

# A comparative study on moral and social issues: China vs. United States

## Abstract

This study compares the moral and social attitudes of Chinese and American populations using 19 questions from the World Values Survey (Wave 7, 2017-2022). The survey, employing a 10-point Likert scale, assessed perceptions of issues such as tax evasion, bribery, homosexuality, and violence. Welch's t-test was used to determine significant differences in mean scores ( $p < 0.05$ ). Results indicate that Chinese respondents exhibited stronger opposition to most moral issues, including tax evasion, bribery, homosexuality, and casual sex, while Americans were more opposed to claiming government benefits, wife beating, and child beating. These findings highlight cultural differences in ethical perspectives, with implications for cross-cultural policy and social understanding.

**Keywords:** moral issues, social attitudes, world values survey, china, United States, tax evasion, bribery, cultural differences, ethics, comparative study

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## Introduction

The goal of this study was to compare the views of Chinese people to those of Americans living in the United States on 19 moral and social issues. Several similar studies have been done using different sample populations and different survey instruments. One study used the same 19 World Values Survey questions we use in the current study to compare the views of people in Turkey and Cyprus.<sup>1</sup> That study found that that views of the sample populations in those countries often differed. Those who spoke Greek and those who spoke Turkish often had views that were significantly different. A study of Yemen opinion conducted by Aljaaidi et al.,<sup>2</sup> ranked three types of tax evasion as the least serious of 30 crimes. Alwitheri<sup>3</sup> surveyed law students at a university in Saudi Arabia, asking their opinion on the seriousness of 26 crimes. Some of the crimes included in his survey instrument were the same as the moral acts included in the present survey.

Benk et al.,<sup>4</sup> examined 475 Turkish taxpayers about their perception of the severity of tax evasion compared to 21 offenses. They found that tax evasion ranked tenth in terms of seriousness. Burton et al.,<sup>5</sup> examined the perception of Americans about their view of the seriousness of tax evasion compared to 20 other offenses. They regarded it as somewhat serious. Karlinsky et al.,<sup>6</sup> surveyed a U.S. audience to determine the relative seriousness of tax evasion as one of 21 crimes and found it to be of average seriousness. Gupta<sup>7</sup> replicated the Karlinsky et al.,<sup>6</sup> study using a New Zealand taxpayers in an attempt to determine the relative seriousness of tax evasion as one of 21 offenses. Mamuti and McGee<sup>8</sup> conducted a survey in Kosovo and found that tax evasion offenses were among the least serious of 50 crimes. McGee et al.,<sup>9</sup> distributed a survey instrument listing 75 crimes to more than 500 people in South Florida, USA. That study focused on determining the relative seriousness of tax evasion. McGee et al.,<sup>10</sup> surveyed a Mexican sample using a similar survey instrument.

Mamuti<sup>11</sup> conducted a series of studies in several countries that used a similar methodology. He distributed a survey instrument to various groups and asked them to rank a series of moral issues and crimes in terms of seriousness, with the goal of determining the relative seriousness of tax evasion. Countries included Macedonia,<sup>12</sup> Albania,<sup>13</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>14</sup> Kosovo,<sup>15</sup> and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the studies listed above had survey instruments that listed a series of crimes and/or moral issues and asked participants to rank them in terms of seriousness. Many of those surveys included some, or perhaps all of the 19 moral issues that are included in the WVS database. Most of the above studies included additional moral issues or crimes as well. The present study uses a similar methodology, but limits itself to the 19 moral issues included in the WVS database. Most of those moral issues are not also crimes. McGee and Benk<sup>17</sup> published a book on the ethics of bribery that included 92 single country studies that used only the 19 WVS moral issues. McGee and Shopovski<sup>18</sup> published a book on the ethics of tax evasion that used only the 19 WVS moral issues. Those studies were also only of single countries. The prior study that comes closest to the present study is the McGee and Petrides<sup>1</sup> study that compared the views of Turkish and Greek speakers. That study also limited itself to the 19 moral issues that are included in the WVS database, and it is also a comparative study. The present study differs from that study in the fact that the samples populations are different – the USA and China instead of Turkish and Greek speakers. It is also a comparative study.

## Methodology

This study used data from the most recent wave (Wave 7) of the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS people have been gathering data from many countries every five years or so, going back to 1981.<sup>19</sup> The most recent wave gathered data from more than 150,000 people in 92 countries between 2017 and 2022. Their survey instrument included more than 200 questions on a wide variety of topics. We chose 19 moral questions from among its pool and compared the data collected in China to that collected in the United States. Participants were asked to select the appropriate number to respond to each of the 19 questions. The survey instrument used a 10-point Likert Scale, where 1 = never justifiable and 10 = always justifiable. The p-values were computed using Welch's t-test<sup>20,21</sup> rather than the usual Student's t-test because several studies have found it to be somewhat superior to the Student's t-test.<sup>22-25</sup>

## The study

The results of the study are presented below.

### Claiming government benefits

Question Q177 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to claim government benefits to which you are not entitled. The results are reported in Table 1. Differences in mean score are considered significant if  $p < 0.05$ . The China mean score was significantly higher than the U.S. mean score, which indicates that the Chinese sample had less of a problem claiming government benefits to which they were not entitled. This attitude might indicate that the Chinese have less respect for their government than those in the U.S. sample.

**Table 1** Claiming government benefits

	China	United States
Mean	3.37	2.62
Std. Dev.	2.54	2.37
n	3023	2559
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

### Avoiding a fare on public transport

Question Q178 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to avoid a fare on public transport. This time the Chinese sample was significantly more opposed to the act, which casts some doubt on the possibility that the Chinese lack respect for their government. Perhaps the reason their resistance is strong is because they use public transport and they receive benefit from public transport. Thus, they may feel that there is an obligation to pay, and that those who do not pay are acting unethically. The results are reported in Table 2.

**Table 2** Avoiding a fare on public transport

	China	United States
Mean	1.63	2.95
Std. Dev.	1.54	2.3
n	3030	2566
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

### Stealing property

Question Q179 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to steal property. The results are reported in Table 3. Given the fact that both mean scores were less than 2.0, it appears that both samples were strongly opposed to stealing. However, the Chinese mean score was significantly lower than the U.S. mean score, which indicates that the Chinese were significantly more opposed to stealing property.

**Table 3** Stealing property

	China	United States
Mean	1.29	1.9
Std. Dev.	1.06	1.84
n	3031	2567
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

### Cheating on taxes

Question Q180 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to cheat on taxes if you have a chance. The results are reported in Table 4. Both mean scores were very low, indicating strong resistance to tax evasion. However, the Chinese were significantly more opposed to tax evasion than the U.S. sample.

**Table 4** Cheating on taxes

	China	United States
Mean	1.5	2.05
Std. Dev.	1.3	1.88
n	3026	2568
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

### Accepting a bribe

Question Q181 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to accept a bribe in the course of your duties. The results are reported in Table 5. Opposition to bribery was very strong for both groups, as indicated by the low mean scores, which were both below 1.80. The Chinese mean score was significantly lower than the U.S. score, which indicates that the Chinese were significantly more opposed to bribery.

**Table 5** Accepting a bribe

	China	United States
Mean	1.62	1.77
Std. Dev.	1.54	1.65
n	3021	2568
p-value	0.0005	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

### Homosexuality

Question Q182 asked whether homosexuality would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 6. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to homosexuality than were the Americans.

**Table 6** Homosexuality

	China	United States
Mean	2.28	6.19
Std. Dev.	2.39	3.42
n	3027	2551
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

### Prostitution

Question Q183 asked whether prostitution would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 7. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to prostitution than were the Americans.

**Table 7** Prostitution

	China	United States
Mean	1.47	3.6
Std. Dev.	1.4	2.69
n	3027	2569
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

### Abortion

Question Q184 asked whether abortion would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 8. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to abortion than were the Americans.

**Table 8** Abortion

	China	United States
Mean	2.36	4.86
Std. Dev.	2.21	3.01
n	3017	2567
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Divorce**

Question Q185 asked whether divorce would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 9. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to divorce than were the Americans.

**Table 9** Divorce

	China	United States
Mean	3.69	6.51
Std. Dev.	2.88	2.49
n	3025	2572
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Sex before marriage**

Question Q186 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to have sex before marriage. The results are reported in Table 10. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to sex before marriage than were the Americans.

**Table 10** Sex before marriage

	China	United States
Mean	3.68	6.49
Std. Dev.	2.93	2.95
n	3020	2564
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Suicide**

Question Q187 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to commit suicide. The results are reported in Table 11. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to suicide than were the Americans.

**Table 11** Suicide

	China	United States
Mean	1.9	3.26
Std. Dev.	1.91	2.6
n	3025	2562
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Euthanasia**

Question Q188 asked whether euthanasia would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 12. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to euthanasia than were the Americans.

**Wife beating**

Question Q189 asked whether it would ever be justifiable for a man to beat his wife. The results are reported in Table 13. The

Americans were significantly more opposed to wife beating than were the Chinese. However, as indicated by the very low mean scores, it can be said that both groups were strongly opposed to wife beating.

**Table 12** Euthanasia

	China	United States
Mean	3.9	5.27
Std. Dev.	3.27	3.06
n	3021	2557
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Table 13** Wife beating

	China	United States
Mean	1.55	1.4
Std. Dev.	1.51	1.41
n	3025	2566
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Parents beating their children**

Question Q190 asked whether it would ever be justifiable for parents to beat their children. The results are reported in Table 14. The American sample was significantly more opposed to child beating than was the Chinese sample.

**Table 14** Parents beating their children

	China	United States
Mean	3.29	2.01
Std. Dev.	2.55	2.02
n	3027	2566
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Violence against other people**

Question Q191 asked whether violence against other people would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 15. The Chinese were significantly more opposed to inflicting violence against other people.

**Table 15** Violence against other people

	China	United States
Mean	1.63	2.32
Std. Dev.	1.47	1.99
n	3025	2570
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Terrorism**

Question Q192 asked whether terrorism as a political, ideological or religious mean would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 16. The mean scores for both groups were very low, indicating strong opposition. However, the Chinese mean score was significantly lower than the U.S. mean score.

**Table 16** Terrorism

	China	United States
Mean	1.33	1.56
Std. Dev.	1.2	1.58
n	3022	2573
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Having casual sex**

Question Q193 asked whether it would ever be justifiable to have casual sex. The results are reported in Table 17. Chinese opposition to having casual sex was much stronger than the American opposition.

**Table 17** Having casual sex

	China	United States
Mean	1.49	5.47
Std. Dev.	1.36	3.03
n	3023	2565
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Political violence**

Question Q194 asked whether political violence would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 18. Chinese opposition to political violence was much stronger than the American opposition.

**Table 18** Political violence

	China	United States
Mean	1.5	2.22
Std. Dev.	1.38	1.98
n	3019	2564
p-value	0	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Death penalty**

Question Q195 asked whether the death penalty would ever be justifiable. The results are reported in Table 19. As indicated by the mean scores, opposition to the death penalty was moderate for both groups. However, the Chinese opposition to the death penalty was significantly stronger than the American opposition.

**Table 19** Death penalty

	China	United States
Mean	5.34	5.54
Std. Dev.	3.58	2.89
n	3025	2563
p-value	0.02	

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

The differences in mean score were significant for all moral issues. The Americans were significantly more opposed to claiming government benefits, wife beating and child beating than were the Chinese. For all the other moral issues, the Chinese sample showed significantly stronger opposition. The differences are summarized below in Table 20.

**Table 20** Summary

Moral Issue	Mean		p-value	Stronger Opposition
	China	U.S		
Claiming government benefits	3.37	2.62	0	U.S.
Avoiding a fare on public transport	1.63	2.95	0	China
Stealing property	1.29	1.9	0	China
Cheating on taxes	1.5	2.05	0	China
Accepting a bribe	1.62	1.77	0.0005	China
Homosexuality	2.28	6.19	0	China
Prostitution	1.47	3.6	0	China
Abortion	2.36	4.86	0	China
Divorce	3.69	6.51	0	China
Sex before marriage	3.68	6.49	0	China
Suicide	1.9	3.26	0	China
Euthanasia	3.9	5.27	0	China
Wife beating	1.55	1.4	0	U.S.
Child beating	3.29	2.01	0	U.S.
Violence against other people	1.63	2.32	0	China
Terrorism	1.33	1.56	0	China
Having casual sex	1.49	5.47	0	China
Political violence	1.5	2.22	0	China
Death penalty	5.34	5.54	0.02	China

(1 = never justifiable; 10 = always justifiable)

**Concluding comments**

This comparative study reveals significant cultural differences in moral and social attitudes between Chinese and American populations, as evidenced by their responses to 19 moral issues from the World Values Survey. The Chinese sample demonstrated stronger opposition to most issues, including tax evasion, bribery, homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, divorce, casual sex, suicide, euthanasia, violence, terrorism, and the death penalty. This suggests a more conservative ethical framework, potentially influenced by cultural values emphasizing social order, collective responsibility, and traditional norms. In contrast, Americans showed greater opposition to claiming government benefits, wife beating, and child beating, indicating stronger concerns about specific forms of social welfare abuse and domestic violence. These findings align with prior studies<sup>1</sup> that highlight cultural influences on ethical perceptions. The results have implications for policymakers, educators, and cross-cultural researchers seeking to understand and bridge ethical divides. Future research could explore the underlying cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors driving these differences, as well as extend the comparison to other nations or demographic groups.

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**Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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