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Temporal self-appraisal in a Chinese context: Distancing autobiographical memory following self-uncertainty salience

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On the premise that individuals are inclined to self-enhance, in temporal self-appraisal (TSA) theory it is suggested that people can motivationally reconstruct subjective distances from their past self to serve that goal. However, given the mixed evidence found in an East Asian cultural context (i.e., Japan), it is important to test the cultural applicability of TSA in a different East Asian culture. Thus we tested the TSA of a Chinese sample, focusing on past-self distance reconstruction. The results supported the prediction suggested in TSA theory, in that participants tended to feel farther away from negative (vs. positive) past experiences. Further, this effect was greater when people were primed with a self-threat (i.e., self-uncertainty salience). These patterns were found independently of whether the past experience was recent (3 months ago) or in the distant past (3 years ago). Implications for cross-cultural applicability of TSA theory are discussed.

Keywords
temporal self; subjective distance; self-uncertainty; self-threat; autobiographical memory; temporal self-appraisal

Based on the premise that Westerners (e.g., North Americans) are motivated to self-enhance, that is, they think highly of themselves and maintain a positive self-view (Baumeister, 1998), in temporal self-appraisal (TSA) theory, it is suggested that people can reconstruct the subjective distance from their autobiographical memories to serve this goal (Ross & Wilson, 2002). Evidence has shown that people tend to feel closer subjectively to their past successes than to their past failures, because they may continue to claim credit for them by perceiving them as part of the present self (Cortes, Leith, & Wilson, 2018). But people also tend to feel more distant subjectively from past failings than from past successes, to prevent blame of the present self, or to downwardly compare with that past self in order to perceive improvement (Ross & Wilson, 2002).

Although the theory of TSA has received much supporting evidence, the findings reported in cross-cultural research have cast doubt on whether TSA is applicable in Eastern (e.g., East Asian) cultural contexts (Ross, Heine, Wilson, & Sugimori, 2005) because the available evidence is mixed. In one study it was found that although Canadians felt closer to positive (vs. negative) past events, Japanese felt them to be equally far away (Ross et al., 2005). In another study, however, the results indicated that self-threat reduced subjective distance from positive past events in Japanese people (Wakimoto, 2011), suggesting that Japanese may use past-self appraisals to restore a positive self-view, consistent with the prediction in TSA theory.

Considering that the findings are mixed, it is necessary to test further if TSA is applicable to people in

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Eastern cultures. China is the biggest country in East Asia, and has the largest population of any country in the world. More importantly, China has a collectivistic tradition in which modesty, interpersonal harmony, and social connectedness with others are emphasized (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, patterns found in China would speak to the universal prevalence of TSA.

According to the self-enhancement tactician (SCENT-R) model (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Cai, 2015; for the initial formulation of self-concept enhancing tactician model, see Sedikides & Strube, 1997), self-enhancement is a fundamental human motive, but its manifestations are deployed tactically depending on social context. Evidence has shown that Easterners tend to self-enhance in relatively indirect ways. For example, using implicit association tests (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), Yang, Zhao, Guan, and Huang (2017) found that Chinese participants associate positive attributes more easily with the present self than with the past self, revealing a self-enhancing tendency. Judgment of the subjective distance of the past self can also be used as an indirect way to self-enhance because individuals need not detail their thinking about the present self explicitly (Ross & Wilson, 2002). For example, one can feel improvement by subjectively distancing oneself from (and thus downwardly comparing oneself with) the negative past self, instead of explicitly expressing the present self as much better than the past self. That is, people in a collectivistic culture can use this tool to build good feelings about themselves, without contradicting their cultural ethos of desirability (e.g., modesty).

Therefore, we predicted that Chinese may have a pattern of past-self distance appraisal similar to that which Western samples have typically shown. Moreover, this pattern should be more salient when the present self is primed with threat, because self-threat can make the need to self-enhance more pressing (Steele, 1988). One such threat is self-uncertainty salience, which results in confusion of important aspects of one's psychological characteristics (Yang, Bi, Li, & Huang, 2017). *Self-uncertainty* is considered to be a threat because it can make people feel less positive and less clear about themselves, challenging the integrity of the self-concept (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001).

Self-uncertainty salience has been found to affect one's cognitions and motivation. Research findings have revealed that threats related to romantic uncertainty, academic uncertainty, or personal dilemmas can cause approach-motivated states, such as extreme convictions about personal goals, values, and ideals (Jonas et al., 2014; McGregor et al., 2001). Yang et al. (2019) have also revealed in a recent study that self-uncertainty salience might heighten self-enhancing motivation. Their results showed that uncertainty priming increased Chinese participants' sensitivity to the self-esteem implications of a task they were currently working on. Alongside these studies, we were interested in broadening the research scope to investigate if and, if it did, how self-uncertainty salience—as a threat to the self—might affect the appraisal of the past self among Chinese people.

For exploratory purposes, we also manipulated the timing of the past experiences: the recent past (e.g., 3 months ago) versus the distant past (e.g., 3 years ago). This variable has not been examined in the past-self distance reconstruction domain. Researchers have shown that people may have different visual perspectives for different periods of their past life (Pronin & Ross, 2006). Specifically, people are more likely to see the distant past from the perspective of an observer, and see the recent past from their own perspective. For instance, when asking undergraduates to form an image of a specific event that they remembered having experienced either in their childhood (i.e., distant past) or yesterday (i.e., recent past), the distant past was more likely to be perceived from an observer's perspective (Pronin & Ross, 2006). Given this, the individual should possibly perceive his or her distant-past self as more detached and different from the current self than the recent-past self, and the recent-past self should be more relevant than the distant-past self to defining who that individual is now. Consequently, the subjective distance reconstruction of the event in the recent past might be more strongly affected by current self-threats than is the event in the distant past. We explored if this factor moderated the effects of self-threat on past-self appraisal.

Method

In this study we used a 2 (uncertainty salience condition: self-uncertainty vs. control) × 2 (event valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (event time: recent past vs. distant past) between-subjects design.

Participants

Results of an a priori power analysis (G*Power 3.1.9.2; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) suggested that a minimum of 245 individuals would provide the recommended 0.80 power level with a small–medium effect size (f = 0.18; cf. Wakimoto, 2011). We initially recruited 270 Chinese undergraduate students, but two were excluded for not completing the main dependent measures. Thus, our final sample consisted of 268 Chinese undergraduate students (181 girls and women, 87 boys and men; age range = 16–21 years, M_{age} = 18.05 years, SD = 0.63). The study was conducted in adherence with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Southwest University. All participants provided written informed consent and they were each compensated with 10RMB (US$1.42) after participation.

Procedure

We told the students they were going to take part in a series of tasks having to do with recall, thinking, and imagining. At one time, they all first completed the uncertainty manipulation materials, followed by a filler task, and then an uncertainty manipulation check. Finally, they rated their subjective distance from the positive or negative past experience.

Uncertainty manipulation. In the self-uncertainty condition, participants were asked to think about two important things that were making them feel uncertain about themselves, their life, or the future (Yang et al., 2019). They then picked one of these things to describe their feelings about it, and detailed the reasons they felt uncertain. In the control condition, participants were asked to write down the two greatest disadvantages (e.g., being deceptive, annoying) of advertisements, to pick one of them, and describe their feelings about it, and their reasons for these feelings. This control manipulation could make participants feel slightly negative, but the manipulation itself had nothing to do with uncertainty or certainty about one's core self-view.

Filler task (affect check). Participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). We included this measure to assess if the uncertainty manipulation aroused positive or negative affect, and to control for the possibility that the uncertainty priming effect is simply because of the induction of general affect. The second aim was to serve as a filler task, because in previous research scholars have suggested the effects of an explicit uncertainty salience manipulation are more robust after a delay (Wichman, Brunner, & Weary, 2008). This measure consists of 10 positive (α = .86) and 10 negative affect items (α = .86), with responses rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Uncertainty manipulation check. Participants rated their current feelings on a scale from 1 (*very slightly*) to 5 (*extremely*) in response to the terms "confused", "unsure", "conflicted", and "contradictory" (McGregor et al., 2001; α = .81). Higher mean scores were taken as the measure of greater uncertainty.

Subjective distance evaluation. Next, participants were asked to write about an event that occurred either about 3 months ago (recent-past condition) or 3 years ago (distant-past condition) that had made them feel either *quite proud* (positive condition) or *quite embarrassed* (negative condition; Ross & Wilson, 2002). Participants were told:

> Past experiences may feel quite close or far away, regardless of how long ago they actually occurred. Think about the incident you described above. Place a mark through the lines below at the points that best indicate how far away the incident feels to you. (Ross & Wilson, 2002).

Participants responded on a 135-millimeter-long horizontal line (anchored at the end points with *feels very close* and *feels very distant*) as the indicator of subjective distance. Greater spatial distance represents longer subjective temporal distance, which means that the individual can feel the past event to have happened a very long time ago even if it might have happened just yesterday. Participants also reported when the target event actually happened (month and year of event), and this information was later used to calculate the actual distance (i.e., the number of months since the event occurred).

Results

The descriptive data for all measures are shown in Table 1.

Manipulation and Affect Checks

Uncertainty feeling check. The manipulation was successful. Participants in the self-uncertainty condition (M = 2.59, SD = 0.90) felt more uncertain than did control participants (M = 2.20, SD = 0.84), $t(266)$ = 3.74, $p < .001$, d = 0.46.

Affect check. The 2 (uncertainty salience condition) × 2 (affect) mixed-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 266) = 4.24$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2 = .016$. Self-uncertainty participants (M = 3.11, SE = 0.06) reported marginally lower positive affect than did control participants (M = 3.28, SE = 0.06), $F(1, 266) = 3.79$, $p = .052$, $\eta^2 = .014$, but the participants in each of the two conditions reported an equal degree of negative affect, $F(1, 266) = 0.53$, $p = .469$, $\eta^2 = .002$.

Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations of Uncertainty Feeling Check, Positive and Negative Affect, Subjective Distance, and Actual Distance of Past Event According to Condition*

Measures	Self-uncertainty				Control			
	Positive		Negative		Positive		Negative	
	Recent past (n = 31)	Distant past (n = 35)	Recent past (n = 34)	Distant past (n = 33)	Recent past (n = 31)	Distant past (n = 36)	Recent past (n = 35)	Distant past (n = 33)
Uncertainty feeling	2.52 (0.88)	2.57 (0.85)	2.26 (0.85)	3.02 (0.91)	1.88 (0.71)	2.07 (0.77)	2.44 (0.93)	2.37 (0.84)
PA	3.34 (0.66)	3.27 (0.76)	2.80 (0.73)	3.03 (0.68)	3.66 (0.54)	3.49 (0.55)	3.05 (0.69)	2.92 (0.76)
NA	1.61 (0.47)	1.81 (0.57)	1.61 (0.55)	1.86 (0.51)	1.47 (0.48)	1.58 (0.51)	1.78 (0.76)	1.85 (0.73)
Subjective distance	39.42 (36.58)	50.74 (31.26)	72.88 (36.41)	83.12 (36.27)	40.74 (35.97)	53.83 (33.26)	60.91 (40.96)	58.30 (41.37)
Actual distance	3.06 (0.81)	35.94 (1.84)	2.88 (0.55)	35.97 (1.83)	3.35 (1.45)	36.56 (1.78)	3.17 (1.04)	35.12 (1.58)

Note. Figures in parentheses are standard deviations, subjective distance of past event is expressed in millimeters, actual distance is expressed as number of months since the event occurred. PA = positive affect, NA = negative affect.

Preliminary Analyses

To preclude any possibility that the actual distance of the past event might confound the effects of uncertainty salience on subjective distance appraisal, we performed a 2 (uncertainty salience condition) × 2 (event valence) × 2 (event time) ANOVA, with actual distance as the dependent measure. The event valence main effect was significant. Negative events (M = 19.29, SE = 0.13) were judged to be temporally nearer than the positive events (M = 19.73, SE = 0.13), $F(1, 258) = 6.26$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .024$. We next treated actual distance as a covariate in the main analyses to ensure it would not confound the effect of the uncertainty priming on subjective distance appraisal.

Main Analyses

Using a 2 (uncertainty salience condition) × 2 (event valence) × 2 (event time) ANOVA, with subjective distance as the dependent measure, the results indicated a main effect of event valence. Negative events (M = 68.81 mm, SE = 3.16) were subjectively perceived to be farther away than positive events (M = 46.18 mm, SE = 3.18), $F(1, 259) = 25.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .089$. This effect occurred even when the actual distance of the negative event was judged as being nearer than the positive event.

More importantly, the interaction effect of the uncertainty salience condition × event valence was significant, $F(1, 259) = 5.28$, $p = .022$, $\eta^2 = .020$. Specifically, a trend indicated that in the control condition negative events were judged to be farther away than positive events (59.61 vs. 47.29 mm), $F(1, 259) = 3.79$, $p = .053$, $\eta^2 = .014$. But the difference between the distance away of negative and positive events was much greater in the self-uncertainty condition (78.00 vs. 45.08 mm), $F(1, 259) = 26.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .094$. See Figure 1.

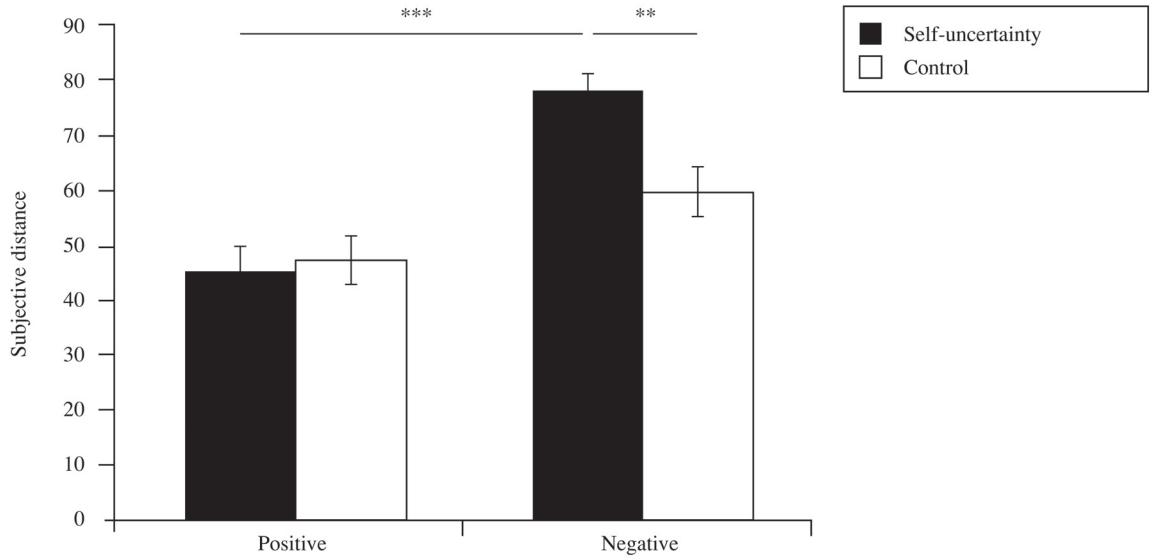

Figure 1. Subjective distance as a function of event valence and uncertainty salience condition. Error bars indicate standard error.
** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

From a different perspective, for positive events, the subjective distances between the self-uncertainty (M = 45.08 mm, SE = 4.51) and control conditions (M = 47.29 mm, SE = 4.48) were not significantly different, $F(1, 259) = 0.12$, $p = .729$, $\eta^2 < .001$. But for negative events, participants in the self-uncertainty condition (M = 78.00 mm, SE = 4.47) judged those events to be farther away than did control participants (M = 59.61 mm, SE = 4.47), $F(1, 259) = 8.46$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .032$.

When we included actual distance as a covariate, the interaction of event valence × uncertainty salience condition remained significant, $F(1, 256) = 4.02$, $p = .046$, $\eta^2 = .015$. Moreover, including each type of affect as a covariate in the main analyses did not change the significance of the interaction, $F(1, 257) = 5.61$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .021$. Thus, subjective distance appraisal outcomes under the condition of uncertainty salience cannot be explained by the variation of actual distance or general affect.

Discussion

Considering that the theory of TSA was proposed based on the premise of self-enhancement of Westerners (Ross & Wilson, 2002), and mixed evidence has been found in an East Asian cultural context (i.e., Japan; Ross et al., 2005; Wakimoto, 2011), the pancultural applicability of TSA needs further testing with samples in other Eastern cultures. We examined TSA using a past-self distance reconstruction in the cultural context of China. Our results were consistent with findings obtained for Western samples, showing that Chinese participants also tend to perceive their negative past self as farther away than their positive past self. We were interested that this effect was augmented by self-threat priming (e.g., self-uncertainty salience). Furthermore, we found this self-threat priming effect was mainly evident in a marked increase in subjective distance for a negative past event. These patterns were found regardless of whether the past experience was in the recent past (i.e., 3 months ago) or the distant past (i.e., 3 years ago).

Based on the SCENT-R model (Sedikides et al., 2015), we predicted that Chinese people would also have a self-enhancement need, and that past-self distance appraisal could be a tactical strategy for them to self-enhance. Thus, we expected that TSA would be applicable in the Chinese cultural context. Indeed, our findings support the presence of TSA and revealed that Chinese participants generally felt that a negative past event was farther away than a positive past event (even when the actual distance was shorter for negative than for positive past memories), suggesting tactical self-enhancement. This parallels the results reported by Yang, Zhao et al. (2017), who found that Chinese participants' implicit evaluation of the past self was depreciated to highlight the positivity of the current self. Thus, the two groups of findings indicate a self-enhancing tendency in people in the Chinese culture, and support the applicability of TSA in the Chinese context from its two main research categories (evaluation of the past/present self).

We hasten to note here that our results are not consistent with those reported by Ross et al. (2005), but are aligned with those of Wakimoto (2011). Both of those studies were conducted with Japanese samples. We cautiously speculate that the prediction in the theory of TSA on subjective distance appraisal might be more observable when the present self is under threat, especially in Eastern cultural contexts. The findings in our study, and also in Wakimoto's study, jointly reveal that Easterners subjectively distance themselves from the negative past or approach the positive past when primed with self-threat, which is consistent with the prediction in the theory of TSA. This might be because self-threat can increase motivation and the need for the individual to restore his or her positive feelings about himself/herself (Steele, 1988), which should highlight the importance, and facilitate the process, of past-self distance appraisal.

We found that self-threat priming increased the difference in subjective distance evaluation between negative and positive autobiographical memories. One possible explanation for this result is that self-uncertainty salience might enhance defensive motivation (McGregor et al., 2001; Yang et al., 2019), and our participants may have wanted to distance themselves from their negative past to cater to this need. When looking back to evaluate one's past, people often treat the past self as though this individual was another person (Pronin & Ross, 2006). This makes the social comparison process possible, allowing the individual to compare the present self with the past self, just as people compare themselves to others. The individual is more likely to perceive the subjectively distant past self (compared with the recent past self) as detached from the present and is, thus, more likely to contrast that past self with the recent self. Therefore, the inferior and subjectively distant past self can serve as a downward social comparison object (e.g., like a comparison to a less competent person) that can result in people appreciating their present achievements and enhancing their current self-regard, and possibly may also improve clarity in the sense of the present self (e.g., "I have improved so I am definitely not who I used to be."). In short, distancing oneself from the negative past self may provide an option for individuals to affirm themselves. This self-affirmation process can help individuals restore a positive self-image, thus aiding in their coping with uncertainty.

One possible explanation for the null moderation effect of time frame may be that the salience of self-

uncertainty can be strong enough to affect past-self appraisal processes regardless of whether the past experience is recent or distant. Self-uncertainty salience is aversive because it makes people feel confused and anxious about who they really are, and can result in a feeling that one's life is meaningless (Yang, Bi, et al., 2017). The defensive motivation of dealing with self-uncertainty is usually strong; it has been found to lead to defensive reactions, such as cultural worldview defense, intergroup bias, compensatory convictions, and even extremism (for a review, see Yang, Bi et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that self-uncertainty salience can also have powerful effects on the past-self appraisal process. In turn, our study contributes to knowledge of a new method for self-uncertainty management—the individual may assuage uncertain feelings by looking back on the past and tactically adjusting the subjective distance with his or her autobiographical memories.

The present study has limitations that reveal opportunities for future research. First, we did not choose the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998) as an indirect measure for assessing past-self distance construction and self-enhancement, because the IAT seems more effective for assessing the association between one target concept (e.g., self: past vs. present) and one target attribute (e.g., valence: positive vs. negative), but less convenient for including a third concept or attribute (e.g., distance: near vs. far) as part of the association (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2005). We look forward to future studies in which the researchers develop designs whereby the IAT can be adopted to test TSA from different perspectives. Second, in the future researchers might want to examine the role that the emotional intensity of past events plays in the reconstruction of subjective distance in the face of self-uncertainty salience. In a recent study the authors suggested that emotional intensity moderates the influence of emotional valence on subjective distance perception (Mei, Li, & Wang, 2018). Specifically, negative events are perceived to be more distant than positive events in a low-intensity condition but not in a high-intensity condition. As we manipulated only the emotional valence of the past event, future research is welcomed in which the role of emotional intensity is considered in order to investigate their joint effect on subjective distance revision of the past under the condition of self-threat.

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