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# Freedom as cultural-discursive resource

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## Abstract

Humanity has never suffered so much from racial repression, social division and cultural domination as in the contemporary world. Freedom is under the severest attack the mankind has ever seen. Erno and Birk timely seize the issue of human freedom and contend that psychologists must turn their attention to it from a practical, political and interdisciplinary perspective, thereby opening up new avenues to human flourishing and self-actualization. And yet this proposal has given still insufficient heed to the cultural nature of freedom. It is the objective of this essay to argue for and sketch out a cultural-discursive approach that purports to provide not just a systematic and precise account of freedom but also a methodological framework for its research.

## Keywords

Communication, discourse, culture, methodology, Chinese tradition

The question of freedom has persisted for thousands of years in human history and yet has never become so acute and as challenging as in the present-day world. It is indeed timely that Ernø and Birk's essay (this issue) draws critical attention to the neglected psychology of freedom. Against the Western tradition of understanding of freedom as personal and negative, they adopt a developmental framework and argue for a notion that is more social and positive. Proceeding from this novel thesis, they propose and insist that freedom should be studied from practical, normative and multidisciplinary perspectives. This innovative approach has at least three merits.

First, by pointing to the practical dimensions of freedom, it becomes possible for psychologists to turn attention to the ways in which people construct freedom as it is lived in the world. Researchers can then examine the ways that people use semiotic means to

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create, define, utilize, seek, demand, repress or abuse freedom. Situated practices like “There was no choice” “I have the right to choose” “This is (not) a free country” “Free Palestine!” become topics of interest.

Second, by calling for attention to the normative dimensions of freedom, it becomes possible for psychologists to expand their scholarship in social, ethical and political terms. They can then plan, guide and critique activities of pursuit, enjoyment and utilization of freedom. Who needs, has or loses freedom, what kind of freedom and how much is needed, how can freedom be achieved, what constitutes breach or repression of freedom, etc. become important concerns for them.

Third, by advocating a multidisciplinary–sociological, political as well as cultural–psychological–approach to freedom, it becomes possible for psychologists to redirect their efforts to mutually broaden, enrich and (re-)vitalize the field of freedom research with other scholarly traditions and lineages, for example, philosophy, cultural studies and communication/discourse studies. What is the relationship between human freedom and the natural world? How, for example, is Chinese freedom compared with that of the US and how do their societies think and feel about each other’s freedom? What role do the media, conventional and new, have on the issue of freedom (think about the current Israeli war in Palestine)? Questions such as these have hardly been touched upon in our scholarship.

The proposal mounted by Ernø and Birk (this issue), provocative and productive as it is, is short of one crucial consideration, however. While it is true that Vygotsky’s (Rieber, 1997) cultural developmental framework is appropriated as a useful avenue to the innovation of the psychological approach to freedom, one deeper question of in what specific sense, and how, freedom may be *cultural*, seems left to all possible imagination. In fact, their account of freedom seems still anchored in and confined to the Western individualistic tradition while purporting to be universal (Ernø & Birk, 2024 this issue, pp. 10–11); where possibilities of culturally different and diverse forms and theories of freedom are ignored, for instance, interactively co-constructed, socially shared freedom, freedom in connection with nature, are left out of the picture. Another related but more complex question is just how cultural pursuit, creation and actualization of freedom may be methodologically looked into, made sense of and accounted for; in that connection, the underlying question is, if freedom is culturally diverse and competitive, how we are to construct local and global theories.

It is the contention of the present author that, unless and until an explicit and systematic *cultural-discursive* framework is rendered available, a practical, normative and multidisciplinary approach to freedom, like the one championed by Ernø and Birk, cannot be properly accomplished.

Let me make a modest attempt at such an account here. First, as should be borne in mind, there is not just commonality in the freedom of humanity, but also diversity, which is more often than forgotten, explained away or otherwise repressed. Chinese society, for example, has shown quite a different character and face of freedom from that of the Western one (this issue, pp. 3–10). On the whole, it may be asserted that it has been more society- and more universe- oriented on the one hand and so conceptually broader and richer on the other than that of the West.

Confucianism, founded by Confucius (551–479 BC), a philosophical doctrine which has exerted a dominant ideological influence in China for over two thousand years till today, advocates a kind of freedom as found in everyone's *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (rite, or appropriateness and respectfulness of conduct) towards a harmonious *relationship with* society. A number of other Confucian thinkers contribute in one way or another to this notion of freedom. Mencius (372–289 BC), following Confucius, argued for the innate goodness of human nature, which, if cultivated, could lead to inner freedom based in harmonious relationship with others. Mozi (470–391 BC), founder of Mohism, a philosophy that insisted on impartial love for everyone, emphasized social responsibility and challenged rigid hierarchies and in this way offered a pathway to societal freedom. Xunzi (313–238 BC) who believed in innate evil nature of human beings and so contended that people could achieve a sense of inner freedom and fulfillment by learning and striving to become virtuous. To these, it should be added that, outside Confucianism, Daoism, enshrined in *Daodejing* (sixth–fourth BC) and *Zhuangzi* (fourth BC), contributes to the Chinese concept of freedom as well. It saw freedom as an inner tranquility through transcending societal expectations and internal ambitions but did bring about a vision of societal freedom that is established through everyone' (in)acting in line with the natural order of the universe, named the *Dao*. Thus, classical Chinese culture has created a notion of freedom, not as individual property, but as societal product that is achieved through collective doing and being.

Of course that does not mean that Chinese freedom has been excessively societal and there is no personal element in it. In modern China under the Nationalist Party's rule, Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of the Chinese most renowned authors, humanist and social critics, explored themes of individual freedom, rebelling against traditional norms and struggling for a more just society. Ba Jin (1904–2005), another renowned writer, focused on the themes of liberation, social justice and the fight against oppressive authority. In these cases, freedom has been used not only as collective, societal right to be protected and maintained, but also as argument to oppose injustice of tradition and authority.

Further, it should be noted that, in the present-day China, freedom has been re-framed in a Marxist perspective. Namely, people will progress from the so-called kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. In such a perspective, the people under the current socialist system with Chinese characteristics are to find freedom by living *in harmony with* nature, with society and with themselves (as physical-and-spiritual beings) (方杲, 杨欣宇, 2023).

Thus, it may be concluded that, for the Chinese, freedom is not merely a personal, individual right, or responsibility for that matter, or developed through external cultural mediation, but a socially shared product that is accomplished collectively and interactively based on the triple-pronged principle of harmony. In this sense, Chinese freedom is thoroughly cultural.

Second, it should be realized that all cultural forms, dimensions and aspects of freedom, and not just freedom but perhaps most of human cognition and emotion, cannot be divorced from human communication (Kienpointner, 2024, p. 214). We think and feel whether or not we are free and how free we are by language and other media in dialogue with others and ourselves. The last words of the dying US air-force serviceman,

disseminated over the world through social media (repeated “Free Palestine!”), speak volumes. And yet, human communication, defined as social practice in which people interact with one another using language and other means purposefully and consequentially in given context of history and culture, is not simply universal. Just like cognition and emotion which are by nature cultural as is the starting point of *C&P*, communication should be seen as a global system composed of culturally diversified and competing discourses (Shi-xu, 2014, 2016). The discourses of the Chinese/Asian/Developing World and those of the American-West may differ, within and without, in worldviews, ways of thinking, values and norms, ways of meaning making, conditions of communicative technology, etc.; further, they are in complex relations of power. The communication of freedom, then, should also be understood in terms of cultural discourses. In the Chinese case we saw above, freedom has never been merely individual but has been conceptualized as in close relation with society and nature; freedom has not only a dimension of obligation, but also one of willed pursuit; freedom has been used rhetorically to oppose old traditions.

Let me end my proposal by offering a methodological support for the cultural-discursive approach to freedom and possibly many other human concepts and experiences.

1. *Intracultural analysis*: to study the ways freedom has been discursively constructed within a particular culture, what historical process this discourse has gone through, etc.
2. *Transcultural analysis*: to study the ways freedom has been discursively re-framed or changed through penetrations of forms and contents from other cultures, under what circumstances and for what purposes, etc.
3. *Crosscultural analysis*: to contrast the ways freedom has been formulated between different cultures, how come the differences, etc.
4. *Pancultural analysis*: to find commonality, similarity or equivalences between or among different cultural discourses of freedom, where there is common ground or synergy to be found, etc.
5. *Intercultural analysis*: to examine the ways different cultural communities interact with each other on the issue of freedom, what kind of actions are performed and what kind of (power) relations ensue, etc.
6. *Axiocultural analysis*: to critique, re-create and guide discourses of freedom, to discuss what kind of standard and standpoint ought to be taken, to strategically plan the ways to achieve freedom, etc.

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## Author Biography

Shi-xu (PhD, University of Amsterdam) is Changjiang Distinguished Professor (Ministry of Education, China) and Director of the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Discourse Studies, Communication University of Zhejiang and Hangzhou Normal University respectively. Previously, he has held university teaching posts in the Netherlands, Singapore and Great Britain. His books in English include *Cultural Representations*, *A Cultural Approach to Discourse*, *Discourse and Culture*, *Chinese Discourse Studies*, *Discourses of the Developing World* (with Prah and Pardo), *Read the Cultural Other* (with Kienpointner and Servaes) and *Discourse as Cultural Struggle* (editor); books in Chinese include 《文化话语研究: 探索中国的理论、方法与问题》, 《什么是话语研究》. He is the founding Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, General Editor of *Routledge Cultural Discourse Studies* and serves on a dozen of international journal boards. His central scholarly position is that human communication must be studied as a site of interaction, contest, cooperation and transformation of diverse cultural discourses on a path towards a higher levels of civilisation.