

## Understanding Chinese Comfortableness in Service

**James Stanworth**

National Changhua University of Education, Taiwan

### **Abstract:**

Despite the growing significance of Chinese consumers, little is known about how they interpret various dimensions of service interactions. In Western contexts, where individualism prevails (Bedford & Hwang, 2003), autonomy of choice underpins customer judgments; its absence induces discomfort. By contrast, Chinese customers are shaped by collectivist norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), which impose relational expectations and complicate feelings of ease. The Chinese term *zìzài* (自在) denotes comfort, arising either from adherence to Confucian role-bound norms (Yang, 1995) or from Taoist ideals of natural self-expression that alleviate moral pressure (Slingerland, 2000). Feeling *zìzài* promotes harmony and sustains long-term service relationships. This study examines the antecedents of *zìzài* and *bùzìzài* (不自在) in service contexts.

We adopt a qualitative design, conducting 15 interviews with Taiwanese customers and eliciting critical incidents (Gremler, 2004) in which *zìzài* or *bùzìzài* was salient. We develop a taxonomy of positive and negative service experiences and identify situational cues that trigger these states. Preliminary findings suggest that *zìzài* emerges as a liminal condition in which customers simultaneously fulfill role expectations and express personal identity. Our results offer practical insights for service employees on fostering *zìzài* among Chinese customers by recognizing and responding to key interactional elements.