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Dialecticism in romantic relationships: An examination in Chinese and American cultural contexts

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Abstract

The cultural theory of naïve dialecticism, denoting Chinese lay beliefs about expectation of change and tolerance of contradiction, was employed to examine Chinese and European Americans' representation and evaluation of their romantic partners and relationships across three studies. We found that Chinese were more likely than Euro-Americans to spontaneously describe their partners with contradictory attributes (Study 1). While Chinese and Euro-Americans organized their evaluative partner knowledge in equally compartmentalized ways, Chinese were more likely to hold complex knowledge structures and to value both positive and negative partner

Statement of Relevance: This research contributes to the limited literature on how romantic relationships vary across cultural contexts. Three studies using diverse methodologies were conducted to test predictions driven by the cultural theory of naïve dialecticism to demonstrate how Chinese and European Americans differ regarding their representation and evaluation of romantic partners and relationships. These findings help enrich understanding of the dynamic nature of relationship well-being in Chinese cultural contexts.

knowledge (Study 2). Moreover, Chinese were more likely than Euro-Americans to simultaneously hold positive and negative attitudes toward their partner and relationship (i.e., being ambivalent), both implicitly and explicitly (Study 3). These findings illuminate theories and research on contradictions in intimate relationships from a cultural perspective.

KEYWORDS

Chinese, culture, dialecticism, romantic relationship

Research addressing cultural influences on close relationships has mainly applied the frameworks of individualism versus collectivism or independent versus interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995) to predict and explain cultural differences in people's values, thoughts, and behaviors in close relationship contexts (e.g., Anderson et al., 2008; Dion & Dion, 1993; Gaines & Hardin, 2013). For instance, in individualistic cultures (e.g., North America, United Kingdom), people tend to emphasize their romantic feelings and desires as the basis for marriage (Levine et al., 1995). In contrast, in collectivistic cultures (e.g., China), family-related concerns (e.g., family approval, filial piety) play a relatively important role in people's relationship decisions (Lam et al., 2016).

However, the distinction between individualism and collectivism is inadequate to predict and explain how people from Chinese and Western (e.g., North America) cultures perceive and react to contradictory positive and negative attributes in their relationships. For instance, as a Chinese metaphor puts it, a relationship is sometimes like a taste of tea–an experience of both "sweet" and "bitter" at the same time (Rosenblatt & Li, 2012). This notion of apparent contradictory positive and negative relationship attributes is also frequently observed in sayings such as "fighting is petting; nagging is loving." These observations point to the importance of employing a cultural perspective to systematically examine and explain the extent to which intimates from different cultural backgrounds view contradictions in their relationships (Cross & Lam, 2018), such as the phenomena of showing ambivalent attitudes toward relationship partners known as relational ambivalence (Fincham & Linfield, 1997).

We posit that the cultural theory of naïve dialecticism (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010)—denoting Chinese lay beliefs about expectation of change and tolerance of contradiction—can help researchers and practitioners understand cultural differences in people's representations and evaluations of their romantic partners and relationships. Accordingly, we conducted three studies to examine cultural differences in partner knowledge organization and partner evaluation by comparing samples of Chinese and European Americans. These findings will contribute to current relationship theories and practices that have thus far been dominated by Western perspectives.

1 | CULTURAL THEORY OF NAÏVE DIALECTICISM

The cultural theory of naïve dialecticism describes distinct ways of viewing the world related to change and contradiction. These ways of thinking stem from the Chinese philosophy of Taoism

and are endorsed by many people from Chinese and other East Asian (e.g., Japanese and Korean) cultures (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010). Peng and Nisbett (1999) borrowed the term "dialectical thinking" from Western philosophy to formulate the unique ways in which Chinese view and react to contradictions. One principle of Chinese dialectical thinking is the notion that the world is constantly changing and in a state of flux, which resembles the Greek philosopher Heraclitus's concept of change. Many Chinese believe that all things continuously change into their opposites in a never-ending cycle and stay in balance (e.g., love in extreme becomes hatred, hatred in extreme becomes love); hence, they expect that a trend may slow down or even abruptly go in the opposite direction (Ji, 2008; Ji et al., 2001). For instance, Chinese participants, compared to European American participants, were more likely to think that a romantic couple at college will break up after graduation or that two children who do not like each other will become lovers when they grow up (Ji et al., 2001). This is contrary to the traditional Western view of change as linear and moving in one direction (Ji et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). For instance, some Westerners may expect a relationship to stay wonderful and to be in the "honeymoon phase" throughout the course of the relationship (Cross & Lam, 2018).

Chinese people's tendency to expect change extends to their beliefs about contradictions. If the world is changing constantly, contradictions are inevitable and should be accepted (e.g., love may suddenly change into hatred; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Notably, contradiction is a core concept of both Chinese dialectical thinking and Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT), a communication studies theory informed by the Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). RDT identifies opposing forces, tensions or desires that naturally occur when people relate to others in relational dialogues, such as in a conversation between partners (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Because of these dialectical tensions, personal relationships are unpredictable (Griffin, 2012), resembling the concepts of complexity and constant state of flux in Chinese dialectical thinking. Chinese dialectical thinking and RDT do not view contradictions as problematic; instead, contradictions should be understood and accepted. The principle of tolerance for contradiction in Chinese dialectical thinking differs fundamentally from the Western philosophical tradition regarding contradictions, such as the law of noncontradiction (loving someone does not equal to not loving someone) and the law of the excluded middle (John either loves or does not love Mary; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Whereas Chinese tend to tolerate contradictions and see contradictory elements to be simultaneously true, Westerners are motivated to resolve seeming contradictions by adopting extreme positions or by means of synthesis (i.e., integrating both positions) — a key feature of Western thinking about the contradiction that can be traced back to the German philosophers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx (Peng & Nisbett, 1999).

Another important thinking style prominent in East Asian culture is a holistic thinking style (Nisbett et al., 2001). Many East Asians assume that every element in the world is interconnected in some way, and hence it is important to pay attention to the context and see the whole picture (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001). The causes of events are understood to be complex and interrelated; thus, East Asians perceive events to have a larger number of potential causes than Westerners and they consider more information when making a final attribution (Choi et al., 2003). In sum, compared to Westerners, East Asians are more inclined to perceive the world as context dependent, interconnected, constantly changing, and contradictory (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010).

The theory of naïve dialecticism helps explain how people with East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, etc.) and Western backgrounds view themselves. East Asians, compared

to Westerners, embrace opposing or contradictory aspects of their self-concepts, and all these aspects exist in active harmony (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010). Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004) measured people's contradictory (or ambivalent) attitudes toward themselves, defined in attitude research as the presence of positive and negative attitudes toward an object at the same time (Conner & Sparks, 2002; Jonas et al., 2000). They found that Chinese people held more ambivalent attitudes toward themselves relative to Euro-Americans, as they simultaneously endorsed positive and negative self-beliefs and generated positive and negative self-statements. Likewise, Chinese participants were more ambivalent in their implicit self-esteem than Euro-Americans, indicating that dialectical thinking is deeply rooted in Chinese people's self-views (Boucher et al., 2009).

The expectation of change and holistic thinking components of dialecticism is reflected in East Asians' greater tendency to recognize the complexity and inconsistency of their own behaviors across contexts and situations and to consider multiple determinants of human behavior, compared to Westerners. East Asians view themselves in context-specific ways, such that they tend to exhibit less consistency in their self-beliefs across roles and situations than Westerners (Boucher, 2011; Suh, 2002). That is, when people are asked to think of themselves in different roles or relationship contexts, East Asians are more likely than Westerners to describe themselves as behaving differently across the different roles or contexts (e.g., I am talkative in front of my partner, but I am quiet in front of my friends).

2 | NAÏVE DIALECTICISM IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP CONTEXTS

Compared to the large body of work on dialectical self-view, only a handful of studies have attempted to apply the theory of naïve dialecticism to predict and explain experiences in intimate relationships. In one study, Shiota et al. (2010) asked Chinese American and Euro-American couples to talk about various relationship topics (e.g., teasing each other and making up nicknames). They found that Euro-Americans tended to report experiencing either love *or* a situation-specific negative emotion during the conversations (for instance, shame when one is being teased by one's partner). In contrast, Chinese Americans were more likely to experience these conflicting emotions–both love *and* the negative emotion–at the same time.

To extend this line of work, the present research examines *dialectical relationship thinking*, reflecting the influence of the Chinese dialectical thinking principles of contradiction, change, and holism on people's cognitive and evaluative processes that influence individuals' relationship quality (Cross & Lam, 2018). We propose that Chinese people's tendency to perceive and accept contradiction is reflected in the ways that they organize positive and negative knowledge of their partners as well as the ways they hold positive and negative attitudes toward their partners (i.e., relational ambivalence), both involving seemingly contradictory positive and negative attributes.

2.1 | Organization of partner knowledge

We expect Chinese and Euro-Americans to differ in their organization of evaluative knowledge of their romantic partners. We employ three structural indicators that are commonly used to assess people's organization of their knowledge and that reflects some of the major features of

thinking dialectically (e.g., holding contradictions without synthesis, recognizing complexity, and inconsistency in human behavior and characteristics). These indicators are compartmentalization (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999), complexity (Linville, 1985, 1987), and differential importance (Pelham & Swann, 1989), which we describe below.

First, some individuals compartmentalize their positive and negative knowledge about their partners such that they separate the positive and negative attributes into distinct aspects (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; see Panel A in Appendix A in the online supplementary material), whereas other individuals integrate their positive and negative knowledge about their partners in each aspect (see Panel B in Appendix A). A compartmentalized structure denotes that positive and negative knowledge is organized in separate aspects without integration. For instance, Yin may isolate positive information about Hong ("Hong is a hardworking student") and negative information ("Hong hates tests and exams") under two aspects. Compartmentalization is consistent with research showing that East Asians compared to Westerners hold in mind a greater amount of contradictory and inconsistent information without resolution or synthesis (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009). Hence, we predict that compartmentalized structures are more common in Chinese people's partner knowledge than in Euro-Americans' partner knowledge (*H1*).

Second, the model of self-complexity describes one way people represent themselves in self-knowledge (Linville, 1985, 1987). Complexity in self-knowledge is conceptualized as a function of the number of aspects that people use to represent themselves and the degree of distinction they maintain among these aspects (Rafaeli-Mor et al., 1999). Individuals with complex self-representations utilize more aspects to represent or describe themselves and make greater distinctions among these unique aspects (hence there is little or no overlap in the features that define each aspect). We apply this concept of complexity in the relationship context; for instance, Hong may describe Yin as having a very different personality as a daughter, as a partner, as a choir member, and so on. Compared to Westerners, East Asians tend to recognize the complexity and inconsistency of people's behaviors and characteristics across time, contexts, and situations (Church et al., 2006), and they consider a greater amount of information in the explanation of human behavior (Choi et al., 2003). Although both Chinese and Euro-Americans are able to observe their intimate partners across contexts and situations, we expect that Chinese are more likely to recognize such complexity in their partner knowledge and represent their partners in more distinct (or less overlapping) aspects, due to their expectations of change and holistic thinking style (*H2*).

Lastly, Western research has found that people weigh the importance of positive and negative self-aspects differently (i.e., showing differential importance); people who rate positive self-aspects as more important than negative self-aspects tend to have higher global self-esteem than others (Pelham & Swann Jr., 1989; Showers, 1992). In the relationship context, Western intimates assign more importance to positive than negative information in their perception of their partner, and this tendency predicts higher relationship satisfaction (Neff & Karney, 2003). Chinese people's tendency to accept apparently contradicting positive and negative information about a person is expected to affect the relative weight given to these two types of information, resulting in more balanced positive and negative views (e.g., Yin may think that knowing both positive and negative qualities about Hong helps her understand him better). Therefore, we expect that Chinese, relative to Euro-Americans, will display lower differential importance for positive information in their partner knowledge organization (*H3*).

2.2 | Evaluation of romantic partner

Research based on Western samples generally observes that intimates view each other and their relationships in a positive light (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). In contrast, East Asians tend to emphasize the coexistence of good and bad in self and others; for instance, Chinese and Japanese people view their ingroups (e.g., family members, ethnic group) more negatively and critically than do Euro-Americans (Ma-Kellams et al., 2011). Because Chinese people tend to hold positive qualities together with negative ones, we expect this tendency to be reflected in their partner evaluation; for instance, Hong may have positive attitudes toward Yin's openness to new experiences, but also recognize that she may take unnecessary risks at times. While existing cross-cultural studies of romantic relationships largely rely on explicit, self-report measures, the present research assesses ambivalent attitudes toward one's partner (i.e., relational ambivalence) both explicitly and implicitly, and we hypothesize that Chinese relative to Euro-Americans will be more ambivalent in their explicit and implicit partner evaluations (*H4*).

3 | OVERVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH

We conducted a preliminary exploratory study (Study 1) followed by two studies to investigate partner knowledge organization (Study 2) and partner evaluation (Study 3) among Chinese and Euro-American samples. Comparing these two cultural groups not only directly tests the propositions of the cultural theory of naïve dialecticism formulated by Chinese philosophies, which is in sharp contrast to traditional Western philosophies (Peng & Nisbett, 1999), but also extends relationship research that has predominantly relied on Western samples (Thalmayer et al., 2021). We use a variety of approaches and methods to investigate theoretically-driven hypotheses about cultural differences in dialectical relationship thinking. These studies are a first step toward systematically examining cultural variation in the cognitive and evaluative processes that influence individuals' relationship quality. Findings from this research may contribute to the development of more global relationship theories by understanding Chinese relationship beliefs, and they may also provide advice to practitioners working with clients with Chinese backgrounds to be more sensitive to the cultural beliefs that shape relationship experiences.

4 | STUDY 1

Before conducting our primary studies, we conducted an exploratory study, which investigated participants' tendencies to reveal dialectical thinking in their spontaneous descriptions of their romantic partners. We expected Chinese, compared to Euro-Americans, to be more likely to use contradictory pairs of attributes (e.g., introvert and extrovert) to describe their romantic partners. An additional purpose of this study was to gather attributes from participants' responses for use in subsequent studies (described further in Study 2).

5 | METHOD

5.1 | Participants

Across studies, we recruited people who were currently in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least 3 months to ensure that their relationships were relatively stable.[1] Based on a power analysis using G * Power (Faul et al., 2009), we attempted to recruit samples of about

200 participants in each study (i.e., about 100 for each cultural group) to achieve a power of 80% to detect cultural differences of a small to medium effect ($d = 0.4$).

Samples of 111 Chinese and 86 Euro-American college students were recruited. Chinese participants were recruited in a university in China, and their counterparts in the U.S. were recruited in a Midwestern university. Four Chinese participants and one Euro-American participant who provided fewer than three descriptions of their partner were excluded (see Materials for details), which resulted in a final sample of 107 Chinese ($M_{age} = 21.57$, $SD = 2.29$; 80 females) and 85 Euro-Americans ($M_{age} = 19.01$, $SD = 1.26$; 53 females). Five Chinese participants were engaged whereas four Euro-American participants were engaged or married. The average length of relationship was similar for the two groups: 20.33 months ($SD = 20.31$) and 22.16 months ($SD = 16.40$) for Chinese and Euro-Americans, respectively, $t(190) = 0.68$, $p = 0.50$, $d = 0.10$.

5.2 | Procedure

Chinese participants were individually approached on the university campus to complete a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Euro-American participants were invited to the lab to complete the questionnaire. The study was described as focusing on people's relationship experience and the questionnaire consisted of a task that asked participants to describe their romantic partner, along with measures that are not relevant to the current research. After participants completed the questionnaire, they were debriefed and thanked. Chinese participants were paid a nominal amount of money; the U.S. participants were granted course credit for their participation.

Across studies, Chinese participants read the materials in Chinese and Euro-American participants read the materials in English. The English materials were translated and back-translated by competent bilinguals into Chinese.

5.3 | Materials

5.3.1 | Partner description task

Participants were asked to use their own words to describe their romantic partner in three aspects: academic/work, social/interpersonal, and family. We selected these three aspects because they are most relevant to college students' lives. Respondents were instructed to list at least one adjective or short phrase in each aspect. Those who listed fewer than three were removed from the analysis.

Two research assistances (one Chinese and one American) were trained to code the descriptions into three types of contradictions adapted from the Dialectical Coding Scheme (DCS; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009). Contradictory partner descriptions can be reflected *within* a single aspect (e.g., at school/work, Hong is sociable but also shy). Contradiction can also be indicated *between* two different aspects (e.g., Yin is shy at school/work but sociable at home). Lastly, contradiction can be expressed as the *negation* of an opposing view (e.g., Hong is *not* sociable). The first author trained the two coders separately until they reached 80% agreement, and subsequently, the two coders worked independently without knowing the predictions. To ensure that coder ratings did not become less reliable over time, spot checking of 20 random cases was conducted halfway through the coding process. The first author agreed with the Chinese coder in 92%–97% of the coding across the three types of contradictions and with the U.S. coder in 86%–95% of the coding. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved before continuing the coding process.

6 | RESULTS

On average, Chinese ($M = 9.52$, $SD = 2.95$) generated fewer partner descriptions compared to Euro-Americans ($M = 10.47$, $SD = 2.69$), $t(190) = -2.30$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.33$. To account for this difference, we computed a ratio of total number of contradictory statements to total number of descriptions for each type of coded contradiction. We analyzed each type of coded contradiction, as well as an average of the three types of contradiction (see Table 1 for descriptives). In all analyses across studies, we included sex as a potential covariate in the initial analysis to explore gender differences as in prior relationship research but removed this variable from the final model if it did not exert any significant effect.[2]

Independent *t*-tests revealed that Chinese people's partner descriptions were significantly higher in *within-aspect* contradiction, $t(190) = -3.06$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.44$, *between-aspects* contradiction, $t(190) = -2.08$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.30$, and *negation*, $t(190) = -2.37$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.34$, than that of Euro-Americans. Regarding the composite index of contradiction, on average Chinese generated more contradictory descriptions of their romantic partner than did Euro-Americans, $t(190) = -3.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.55$.

7 | DISCUSSION

Study 1 demonstrated that Chinese saw their romantic partners in a more contradictory way than did Euro-Americans as reflected in their spontaneous descriptions of their partner. These results were consistent with past research which showed that Chinese generated more contradictory self-descriptions than did Euro-Americans in the open-ended, Twenty Statements Test (TST; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009). In the subsequent studies, we used more structured measures to investigate Chinese people's tendency to tolerate seeming contradictions as reflected in their evaluative knowledge (Study 2) and attitudinal evaluation (Study 3) of their partners.

8 | STUDY 2

Our second study examined how Chinese and European Americans organize their evaluative partner knowledge using the partner knowledge organization task (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). In this task, respondents were asked to create different groups of positive and negative attributes to

TABLE 1 Descriptives for major variables in study 1

	Chinese ($n = 107$)		Euro-Americans ($n = 85$)		Cultural difference	
Variable	***M***	**SD**	***M***	**SD**	***t***	***d***
Within-aspect contradiction[a]	0.04	0.07	0.01	0.03	−3.06**	0.44
Between-aspects contradiction[a]	0.09	0.17	0.05	0.08	−2.08*	0.30
Negation[a]	0.04	0.10	0.01	0.04	−2.37*	0.34
Average contradiction	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.03	−3.76***	0.55

Note: *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

[a]These variables were computed as the ratio of total number of contradictory/negation statements to total number of descriptions.

represent their partner. We employed three indices to capture the ways people organize their evaluative partner knowledge related to Chinese dialectical thinking. First, we expected that Chinese would be more likely to hold a compartmentalized structure of partner knowledge than Euro-Americans would because a compartmentalized structure involves maintaining contradictory information without resolution (*H1*). Second, we predicted that Chinese would have more complex partner knowledge organization than Euro-Americans would, through generating more groups in describing their partners and characterizing the groups with fewer overlapping attributes (*H2*). Third, we anticipated that Chinese would be less likely than Euro-Americans to differentially value positive groups of attributes that describe their partner (i.e., lower differential importance; *H3*).

9 | METHOD

9.1 | Participants

We recruited a sample of 126 Hong Kong Chinese and 154 Euro-American college students who were currently in a romantic relationship. If a person uses fewer than two positive/negative words in the task, the index of compartmentalization cannot be accurately computed because the expected usage of positive/negative words cannot be calculated (see Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). Moreover, the differential importance index cannot be computed if a person does not use any positive or negative words, due to the fact that there is no variability in valence. This resulted in five Chinese (about 3%) and 15 Euro-American participants (about 10%) being removed from further analysis.[3] The percentage of case removal in the U.S. sample was comparable to previous research (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999).

The final sample consisted of 121 Chinese (M_{age} = 20.31, SD = 1.67; 76 females) and 139 Euro-Americans (M_{age} = 19.10, SD = 1.38; 83 females). All participants were in a dating relationship, while four Euro-American participants were engaged or married. The average length of relationship was similar for the two groups: 21.43 months (SD = 17.47) and 24.91 months (SD = 19.32) for Chinese and Euro-Americans, respectively, $t(258) = 1.51$, $p = .13$, $d = 0.19$.

9.2 | Procedure

Participants were invited to the lab in groups to participate in a study on relationships. Seated in individual cubicles, they were instructed to complete the partner knowledge organization task, with materials presented in a booklet in their native language. After participants had finished, they were debriefed, thanked, paid or given course credits, and dismissed.

9.3 | Materials

9.3.1 | List of words/attributes

The original list of words/attributes was collected from Showers and Kevlyn (1999) attribute list, the Interpersonal Quality Scale (Murray et al., 1996a), as well as attributes generated in Study 1. In addition to the 62 words from the two existing measures, 12 words were added from the Chinese data and 12 words were added from the US data from Study 1. This resulted in a total of 86 words in the initial pool.

To select words that were approximately equally valenced and salient in each cultural group, we conducted a pilot study on a sample of Chinese ($n = 57$) and Euro-American ($n = 45$) dating individuals. Participants were asked to rate the valence ("How positive is this word/phrase when used to describe a romantic partner?" and "How negative is this word/phrase when used to describe a romantic partner?") and usage frequency ("How commonly used is this word/phrase to describe a romantic partner?") of each word on 7-point scales: 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *extremely* for valence; 1 = *not common at all* and 7 = *very common* for usage frequency. Based on the valence ratings, we first selected positive words that were high in positive ratings (Mean positivity >5) and low in negative ratings (Mean negativity <3) in both cultural groups. Similarly, we selected negative words that were high in negative ratings (Mean negativity >5) and low in positive ratings (Mean positivity <3) in both cultural groups. Further, we ensured that the selected words were either similar in usage frequency across cultures (no significant cultural difference at $p < .01$) or were commonly used in both cultural groups (Mean usage frequency >5). The final list of 41 words (22 positive and 19 negative), together with their ratings, are presented in Online Appendix B.

9.3.2 | Task instructions

In the organization task, participants were asked to put positive and negative words/attributes into groups/aspects to describe their partners. In particular, participants were presented the list of 41 words and then given 25 min to generate groupings that describe aspects of their partner using the words provided. Participants were told that they were free to use a word more than once or not at all.

The groupings of words were freely created by the participants. In the Chinese sample, a majority of the groupings were about interactions with the partner (e.g., when s/he is with me, when we date), as well as the partner's interactions with friends and family (e.g., around his/her friends, with his/her family). In the U.S. sample, many of the groupings were about personality traits and qualities (e.g., his/her personality), as well as about interaction with the partner and the partner's interaction with friends and family.

Participants were also asked to rate each grouping in terms of its importance ("When you think about your partner, how important is this aspect?") on a 7-point scale from 1 = *not important at all* to 7 = *very important*.

9.3.3 | Computation of indices

An index of positivity was computed based on the number of positive words used by the participant over all the words they used (i.e., proportion of positive words), ranging from 0 to 1. The higher the positivity index, the more a person used positive than negative words in the task.

An index of compartmentalization (vs. integration) was computed to indicate whether there was polarization in the valence of attributes (either positive or negative) across groups/aspects (resulting in "pure" positive and negative groups) versus whether valence was mixed within each group/aspect (resulting in groups with mixed valence), relative to the overall usage of attributes. Specifically, a phi coefficient based on a chi-square statistic was calculated by comparing the observed frequencies of positive and negative attributes in each group/aspect and those that would be expected based on the overall usage of attributes (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). The phi

coefficient ranges from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating more polarization in the valence of attributes (i.e., compartmentalization) across groups, whereas lower values indicate the mixing of valenced attributes within a group (i.e., integration).

To assess complexity, we computed an index of quantity of groupings as well as an index of overlap (Rafaeli-Mor et al., 1999). These two measures independently assess the two major components of complexity (i.e., number of groupings and the distinction among these groupings). The quantity index is simply the number of groupings/aspects participants generated in the task. The overlap index is a measure of the overlap between two groups (in terms of using the same words), over all possible combinations of the groups; the index ranges from 0 to 1 with higher values reflecting more overlap and more similar groupings in one's partner knowledge structure. Thus, a higher quantity index and a *lower* overlap index indicate more complex partner knowledge structure.

We also calculated an index of differential importance based on the importance and valence of each group of attributes (Pelham & Swann, 1989). Differential importance was computed by correlating ratings of importance and proportion of positive words across groups (i.e., within-subjects correlations), which had a range from −1 to 1. Higher values reflect a tendency to think of positive relative to negative partner groups as important, while values close to 0 indicate a tendency to view positive and negative groups as equally important.

10 | RESULTS

10.1 | Preliminary analysis

Overall, participants used more positive than negative words, although Chinese people's partner knowledge (average ratio of positive vs. negative = 0.75) was more negative than that of Euro-Americans (average ratio = 0.79), $t(258) = 2.06$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.32$. It is also noteworthy that Euro-Americans' levels of positivity (79% positive words), compartmentalization (a phi of 0.66), and differential importance (a correlation of 0.36) in the present study were similar to those reported in previous research using a Western sample (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999).

10.2 | Cultural differences in partner knowledge structures

Independent *t*-tests revealed significant cultural differences in the index of the quantity of groups, $t(258) = -8.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$, the index of overlap among groups, $t(258) = 2.23$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.32$, and differential importance, $t(258) = 4.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.55$, but not in the compartmentalization index, $p = .43$ (see Table 2 for descriptives).[4] Chinese and Euro-American participants did not differ in compartmentalization (rejecting *H1*). However, Chinese participants, compared to Euro-American participants, were higher in the index of the quantity of groups, and lower in the index of overlap and differential importance (supporting *H2* and *H3*).

11 | DISCUSSION

The current findings partially supported our predictions that Chinese and Euro-Americans would organize their evaluative knowledge of their partners differently. Chinese and Euro-

TABLE 2 Descriptives and bivariate correlations for major variables in Study 2

	Chinese ($n = 121$)		Euro-Americans ($n = 139$)		Cultural difference						
Variable	***M***	**SD**	***M***	**SD**	***t***	***d***	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Positivity	0.75	0.14	0.79	0.11	2.06*	0.32	1	−0.39***	−0.06	0.46***	−0.12
2. Compartmentalization	0.68	0.18	0.66	0.21	−0.79	0.10	−0.37***	1	−0.12	−0.55***	0.32***
3. Quantity of groups	9.55	2.45	7.16	2.22	−8.24***	1.02	−0.26**	0.34***	1	0.14	−0.16
4. Overlap of groups	0.27	0.13	0.31	0.12	2.23*	0.32	0.50***	−0.64***	−0.13	1	−0.03
5. Differential importance	0.12	0.42	0.36	0.45	4.39***	0.55	0.02	0.11	0.06	−0.02	1

Note: Correlation matrix for Chinese is in the lower panel, whereas that for Euro-Americans is in the upper panel. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Americans compartmentalized their knowledge of their partner to a similar degree, contrary to our expectation that Chinese would be more likely to compartmentalize than Euro-Americans. Because classifying attributes as good or bad is a natural tendency, compartmentalization requires fewer cognitive and emotional resources to maintain compared to an integrative structure (Showers et al., 2004). Compartmentalization may therefore be culturally general in managing mostly positive knowledge and some negative qualities. Yet, this finding might be a result of other methodological issues such as the use of predominantly dating individuals who were in relatively short relationships (about 20 months in length), and hence they might not have enough negative experiences in their relationship to require integration.

We also found that Chinese generated more distinctive groups to describe their partners and valued positive and negative groups of attributes more equally than did Euro-Americans. This reveals the Chinese tendency to hold evaluatively contradictory partner beliefs. While this study examined Chinese dialectical thinking in a structured partner description task, in Study 3 we extended these findings using a different paradigm, which reflected participants' implicit and explicit evaluations of their partners. Study 3 also examined ambivalent attitudes toward both one's partner and the relationship itself.

12 | STUDY 3

In this study, we examined cultural differences in ambivalent attitudes toward one's romantic partner and one's relationship (i.e., relational ambivalence) among Chinese and European Americans (*H4*). Relative to Euro-Americans, we expected Chinese to simultaneously evaluate their romantic partner in both positive and negative ways. We used both implicit and explicit attitude measures in this study, because diverging results from the use of these measures, which have their own strengths and limitations, may suggest the various ways that dialectical relationship thinking influences individuals' partner and relationship evaluations (Baldwin et al., 2010).

12.1 | Implicit partner evaluation

Among the available implicit measures of partner attitudes, the Go/No-Go Association Task (GNAT; Nosek & Banaji, 2001) has two major advantages over other implicit measures. First, unlike the Implicit Association Test, the GNAT does not require a comparison group. Researchers can assess respondents' implicit associations between their partner and some valenced stimuli (e.g., positive and negative words) without comparing the associations between another target and the valenced stimuli. This is especially important in cross-cultural research because the comparison group, no matter whether it is a generalized other or a close friend, may have different meanings for people with different cultural backgrounds (Boucher et al., 2009). Second, the GNAT can separately assess both the associations between partner and positive stimuli and the associations between partner and negative stimuli (Lee et al., 2010), such that we can compute an ambivalence index based on these separate evaluations. Other measures either require computation of a difference score between associations with positive and negative stimuli or require asking respondents to make a one-dimensional judgment (see Baldwin et al., 2010 for review).

12.2 | Index of ambivalent attitudes

Attitudinal ambivalence is defined as simultaneously holding positive and negative attitudes toward an object (Conner & Sparks, 2002; Jonas et al., 2000). Here, by the term ambivalence, we refer to bi-valanced attitudes, rather than to indifference or ambiguity. Researchers have proposed various formulas to capture people's ambivalent attitudes toward an object based on their separate evaluations of the positive and negative aspects of the object. In the current study, we applied the Similarity-Intensity Model (SIM; Thompson et al., 1995) to compute ambivalence indices based on participants' positive and negative attitudes toward their partners and their relationships. Previous research that examined cultural differences in self-ambivalence (Boucher et al., 2009; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004) revealed that results were very similar using different formulas (Kaplan, 1972; Priester & Petty, 1996). More information about the SIM formula can be found in Online Appendix C.

13 | METHOD

13.1 | Participants

Samples of 94 Chinese and 117 Euro-American college students were recruited in Hong Kong and U.S. universities, respectively. Four participants who had negative d' values in the implicit task (negative values indicated poor performance; see Measures for details), four participants who reported color blindness, one participant who encountered a computer breakdown, and one participant who had difficulty following task instructions were excluded (two Chinese and eight Euro-Americans in total). The final sample consisted of 92 Chinese ($M_{age} = 20.39$, $SD = 1.56$; 54 females) and 109 Euro-Americans ($M_{age} = 19.51$, $SD = 1.44$; 74 females). All participants were in a dating relationship, except two Euro-American participants who were engaged. The average length of relationship was similar for the two groups: 22.90 months ($SD = 21.62$) and 19.95 months ($SD = 16.00$) for Chinese and Euro-Americans, respectively, $t(199) = -1.11$, $p = .27$, $d = 0.16$.

13.2 | Procedure

Participants were invited to the lab in groups. Each participant was seated in front of a computer in an individual cubicle and after providing informed consent, they were instructed to complete the measure of implicit partner attitudes, the partner-GNAT (PGNAT; Lee et al., 2010). The PGNAT was programmed using Inquisit 4 (2014) (Millisecond Software, Seattle, WA) with all instructions presented on the screen. As a first step, participants were asked to input the name they usually address their partner for use as one of the target stimuli. Then, they were instructed to work on the PGNAT as fast as possible while maintaining accuracy.

After the PGNAT, participants completed a survey that consisted of a filler task, which asked participants to match capital cities and countries, and which was followed by measures of explicit partner attitudes, relationship evaluation, and demographics. After participants completed the survey, they were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

13.3 | Measures

13.3.1 | Implicit partner evaluation

The PGNAT consisted of two critical blocks of trials. For each block of trials, some stimuli were assigned as targets and the other stimuli were assigned as distractors. Specifically, in one block of trials (*partner* + *positive/good*), participants were asked to press the space bar when their partners' name or a positive word (e.g., accepting) appeared, and they had refrain from pressing the space bar when a negative word (e.g., annoying) appeared. Similarly, participants were instructed to respond to their partners' name or a negative word in another block of trials (*partner* + *negative/bad*). The target group labels (e.g., Partner, Good) were shown on the upper corners for participants' easy reference. We selected five positive words (*warm*, *friendly*, *accepting*, *giving*, and *optimistic*) and five negative words (*distant*, *complaining*, *criticizing*, *annoying* and *irritable*) from the attribute list developed in Study 2 for use as the target stimuli.

Each critical block contained 70 trials (40 target stimuli plus 30 distracting stimuli), and the two blocks (*partner* + *positive* and *partner* + *negative*) were counter-balanced in order of presentation across participants. Participants had a chance to practice the classification of positive and negative words (20 trials) before the critical trials. Each stimulus was presented for 600 ms, which is a very fast response window to avoid conscious processing, with an intertrial interval of 400 ms. A red cross (X) appeared at the bottom if the participant made an incorrect classification, while a green circle (O) appeared at the bottom if the participant made a correct classification. We pilot tested the response time window in an independent sample of participants from both cultural groups ($n_{\text{Chinese}} = 14$; $n_{\text{E.American}} = 7$) to ensure that there were variations in people's responses to the stimuli.

A measure of sensitivity (d') was computed to assess implicit partner attitudes based on signal detection theory (Nosek & Banaji, 2001). If a participant correctly hit the space bar, the response was counted as a hit. However, if the participant wrongly hit the space bar, the response was counted as a false alarm. The proportions of hits and false alarms in a block of trials were computed and then transformed into z scores following Nosek and Banaji (2001). Sensitivity is the difference between hit rate and false alarm rate, and two variables of d' were computed, one for *partner* + *positive* and one for *partner* + *negative*. Higher values of d' indicated greater sensitivity in making the discriminations for the targets against the distractors. Thus, if participants have a stronger association between their partners and positivity, as compared to those who have a weaker association, they are more likely to correctly identify their partner's names and positive words across the *partner* + *positive* trials. Values of d' lower than 0 indicated that participants were not able to discriminate the targets and the distractors or they did not pay attention to the instructions. As a result, their data were removed from further analysis.

Implicit partner-ambivalence was computed using the sensitivity scores for *partner* + *positive* associations and *partner* + *negative* associations. The SIM formula was used for the computation of the ambivalence index.

13.3.2 | Explicit partner evaluation

Participants' explicit attitudes toward their romantic partners were assessed by an 18-item scale that tapped people's cognitive, behavioral, and affective reactions toward their partners

TABLE 3 Descriptives and bivariate correlations for major variables in Study 3

	Chinese ($n = 92$)		Euro-Americans ($n = 109$)		Cultural difference										
Variable	***M***	**SD**	***M***	**SD**	***t***	***d***	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
1. Positive implicit partner attitudes	2.15	0.73	1.92	0.71	−2.27*	0.32	1	0.45***	0.50***	0.11	−0.08	−0.09	0.08	0.03	−0.00
2. Negative implicit partner attitudes	2.10	0.63	1.60	0.76	−5.02***	0.71	0.32**	1	0.82***	0.06	−0.02	−0.02	0.05	−0.00	−0.02
3. Ambivalent implicit partner attitudes	2.98	1.45	2.18	1.57	−3.72***	0.53	0.53***	0.72***	1	0.13	−0.04	−0.04	0.07	−0.04	−0.06
4. Positive explicit partner attitudes	5.61	0.71	6.28	0.53	7.62***	1.08	0.07	0.03	−0.04	1	−0.48***	−0.61***	0.62***	−0.41***	−0.53***
5. Negative explicit partner attitudes	2.70	0.84	2.00	0.83	−5.91***	0.84	−0.29**	−0.08	−0.11	−0.49***	1	0.98***	−0.57***	0.68***	0.72***
6. Ambivalent explicit partner attitudes	2.44	2.85	−0.32	2.65	−7.11***	1.01	−0.27*	−0.07	−0.09	−0.64***	0.98***	1	−0.62***	0.66***	0.72***
7. Positive relationship evaluation	4.88	1.17	5.97	0.82	7.67***	1.09	0.16	−0.03	0.05	0.62***	−0.52***	−0.59***	1	−0.56***	−0.78***
8. Negative relationship evaluation	1.08	0.89	0.48	0.58	−5.79***	0.81	−0.18	−0.03	0.02	−0.54***	0.66***	0.68***	−0.56***	1	0.96***
9. Ambivalent relationship evaluation	−1.68	3.32	−4.52	2.29	−7.14***	1.01	−0.19	−0.01	0.00	−0.61***	0.68***	0.72***	−0.78***	0.95***	1

Note: Correlation matrix for Chinese is in the lower panel, whereas that for Euro-Americans is in the upper panel. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

(Banse & Kowalick, 2007).[5] Participants rated nine positively framed items such as "When I think about my partner I rejoice" ($\alpha_{Chinese} = .89$; $\alpha_{E.American} = .80$) and nine negatively framed items such as "When I think about my partner I get angry" ($\alpha_{Chinese} = .77$; $\alpha_{E.American} = .73$), on 7-point scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Explicit partner-ambivalence was computed based on average scores on the positive partner attitude items and the negative partner attitude items, using the SIM ambivalence formula.

13.3.3 | Relationship evaluation

The Positive and Negative Semantic Differential (PN-SMD) measure was used to capture participants' positive and negative attitudes toward their relationships (Mattson et al., 2013). Participants rated their relationships using a list of positive (e.g., interesting; $\alpha_{Chinese} = .93$; $\alpha_{E.American} = .89$) and negative (e.g., empty; $\alpha_{Chinese} = .86$; $\alpha_{E.American} = .76$) attributes on 8-point scales anchored by 0 = *not at all* and 7 = *completely*. Again, we used the SIM formula to compute ambivalent attitudes toward one's relationship.

14 | RESULTS

Table 3 summarizes the descriptives and bivariate correlations of variables in Study 3. Implicit and explicit partner attitudes were not significantly associated in both samples, except for a

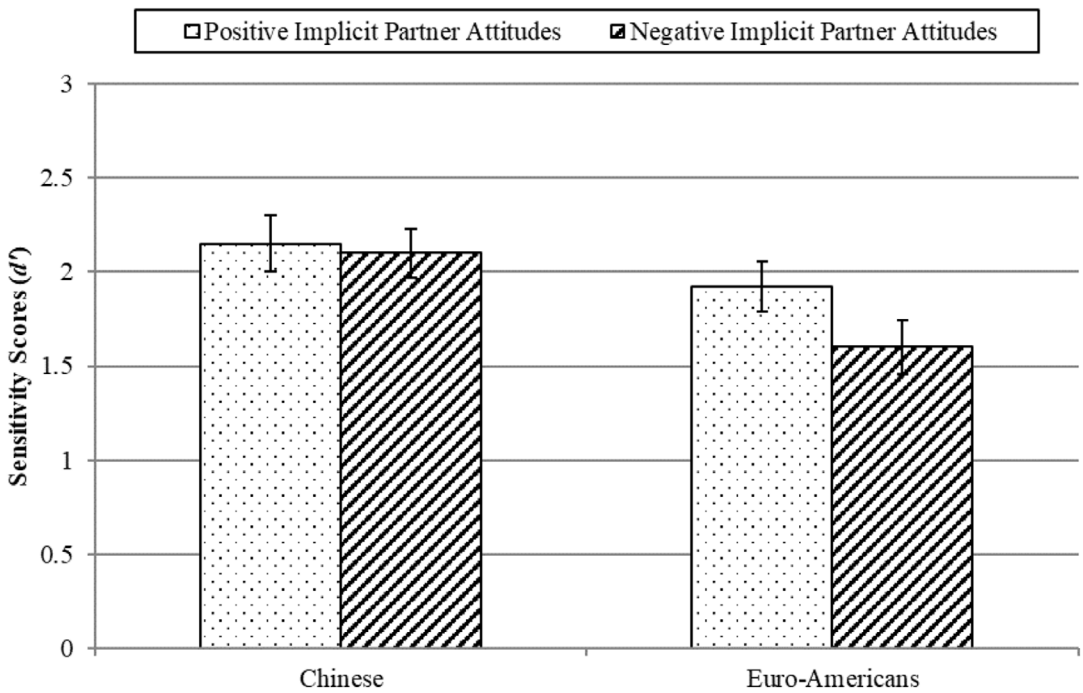

FIGURE 1 Positive and negative implicit partner attitudes across cultural groups in Study 3 (with 95% CI bars)

significant negative correlation between positive implicit partner attitude and negative explicit partner attitude in the Chinese sample ($r = -.29$, $p = .01$).

14.1 | Cultural differences in implicit partner-ambivalence

Two sets of analyses examined the prediction that Chinese participants would hold stronger implicit ambivalent attitudes toward their partners than Euro-American participants would. First, we conducted a 2 (Culture: 0 = Euro-Americans vs. 1 = Chinese) × 2 (Order: 0 = *partner* + *positive* block first vs. 1 = *partner* + *negative* block first) × 2 (Valence: positive implicit partner attitudes vs. negative implicit partner attitudes) mixed ANCOVA on implicit partner evaluations, controlling for sex.[6] We observed a significant Culture × Valence interaction effect, $F(1, 196) = 5.87$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$.[7] Pairwise comparisons showed that Chinese people's positive and negative implicit partner attitudes did not differ, $F(1, 196) = 0.51$, $p = .48$, whereas Euro-Americans had higher positive than negative implicit partner attitudes, $F(1, 196) = 19.09$, $p < .001$. These results suggested that Chinese held ambivalent implicit partner attitudes, whereas Euro-Americans had stronger positive than negative implicit attitudes (see Figure 1).

Subsequently, we conducted an ANCOVA examining cultural difference in the SIM index of implicit partner ambivalence, controlling for sex. There was a significant effect of culture, $F(1, 197) = 15.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$, such that Chinese were more ambivalent than Euro-Americans in their implicit partner attitudes (supporting *H4*).

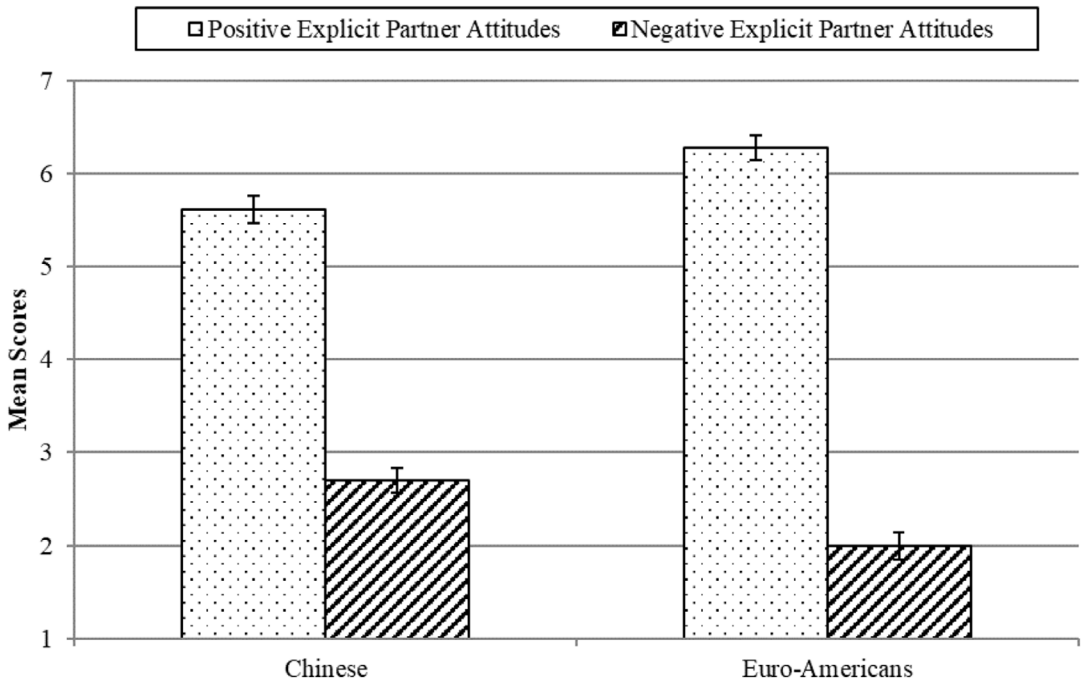

FIGURE 2 Positive and negative explicit partner attitudes across cultural groups in Study 3 (with 95% CI bars)

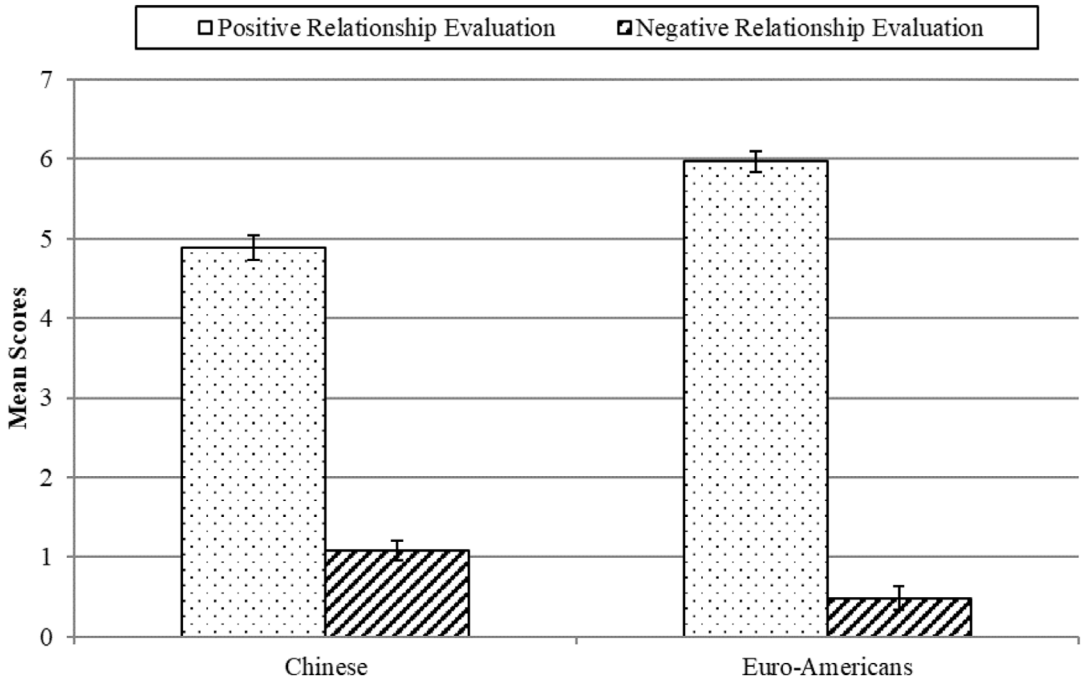

FIGURE 3 Positive and negative relationship evaluations across cultural groups in Study 3 (with 95% CI bars)

14.2 | Cultural differences in explicit partner-ambivalence

We conducted a mixed ANCOVA on explicit partner evaluations, with a 2 (Culture: 0 = Euro-Americans vs. 1 = Chinese) × 2 (Valence: positive partner attitudes vs. negative partner attitudes) design. We found a significant interaction effect of Culture × Valence, $F(1, 198) = 42.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.22$. In both cultural groups, participants held stronger positive than negative partner attitudes, but pairwise comparisons showed that this difference was greater in the Euro-American sample, $F(1, 198) = 1297.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.87$, relative to the Chinese sample, $F(1, 198) = 522.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.73$ (see Figure 2). We then conducted an ANCOVA on the explicit partner-ambivalence SIM index. A significant effect of culture was observed, $F(1, 198) = 48.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$. Supporting *H4*, Chinese were more ambivalent in their explicit partner attitudes than Euro-Americans.

14.3 | Cultural differences in relationship evaluation

We examined whether the same pattern of ambivalence would be observed in the semantic differential measure of relationship evaluation. In our ANCOVA, we found a significant Culture × Valence interaction, $F(1, 198) = 57.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.23$. Participants reported higher positive relationship evaluations than negative evaluations, but this difference was greater among Euro-Americans, $F(1, 198) = 1420.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.88$, than among Chinese, $F(1, 198) = 589.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.75$ (see Figure 3). An ANCOVA on the SIM ambivalence index for relationship evaluation revealed a significant effect of culture, $F(1, 197) = 48.43$,

$p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$. Chinese were more ambivalent in their relationship evaluations than were Euro-Americans.

15 | DISCUSSION

Results from Study 3 generally supported our hypothesis that Chinese were more ambivalent about their romantic partners at both the implicit and explicit levels than Euro-Americans (*H4*). Chinese associated their romantic partners with similar levels of positive and negative stimuli, whereas Euro-Americans associated their partners with more positive than negative stimuli. In addition, although people from both cultural groups explicitly viewed their partners and relationships in a more positive way rather than in a negative way, this difference was smaller among Chinese participants than among Euro-American participants. These cultural differences in implicit and explicit partner and relationship evaluations were captured by the ambivalence indices.

These results were consistent with previous studies that demonstrated Chinese people's stronger tendency to show negative and ambivalent attitudes in their self- and social perception, assessed by both implicit and explicit measures, as compared to Euro-Americans (Boucher et al., 2009; Ma-Kellams et al., 2011). Moreover, the cultural difference in relational ambivalence was larger for the explicit measure ($d = 1.01$) than the implicit measure ($d = 0.58$). This result may suggest that cultural forces that shape expression of negative and ambivalent partner attitudes are stronger in explicit evaluations than in implicit evaluations, indicating that Chinese people's tendency to show relational ambivalence may be a more controlled process than an automatic process.

16 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Most relationship theories have been developed based on samples of North Americans with European heritage, and we know that these samples are not representative of human populations across the globe (Henrich et al., 2010; Thalmayer et al., 2021). There are only a handful of studies that investigate cultural differences in romantic relationships, and they mainly rely on the individualism–collectivism distinction to predict and explain these cultural differences (e.g., Anderson et al., 2008; Dion & Dion, 1993; Gaines & Hardin, 2013). The cultural theory of dialecticism has received relatively little attention in the culture and relationship literature, and the present research provides the first investigation in addressing this gap.

To our knowledge, these are the first studies to apply the theory of naïve dialecticism to test and explain cultural differences in partner knowledge organization and ambivalent partner evaluation. Using indirect, implicit, and explicit measures across three studies, we demonstrated that Chinese, compared to European Americans, were more likely to tolerate seeming contradictions in their evaluative partner knowledge and attitudes. Documenting these cultural differences in dialectical relationship thinking not only allows us to recognize diversity in relationship experiences and normalize these differences, but it also lays important groundwork for predicting and testing other functions of dialectical relationship thinking in future cross-cultural research.

16.1 | Dialecticism in partner knowledge organization and partner evaluation

Our first exploratory study provided initial evidence to demonstrate that Chinese were more likely than Euro-Americans to see their partners in a contradictory way in an attribute listing task, even though these contradictory components were not necessarily evaluative (e.g., good and bad) but included contradictions in content (e.g., introvert and extravert). This finding based on participants' spontaneous responses shows that contradictions are more likely to occur naturally in Chinese people's partner descriptions than in Euro-Americans' descriptions; it is not an artifact due to the use of specific methodologies (e.g., using a specific partner attitude scale). Study 2 examined cultural differences in the ways people organize their positive and negative partner knowledge using a more structured partner description task. In contrast to our prediction that Chinese participants would be more likely to mentally separate positive and negative features of their partner into different aspects (*H1*), we found that people from the two cultural groups were similar in the use of the compartmentalization strategy. One might hypothesize the opposite of Hypothesis 1, that given tolerance of contradiction, Chinese people would be more likely than Euro-Americans to integrate positive and negative attributes within an aspect. This was what we found in Study 1. However, the null finding on cultural difference in compartmentalization/integration in Study 2 does not support either prediction. The particularly positive partner knowledge may limit the detection of a cultural difference in integration. This possibility awaits further investigation using other research paradigms that do not depend on the overall usage of positive or negative attributes. Other hypotheses in Study 2 were supported, such that Chinese, relative to Euro-Americans, had a stronger tendency to think of their partners in distinct ways (*H2*) and to value both positive and negative attributes in their partners (*H3*), which demonstrates Chinese people's tendency to view their partners in a complex and balanced way.

In addition, Study 3 revealed that Chinese people were more ambivalent in their attitudes toward their partners (or higher in relational ambivalence) than were Euro-Americans, as observed in their explicit and implicit global partner evaluations (*H4*). Another result worthy of note is that implicit partner attitudes were not significantly related to explicit partner attitudes or relationship evaluation, except for a modest, negative correlation between positive implicit and negative explicit partner attitude in the Chinese sample. Research reveals that implicit and explicit measures are often independent of each other, but both types of measures uniquely contribute to the prediction of important relationship outcomes (Lee et al., 2010). Examining people's automatic evaluations of their relationships or partners may reveal important processes that are obscured by explicit, self-report methods. For instance, daily interactions among dyads usually happen in contexts of time pressure, fatigue, distraction, and multitasking, in which automatic processes play a more important role than controlled responses (Baldwin et al., 2010). The current cross-cultural examination of automatic evaluative processes using implicit measures helps extend findings based on explicit measures.

One observation across studies is that most participants showed stronger positive than negative explicit attitudes, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The findings from Study 2, using a relatively indirect measure of positive and negative partner knowledge, revealed that in both cultures about 70%–80% of the content was positive–only 20%–30% was negative. Despite an overall positive view of one's partner and relationship, Chinese participants showed more negative explicit partner attitudes than did Euro-Americans. This corresponded to a previous finding that both East Asians and Westerners wrote more favorable than unfavorable self-statements,

but that those of East Asians were more balanced (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). East Asians are more inclined to maintain equilibrium in keeping opposing and contradictory elements, without downplaying the negative characteristics of their partners (Cross & Lam, 2018).

One strength of this research is the use of multiple methods to assess individuals' evaluations of their partners. We used an indirect knowledge organization task, an implicit assessment, and explicit self-reports to provide a multi-dimensional perspective on relationship thinking in two cultural contexts. The results of these diverse approaches converge in showing that Chinese people evaluate their partners more negatively and ambivalently than do Euro-Americans. However, our studies are not able to disentangle whether Chinese people's negative and ambivalent relationship evaluation reflects their motivation to attend to and acknowledge negative relationship experience, their accurate recall, and tolerance of negative relationship experience, or both. Future work using dyadic designs and observational measures will help address this important issue.

16.2 | Understanding dialecticism in Chinese relationships

The current research has important implications for better understanding of Chinese relationships and the development of more global relationship theories. We find that attitudinal ambivalence is relatively prevalent in Chinese relationships. This suggests that relationship research should pay attention to positive, negative, and ambivalent relationship experiences when examining relationship quality in Chinese cultural contexts. A two-dimensional model of relationship quality has already been proposed, in which it is argued that one's romantic partner and relationship can be a target of attitudinal ambivalence (e.g., a person can love and hate his or her partner at the same time) and that negative components are as important as positive components in relationship evaluations (Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Fincham & Rogge, 2010). However, relational ambivalence and its antecedents and consequences have not been widely investigated in different cultural groups, and hence more work is needed to demonstrate that findings related to relational ambivalence are generalizable across cultural contexts (for an example of self-ambivalence see Brown, 2013).

Dialectical relationship thinking can be beneficial for relationships in contexts that have not been examined in the present research (Cross & Lam, 2018; see also Spencer-Rodgers & Peng, 2004 for a similar discussion). For instance, a dialectical view of one's partner/relationship may buffer the relationship from negative events or adversity. For dialectical thinkers, the world–including relationships–is constantly changing, so ups-and-downs in a relationship are to be expected. Hence, dialectical relationship thinking may lead to perseverance and persistence in the relationship because dialectical thinkers perceive relationship experience and well-being in a dynamic fashion that changes across time and contexts (Ji et al., 2001). In contrast, non-dialectical thinkers believe that once something is on a certain trajectory, it will continue to follow that trajectory (Ji et al., 2001). Consequently, they may think that if there are bad times in the relationship right now, these bad times will persist because change is not expected, which may ultimately result in premature dissolution of the relationship. We do not, however, blindly recommend that people develop dialectical thinking without consideration of specific relationship contexts, because there are times when an early dissolution of a malfunctioning relationship can be beneficial to both parties. Similarly, promoting dialectical thinking may help intimates appreciate and accept the negative qualities of one's partner/relationship, but this can backfire if a partner/relationship is abusive. Some research also suggests

that dialectical thinkers are more likely than non-dialectical thinkers to use flexible coping strategies to handle different stressful situations because of their recognition of changing situations and acceptance of potentially conflicting approaches to coping (Cheng, 2009). Such flexibility can be adaptative when intimates handle relational conflicts in diverse contexts, but the nature of these conflicts should be carefully examined. Additional studies are needed to demonstrate potential benefits and pitfalls as well as long-term consequences of dialectical relationship thinking to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the specific contexts under which such thinking may or may not be beneficial.

It is worth noting that not all people from collectivistic cultures endorse dialectical thinking (e.g., Latino culture; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). Collectivism and dialecticism are only weakly correlated (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010), and dialecticism helps explain cultural differences in acceptance of contradictions after controlling for collectivism (Zell et al., 2012). This illustrates the unique contribution of dialecticism theory to understanding cultural differences in cognitive processes related to contradictions. However, future studies would benefit from measuring dialectical relationship beliefs (e.g., "Partners nag to show they love you") and other cultural dimensions (e.g., collectivism) to unpack the cultural differences observed in the present research.

The findings from this research may inform practitioners' interpretation of assessments of Chinese people's relationship well-being. For example, practitioners who provide services to Chinese couples need to be cautious in interpreting their clients' ambivalent attitudes toward their partners, which may reflect specific cultural meanings (e.g., my partner's criticism can be a sign that s/he cares about me). Chinese couples may appear generally less optimistic about their relationships as compared to Euro-Americans if they believe that even a perfect relationship has its negative sides. A different conception of relationship well-being in Chinese populations–as a two-dimensional, dynamic construct–is needed, in order to more accurately reflect how these relationships function and flourish.

16.3 | Limitations and future directions

The current studies are limited to four primary ways. First, our samples were mostly dating college students. Given that people face more stress and negative events in a marriage than in a dating relationship, future research that samples more widely across people in different relationship statuses may identify the ways that everyday (or extraordinary) stressors affect dialectical relationship processes. Second, we mainly relied on self-report measures to assess relationship quality outcomes. Future research should explore outcomes that are not self-report in nature (e.g., videotaping couple's interaction behavior), to minimize methodological biases in self-report measures and to supplement the current findings. Third, we tested our propositions by comparing Chinese and Euro-American samples, although people from other non-Western cultural groups may also endorse dialectical thinking (de Oliveira & Nisbett, 2017). We recommend further research in those cultures before these results are generalized to non-Chinese populations. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of this research does not allow us to draw casual interpretations. Further evidence from experimental designs such as priming dialectical relationship beliefs (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004) is needed to establish causal links between culture, dialectical relationship thinking, and relationship well-being.

17 | CONCLUSION

The current research on how people evaluate their partners and organize that evaluative knowledge builds upon the cultural theory of naïve dialecticism and addresses an important gap in the research on culture and close relationships. An understanding of dialectical thinking helps members of other cultural groups understand why Chinese people think of a relationship as like tea–bitter at first but with an underlying sweetness that will emerge. Some readers may wonder why Chinese couples would think of their relationship as "bitter", as a relationship that involves bitter or negative qualities may be viewed as tainted or dissatisfying. Lest the reader wonder what a "good" relationship means in Chinese contexts, we recommend that readers entertain a dialectical approach to this question: perhaps the "bitter" aspects of a relationship contribute to "sweet" outcomes. Unfortunately, researchers have not yet articulated or found appropriate ways to assess Chinese notions of the "good" or "ideal" romantic relationship, so we advise readers to wait to make a judgment. Until then, we urge relationship researchers to continue to investigate the effects of particular cultural beliefs and ways of thinking on relationship outcomes.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author Ben C. P. Lam: ben.lam@unsw.edu.au upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTES

[1] The project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Iowa State University as part of the first author's PhD dissertation. Data were collected in 2015/2016.

[2] There was no gender difference observed in ANCOVAs in Study 1, and hence sex was not included in the final analysis.

[3] Results on other indices were similar whether these participants were included. To note, these participants are extremely positive in their partner knowledge (they used very few negative words), and given that more Euro-Americans are removed from the sample than Chinese, cultural difference in the positivity index would be larger if these participants were included.

[4] We found no gender difference in ANCOVAs in Study 2. But sensitivity analyses were conducted controlling for positivity and the other indices when testing cultural differences on each of the indices given their small to modest inter-correlations. We found similar patterns of results as the *t*-tests results for compartmentalization, $F(1, 254) = 0.18$, $p = .67$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$, quantity of groups, $F(1, 254) = 55.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.18$, and differential importance, $F(1, 254) = 10.25$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$. However, cultural difference in overlap among groups did not reach significance, $F(1, 254) = 3.43$, $p = .065$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$, but it suggested a similar trend that Chinese generated less overlap groups than did Euro-Americans.

[5] We conducted principal component analysis to examine the factor structures of the two explicit measures in Study 3. We observed a two-factor structure for the partner attitudes measure in both cultural groups, with one

factor tapping positive partner attitudes and the other factor tapping negative partner attitudes. Similarly, we found two factors underlying our relationship quality measure in both cultural groups, namely, positive relationship quality and negative relationship quality. Partial scalar equivalence was established using confirmatory factor analysis for the two measures in another larger sample not reported in the current paper.

[6] Sex was controlled for in all analyses in Study 3. Males were more ambivalent in their implicit partner evaluation, $F(1, 198) = 4.98$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$, explicit partner evaluation, $F(1, 198) = 7{,}57$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$, and relationship evaluation, $F(1, 198) = 5.92$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$, than females.

[7] There was a significant Order × Valence interaction, $F(1, 196) = 10.19$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Participants were lower in their positive implicit partner attitudes when they did the *partner + positive* block first than when they did the *partner + negative* block first, $F(1, 196) = 6.49$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$, although this was not found for negative implicit partner attitudes ($p = .35$). This may suggest a practice effect in the PGNAT, particularly for the positive attitudes, such that after participants practiced in one block they were better at classification in the next block.

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