

Dual-language psychology program at ASU shows the importance of cultural context

‘Psychological theories don’t exist in a vacuum’

By Mariana Lozovanu, ASU News
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Context matters — even in as seemingly a straightforward situation as quitting smoking.

A recent discussion in an Arizona State University graduate psychology course delivered in Mandarin showed this in action. What Western research often defines as individual addictive behavior was reframed by a student in China as a culturally embedded workplace practice — a pause during tense meetings that, for some people, restores harmony among colleagues.

“That moment shifted the entire conversation,” said [Kailee Zhu](#), assistant teaching professor of psychology at ASU’s West Valley campus. “It reminded all of us that psychological theories don’t exist in a vacuum. Cultural and social context matters deeply.”

Zhu teaches psychology in three formats simultaneously: in person at the West Valley campus, through ASU Online for English-speaking students, and through [ASU ZaiXian](#), or AZX, a program for Mandarin-speaking learners globally. The experience offers a rare vantage point into how culture shapes learning and interpretation.

In the AZX program, ASU delivers graduate psychology education to Mandarin-speaking students around the world in Mandarin or in English with Chinese subtitles.

“This isn’t about exporting U.S. psychology to an international audience,” Zhu said. “It’s about creating a shared learning space where knowledge is co-constructed across cultures.”

In AZX classrooms, many students are working professionals with years of lived experience. Their insights often deepen conversations around social identity, stereotypes and group membership —

core topics in social psychology.

“It’s like watching a qualitative research study unfold in real time,” said Zhu, whose research examines how children and adults think about social groups. “Psychology is fundamentally about how people think, feel and act in everyday life. These students bring perspectives grounded in experience that push me to refine the questions I ask — both as a teacher and as a researcher.”

As Lunar New Year approaches, Zhu has incorporated the holiday into her social psychology course through a lecture on happiness and social comparison. Holiday gatherings often heighten comparisons around career progress, family roles and achievement — emotions that can trigger envy or stress. Social psychology offers tools for reframing those reactions.

“When we begin to see others as part of our ‘in-group’ rather than competitors, those same comparisons can foster pride and shared joy,” Zhu said. “Using Chinese New Year as a cultural anchor helps students connect abstract theory to lived experience while reflecting on how culture shapes emotional life.”

AZX, led by Director [Baoyu Wang](#), is delivered in the [New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences](#) through a partnership with CinLearn, allowing ASU to provide degree programs in Mandarin without requiring students to relocate or attend a physical campus.

For student Xi “Sunny” Chen, the experience has reshaped both academic thinking and career direction.

“At first, I approached it like any other program — learn the material and pass the test,” Chen said. “But this program pushes you into psychology’s big debates. You have to question ideas, take them apart and see how they evolve.”

Over time, the shift moved from absorbing knowledge to generating it. That transformation has influenced Chen’s professional aspirations — moving from following a defined career ladder to pursuing work centered on innovation and meaningful impact.

“I’m not just looking for answers anymore,” Chen said. “I’m trying to ask my own questions and contribute something new. Learning in two languages became learning in a new way of thinking.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Kailee Zhu, assistant teaching professor in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (pictured with students Nientung Lin and Yu Fan Hsu), teaches PSY 553: General Psychology Capstone at ASU's West Valley campus.

Text image(s)



Kailee Zhu is an assistant teaching professor in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences.