

Chinese Traditional Culture and College Students' Mental Health Education: Goals, Content, and Actions

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Abstract: *Traditional Chinese culture is a rich source of resources for mental health education. At its core, it emphasises the achievement of physical and mental harmony through the principle of GeWu ZhiZhi, the unity of knowledge and action through ChengYi ZhengXin, and, through KeJi XiuShen, the coordinated development of the relationship with one's inner self and with the external world. These concepts represent key components of mental health education, including an introspective view of the self, a life-long pursuit of self-improvement, an emphasis on harmony and solidarity in interpersonal relations, a dialectical harmony in thought, and a value system integrating family and nation. This paper proposes practical approaches for integrating traditional Chinese culture into mental health education for college students. These include compiling a database of mental health education resources based on traditional Chinese culture and incorporating this culture into student activities, the campus environment, and a new model of group counselling.*

Keywords: Traditional Chinese culture, Mental health education, College students.

1. Statement of the Problem

Integrating traditional Chinese culture into mental health education provides an effective means of preserving national heritage while also offering individual spiritual enrichment. As well as fostering moral and emotional development, such an initiative also has the potential to promote personal growth and resilience, strengthen self-awareness, and support the development of robust mental health (Ren, Zhou, & Zhao, 2020). The incorporation of traditional Chinese culture thus represents a vital enhancement of the existing theoretical framework of mental health education for college students, as well as a means of bolstering their cultural identity, self-confidence, and sense of belonging to the Chinese national community.

Currently, due to a complex combination of factors, college students exhibit a range of psychological problems to varying degrees, including feelings of inferiority, jealousy and hostility, as well as emotional alienation and withdrawal from social life. Cognitive issues and inappropriate sexual behaviour have also been noted among the student population. These phenomena indicate that systematic and scientifically grounded mental health education is urgently required to promote psychological adjustment and healthy physical and mental development among students.

Although traditional Chinese culture has no specific concept of "mental health", classical texts abound in reflections on the cultivation of the mind and body. For example, Confucianism, a cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture, consistently promotes the values of Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), Li (propriety), Zhi (wisdom), and Xin (integrity). Passed down from generation to generation, these values have gradually become moral standards and behavioural norms that, taken together, constitute China's distinctive spiritual identity.

The urgent question facing researchers and practitioners is how to harness the unique advantages of this cultural heritage

in order to create effective, scientifically sound mental health education systems in colleges and universities. This study draws on classic Confucian theories and the wider perspective of traditional Chinese culture to offer systematic recommendations regarding the objectives, content, and approaches of mental health education for college students, with a view to providing useful references for the further development of classroom and campus interventions.

2. The Main Goals of College Students' Mental Health Education from the Perspective of Traditional Chinese Culture

DaXue outlines eight steps for the progressive cultivation of a gentleman's personality: GeWu (investigating things), ZhiZhi (extending knowledge), ChengYi (making the will sincere), ZhengXin (rectifying the mind), XiuShen (cultivating the self), QiJia (regulating the family), ZhiGuo (governing the state), and PingTianXia (bringing peace to the world) (Li & Lin, 2026). Of these, XiuShen (cultivating the self) provides the key link between the inner and outer worlds of the individual. GeWu (investigating things) and Zhizhi (extending knowledge) together constitute the external path to self-cultivation, emphasising the development of knowledge of both the self and the outside world through learning and exploration. ChengYi (making the will sincere) and ZhengXin (rectifying the mind), on the other hand, emphasise inner sincerity and rectitude. With this foundation, individuals continuously improve themselves through KeJi (self-discipline) and XiuShen (self-cultivation), eventually achieving a personality that combines knowledge with strength of character. Finally, QiJia (regulating the family), ZhiGuo (governing the state), and PingTianXia (bringing peace to the world) represent the practical process of graduating from personal growth to serving others, which is the apex of personality development within Confucianism. This is reflected in the traditional proverb: "In poverty, one should cultivate oneself alone; in success, one should benefit the whole world." The traditional Chinese conception of personal development thus dictates that when one's basic

needs are met, one should focus on social responsibility and contributing to the nation, thereby pursuing higher-level values. The idea is that participation in social governance and public affairs allows individuals to improve the world around them while also realising their own aspirations, ultimately aiming for the ideal state of “great harmony under heaven”.

The Confucian scheme of personality development outlined above ultimately seeks the unity of cognitive improvement, inner cultivation, and behavioural regulation; it envisages a coordinated development of the body and mind, as well as of the individual and the external world. This trajectory provides a framework for establishing goals for college students’ mental health education. This paper takes the three composite developmental phases mentioned above – GeWu Zhizhi (investigating things and extending knowledge), ChengYi ZhengXin (making the will sincere and rectifying the mind), and KeJi XiuShen (self-discipline and self-cultivation) – as the basis for such goals, which it identifies as follows: physical and mental harmony; unity of knowledge and action; and coordination between self and environment. These are explored in turn in the following sections.

2.1 Achieving Physical and Mental Harmony through GeWu Zhizhi

There is a famous Confucian proverb that goes as follows:

“Things being investigated, knowledge became complete; knowledge being complete, the will became sincere; the will being sincere, the mind became rectified; the mind being rectified, the self was cultivated; the self being cultivated, the family was regulated; the family being regulated, the state was governed; the state being governed, peace was brought to the world.”

This encapsulates the progression from self-improvement to public service outlined in the previous section (Xiao, Tao, & Yang, 2024, p. 75). It emphasises the importance of physical and mental harmony for the individual, not only in terms of personal character but also with regard to external success. The average person may never achieve real influence in matters of state governance or world peace, but the principles referred to above nonetheless serve as fundamental guides for personal conduct, growth and stability.

Though translated as “investigating things” GeWu more concretely refers to correcting faulty perceptions, including regarding oneself. The “Ge” in GeWu refers to the application of this process to specific events; combined, GeWu and Zhizhi refer to the regulation of the mind in relation to specific events in life, through which the individual trains their own psychological responses. In other words, Confucianism teaches us that we must learn to educate and train ourselves in order to develop fully.

2.2 Achieving the Unity of Knowledge and Action through ChengYi ZhengXin

Originally a Confucian method of self-cultivation, ChengYi ZhengXin (making the will sincere and rectifying the mind) later came to be understood as referring to the state of having a “rectified” mind and being sincere with others (Xiao, Tao, &

Yang, 2024, p. 78). The phrase itself comes from DaXue, which states: “To rectify the mind, one first makes the will sincere.” In ancient Confucianism, “rectifying the mind” meant having the correct intentions and no evil thoughts. The broader implication of this principle is that a good psychological foundation should precede any action; that is, one should approach action with sound motivations and the correct attitude, being neither self-centred nor biased against others. “Making the will sincere”, on the other hand, refers to being genuine and not deceiving oneself.

Confucianism holds that the rectified mind is not influenced by emotions such as anger, fear, pleasure or worry; the mind must, moreover, be sincere in order to avoid confusion and make the right choices. The key to “making the will sincere” lies in the principle of GeWu Zhizhi (investigating things and extending knowledge), discussed above. In DaXue, the statement “knowledge being complete, the will became sincere; the will being sincere, the mind became rectified” is preceded by “things being investigated, knowledge became complete”. Applying these maxims to psychological development, we see that, in Confucian terms, it is only by improving one’s understanding of human emotions that one can believe in justice and adapt one’s behaviour to subdue the influence of desire. This also has significant implications for the later stages of personal development: only when personal morality is complete and the individual’s intentions are sincere, can there be harmony within the family, the state and, ultimately, the world at large. All of this is underpinned by ChengYi as the necessary path to sincerity.

2.3 Achieving Coordination between Self and Environment through KeJi XiuShen

The Confucian principle of KeJi XiuShen (self-discipline and self-cultivation) was central to moral and social education in traditional Chinese society. We see this in classic Confucian maxims such as “To establish oneself, help others establish themselves; to succeed oneself, help others succeed”, “Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself,” and “One thrives on adversity and perishes on comfort”. These express a number of key principles regarding self-discipline and self-cultivation, as well as setting benchmarks for individual action. Confucius said, “So intent on learning that I forget to eat, so joyful that I forget my worries, not noticing that old age is approaching.” According to Xunzi, “Learning should never cease.” Learning should thus be the starting point of KeJi XiuShen; it is crucial for personal growth, the practical application of knowledge, and contributing to the nation. Crucially, Confucianism holds that significant learning can only be achieved in the long term; learning, reflection, self-examination and self-discipline should be continual, lifelong processes.

The concept of self-cultivation is frequently mentioned in Confucian literature, in which it is presented as the first step in the journey to becoming a sage. More broadly, it was seen as the foundation for improving personal ability, maintaining harmony within the family and wider society, and even for achieving world peace. Besides this historical significance, KeJi XiuShen remains relevant today. For college students, it offers a means of cultivating moral character; in this context, it should be conceived primarily in terms of developing a

strong work ethic, a spirit of cooperation and commitment, a willingness to help others, and a commitment to improving knowledge and skills through practice.

3. Core Content of College Students' Mental Health Education from the Perspective of Traditional Chinese Culture

Having clarified the goals of mental health education for college students, the question of the content of that education must now be addressed. Instead of simple knowledge transmission, traditional Chinese culture emphasises the use of systematic values and behavioural norms to nourish the individual mind. In this way, it supports the subtle promotion of healthy psychological development. Applying this perspective to college students' mental health education means systematically addressing its core content and imbuing this with long-term practical and moral guidance.

3.1 An Introspective View of the Self

For college students, deep and continuous self-examination and reflection are essential for the formation of a robust personality and healthy self-concept (Zhong, 2024). This means regularly reviewing and evaluating one's own behaviour, a practice which has deep roots in traditional Chinese culture. Consider this passage from *The Analects*: "Every day I examine myself on three points: in planning for others, am I being loyal? In interacting with friends, am I being trustworthy? In transmitting knowledge, am I practicing what I teach?" This emphasises the importance of continual reflection on one's conduct in daily life, with regard to both relationships and knowledge. This allows individuals to understand themselves more clearly and so optimise their personalities, systematically taking stock of their successes, failures and shortcomings and making targeted adjustments accordingly. Crucially, this process provides the awareness and self-cultivation necessary for achieving the unity of personal growth and social responsibility targeted by the trajectory outlined earlier in this paper. This journey from self-improvement to family management, governance and, ultimately, world peace offers a logic of development with which students can face the complex contemporary society in which they find themselves. Developing in this way requires robust self-reflection and reliable mechanisms for self-regulation. In practice, students should focus on strengthening their self-awareness while avoiding falling into narrow self-centeredness; they should pursue personal growth while maintaining the discipline required to ensure they do not deviate from a healthy development trajectory.

3.2 A Proactive Outlook on Life

Traditional Chinese culture places significant emphasis on striving tirelessly, being proactive, and pursuing noble goals in life. As Sima Qian wrote in his letter to Ren An:

"King Wen was imprisoned and elaborated the *Book of Changes*; Confucius was in distress and wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; Qu Yuan was exiled and composed *Li Sao*; Zuo Qiu lost his sight and produced the *Discourses of the States*; Sun Bin had his feet amputated and compiled the *Art of War*; Lü Buwei was exiled to Shu and transmitted the

Spring and Autumn of Lü Buwei; Han Fei was imprisoned in Qin and wrote *Difficulties of Persuasion and Indignation*; the three hundred poems of the *Book of Songs* were mostly written by sages and worthies in their frustration."

This litany of examples was intended to demonstrate that, throughout history, great success has often been achieved through resilience, tenacity, and effort in the face of adversity. The primary task for college students if they are to embrace these values is to develop a scientific and rational understanding of setbacks. It is crucial that they see these as a common feature of all life stages, which bring with them not only challenges but also opportunities for growth. The key, then, is to face them with a positive attitude and use them as a means of achieving development and self-adjustment. Indeed, it is only by actively confronting difficulties that students can accumulate experience, build resilience, and continue to grow as individual and as members of society. As such, college students should aim to meet real-life challenges with determination and composure, overcoming personal limitations in order to develop a more mature and rounded self.

3.3 A Harmonious and Cooperative View of Interpersonal Relations

The cultivation of positive interpersonal relationships has always been emphasised in traditional Chinese culture. This is reflected in concepts such as "harmony as most precious" and "harmony as beauty", and in the maxim that "heaven's timing is less important than earth's advantages, and earth's advantages are less important than human harmony". The latter indicates a striving towards coordinated social coexistence, highlighting the centrality to social interaction of ethical norms such as benevolence (Li, Ouyang, & Zhang, 2021). However, these norms have been weakened to a certain extent by the continuous development of the market economy, resulting in a tendency towards alienation and indifference in interpersonal relationships. The rapid increase in internet usage has compounded this development, with many individuals neglecting real-world interactions to immerse themselves in virtual spaces and therefore experiencing reduced face-to-face communication. Effective communication may be lacking even when people interact in real-world settings, leading to increased emotional distance.

The Confucian notion of benevolence provides important insights for addressing these contemporary challenges in interpersonal interaction. It emphasises the importance of self-restraint and mutual understanding in communication, advocating a calm, humble attitude in the construction of positive relationships. Specifically, the concept of "putting oneself in others' place" promotes understanding and trust by guiding individuals to see problems from perspectives other than their own. Accordingly, college students should aim to overcome superficial emotional responses when interacting with others, taking particular care to avoid jealousy arising from contact with those more capable than themselves. By adopting a more open attitude to the feelings and insights of others, they can not only grow as individuals but also build more harmonious and positive interpersonal networks.

3.4 Dialectical Harmony

Dialectical harmony is a characteristically Chinese way of thinking (He & Zhu, 2025). The dialectical element is reflected in a number of traditional Chinese maxims, such as “fortune and misfortune depend on each other” and “misfortune may lead to good fortune”. These are indicative of a deep insight into the dual nature of things. According to this way of thinking, life’s disappointments should be met not with complaint but with a more comprehensive perspective, acknowledging their positive side. Likewise, we should calmly accept our own shortcomings or defects and try to discover the strengths hidden within them.

The importance of harmony, on the other hand, is reflected in The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong). This advocates recognising the complex relationships among things in order to reconcile contradictions, thereby avoiding extremes and achieving harmony (Luo, Su, & Meng, 2009). Given that college students have a tendency to think in ways that are impulsive and one-sided, promoting the Chinese tradition of dialectical harmony offers an effective means of helping them to make more rational and rounded judgements and decisions in the face of difficulties.

3.5 A Value System Integrating Family and Nation

It is necessary for individuals to establish clear life goals at different stages of development in order to guide their actions. This will allow them to attain successive levels of development through sustained effort. As one traditional saying puts it: “Aim high to achieve medium; aim medium to achieve low; aim low to achieve nothing.” Another saying explicitly links this development trajectory to the fate of the nation: “In poverty, cultivate oneself alone; in success, benefit the whole world.” Traditional Chinese culture thus ties personal growth to a strong sense of responsibility. Such traditional ideals and beliefs are relatively weak among contemporary college students; as such, traditional culture represents an invaluable resource in terms of practical guidance and spiritual revival. College students should actively draw on this heritage to establish robust scientific principles with which to approach life and strive consistently to implement them. Only by aligning personal development with national wellbeing in this way can students fully realise their own potential and fulfil their responsibilities to the wider community (Huang, 2020).

4. Action Paths for College Students’ Mental Health Education from the Perspective of Traditional Chinese Culture

Having identified appropriate goals and content for mental health education from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture, the next step is to formulate concrete strategies for applying these insights in practice. Crucially, integrating traditional Chinese culture into college students’ mental health education cannot simply be a matter of indoctrination; it should instead be introduced in such a way that it subtly pervades all aspects of students’ personal, academic and professional lives over the long term.

4.1 Building a Resource Library of Traditional Chinese Culture for Mental Health Education

Due to the contemporary dominance of new media, college students now obtain and exchange information primarily through social media platforms such as Tieba, Douyin, Weibo and WeChat. This media environment has a significant impact on students’ psychological and emotional states, as well as their values, ways of thinking, and even to some extent their everyday behaviour.

Overall, new media is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, rational use of these platforms can allow college students to participate in innovative new ways of sharing and interpreting traditional Chinese culture. As well as stimulating their creativity, such engagement also helps them to make use of the psychological resources offered by traditional culture, encouraging the cultivation of an optimistic mindset and other positive psychological traits. On the other hand, in the absence of effective guidance and regulation, students are at risk from fragmented or negative information which may adversely affect their mental health and personal development. Acknowledging the ubiquity of such information in the contemporary media landscape, students should be encouraged to participate in the new and creative forms of engagement with traditional culture that this allows; however, they should also be encouraged to disseminate such information constructively, emphasising the correct values. It is crucial that mental health educators actively adapt to the contemporary digital communication environment in order to ensure that traditional cultural resources are well represented in this context. This may be achieved by establishing specialised public Weibo or WeChat accounts with a view to enhancing the reach of such content while also providing appropriate guidance.

Traditional Chinese culture represents a vast and comprehensive repository of knowledge which must be systematically reviewed based on the actual needs of college mental health education; in this way, the most appropriate and effective resources can be identified and extracted to construct a library of psychological culture resources. As mental health educators, we should aim to develop a systematic mastery of classical sources. A deep understanding of this cultural heritage will allow us to organise relevant content on a scientific basis in order to develop frameworks for integrating it into mental health education. Mental health educators may compile extensive collections of traditional cultural resources, such as poems, classical references, proverbs, operas and folktales, and present them, along with summaries, as a structured resource library for psychological education. This initial work of collecting and organising will allow relevant resources to be drawn on quickly and conveniently during teaching, exposing students to appropriate and targeted examples in the course of their education.

By encountering traditional culture in this way, students will gradually absorb and understand it, converting knowledge into internalised cultural cognition. In turn, this will lead to positive psychological development, laying a solid foundation for all-round personal growth. For example, specific traditional principles, such as self-cultivation or the integration of family and nation, can be classified and incorporated into mental health education in a targeted manner according to specific educational goals. In practice, the organic unity of cultural education and psychological

education can be achieved through the basic principle of “cultivate virtue through moral education to nurture the heart; enrich the mind through cultural education to nourish wisdom; move the emotions through affective education to please the heart”.

4.2 Creating Student Activities Incorporating Traditional Chinese Culture

The unity of knowledge and action is an important principle in traditional Chinese culture. In light of this, theoretical teaching alone is insufficient; cultural guidance must be effectively combined with practical activities to ensure maximum integration of psychology development and behavioural outcomes. To this end, universities may institute events such as a Mental Health Education Month or a Mental Health Culture Month. Similarly, student clubs may be used to promote traditional Chinese culture by hosting a diverse range of activities aimed at building cultural confidence. For example, students may be encouraged to engage in activities such as reading classical texts, traditional festivals, Tai Chi, martial arts, and tea art, helping them appreciate the unique charms of Chinese culture while also achieving spiritual enrichment. Moreover, practical activities should be integrated with course content in order to promote student engagement and nurture practical skills, for example through traditional crafts and recitation competitions. Finally, students should be encouraged to engage deeply in social practice, allowing them to gain firsthand life experience and develop an understanding of hardship, as well as strengthening their confidence in learning, gaining insight into their own strengths and weaknesses, and nurturing strong values through personal growth.

4.3 Infusing the Campus Environment with Traditional Chinese Culture

Schools are key sites for the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture. Combined with college students' home lives, the campus environment provides an important space for spiritual growth. By incorporating organised activities promoting traditional culture, it can effectively guide students' value orientations and development goals. Embodying the wisdom of ancient sages, the ideas contained in this heritage constitute important resources for bolstering the willpower of contemporary college students, as well as exposing them to moral norms and a humanistic ethos. It is therefore important that a positive campus culture be created with traditional Chinese culture at its heart. There should be a renewed emphasis on guided reading of literary classics, supplemented by traditional activities such as music, chess, calligraphy and painting, allowing students to achieve spiritual growth through aesthetic experience and cultural enrichment.

Students have much to gain from the traditional values of perseverance (embodied in the notion of “carving without stopping”), duty to family and nation (“everyone has a duty to the rise and fall of the country”), and resilience in the face of hardship, as well the moral norm that dictates, “Do not do evil because it is trivial, do not neglect good because it is small.” In order to deal with the frequent challenges they face, such as

exam anxiety, the pressures of job-seeking, and the confusion of growing up, students require appropriate psychological adjustment and emotional regulation. Both can be achieved by drawing on the traditional concept of the doctrine of the mean; in this way, students should learn self-awareness as a means of maintaining emotional stability and rational thought in the face of negative emotions such as anger or sadness. Such psychological stability significantly influences individual judgement and behaviour. Excessive negative emotions can quickly undermine rational judgement; maintaining a positive psychological state and facing challenges with a calm and optimistic attitude are therefore important personal development goals for college students.

4.4 Establishing Group Counselling Models Based on Traditional Chinese Culture

In the context of rapid technological development and the pervasive influence of Western ideologies and foreign cultures, college students are vulnerable to a degree of instability and fluctuation in their values. As the pace of study and of life in general accelerates, students face a variety of difficulties in relation to personal development, interpersonal relationships and emotional adjustment. Mental health educators can respond to this challenging environment by constructing systematic group counselling models based on actual needs and incorporating traditional Chinese cultural resources. The latter can be employed in a targeted manner according to different themes; for example, students can be guided towards personal growth and positive values through cultural identification in relation to core cultural content on topics such as filial piety, duty to family and nation, and respect for elders.

At the same time, in line with the development of Chinese higher education and the identified needs of college students, a multi-level psychological counselling and training system should be constructed, focusing on peer support mechanisms and training in self-compassion. In practice, this counselling system may be differentiated to reflect two different group types: special and ordinary. Groups in the former category will be relatively homogeneous and require more specialised intervention plans involving a larger number of sessions – generally no less than four – to reflect the principle of student-centred development. For ordinary college students, counselling may be carried out within natural groups, such as dormitories, classes, or majors, and may take common issues such as interpersonal communication, emotion regulation and group cohesion as its focus. Flexible design and individualised adjustments may be incorporated based on the specific circumstances of each group. Finally, during the process of training and counselling, teachers may select highly motivated students who demonstrate strong understanding to serve as core members. Core members will assist in organising and delivering group counselling, thus forming a collaborative support network of teachers and students. This ‘point-to-area’ promotion mechanism will enable the gradual expansion of mental health education coverage, promoting the continuous development of a system that involves all members and promotes integration throughout the entire process.

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