An Ethnographic Study of Coping Strategies among Chinese College Students in Beijing

Xiaodong Yue

Dept. of Educational Psychology
Chinese University of Hong Kong

The present article discusses the patterns of coping strategies among a group of college students in Beijing. Specially designed questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data for the study. Results indicated that to cope with stress in their academic underachievement, emotional frustrations, interpersonal conflicts and others, the Chinese college students used a variety of strategies, including culturally appropriate ones such as self-reflection, endurance, self-control, Ah-Qism, take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may. The practical implications of the strategies are explored in relation to the current social and political realities in China. Additionally, the experiential and psychosocial significance of the culturally appropriate coping strategies are analyzed in terms of the Confucian ethics of self-cultivation and the Taoist ethics of self-transcendence. The analyses demonstrate that the coping strategies foster a sense of enlightened awareness of the dynamics of conflicts in the mundane world and that attainment of inner harmony "he" constitutes the cultural protocol for coping with stress in Chinese society. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the present study on further researches on the issue being explored.

本文試圖以族誌學 (ethnographic) 的方法來研究中國大學生應付不同心理壓抑的方法。本研究通過自行設計的兩份問卷調查了北京四所大學中 120 名大學生所常用的心理壓力應付策略。此外，本研究還採訪了其中 30 名學生。調查結果表明：中國大學生運用了許多與中國文化與當前社會背景相適宜的應付策略。本文從儒家與道家之修身養性的論說探討了這些應付策略的文化根源與心理學特點，並提出辯證協調矛盾衝突是中國人應付內、外壓力之哲學思想基礎。本文最後呼籲今後多採用質性與量性相結合的方法來研究中國文化對於個人應付心理壓抑的影響。

The ability to cope with stress is important to one's mental as well as emotional well-being. In recent decades, coping has caught increased attention among psychologists, clinicians, anthropologists, and educational researchers. Numerous empirical as well as ethnographic studies have been conducted to examine the influences of physiological, psychological, and sociological factors in the individual's coping behaviours. Many theories have been generated to account for the interrelationship among these factors and coping has been defined differently from a wide variety of perspectives.

For instance, coping has been defined as one's conscious efforts to deal with stressful demands (e.g., Stone & Neale, 1984), as one's protective

attempts to cope with stress (Garmezy, 1972, 1981, 1983), as a stimulus of environmental influences (Holmes & Masuda, 1974; Holmes & Rahe, 1967), as a personal trait (Wheaton, 1983; Kobasa, 1979; Billings & Moos, 1984), and as a state of adaptation (Shanan, De-Nour, & Garty, 1976). Building on these perspectives, Lazarus and Folkman (1984, 1991) developed a transactional model of coping which emphasizes the dynamic nature of coping in person-environment transactions through cognitive appraisals. The model assumes that coping includes two processes: cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal evaluates whether or not a person-environment encounter is stressful and if so, how. Coping represents one's cognitive and behavioral efforts to handle the internal or external demands of a person-environment encounter that are appraised as exceeding his resources. Further research studies have identified a variety of coping mechanisms (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, Delongis, & Gruen 1986), such as *aggressive interpersonal efforts to alter the situation, deliberate efforts to change the situation, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, escape-*

avoidance, accepting responsibility, and positive reappraisal. Taken together, these strategies enable a person to manage the demands of person-environment encounters within the framework of his or her own meaning-making system.

In addition, coping has also been studied in terms of different styles of adaptation. Some researchers (Vaillant, 1976; Worden and Sobel, 1978) focused on general styles of coping across specific situations. Others (Kleinman, 1980) linked coping styles to psychoanalytic defense mechanisms such as denial, suppression, and displacement, etc. Still others (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) studied the impact of role-specific coping efforts on stress and identified three general kinds of coping styles: *action to alter the situation, reinterpretation of the problem, and efforts to manage negative emotions.* Similarly, Menaghan (1982, 1983) identified four different styles of coping: *optimistic comparisons, selective inattention, restricted expectations,* and *direct action.* More specifically, *optimistic comparisons* uses comparative frames of reference to construct negative attributes of stressful situations positively. *Selective inattention* focuses on constructive aspects of a stressful experience or situation to minimize its perceived harm. *Restricted expectations* resigns one to the inevitability of stressful situations. *Direct action* involves spontaneous efforts to bring changes to coping with stress.

In the same vein, Matheny etal. (1986) proposed two general styles of coping: *preventive coping and combative coping.* For *preventive coping, avoiding stressors through life adjustments* seeks to substitute stressful situations or relationships with more nurturing ones; *adjusting demand levels* attempts to balance the demand resource equation by developing a more appropriate person-environment fit; *altering stress-inducing behaviour patterns* aims at modifying the stress-spiralling nature of the anxious reactive personality; and *developing coping resources* promotes the use of physiological and psychological assets in one's coping repertoire. *Combative coping,* on the other hand, includes five subcategories. *Stress monitoring* seeks to detect stress build-up and initiate combative behaviours early in the stress cycle. *Marshalling resources* prepares a person to effectively cope with stress. *Attacking stressors* represents one's spontaneous and active efforts to reduce or eliminate stressors. *Tolerating stressors* enables a person to adapt or adjust to stress in the least harmful ways. *Lowering arousal* lowers physiological arousal of pains in a person so that he is less distressed. In brief, these coping styles, whether passive or active, or whether preventive or combative, all attempt to increase one's resistance to effects of stress by appraising or reappraising it more constructively.

Anthropologically speaking, culture organizes experiences of coping through the mediation of distinctive cognitive processes. This mediation process determines how an environmental stimulus is appraised as stressful and what coping strategies are chosen. Apart from physiological responses, a person also experiences psychosocial responses which are defined by culturally-constructed meanings, social relationships and interpersonal behaviours. According to the enculturation theory (Herskovits, 1948; LeVine, 1990), human adaptation largely operates on specific social organizations in accordance with culturally prescribed scripts in various domains of human behaviour. Therefore, any act of coping is a form of psychosocial adaptation to a stressful situation in socially appropriate manners. By implication, the patterns of coping in Chinese society are presumably a process of acquiring a system of culturally constituted meanings and acts in Chinese society as well.

In regard to coping behaviours of Chinese people, it has been reported that Chinese people are generally less willing to acknowledge the psychological components in their stressful experiences and tend to perceive and express them in somatic idioms (Cheung, 1981, 1982; Kleinman & Lin, 1981; Kleinman ,1986). For instance, Kleinman (1980) studied the patterns of coping behaviours among a group of psychiatric patients in Taiwan, and discovered that *suppression, lack of differentiation, minimization, dissociation,* and *somatic substitution* were commonly used by the Chinese patients to cope with their dysphoric affects. All these coping mechanisms are culturally constituted and are shown to have personally and socially adaptive consequences. Along similar lines, Hwang (1977) examined the patterns of coping among 180 married male heads of households in Taiwan and identified four broad categories of coping strategies which are culturally appropriate to the Chinese, including *"relying on oneself," "asking help from others," "appealing to a supernatural power,"* and *"avoidance by referring to wishful thinking or the traditional philosophy of doing nothing."* More strikingly, many of these strategies are heavily influenced by Confucianism and Taoism. For example, *jen-nai* (forbearance), *hsiu-yang* (self-cultivation) and *nu-li fen-tou* (making efforts to strive) are rooted in the Confucian ethics of

moderation and self-cultivation, whereas *shun-chi tzu-an* (let Nature take its course), *I pu-pien ying wan-pien* (coping with the shifting events by sticking to one unchangeable way), *k'an-k'ai* (to see a thing through) are embedded in the Taoist philosophy of non-action. Further, Li (1990) examined the coping strategies of Chinese college students from several universities in Beijing and discovered six major forms of coping among Chinese college students: *denial, delay, counting on luck, action based on intuition, action based on interest, and go with the flow.* Underlying these forms of coping, as Li argued, is the Taoist philosophy of "non-action," i.e, students often do not strive for a solution to their problems, but wait for one to emerge. Li contended that such strategies were frequently used by Chinese students to maintain faith in themselves.

In summary, the features discussed above indicate that the Chinese people's coping behaviours are embedded in Chinese cultural values of self and self-other relationships. It is important to recognize the influences of culture and ethnicity in examining an individual's coping behaviours. In light of the thinking, Kleinman (1980) made a distinction between illness and disease in his study of human suffering. Specifically, illness refers to the psychosocial experience and interpretation of a perceived disease, whereas disease refers to the medical interpretation of a specific abnormality reported by the patient. An implication of the distinction is that social and cultural factors intervene in the illness experience at the level of cognition. Therefore, though all humans experience a common range of distressing affects, they may interpret and cope with them in ways that are culturally meaningful to them. The distinction sheds light on understanding coping behaviours in Chinese society and provides a theoretical foundation for the design and interpretation of empirical studies on the issue as well.

Conception of the Study

In order to examine the cultural configuration of coping behaviours among Chinese adolescents, the present investigator conducted an ethnographic study of the common strategies that were used by the Chinese college students to cope with stress in life. There are two objectives to the present study. The first objective is to examine how Chinese college students cope with stress in terms, symbols, idioms and metaphors which are culturally meaningful to them. The focus is on identification of various

culturally-constituted strategies for coping with stress, such as self-cultivation, forbearance, and non-action, among others. Hence, this study seeks to describe, as indigenously as possible, how these strategies affect the Chinese students' coping behaviours within the context of their social milieu and experiential worlds. The second objective is to obtain an insider's perspective on the coping behaviours of Chinese college students and explicate the folk psychology associated with them. As such, this study represents an emic approach to the study of coping behaviours in Chinese society.

In accordance with the above objectives, three general research questions were raised for the present study:

1. What are the common psychological stresses among Chinese college students now?
2. How do Chinese college students cope with these psychological stresses and what strategies do they commonly use?
3. How are these coping strategies culturally constructed?

Method

Subjects

120 college students from Beijing participated in the present study. They were sampled from four universities in Beijing: Beijing University, Beijing Normal University, Beijing University of Sciences and Technology, and the People's University, representing a wide variety of disciplines and student bodies. More specifically, 30 subjects were sampled from each university to complete two questionnaires that were specifically designed for the study. The subjects all were 18-to 22-year-old freshmen and sophomore students at college.

In addition, out of the 30 subjects from each university, 10 were sampled for a follow-up interview which sought to collect in-depth information about the coping strategies used by the Chinese students.

Assessment Instruments

Two open-ended survey questionnaires were designed for this study. The first one is called **Questionnaire of Coping by Chinese College Students** (QCCC), which has five open-ended questions about the most common psychological stresses experienced by the subject and about his or her ways of coping with them. The five questions are: *(1) What is your biggest psychological stress*

now? (2) How do you cope with it? (3) What kind of help would you like to get in coping with psychological stress? (4) What do you think is the most effective way of coping with the stress? (5) How do you think your way of coping is affected by Chinese culture?

The second questionnaire is called **Questionnaire of Different Strategies of Coping by Chinese College Students** (QDSC), which has thirty-three open-ended questions about eleven kinds of coping strategies identified by the present investigator through a pilot study with some college students and counsellors in Beijing. The eleven kinds of coping strategies include *studying hard, focusing of studies, preparing for TOEFL, party-going, doing physical exercises, talking with friends and relatives, seeking counselling assistance, self-contentment, having fun, eating/drinking, and developing love affairs.* There are three questions to each kind of the coping strategy, exploring the experiential, social, and psychological significance of the particular coping act. The questionnaire was designed to measure the effectiveness of these coping strategies across a variety of social and educational contexts, such as maladjustment to new environment, excessive academic pressure, academic underachievement, interpersonal conflicts, frustrations in love affairs, low self-esteem, boredom with learning, homesickness, and others.

In addition, the follow-up interviews were designed to further clarify and justify the use of appropriate coping strategies by the Chinese students for various socially adaptive purposes. It also enabled the participants to play a dual role in the interview process: as the informant about his or her own experiences and as the observer's observer. The interviews proved to be very helpful to the understanding of the students' coping behaviours in the milieu of their social and educational realities.

Procedure

To start with, QCCC and QDSC were administered in sequence to 120 Chinese college students sampled for this study. The two questionnaires were administered together and took approximately 50 minutes to complete. Each subject was paid 10 Chinese yuan for participation in the study. Of the 120 questionnaires collected, 117 were valid. The demographic data of the 117 subjects are displayed in Table 1.

As can be seen in the table, there were 63 male subjects and 53 female subjects. The mean age of the

Table 1
Demographic data on 117 Chinese college students in Beijing

School	Beijing Univ.	Beijing Normal	Beijing Univ. of Sci.&Tec.	People's Univ.	Total
Subtotal	29	29	29	30	117
Man	14	15	16	18	63
Woman	15	14	12	12	53
Mean Age	20.5	20.9	20.6	21.3	21.5

subjects was 21.5 years old. The mean age for the People's University was slightly higher than that for the other three universities because the University, being strong in social science subjects, tends to enrol more older students.

Next, follow-up interviews were conducted by contacting the subjects through randomization of their name lists. To facilitate the interview process, an interview guide was prepared, covering the following foci: *the physical experience of psychological stress and its verbal expression, sources and rational contexts of stress, self-initiated coping behaviours, health-seeking behaviours, cultural justifications of coping.* The interview ran for approximately 30-50 minutes in length. Each interviewee was paid five Chinese yuan.

A total of 40 interviews were conducted, of which the present investigator personally conducted 20 and the remaining 20 were conducted by two assistants who were trained for the purpose. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and were later translated into English. To ensure its accuracy, the present investigator arranged to have a Chinese graduate student studying in Boston to proof-read the translation.

Data Categorization

Three different methods were used to organize, categorize and interpret the data collected through the questionnaires: content coding, content analysis (Berelson, 1952), and categorization of clustered data. The content coding enabled the present investigator to categorize all the idiomatic languages used by the students under different conceptual groups. The units for coding expressed a specific kind of coping behaviour. When the students' responses contained more than one kind of coping behaviour, all were coded. In most cases, the subjects' responses in the questionnaires were simply short phrases or brief sentences. The

groupings revealed many indigenous concepts and idioms about patterns of coping strategies among Chinese students.

Categorization of clustered data enabled the present investigator to group the subjects' responses into different categories according to various related themes and meanings. Frequently, each category was further divided into some sub-categories. The kinds and frequencies of these categories are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

Finally, content analysis enabled the present investigator to consider the frequency counts of the students' responses to specific themes as well as the interrelationships among different content variables. It provided valuable insights into the nature of psychological stresses commonly experienced by the Chinese students.

Results and Discussion

Results of QCCC

Table 2 displays the common psychological stresses among Chinese college students in the form of content analysis (with percentage attached).

As shown in the table, the subjects' common psychological stresses are grouped into four categories: *academically oriented stress* (50%), *affectively oriented stress* (29%), *relation oriented stress* (24%), and *others* (3.5%). Each is further divided into some thematically related sub-categories. An overview of them suggests that *worry about the future* (22%), *shame/humiliation* (16%), *frustration in love affairs* (9%), *maladjustment to new environment* (5%), *excessive academic pressure* (5%), and *boredom with learning* (5%) are among the common psychological stresses for the Chinese college students. A brief description of these stresses follows.

Worry about the future. Worry for the future was the most common academic stress for the Chinese students for a number of reasons. First, students were generally worried about finding a desirable job after graduation. Our interviews with students indicated that the students were mainly concerned with getting a job in a metropolitan city, such as Beijing or Shanghai. This concern needs to be understood in the context of the job placement system in China. Most Chinese college graduates are customarily assigned jobs upon graduation, even though the State Commission of Education in China has permitted college graduates to look for jobs on their own since 1988. Worse still, most colleges and universities in Beijing require that college graduates

Table 2

Content analysis of common psychological stresses among a sample of 117 Chinese college students in Beijing (QCCC)

Common Psychological Stresses	Response Frequency	Subtotal
I. Academically Oriented Psychological Stresses		57 (50%)
1. Worry about the future	26 (22%)	
2. Maladjustment to new environment	6 (5%)	
3. Excessive academic pressure	6 (5%)	
4. Boredom with learning	6 (5%)	
5. Academic competition	5 (4%)	
6. High parental expectations	3 (3%)	
7. Low achievement	3 (3%)	
8. Test anxiety	1 (0.9%)	
9. Anxiety over speaking in class	1 (0.9%)	
II. Affectively Oriented Psychological Stresses		29 (25%)
1. Shame/humiliation	18 (16%)	
2. Self-hatred	5 (4%)	
3. Loneliness	4 (3.5%)	
4. Homesickness	1 (0.9%)	
5. Loss of a family member	1 (0.9%)	
III. Relation Oriented Psychological Stresses		24 (21%)
1. Frustrations in romantic love	10 (9%)	
2. Interpersonal conflicts	4 (3.5%)	
3. Feeling lack of genuine friendship	4 (3.5%)	
4. Feeling misunderstood by others	4 (3.5%)	
5. Coldness in human relations	1 (0.9%)	
6. Jealousy	1 (0.9%)	
IV. Others		4 (3.5%)
1. Financial difficulties	3 (2.6%)	
2. Dissatisfaction with current political situation	1 (0.9%)	

who are not natives of Beijing go back to their own provinces for work. Therefore, it was very anxiety-provoking to think of graduation for the subjects, even though they were only in their junior years of college. Besides, Chinese students were no longer used to seeing attaining academic success as the major goal of achievement at college. They had become increasingly interested in making money and were less willing to get into teaching. Some students even engaged in business activities at college by doing market sales, small vendor sales, translating, private tutoring, and so on. Such activities challenged severely the traditional concept and role of being a student, generating enormous anxiety and bewilderment among students as well. Finally, the stress was believed to be related to the current political situations in China as well, even

though the students were reluctant to talk about politics in our interviews.

Maladjustment to new environment. Maladjustment to new environment usually resulted from poor academic performance and in many cases, amounted to a total disorientation to college life. Our interviews revealed that students who came from remote or rural areas where they had excelled in their local schools were most vulnerable to this stress. For such students, adjustment to a highly competitive environment was very distressing, often leading to a significant slippage in their academic performance. Even more distressing was to accept this slippage gracefully, which could considerably undermine their self-confidence and mianzi (face) among family and friends.

Excessive academic pressure. Excessive academic pressure normally came from competition for good grades in learning. Many students complained of the pressure of having to study hard, to score high on tests, and to compete to be the top students in class. Therefore, it was very anxiety-provoking for them to confront fluctuations in test scores. This experience was often a reminder of the severe mental distress that they withstood throughout high school.

Shame/humiliation. Shame/humiliation denotes feelings of disgrace, self-pity, and embarrassment, which often resulted from poor academic performance, perceived physical unattractiveness, and low socio-economic status, etc. Many students reported that they had never been so conscious of their weaknesses in learning, family background, and physical build-up. For instance, some students reported that they could not believe that they could do so poorly at school. Feeling humiliated, they were desperate to change the embarrassing situations. Unfortunately, not all such efforts succeeded for them and in consequence, students felt even more ashamed and frustrated. Besides, perceived physical unattractiveness and lack of family wealth also contributed to one's feelings of shame. Matters such as appearance, body build, dress styles, and skin care were all key factors for one's self-esteem. Many students were ashamed for not having enough money to spend, not being able to wear fashionable clothes, and not coming from powerful families.

Boredom with learning. Boredom with learning was expressed as lack of interest or motivation in learning. It came from a variety of personal, social, and political sources. Our interviews showed that disillusionment with unrealistic expectations of college life and conflicting concerns for academic excellence and material gains were most responsible for boredom with learning. Many students were more interested in exploring business opportunities outside college than with reading in the library.

Frustrations in love affairs. Frustrations in love affairs were common among students as well. Students' attitudes toward romantic love are much more open and practical than they were 12 years ago when the author was a college student in Beijing. Our interviews identified a variety of instrumental purposes for romantic love now. One instrumental purpose was to get emotional support for one's poor academic performance. Another instrumental purpose was to counterbalance boredom in learning or feelings of loneliness and homesickness at school. A third instrumental purpose was to compensate for the severe academic and emotional strains that students experienced in high school. A final instrumental purpose was to stay in Beijing. Specifically, for students who came from smaller cities and wanted to stay in Beijing, a romantic relationship with a native of Beijing justified their request for a job assignment in the city. For all such purposes, students turned to romantic love for support and comfort. Nevertheless, not all attempts at romance succeeded. When such attempts failed, students would feel hurt, saddened, confused, and frustrated. They frequently underwent considerable soul searching in order to successfully cope with the emotional distress.

Results of QDSC

Table 3 presents the patterns of coping strategies commonly used by the Chinese students.

In the table, the students' coping strategies are broadly grouped into four categories: *deliberate efforts to change* (46%), *self-cultivation* (18%), *avoidance/escape* (18%), and *seeking help from others* (18%). Each category has a number of thematically related sub-categories as well. An overview of them indicates that *studying hard* (21%), *recreational reading* (17%), *talking with people* (11%), *self-reflection* (9%), *take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may* (7%), *physical wellness* (6%), and *having fun* (6%) are among the commonly used coping strategies for the Chinese students. It also indicates that the Chinese students used a number of culturally-constituted coping strategies, such as *self-reflection, endurance, self-control, Ah-Qism,* and *take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may.* A more detailed description of the major coping strategies in each category is given below.

Table 3

Content analysis of stress coping strategies among a sample of 117 Chinese college students in Beijing (QDSC)

Coping Strategies	Response Frequency and Percentage	Subtotal
I. Deliberate Efforts to Change		64 (46%)
1. Studying hard	29 (21%)	
2. Recreational reading	24 (17%)	
3. Physical wellness	9 (6%)	
4. Trying to change oneself	2 (1%)	
II. Self-Cultivation		25 (18%)
1. Self-Reflection	12 (9%)	
2. Endurance	5 (4%)	
3. Self-Control	5 (4%)	
4. Ah-Qism	3 (2%)	
III. Avoidance/Escape		25 (18%)
1. Take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may	10 (7%)	
2. Having fun	9 (6%)	
3. Listening to music	3 (2%)	
4. Eating and drinking	2 (1%)	
5. Taking comfort in remembering the past	1 (0.6%)	
6. Total self withdrawal	1 (0.6%)	
IV. Seeking Help from Others		26 (18%)
1. Talking with people	15 (11%)	
2. Writing to people	5 (4%)	
3. Making new friends	4 (3%)	
4. Counselling	2 (1%)	

Deliberate Efforts to Change

The strategies in this category include *studying hard, recreational reading, physical wellness,* and *trying to change oneself.* They represent the students' combative and spontaneous efforts to alter and gain control over the stress-inducing situations in life.

Studying hard. Studying hard is the most commonly used coping strategy for the Chinese students. As such, students worked hard to meet challenges in learning, hoping to claim academic excellence. This is especially true for students who experienced dramatic academic slippage and did not easily adjust to a new environment. Besides, studying hard contributes to attaining ambitious goals in life as well. For instance, many students, hoping to pursue graduate studies abroad, spent a great deal of time studying for TOEFL and GRE at the expense of time for regular studies. There was even a popular saying among students that there were only two groups of people on campus: the *tuo pai group,* which refers to students who would prepare for TOEFL and GRE tests, and the *ma pai group*, which refers to students who just wanted to have fun throughout college.

Recreational reading. Recreational reading serves to ease students' tension over stressful matters in life by reading entertaining materials, such as those about art, history, literature, etc. Thus, students would feel relaxed and were able to go back to work. For example, several students whom we interviewed remarked that whenever they felt mentally distressed, they would go to the university library and read for hours on whatever was interesting to them. Then they would feel better about themselves.

Physical wellness. Physical wellness means maintaining physical fitness, proper weight control, and high concentration levels. It is primarily achieved through doing vigorous physical exercises, such as jogging, basketball, soccer, table tennis, badminton, and some working out. For those students who were stressed by poor academic performance and emotional problems, physical wellness was symbolic of self-control and self-mastery as well. In some instances, physical exercises even became a source of pride for students who were low-achieving academically.

Self-Cultivation

Self-cultivation seeks to harmonize emotional distress and interpersonal conflicts through self-control and moderation. Psychologically, it features a cognitive restructuring of the perceived seriousness of stressful matters in life and of limitations on one's resources. Strategies in this category include *self-reflection, endurance, self-control,* and *Ah-Qism.*

Self-reflection. Self-reflection (fan xing) means to engage in constant self-examination of one's moral or ethical deeds. Implicitly, it requires a person to be self-critical in situations whereby he may or may not be responsible for what has happened to him. It also encourages a person to take a constructive look at his setbacks and misfortunes in life. Our interviews demonstrated that the Chinese students frequently used it to draw lessons from frustrating experiences in life and to explain away negative emotions. So seemingly passive, the strategy is actually an active way of coping with stress.

Endurance. Endurance (ren nai) means to put up with some sustained stress through civility and self-restraint. Psychologically, the concept denotes both a capacity for self-control when emotionally agitated and an ability to endure long-term suffering caused by misfortune and hard work (Bond, 1992). Students

reported using endurance to cope with stress, emotional or otherwise, as both a source of moral support and a demonstration of will power.

Self-control. Self-control (zi zhi) cultivates a sense of self-mastery and self-worth in a person by learning to be self-determined and to behave assertively. Self-control was used by the students to modify their behaviours in situations whereby they encountered academic, emotional or interpersonal difficulties. It was also used to show one's determination to change himself for the better.

Ah-Qism. Ah-Qism is a coping strategy which features both endurance and avoidance. The term Ah-Qism originated with the novel *The Story of Ah-Q* written by Lu Xun, a renowned Chinese novelist and essayist in the 1920's-30's. It is symbolic of spiritual superiority over physical, psychological or any other kind of inferiority. Hence, to assume an Ah-Q spirit means to deny or distort, in one's own mind, stressful encounters and demands in life. It enables a person to endure hardship and distress by looking at them in a self-serving light. As such, it has a positive adaptive value in the early stage of coping when a person is unable to cope with stress in a more direct problem-focused manner (Monet & Lazarus, 1985).

Avoidance/Escape

Avoidance/escape attempts to reduce the perceived punitiveness of a stressful encounter or demand by detaching oneself from such stressors. Strategies in this category include *take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may, seeking fun, doing interesting things,* and *others*. Central to these strategies is a preventive attempt to minimize or dissociate the experience of stress in culturally constituted ways.

Take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may. Take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may means to cope with stress by ignoring its significance and disassociating oneself from its effects. It serves to minimize the severity of a stressful encounter or demand by reappraising its potential or actual harm. This is often achieved by suppressing thoughts of the stressors or by referring them to nature and fate. Use of the strategy is common among Chinese (Hwang 1977; Li, 1991) and has been confirmed in this study as well.

Having fun. Having fun distracts students' attention away from stressful matters in life for the sake of tension deduction. Specifically, by engaging in various fun-related activities, students would feel relaxed and be relieved of some of their pressure. Our interviews revealed that students engaged in a variety of indoor and outdoor activities, including mahjongg, chess and poker, dance parties, movies, sightseeing, and others.

Seeking Help from Others

Seeking help from others draws on resources that are external to students. The common strategies used in this category include *talking or corresponding with friends and relatives, talking with teachers, and seeking counselling help*.

Talking with people. Talking with people is an important source of support for students. It brings about emotional comfort and support in students, inspiring them to work out their problems. According to our interviews, the students usually talked with friends, siblings, and parents when they were distressed. Many students reported feeling greatly relieved after having spoken with people about their problems in life.

Correspondence. Just as talking is an important source of support for students, so is letter writing. Correspondence through letters, especially for students who are not natives of Beijing, is as significant as talking. Many students remarked that the most exciting moment of a day was when they received letters from families or friends.

Use of psychological counselling. Use of psychological counselling is a recent development in China. It was not until the mid-1980's when student counselling services began to appear in China, and it has been developing very rapidly in Chinese universities (Li Xing-hu, 1990; Ma Jian-qing, 1990). It is reported that students came for counselling mostly for matters of learning difficulties, interpersonal conflicts, personality problems, and romantic relations (Lang Shi-chun, 1990; Yin Bin-jiang, 1990; Zhang Zong-ying, 1990; Zhao Xiao-qing, 1990). They usually expected to get direct and explicit help from counsellors as to how to solve their problems. Our interviews with students supported these observations.

Some General Observations

The results of the present study generally indicate that the Chinese college students encountered a variety of psychological stresses in life which were determined by the social, educational, and political realities in China and that they employed a variety of coping strategies which draw on various internal or external resources that were available or applicable to them. A number of observations are worthy of notice.

In regard to the common psychological stresses reported by the students, it is intriguing to find that *worry about the future* is the most common psychological stress for the Chinese college students, almost as much as the rest of the academic stressors put together. By implication, Chinese students experienced increasing anxiety as they thought of their future after college. This is especially significant with the finding that more and more Chinese students were interested in acquiring wealth rather than knowledge at college and after graduation.   Besides, it is important to notice that shame related stresses (*shame, humiliation, and self-hatred*) were reported by nearly 20% of the respondents. This suggests that the Chinese students cared a great deal for their *mianzi* (face) at college. According to Hwang (1987), *mianzi* is a function of perceived social position and prestige within one's social network and losing *mianzi* would significantly undermine a person's self-esteem and power in social relations. The results of the present study lends good support to this assumption. In fact, in our interviews, the students frequently used the expression *diu mianzi* (losing face) to describe their feelings of shame and embarrassment in doing poorly academically and in other areas as well. Finally, it is surprising to observe that romantic love should become so instrumental for the Chinese students now. The increased pragmatism in developing romantic relationships among the Chinese students seems to indicate that Chinese young people are becoming increasingly realistic and practical in their attitudes toward love and marriage.

As to the coping strategies reported by the students, it is ironical that although *studying hard* was the most commonly used coping strategy by the Chinese students, many students chose to study TOEFL and GRE instead of their regular subjects at college. This suggests that many Chinese students were more concerned with pursuing graduate studies abroad after graduation than with getting high scores on their current studies. Additionally, it is intriguing to recognize that *recreational reading* was such a popular coping behaviour for the Chinese students. The activity resorts to mentally relaxing and sublimating reading materials for acquiring tranquillity of mind. In fact, it may be argued that by reading recreational materials, the Chinese students were actually awaiting illumination of mind and wisdom in coping with stress. Besides, it is equally intriguing that eating and drinking played such a small part on the results of QDSC, which implies that the Chinese students rarely used eating and

alcohol to cope with stress. Furthermore, it is quite surprising that counselling was seldom used by the Chinese students, which might be attributed to the assumption that Chinese people are not yet used to disclosing their morbid thoughts to total strangers (Cheung and Lao, 1982; Kleinman, 1986).

Finally, the results of the present study demonstrate that the Chinese students used a number of culturally appropriate strategies for coping with stress as well, such as endurance, self-reflection, Ah-Qism, take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may, and so on. In what follows, I will examine the psycho-social significance of these strategies in relation to the Confucian ethics of self-cultivation and the Taoist ethics of self-transcendence.

Coping as Self-Transformation through Confucian Self-Cultivation and Taoist Self-Transcendence: A Psycho-Social Analysis

To start with, it may be argued that the culturally appropriate coping strategies reported by the Chinese students may be generally understood in terms of Confucian and Taoist morals of ethical conduct, as the two schools of philosophy have most influence on the intellectual class in Chinese history (Cheng, 1977). In other words, these strategies may be conceived as a process of self-transformation through Confucian ethics of self-cultivation, which seeks to promote a sense of self-mastery through acts of *ren nai* (endurance), *fan xing* (self-reflection), *zi zhi* (self-control), and Taoist ethics of self-transcendence, which seeks to promote a sense of inner tranquillity through acts of *take-it-easy* and *let-happen-what-may*. Taken together, the two forms of self-transformation develop an enlightened awareness of the dynamics of strife and conflicts in the mundane world, yielding internal harmony and unity in people (Tu, 1979a).

In regard to coping as self-cultivation, it may be argued that such coping acts as *self-reflection, endurance, self-control,* and *Ah-Qism* all attempt to "foster inner character and external acts to fulfil one's duty to family, community, and the state" (Berling, 1979). Central to self-cultivation is attainment of inner harmony — "*he*" (和, frequently spelled as "*ho*" as well), which Confucius regards as a fundamental virtue for a man of character and refinement. According to Cheng (1989), "*he*" is the experience, perception, and reality of a unity together with the interrelationship of its parts. To achieve "*he*", one must learn to release his feelings, good or bad, "in proper measure with proper intentionality and proper restraint relative to an event

or a situation in the world" (Cheng, 1989).

Psychologically, the state of "*he*" derives from one's conscious efforts to perceive, recognize and organize the conflicts in life in terms of *gestalts* of truth, enhancing an increased appreciation of conflicts in life and a decreased concern for self-interests. In light of the perspective, all acts of self-cultivation seek to compare temporal or interpersonal frames of reference to reach a dialectical evaluation of the stressful situation. As such, they do not necessarily change the threatening conditions of the psychological stress a person experiences, but enable him to feel less emotionally distressed (Monat & Lazarus, 1985).

For instance, rather than externalizing the cause of a stressful experience, *self-reflection* drives a student to turn "inward" to examine his role in this experience so as to maximize the learning from it. The "inwardness" represents a strong internal locus of control and features a positive restructuring of a negative experience. It enhances a student's internalized efforts to gain control over his embarrassing situations, motivating him to strive for continued self-refinement. Similarly, coping acts of *self-control* and *studying hard* stimulate a student to consider current academic or emotional difficulties as opportunities for acquiring enhanced self-awareness and self-mastery.

As to the Taoist position on coping, Taoism never treats one's stress-inducing experiences as calamities in life, but as opportunities for harmony and self-transcendence. Therefore, self-transcendence does not intend to repress stress, but to let nature take its course. However, to act by means of non-action does not mean to take a passive stance in resolving a problem. Rather, it refers to avoiding actions that are not spontaneous or against one's personal needs (Blofeld, 1985).

Psychologically, the coping acts of *take-it-easy/let-happen-what-may, having fun,* and others may be seen as efforts to detach perceived threats or damage of an endangering situation through selective reappraisal and self-contentment. The selective reappraisal emphasizes or reframes the positive attributes of a stress-inducing situation so as to devalue the negative ones. Self-contentment, on the other hand, attempts to achieve internal harmony by lowering one's expectations by balancing the demand resource equation. It features a self-perceived, often self-deceived assessment of spiritual implication of a stress-inducing experience in life. Taken together, they enable a student to appraise a stress-inducing situation as a challenge rather than a threat in life.

Finally, it is important to point out that the self-cultivation and self-transcendence models of coping are not mutually exclusive. They share a number of important goals to moral perfection of the individual. First of all, they both seek to increase one's awareness of his potentials and limits in coping with stress. Secondly, they both strive to resolve one's internal and external conflicts by synthesizing them rather than dichotomizing them. Thirdly, they share the same efforts to harmonize conflicts in a dialectical light, imparting an interpretative reappraisal of positive attributes in unworthy situations. Hence, the two models complement each other in one's struggle to achieve inner harmony "*he*".

Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicate that Chinese college students used a variety of strategies to cope with stress in their lives. Some of these strategies are indigenous to Chinese culture and may be understood in terms of embodiment of Confucian ethics of self-cultivation and Taoist ethics of self-transcendence. They provide a cultural protocol for coping with stress in the Chinese society via means of increased appreciation of conflicts, decreased concerns for self-interests, selective reappraisal, and self-contentment in accordance with the Chinese cultural value of "*he*", which cultivates a state of harmony in mind and society (Tu, 1979b).

In addition, the present findings have several significant implications as well. First of all, it is theoretically important for researchers to further investigate the cultural determinants of coping in Chinese society on the basis of the present findings. As an example, further research is needed to identify psychological compartmentalization of Confucian ethics of self-cultivation and Taoist ethics of self-transcendence in Chinese people's coping repertoire.

Secondly, the present study is confined to a sample of college students in Beijing, which is a privileged group of young people in China. Hence, more studies are necessary to examine the validity and applicability of the present findings and theoretical assumptions in the context of other age and SES groups in Chinese society. It would be particularly interesting to examine the gender differences in Chinese people's coping behaviours as well.

Thirdly, more studies need to be done to determine the relationships between different psychological stresses and their corresponding

coping strategies. For instance, it is interesting to specify what strategies are commonly used by Chinese students to cope with particular kinds of academic, emotional and interpersonal stresses and what their effects are. Additionally, it is interesting to specify how self-reflection, self-control, endurance, Ah-Qism, let-happen-what-may are used by ethnic Chinese in other parts of the world and identify whatever differences there may be.

Finally, in terms of methodology of research studies, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches should be adopted. Combined qualitative and quantitative research design would provide efficiency, clarification, and a better understanding of reality (Tam, 1993).

References

Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.

Berling, J. A. (1979). Paths of convergence: Interactions of inner alchemy Taoism and neo-Confucianism. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 6, 123-147.

Billings, A. G., & Moos, R. H. (1984). Coping, stress, and social resources among adults with unipolar depression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 877-891.

Blofeld, J. (1985). *Taoism: the road to immortality*. Boston: Shambhala Publications. Inc.

Bond, M. H. & Wang, S. H. (1983). Aggression behaviour in Chinese society: The problem of maintaining order and harmony. In A. P. Goldstein & M. Segall (Eds.), *Global perspectives on aggression* (pp. 58-74). New York: Pergamon.

Bond, M. H., Hewstone, M., Wan, K. C., & Chiu, C. K. (1985). Group-serving attributions across intergroup contexts: Cultural differences in the explanation of sex-typed behaviours. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15, 435-451.

Bond, M. H. (1991). *Beyond the Chinese face: Insights from psychology*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Bond, M. H. (1993). Emotions and Their Expression in Chinese Culture. *Journal of Nonverbal Behaviour*, 17(4), 245-262.

Chandler, C. K., Holden, J. M. & Kolander, C. A. (1992). Counselling for spiritual wellness: Theory and Practice. *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 71, 168-175.

Cheng, C. Y. (1989). On harmony as transformation: paradigms from the I Ching, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 16, 125-158.

Cheng, C. Y. (1977). Toward constructing a dialectics of harmony: harmony and conflicts in Chinese philosophy. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 4, 209-245.

Cheung, F., and Lao, B. (1982). Situational variations of help-seeking behaviour among Chinese patients. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 23, 252-262.

Cheung, F., et al. (1981). Somatization among Chinese depressives in general practice. *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*, 10, 361-374.

Folkman, S., Lazarus, R., Gruen, & DeLongis. (1986). Appraisal, coping, health status, and psychological symptoms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50 (3), 571-579.

Folkman, S. (1984). Personal control and stress and coping processes: A theoretical analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Behaviour*, 21, 839-852.

Garmezy, N. (1983). Stressors of childhood, In M. Rutter (Ed.) *Stress, coping and development in children*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Garmezy, N. (1981). Children under stress: Perspectives on antecedents and correlates of vulnerability and resistance to psychopathology. In A. I. Rabin, J. Aronoff, A. M. Barclay, & R.A. Zucker (Eds.) *Further explorations in personality*. New York: Wiley Interscience.

Garmezy, N. & Neuchterlein, K. (1972). Invulnerable children: The fact and fiction of competence and disadvantage. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 1972, 42, 328-329.

Herskovits, M. (1948). *Man and his works*. New York: Knopf.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1986). Chinese patterns of socialization: A critical review. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The psychology of Chinese people*. (pp. 1-37). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Holmes, T. H., & Masuda, M. (1974). Life changes and illness susceptibility. In B.S. Dohrenwend & B.P. Dohrenwend (eds.), *Stress Life Events*: Their nature and effects, New York: John Wiley.

Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, M. (1967). The social adjustment rating scale, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 213-218.

Hsu, F. L. K. (1971). Psychosocial homestasis and jen: Conceptual tools for advancing psychological anthropology. *American Psychologist*, 73, 23-44.

Hwang, K. K. (1977). The patterns of coping strategies in a Chinese society' *Acta Psychological Taiwanica*, 19: 61-73.

Jing, Wen-ju (1990). The campus diseases, *College Students*, April, 1990, p. 30-31.

King, A. Y. C., & Bond, M. H. (1985). The Confucian paradigm of man: A sociological view. In W. S. Tseng and D. Y. H. Wu (Eds.), *Chinese culture and mental health* (pp.29-45). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Kleinman, A. (1986). *Social origins of disease and distress: depression, neurasthenia, and pain in modern China*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.

Kleinman, A., & Lin, T. Y. (1981). *Normal and abnormal behaviour in Chinese culture*. Dordrecht, Holland/Boston, U.S.A.: Reidel Publishing Company.

Kleinman, A. (1980). *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kobasa, S. C. (1979). Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1-11.

Lang, Shi-chun (1990). *Common psychological stress among first year students*. Unpublished conference paper for the First Annual Conference on College Counselling.

Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. New York Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer.

LeVine, R. A. (1990). Enculturation: A biosocial perspective on the development of self. In Dante Ciccetti and Marjorie Beeghly, (eds.), *The Self in transition: Infancy to childhood*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Li, Qing-shan (1990). A discussion of psychological conflicts and their coping strategies among college students. *Journal of Youth Study*, March, 1990. p. 26-32.

Li, Xing-hu et al. (1990). *Psychological counselling: an important tool to moral education of students*. Unpublished conference paper for the First Annual Conference on College Counselling.

Ma, Jian-qing (1990). *The current situation and tasks for college*

counselling. Unpublished conference paper for the First Annual Conference on College Counselling.

Matheny, K.D., Aycock, D.W., Pugh, J.L., Curlette, W.L., & Silva Cannella, K.A. (1986). Stress coping: A qualitative and quantitative synthesis with implications for treatment. *The Counseling Psychologist, 14,* 499-549.

Menaghan, E. G. (1983). Individual coping efforts: Moderators of the relationship between life stress and mental health outcomes. In H.B. Kaplan (ed.), *Psychological Stress.* New York: Academic Press.

Menaghan, E. G. (1982). Measuring coping effectiveness: A panel analysis of marital experience. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour,* 23, 220-234.

Monat, A. & Lazarus, R. (1985). *Stress and coping: An anthology.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Pearlin, L. I., & Schooler (1978). The structure of coping. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour,* 19, 1-21.

Shanan, J., De-Nour, A. K., & Garty, I. (1976). Effects of prolonged stress on coping style in thermal and renal failure patients. *Journal of Human Stress,* 2 , 19-27.

Stone, A. A., & Neale, J. M. (1984). New measure of daily coping: Development and preliminary results. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 46, 892-906.

Tam, T. K. (1993). The role of quantification in qualitative research in education. *Educational Research Journal,* 8, 19-27.

Tu, Wei-ming (1979a). Ultimate self-transformation as a communal act: Comments on modes of self-cultivation in traditional China. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy,* 6, 237-246.Hawaii.

Tu, Wei-ming (1979b). *Humanity and self-cultivation: Essays in Confucian thought.* Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press.

Vaillant, G. E. (1976). Natural history of male psychological health: Vol.5. The relation of choice of ego mechanisms of defense to adult adjustment. *Archives of General Psychiatry,* 33, 535-545.

Wheaton, B. (1983). Stress, personal coping resources, and psychiatric symptoms: An investigation of interactive models. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour,* 24, 208-229.

Worden, J. W., & Sobel, H. J. (1978). Ego strength and psychosocial adaptation to cancer. *Psychosomatic Medicine,* 40, 585-592

Yin, Bin-jiang. (1990). *The goal of counselling is to enhance college students' socialization.* Conference paper for the First Annual Conference on college counselling.

Zhang, Zong-ying (1990). *Counselling: the second front for moral education of college students.* Unpublished conference paper for the First Annual Conference on College Counselling.

Zhao, Xiao-qing (1990). *An aggressive but steady development of mental hygiene in universities.* Unpublished conference paper for the First Annual Conference on College Counselling.