 per cent and 23 per cent claimed a “Chinese identity” in 2007 and 2013 respectively. A further 31.8 per cent saw themselves as “Chinese Hongkongers”, while 16.7 per cent said they were “Hong Kong Chinese”. In the 2013 survey, 36 per cent chose “Chinese Hongkonger” or “Hong Kong Chinese” (Cheung, 2013). In a 2014 poll, a historic low of 31 per cent of the respondents chose to consider themselves “Chinese people” or “Chinese in Hong Kong” (Wang, 2014).

Abbas (1997) echoes Lau and Kuan (1988) by stating that the Hong Kong identity distinguishes itself from the mainland Chinese and the overseas Chinese who may have been more strongly influenced by Confucian teachings. “As a former colony, the city’s lack of a Chinese identity was understandable” (Chou, 2015). Hong Kong, however, has a unique position in terms of political and economic changes. In a very recent protest for universal suffrage in October 2014, the Hong Kong identity crisis was raised again because of the different levels of economic development with Mainland China and the one country two (political) systems under the rule of Beijing (Ying, 2014).

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Bond (1991) suggests that people in Hong Kong are eager to learn the English language, which is an international language and be in contact with the contemporary world as it allows a blending of Chineseness with modernity. Lau (1982) has never associated Hong Kong with a Confucian society even though he stresses the importance people here see in the relationships in the family. Lau (1982) regards 'emphasis on material values' as the first major normative orientation of Hong Kong. This is due to the success of the market competition in the 1970s and 1980s that has given Hong Kong people a more "comfortable" and "affluent" lifestyle than their Chinese counterparts (Ng, 1995). This is similar to Bond's description of 'materialism', which is considered as 'the pursuit of wealth'. People in Hong Kong work hard for monetary rewards, which are set high on their list of priorities according to Bond's (1986) attitude survey among Chinese workers.

In Hofstede (1980; Hofstede and Bond, 1984; Hofstede, 2001) Hong Kong culture is characterized as low on individualism and high on collectivism, with a strong orientation towards the family (Venter 2002), as well as high power distance, weak uncertainty avoidance, medium masculinity and high long term orientation. Trompenaars (1993) concluded that in Hong Kong, Chinese managers demonstrate a high level of collectivism, a strong sense of belonging to a social group and prefer working in groups to solve problems.

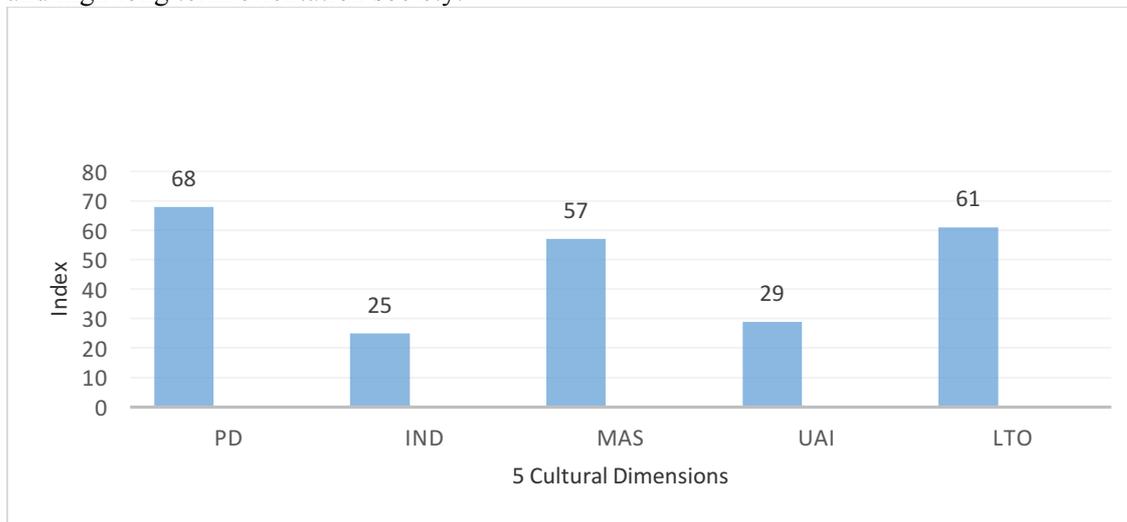
The prevalence of Western influence in terms of the 'culture of commodity', 'commercialism' (Leung, 1995) and Western capitalist ideas (Choi, 1991) have dominated the Hong Kong society, where people are not concerned about being in a 'collectivist society' working for the common good but for the 'individual pursuit of personal achievements'. This was interpreted by Lau (1982, 1984), who found that Hong Kong cannot possibly be called a 'collectivist' society in the sense of ancient Japan and China because of economic and social constraints. For example, it is hard for the local residents to live under the same roof with their extended families (typically of three generations) as the size of flats is more suitable for a nuclear family of four. The scarcity of space means that flats in Hong Kong are small and are meant for a nuclear family. The extended family or the clans are no longer considered as 'family units'. The family unit is thus a small unit and personal achievements are thus shared among the few people in the unit. Venter (2002) reviewed the literature on Hong Kong culture and made the following summary:

"Hong Kong is portrayed as a collective society with a strong orientation to the family. Within this context, a relatively apolitical society has emerged in which individuals tend to focus their efforts on the family as a resource for survival rather than taking mass collective action. Within the culture is a strong sense of order, consensus and social harmony, perhaps largely explained by the influence of Confucianism, and this has meant a demand for respect for particular positions and a tradition of obedience. Indicative of this is Hong Kong's high score on Hofstede's power distance index." (Venter, 2002:51)

With this unique Hong Kong identity, people in Hong Kong might be considered as more receptive to Western ideas than their mainland counterparts. Coaching was introduced into Hong Kong in the 1990s and all the coach training since then has been dominated by trainers using English as their medium of instruction. The objective of this research is to investigate if this Western originated intervention is compatible with this unique mixed culture in Hong Kong.

## Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions of Hong Kong

Another aspect of Hong Kong cultural characteristics has been widely discussed in Hofstede, et al (2010) who describe the five cultural dimensions and the index for Hong Kong. Fig 1 is a diagrammatical presentation of the five dimensions for Hong Kong. This research examines the compatibility of coaching to this group of people who are described as living in a high power distance; low individualism; high-mid masculinity index; low uncertainty avoidance; and high long term orientation society.



**Fig. 1 - Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions of Hong Kong (2010)**

### *Power Distance Index (PDI)*

Hofstede's power distance index (PDI) is the degree of equality/inequality due to different individuals' positions in a society. People in a high power distance society accept that there is a hierarchy in society. The seniors or elderly people are respected. Hong Kong ranks 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> among 76 countries with an index of 68 (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010: 58).

### *Individualism Index (IDV)*

Hofstede's Individualism index (IDV) describes the relationship between an individual and his/her fellow individuals. It refers to the ties between individuals and society. Individualistic societies are loosely integrated and participants are concerned about their own needs, goals and achievements. People's privacy is being respected. Collectivist societies are usually tightly integrated and social group norms and benefits take precedence. There is respect for age and wisdom in the group. Personal feelings and emotions are being suppressed to work for harmony. In this dimension, Hong Kong ranks 55<sup>th</sup> to 56<sup>th</sup> among 76 countries with an index of 25 (Hofstede et al, 2010: 96). This means Hong Kong is a relatively low individualism society where there will be a preference for maintaining harmony and direct confrontation will normally be avoided. The importance of saving one's "face" is often emphasized.

### *Masculinity Index (MAS)*

Hofstede's Masculinity index (MAS) refers to the differences between values which have been traditionally associated with males or females. In masculine societies people are assertive and competitive rather than modest, and care for things and money rather than people. Hong Kong ranks 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> among the 76 countries with an index of 57 (Hofstede et al, 2010: 142). This is a relatively high to mid score in masculinity. People are assertive, and material things and money are important, advancement and earnings are prioritised and ego is strong in this society.

#### *Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)*

Hofstede's Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) describes the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Hong Kong ranks 72<sup>nd</sup> to 73<sup>rd</sup> with a very low UAI index of 29 (Hofstede et al, 2010:194). People here do not stick rigidly to rules and are less concerned about risk and uncertainty. In learning situations, open-ended discussions are accepted and unanswered questions are tolerated. Students from low UAI countries accept a teacher who says "I don't know."

#### *Long Term Orientation index (LTO)*

Hofstede believes that people in societies with high long term orientation (LTO) index value long term tradition and focus on the future. These people value education and have a strong work ethic. They tend to reward perseverance, loyalty and commitment. Hong Kong is the second highest long term orientation culture with an index of 96 among the 23 countries in the 1985 survey (Hofstede et al, 2010:240). Even though in the more recent World Values Survey of Minkov in 2007, Hong Kong ranks 28<sup>th</sup> to 32<sup>nd</sup> among 93 countries with an index of 61 (Hofstede et al, 2010:256). Hongkongers are still considered to have a relatively high LTO index. They are persistent and work hard for the future good. In the learning situation, they emphasize the future and are very concerned about commitment and loyalty.

### **Principles of Coaching**

Silsbee (2004) generalizes coaching as "evocative, drawing upon the client's capabilities, aspirations and resourcefulness; based on a partnership with clear, mutually defined expectations; focused on, and dedicated to, the development of the client; and interactive and non-prescriptive." (2004:19). He further elaborates that a person is not coaching if he "uses authority or positional power to motivate the "client" by stating organizational expectations...." and "...diagnoses the client using an 'expert' system." Another conventional understanding of coaching holds that the client is the expert in his or her field and has all the resources to find answers to the challenges he or she may be going through (Whitworth, Kimsey-House & Sandahl, 1998). Rosinski (2003:4) defines coaching as the "the art of facilitating the unleashing of people's potential to reach meaningful, important objectives". Overall it can be argued that coaching aims to make concrete impacts and results. It is about helping the client to articulate and achieve objectives. The focus is on the current lives and future plans of their clients (Rosinski, 2003). Other key terminologies in these definitions are "facilitating"; "unleashing" and "potential". Facilitating does not imply being prescriptive instead coaching is an interactive and development process where the coach enables the client to find his/her own solutions, discover new opportunities and implement action. Unleashing ones potential is synonymous with drawing on one's capabilities, aspirations and resourcefulness as stated by Silsbee (2004).

In these descriptions of coaching, there are a few common terms which identify coaching from other ‘people helping’ interventions, like mentoring and consulting. The coach partners with the client in an interactive process to develop the client’s potential. What coaching does not entail is the use of authority and the expert system on the part of the coach. All these are in line with the conventional understanding of coaching (Nangalia & Nangalia, 2010) as expounded by leading writers and coach training schools, however it appears they are written from a Western cultural ethos. The main characteristics of coaching are that coaching is a relationship of equality; the coach must not give advice or tell the client what to do; the coaching agenda is the one of the client. With these principles of coaching in mind, this research sets out to investigate if the Hong Kong Chinese find these principles of coaching compatible with their cultural inclination.

## **Methodology**

The study took a mixed methods approach which the Journal of Mixed Methods (2006) defines as a way of research in which the investigator collects, analyses, mixes and draw inferences from both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study. The benefit of using the mixed methods approach is that the researcher can use results from one method to help develop or inform the other method. As Mertens (2003) and Punch (1998) suggest, mixed method investigations may be used to better understand a research problem by converging numeric trends from quantitative data and specific details from qualitative data.

This study includes a small scale focus group that generates a number of major themes which are then developed into a questionnaire to collect quantitative data which elaborates on the themes with numeric support (Schmidt & Conaway, 1999). To generate ideas for the design of the survey, a focus group was held with 6 practicing coaches who all had at least two years’ coaching experience. They were all local Chinese coaches trained by local English speaking coaching schools. Since all the training courses were delivered in English, learners are all expected to have a relatively competent grasp of this Western language which is typically the second language in Hong Kong.

The main objectives of the focus group were three-fold. Firstly, the purpose was to find out if Chinese culture prevails in Hong Kong. Secondly, the purpose was to determine whether Confucianism is the dominant value in Hong Kong. Thirdly, participants were also encouraged to share their views regarding whether coaching is compatible with the unique culture of Hong Kong. Lasting ninety minutes, the focus group was audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. Analysis of the coded data from the focus group informed the development of a quantitative questionnaire.

With a number of major themes established from the focus group, a questionnaire with 16 items on a five-point Likert-style totally agree/totally disagree scale was administered to a group of 62 Hong Kong Chinese who have either been trained as coaches or have had the experience of being coached. These participants were invited using a random sampling method (Robson, 1993) via email by friends and colleagues who are certified coaches or Human Resource practitioners who have been using coaching in their workplace. Over 60% of these participants were aged between 31 and 50. These people have experience with coaching for at least one or two years to over 10 years. These quantitative data were analysed and categorized into

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themes related to the Hong Kong Chinese culture and coaching literature, particularly with Hofstede’s studies on cultural dimensions and the data related to Hofstede’s dimensions of culture.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The focus of this study is to investigate the compatibility of coaching, which is a relatively new and Western intervention, with the local Hong Kong Chinese cultural characteristics. The main areas of discussion include the Hong Kong cultural identity; the Hong Kong Chinese views on coaching; as well as an analysis of Hofstede’s five dimensions of culture matched against the underlying principles of coaching.

### ***Hong Kong Cultural Identity***

As stated in the methodology section, all the 6 members of the focus group considered themselves “Hong Kong Chinese” and accepted the values taught by Confucius. All 62 respondents to the survey also claimed that they were Hong Kong Chinese. Thirty-four respondents (55%) accepted the Confucian teachings that society is made up of a structured hierarchy, 20 were not sure and only 8 (13%) responded that they do not accept the structured hierarchy in society. The results also indicate that 44 respondents (71%) accepted Confucian teachings on the “five basic relationships”, while 15 were not sure and 3 (9%) did not accept this five basic relationships. This shows that about two-thirds of the respondents were Chinese ‘in-thought’. However, another question on whether they were affected by traditions and culture from the West, 43 (69%) was answered affirmatively. All the 6 focus group members agreed that their way of thinking had been greatly influenced by Western ideas because of the education system they had experienced. This implies that Chinese people in Hong Kong are highly influenced by the culture and traditions from the West even though they are basically Chinese in thoughts and behaviour. The next step of the study was to explore if these individuals accepted Western techniques of coaching alongside their Chinese mind-sets which were highly affected by Western traditions and culture.

<b>Cultural Values</b>	<b>Agree</b>
Accept structured hierarchy in society	55%
Accept “five basic relationships”	71%
Affected by traditions and cultures from the west	69%

***Table 1: Cultural Values of Hong Kong Chinese***

### ***Hong Kong Chinese Views on Coaching***

To many people coaching is still a relatively new kind of people intervention and it is often misunderstood to be an equivalent to mentoring or counselling. The participants of the survey were drawn mostly from people who had undergone a certain amount of training in coaching and had an understanding of what coaching is. Around 30% of these respondents agreed that coaching is a product of Western societies. It is a technique imported originally from USA to Asia which is becoming increasingly popular in Hong Kong. Yet most coach training is still relatively Western as most of the local training schools conduct their training in English (Spaxman, 2015). Another 47% did not accept that coaching was a product of Western

societies. These may be people who see a lot of similarities between coaching and other people interventions and did not find coaching a foreign concept.

### ***Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions of Hong Kong and Coaching***

This section is a discussion of Hofstede's (1980, 2001; Hofstede, et al., 2010) five cultural dimensions and the index for Hong Kong. The purpose is to determine if these five dimensions correspond with the main characteristics of coaching. Respondents' views on coaching are also presented and some major arguments from various writers are discussed.

#### *Power Distance Index (PDI) and Coaching*

According to Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov (2010) people in a high power distance society like Hong Kong accept that there is hierarchy in society. In this study 55% of the respondents accept that there is a hierarchy in society and they agree that seniors are respected among the Chinese. As in Nangalia & Nangalia (2010), the coach in Asia is respected as someone senior with wisdom and knowledge. He or she is seen as a respected elder or teacher and is more knowledgeable. This idea is echoed by Ng (2013) who believes that the hierarchy in society leads to the unequal status between the coach and the client. This is in line with the idea of the Confucian hierarchy in society.

Respondents in this research were asked if they felt that the coach had authority over the client. Forty-five respondents (74%) felt that the coach does not have authority over the client, however, 41 respondents (66%) accepted the view that the relationship between the coach and the client is of equal status. 12 respondents (19%) disagreed with this view. Tulpa and Bresser (2013) suggest that one of the underlying principles of coaching is of a low power distance relationship. It implies that during a coaching session, the coach and the client are at the same level looking at issues with an open mind. This reconfirms that most Hong Kong Chinese adopt a Western mode of thinking and feel that the coach and the client are equal during a coaching session and the coach does not have authority over the client. So while Hong Kong ranks relatively high in the power distance index and respondents feel that there is a strong hierarchy in society, they believe that the coach and the client are equal in status. In a coaching relationship, most Hong Kong people see the equal status between the two parties and this also confirms Silsbee (2004) arguments that anyone who uses authority or positional power to motivate the client is not coaching. This is to a large extent contrary to the relatively high power distance index of Hong Kong.

Two members of the focus group described the coaching relationship as a "partnership". They agreed with Silsbee (2004) who argues that coaching is a partnership with clear, mutually designed expectations. This coincides with the ICF definition of coaching as "... partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential." O'Neill (2007) calls "partnership" the second ingredient of executive coaching because she sees the coach standing shoulder to shoulder with the executive in untangling and assessing many factors, forces and dilemmas facing the leader. Flaherty (2005) calls "relationship" the first principle of coaching. He simply says that: "the relationship is the background for all coaching efforts. The relationship must be one in which there is mutual respect, trust, and mutual freedom of expression." (2005:11).

Just less than half of respondents (27 of the 62) felt that the coach should initiate the talking at a coaching session. Only 25 respondents felt that the coach should control the flow of

the coaching session. In this aspect, respondents in Hong Kong do not see the real tasks and responsibilities of the coach, as what Silsbee (2004) calls the seven voices of the coach: the master - who is fully present; the partner - who is defining, negotiation and sharing responsibility; the investigator - who is finding out the client's true needs; the reflector - who is providing feedback and encouraging self-awareness; the teacher - who provides information, language and tools for addressing issues and problems, the guide - who is providing impetus and ideas for action and the contractor - who is encouraging mutual accountability, monitoring client follow-through. The coach is, in fact, in full control, initiating the talking and listens attentively, in order to play all the seven roles successfully and simultaneously. This role is confirmed by O'Neill (2007) in her four phrases of executing coaching which are contracting; planning; coaching and debriefing. In each of the stages, the coach is in control of the flow and is the one who initiates the talking even though they are at an equal footage in terms of hierarchy.

### *Individualism Index (IDV) and Coaching*

Tulpa and Bresser (2013) suggest that one of the underlying principles of coaching is of a medium individualism index. It means the individual is concerned about his/her own needs, goals and achievements. However, an interpersonal relationship is also governed under this dimension (2013:3). During a coaching session, the coach and the client are both concerned about the individual goals and the well-being of the organization or the society. Hofstede (2001) ranks Hong Kong a relatively low individualistic society where harmony should always be maintained and direct confrontation avoided. The importance of saving one's "face" is often emphasized.

The issue of "face" is a very typical Confucian value and is an important one to maintain harmony in society (Ng, 2013; Sun, 2008; Bond, 1996). Respondents were asked if they were concerned about losing face during a coaching session when they have to be honest and open up their own weaknesses during the coaching conversation. Thirty respondents (i.e. 48%) disagreed. It is surprising that these Chinese clients are not concerned about losing face and are very willing to open themselves up. Only 18 respondents (29%) were concerned about losing face in a coaching situation. Thinking along the same lines, all members of the focus group felt that "face" was not an issue as the real objective of coaching is to help build self-esteem. In a genuine coaching relationship, the non-judgmental nature of this intervention opens up the client and the coach.

One of the masteries of coaching advocated by the International Association of Coaching is "trust". It requires the coach to build a relationship based on trust. Trust is also emphasized in Wong and Leung (2007) when they define it as "interaction". They call it...an assertion of confidence, or simply an expectation that the person you have chosen to trust can be relied on." (2007:242). With trust, the client is more comfortable in opening himself or herself up and the issue of "face" is not a concern. One participant remarked that the idea of "face" has never come up her mind in a coaching scenario. She feels extremely natural and comfortable in the coaching relationship and is very willing to open herself up for self-reflection.

The issue of privacy is something that is relatively Western and respondents were asked if they felt that their privacy is being respected during a coaching session. This is because during the coaching conversation, the client is expected to be open and honest about some personal feelings and thoughts. Fifty respondents (89%) said that they felt strongly about their privacy being respected during a coaching session. The Western idea of privacy and individualism is

highly valued in the Hong Kong Chinese society (Tse, 2013). In this aspect, Hong Kong's lower individualism score in Hofstede's cultural dimension is not reflected in respondents' high respect for personal privacy. This further reinforces the idea that Hong Kong people have been strongly influenced by the British rule for over a century and they have almost adopted the British way of thinking.

#### *Masculinity Index (MAS) and Coaching*

Hong Kong ranks relatively high-mid-score in Hofstede's masculinity index. People are assertive and so are coaches and their clients. Material things and money are important, advancement and earnings are important and ego is strong in this society. Tulpa and Bresser (2013) analysis of Hofstede's dimensions suggests that the underlying principles of coaching stand for a medium masculinity index. A coaching session is supposed to be an open conversation when the coach listens to the client's concerns and feelings and facilitates the client towards setting personal goals. The role of the coach is one of guiding and not of "telling". Fifty-two respondents (84%) felt that the client was not expected to "listen" to the coach during the coaching session and 45 respondents (74%) said the coach should not be "telling" the client what to do. Even though respondents felt that during a coaching session, both parties are equal and that the coach is not to tell the client what to do, paradoxically, 49 respondents (79%) felt that the coaching session is a learning experience for the client. As Sieler states:

".....coaching is about learning. This means that the coach and the coachee enter into a learning partnership together. The coach is neither a trainer nor a teacher who delivers content and skills. The coach is a facilitator of learning,....." (2014: 34).

Cox (2013) also refers to coaching as a transfer of learning and she suggests that one of the unwritten goals of coaching is to ensure sustainable learning and development for the client long beyond the end of the coaching intervention. This implies that coaching is a two-way communication process when the two parties discuss issues rather than one party being in control. Even though the coach may not overtly control the situation, seven respondents (11%) preferred a coach who was more assertive. This is consistent with Hong Kong's relatively high score in masculinity index where people value assertiveness and openness. Being assertive implies that the coach is open and persistent in facilitating the client in achieving his/her goals. It may also imply that the coach takes the relationship seriously and is persistent in helping the client.

#### *Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) and Coaching*

Hong Kong ranks very low in UAI index (Hofstede et al, 2010:194). People here do not stick rigidly to rules and are less concerned about risk and uncertainty. In the learning situation, open-ended discussion is accepted and unanswered questions are tolerated. Students from low UAI countries accept a teacher who says "I don't know." Tulpa and Bresser's (2013) analysis of Hofstede's dimensions suggest that the underlying principles of coaching also stand for a low uncertainty avoidance index. Since the coaching session is an open conversation, issues are not always meant to be resolved. When respondents were asked if they were comfortable with having unanswered questions after the coaching session, 35 (56%) said they were and 12 (19%) were not sure. There were only 15 (25%) who said they were not comfortable if they had questions that do not obtain an answer. Sieler states that:

“Coaching is always a relationship between coach and coachee, and the nature of this relationship has a major bearing on the learning that occurs in the coaching interaction. The coach does not have ‘the answers’ or know ‘what is best’ for the coachee.” (2013:5)

Silsbee (2004) also affirms that coaching may result in client learning but it is interactive and non-prescriptive. The coach should not diagnose the client using an ‘expert system’. Whitworth et al (1998) share the same idea that the coach must not provide the answers but encourage the client to generate their own solutions and strategies because the conventional understanding of coaching holds that the client is the expert in his or her life and is resourceful enough to find the answers to the challenges they may be going through.

Even though the Hong Kong Chinese culture has a low uncertainty avoidance index, one focus group member felt that Hongkongers were rather “short-sighted” and lacked a sense of security. Another member wished that the coach could inspire the client in his/her area of uncertainty. Their fear of the uncertainty is also supported by Nangalia and Nangalia (2010) whose research supports that in Asian societies, the coach is seen as someone more senior in the social hierarchy and is typically respected as someone who is knowledgeable. Thus, they are able to give advice and insight to the client.

The point that needs elaboration here is that 56% of the respondents were happy with not getting an “answer” or advice from the coach. When this is compared to other Asian Confucian societies, one can argue that Hong Kong people are aptly described by Hofstede’s low UAI index. They are more receptive to uncertainty than people from other Asian countries. In the coaching situation, they are stimulated to think, to set goals, to plan for the future, but do not necessarily requiring concrete advice or answers to their questions.

#### *Long Term Orientation (LTO) index and Coaching*

Tulpa and Bresser’s (2013) analysis of Hofstede’s dimensions suggests that the underlying principles of coaching stand for a medium long term orientation. Hong Kong ranks very high in the long term orientation index which according to Hofstede, is where people value long term traditions and focus on the future. As one of the focus group members said, coaching helps the client grow, master his/her direction and become confident for future change. One of the survey questions asked whether the coaching session emphasized the future. 42 respondents (68%) were affirmative of this. This shows the majority of respondents accept the future orientation of coaching and that they believe the purpose of coaching is the discussion of present issues with a view for a better future. Flaherty (2005:5) supports this stating that:

“...coaches have to address both a short- and a long-term view. Short term in the sense that they must support their clients in reaching their goals, but long-term in the sense that the client will always have more challenges later and must be left competent to deal with these situations as they arise, while simultaneously conducting a fulfilling life.”

Silsbee (2004) reminds his readers that while it is important to meet the short term needs of the clients for immediate ideas and solutions, their long term development is the ultimate goal. Cox (2013) confirms this when she summarizes the closeness of the experiential coaching cycle:

“I examined manifestations of coaching transfer to the workplace and related them to levels of experience, cognitive awareness and situational uncertainty. I then looked at

how clients can be helped to take their perspectives and new learning forward into future experiences. This helps takes two forms. Intentions are supported through familiar action planning and goal setting strategies, ensuring resources are in place and making time to rehearse upcoming situations, while the support for implementation suggests that coaching may often need to continue in some form beyond the normal coaching six or 12 sessions, in order to guarantee sustainability”. (2013:160).

The long term orientation index for Hong Kong clearly shows that two thirds of the respondents recognized the future orientation of coaching and were able to continue with the plan or the solutions towards a more sustainable future. The table below summarizes the survey results related to the major themes in coaching and Hofstede’s dimensions of culture for Hong Kong, in comparison with Tulpa and Bresser’s (2013) views on coaching.

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions	Tulpa and Bresser (2013) views on coaching	Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions for Hong Kong	Major themes in coaching	Survey Results Percentage of Agreement
Power Distance	Low PD relationship	High PD Index 68	In a coaching session, the coach and the client are equal	66%
			The coach has authority over the client	3%
			The coach should initiate the talking	45%
			The coach controls the flow of the coaching session	40%
Individualism	Medium IDV	Low IDV Index 25	I am concerned about “face” during a coaching session	29%
			I feel strongly about my privacy being respected	89%
Masculinity	Medium MAS index	High-mid MAS Index 57	The coach should not tell the client what to do	74%
			The client is not expected to listen to the coach	84%
			He coaching session is a learning experience for the client	79%
			I prefer a coach who is assertive	11%
Uncertainty Avoidance	Low UAI index	Low UAI Index 29	Client feel comfortable with having unanswered questions after the coaching sessions	56%
Long Term Orientation	Medium LTO index	High LTO Index 61	The coaching session emphasizes the future	68%

**Table 2: Survey Results on the Major Themes in Coaching in Comparison between Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions for Hong Kong and Tulpa and Bresser Views on Coaching**

### Conclusions

The conclusions that can be drawn from this study provide valuable insights into the acceptance of coaching in a context with a different set of cultural norms. Hong Kong people are basically Chinese in thoughts and behavior, however, they are highly influenced by Western,

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and in particular it would seem British, culture and traditions. Hong Kong people accept coaching as an open discussion for both parties to share issues and concerns freely at an equal status level. The effect of Confucianism and Hofstede's cultural dimensions do not appear to have a high impact on Hong Kong people's acceptance of the Western technique of coaching.

Despite being in a high power distance society, these respondents from Hong Kong do not treat the coach as the authority figure. They feel that in a coaching situation, there is equal status between the coach and the client. The idea of the coaching relationship being a partnership is accepted and supported by various writers as well as the ICF. Even though Hong Kong has a medium low individualism score, the majority of respondents value their privacy being respected. The issue of face does not become an issue in the coaching situation although in a Confucian society this is a very significant value. Clients are willing to open themselves up to their coach because of the trustful relationship that has been built. This is indeed one of the Masteries of the coaches advocated by the International Association of Coaching.

Hofstede's dimension of masculinity index and the relatively high score for Hong Kong is reflected by the respondents' preference for an assertive coach. An assertive coach is someone who is open and persistent about developing the client. The idea that coaching is a transfer of learning and the coach is the facilitator of learning is generally accepted. Sieler's (2005) idea that the coach is neither a trainer nor a teacher who delivers content and skills is accepted and 79% of the Hong Kong respondents felt that coaching is a learning experience where the coach and the client have entered a learning partnership together. Hong Kong's relatively low uncertainty avoidance score is reflected by the respondents' tolerance of conflicting opinions and having unanswered questions at the end of coaching sessions. Only 15% of the Hong Kong Chinese felt that they were uncomfortable having answered questions after the coaching. These findings differ from other studies of coaching in a Confucian society (Nangalia and Nangalia, 2010) which propose that the coach in a Confucian cultural setting is seen as a more senior and respectable person who is expected to give advice and insight to the client. The modern Hong Kong Chinese would tend to agree more with Whitworth et al (1998) who claim that the coach must not provide the answers but encourage the client to generate their own solutions and strategies because the client is the expert in his or her own life.

Hofstede's long term orientation index is also reflected in the Hong Kong situation when respondents suggest they accept the fact that coaching emphasizes the future. The future orientation of coaching was recognized by 68% of the Hong Kong respondents. Tulpa and Besser (2013) amongst others (Flaherty, 2005; Silsbee, 2004; Cox, 2013) have the same belief that coaching is part of a long term learning process for the client and their long term goals are to be achieved supported by the coach even beyond the duration of the coaching assignment.

### **Implications of Findings for Coaching Practice in Hong Kong**

The findings of the study imply that Hong Kong Chinese are greatly affected by the Western way of thinking even though they have a strong Chinese cultural heritage. Coaching is a Western intervention imported into the Hong Kong Chinese society relatively recently but it is accepted as a useful approach for the client to "partner" with the coach in a "thought provoking and creative process" to maximize his/her personal strengths.

Despite their Confucian views on respecting seniors and following advice from wiser people, Hongkongers do not see the coach as a senior. They understand the role of the coach as a facilitator of learning and someone who helps draw out their potential. The Hong Kong

Chinese feel the need to be treated as equal in a coaching relationship and they also feel the need for their privacy to be protected. The issue of “face” is not a concern in a coaching situation and they can happily open themselves up and discuss options and opportunities freely.

The idea of future orientation of coaching is acceptable to most Hongkongers. Coaching is not a solution to issues and problems. Coaching helps clients see the future clearly as they set objectives after evaluating various options with the coach. They do not tend to expect the coach to provide answers to their questions or give them any advice. The study has indeed opened up the Hong Kong Chinese face to foreign coaches who might have misconceptions regarding their Chinese clients because of the stereotyping of their Chinese cultural heritage. Hongkongers are in fact global citizens who are extremely receptive to novel ideas and interventions as long as they are proven to be efficient.

### **Future Research**

This small scale pilot research of coaching in an Oriental country with Western influence collected data from Hong Kong coaches and clients to explore if Hofstede’s descriptions of the cultural characteristics are demonstrated in coaching interventions. The findings provide some insights into the Hong Kong Chinese views towards coaching and their beliefs in this ‘free open discussion’ involving respecting each other’s face and privacy. The researcher hoped that the findings would provide the opportunity for readers to share their cultural experiences and extend their insights of working with different cultures.

This is the first attempt in scratching the surface of understanding coaching and its development in the unique culture of Hong Kong. Future research will be encouraged to comprise a bigger sample size and explore in more depth the more abstract cultural issues and their compatibility with coaching. It is also hoped that foreign coaches will have a better understanding of their local clients so their coaching effectiveness is enhanced.

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