

# A cultural look at moral purity: Wiping the face clean

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Spike W. S. Lee is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management . He is interested in the embodied and metaphorical nature of human thinking, which often leads to quirky effects (e.g., physical cleansing helps people move on by "wiping the slate clean"; when people "smell something fishy," they become suspicious and invest less money in a trust-dependent economic game). Specifically, he explores how the mind interacts with the body in multiple ways; why mind-body relations are often predicted by the metaphors we use; when and how metaphors influence judgment, affect, and behavior; what cognitive principles govern these metaphorical effects and how they vary by experimental, social, and cultural context. Credit: Rotman School

Moral people have a pure heart. Immoral acts feel dirty. Expressions that describe morality in terms of purity abound in English and numerous other languages. The idea is rooted in religions around the world as well. For example, ritual purification of the physical body symbolizes moral purification, from baptism of Christianity and mikvah of Judaism, to ablution of Islam and Buddhism, to bathing in the Ganges of Hinduism and amrit of Sikhism. Across human societies, bodily purity seems deeply intertwined with morality. Does it imply that the morality-purity link is a universal psychological phenomenon?

The answer turns out to be Yes and No—it depends on what exactly we want universal to mean, according to a new study by Prof. Spike W. S. Lee of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and colleagues Jin Wan of the University of Groningen, Honghong Tang and Chao Liu of Beijing Normal University and Xiaoqin Mai of Renmin University of China.

"If by universal we mean, 'Does the general link between morality and purity exist across cultures?', then yes, it appears to. But if by universal we mean, 'Does the link manifest itself in identical ways across cultures?', then no, it doesn't," says Prof. Lee.

Consider East Asians. Cultural psychologists have long observed that East Asians care a lot about their "face," or the public image of one's self. It is evident in their tendency to avoid "losing face," which happens when they are seen acting selfishly, disloyally, or inappropriately, and in their keenness to "gain face" by moving up the social hierarchy so that others "give face" to them. Psychologists call them a "face" culture.

Given East Asians' special emphasis on the face as a representation of public self-image, Prof. Lee and his colleagues hypothesized that facial

purification might have particularly powerful moral effects among members of a face culture. They conducted several experiments to find out.

In one experiment, after people recall their immoral behavior, whereas hands-cleaning effectively reduces guilt and regret against a Western backdrop, face-cleaning is more effective against an East Asian backdrop. Face-cleaning frees East Asians from the urge to engage in guilt-driven compensatory prosocial behavior. In the wake of their immorality, East Asians find a face-cleaning product especially appealing and spontaneously choose to wipe their face clean.

These results suggest that [moral purity](#) is both universal and culturally variable. Its existence is found East and West. But the specific form of purification may differ from one culture to another. Whether people should wipe their hands or face clean—or rinse their mouth, or shampoo their hair, or wash their feet—is likely to depend on the cultural meanings attached to each body part.

Provided by University of Toronto

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