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Indigenous Counseling in the Chinese Cultural Context: Experience Transformed Model

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This article argues that indigenous Chinese counseling must provide culturally relevant therapy. Chinese clients' expectations of directive, goal-oriented, time-limited and pragmatic counseling, their particular form of expressing emotions, and their needs of particular counseling relationships have reframed the counseling process in cultural context. For this, the Experience Transformed Model, an open dynamic model that conflates the tempo-spatial framework and cultural demands with contemporary counseling ideas, is raised. The model suggests that counseling Chinese clients needs to focus on their life and social practice so as to achieve harmony and balance between individuals, in-group, society, and the universe. Therefore, an indigenous counseling needs to readjust the counseling relationship and rearrange counseling stages.

Since the 1970s, counseling professionals have been increasingly conscious of barriers in relation to the application of Western-centered theories to nonwhite clients. As the product of Western civilization, counseling theories essentially stress autonomous, self-actualization, and

individualism, hence largely relying on clients' information giving, logical thinking, and actively sharing experiences and emotions with the counselors. This gives rise to the question of whether applying counseling theories directly to Chinese clients is effective, because Chinese societies have different cultural characteristics, such as collective values, the virtue of harmony, and transcending conflict (Saeki & Borow, 1985). The differences between Western and Chinese cultures and philosophical backgrounds lead to the debate of modifying Western theories or developing indigenous theories in Chinese societies. Beyond the controversy, efforts of establishing Chinese culture-oriented counseling can be observed in China mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Chen, 1999; Fan, 1999; Leung, 1999).

The supporters of modification suggest to usher in Chinese indigenous cultural characteristics with Western theories, and to merge them together through "technical adjustment," "theoretical modification," or "philosophical reorientation" (Tseng, 1995, p. 1). They believe that "Western developed professional counseling practices should be culturally transformed to serve Chinese people and the Chinese culture" (Duan & Wang, 2000, p. 1). Thus, Chinese cultural components, especially the inheritance of Confucianism, such as Familism, collectivism (Duan & Wang, 2000), and filial piety (Kwan, 2000), are applied. However, this trend lacks a coherent configuration between theoretical establishment and practice, and is inadequately informed by cultural congruence, because it usually presents as fragmental pieces. In particular, there is a potential risk of confusing clients or even counselors themselves in practice because of possible contradictions between Western and Chinese cultural assumptions in the accommodation.

The supporters of indigenous theory argue that the modified models lack uniqueness and autonomy because applying Western theories to help Chinese clients will dangerously suppress Chinese philosophy and forms of thinking (Yang, 1993b). Therefore, they attempt to initiate new systematic counseling models on the grounds of Chinese cultural

heritage. In this stream, religious beliefs, such as Zen and Sadhanas, are brought into counseling. This is especially popular in Taiwan, because people seek to release daily pressure through the practice of meditation. Research found that Zen beliefs and meditation could improve the quality of daily life, emotional quotient, and mental health (Ho, 2001; Lin, 1998; Wang, 1997). However, this approach lacks the capacity to solve clients' immediate problems. Also, counselors need to have ample knowledge of religion and meditation. Zhang and Yang (1998), by adopting Daoism, establishes an indigenous model — the ABCDE techniques of Daoist cognitive method. This model appears to be highly systematic in terms of technique and strategy. Nonetheless, since this model has been mainly applied for the group of clients with neuroses, the extent of application needs to be further examined. In addition, the importance of the counseling relationship is not addressed in this model.

In agreement with what Kao and Sinha (1997) suggested, “in China the indigenous traditions were so rich and highly developed that they could not be cast aside” (p. 10). Based on the above discussion, we suggest that indigenous counseling should be developed on the grounds of Chinese culture, rather than modifying Western theories. An indigenous framework derived from the review of Chinese characteristics — the Experience Transformed Model — is initiated here. It should be noted in advance that the model is based on the heuristic principle. This means that we attempt to construct a thinking tool, rather than an operational technique, to stimulate further thoughts. Thus, it is a map rather than the territory.

Cultural Demands of Counseling

This section addresses the major features of Chinese culture, and how they influence counseling practice. Three crucial features of the Chinese culture are distinct from the Western culture, including: self and wider society; pragmatism; and the uniqueness of emotional expression.

The first and most significant feature of the ancient Chinese belief is that a stable and prosperous society leads to a stable and prosperous family, and further benefits individual members of the family; in turn, a well-cultivated individual will also put the family and society in order. This view assumes that there is a state of being that transcends thoughts, feelings, and actions, in which human beings are seen as part of a larger whole, interconnected through a universal force that binds all existence together (Lee & Armstrong, 1995). This issue highlights the first significant point to develop an indigenous counseling theory: the concept of self. As Bond and Hwang (1990) noted, “the concern of self is often derided and played down in favor of group considerations” (p. 236). Chinese people act preferably in accordance with external expectations or social norms, rather than with internal wishes or personal integrity. In other words, the existential self is a relative self, as well as an undivided unit of family and society. This concept of self leads the Chinese to have a strong desire to avoid conflict, to ingratiate themselves with others, and to be “correct,” since dissimilarity and nonconformity may cause anxiety (Bond & Hwang, 1990; Yang, 1993b). To underline the importance of interdependent relationship rather than personal independence (Yang, 1993b), Chinese people emphasize self-cultivation and internal constraints at the individual level; address relational concern about status and role at the interpersonal level; and stress role achievement, maintenance of face, harmonious relationship and social obligation at the social level.

The second cultural feature is pragmatism. As the proverb says, “the purpose of learning is for use.” This reflects that Chinese people value “knowing how to” more than “knowing why,” and emphasize practice rather than conceptual thinking. There are two levels of practice: life practice and social practice. Life practice refers to the reflection of daily life on one’s own morality, weaknesses, and transpersonal aspects. Social practice is about how people understand the way of fulfilling their own roles and responsibilities in order to achieve harmony in interpersonal

relationship and social stability. With the emphasis on pragmatism, Chinese clients prefer counseling to be goal-oriented, time-limited, efficient, and directive. They desire to feel immediate benefits from counseling. If they have to be engaged in counseling for months or even years before the outcome emerges, their motivation may be lost (Lo, 1993). Therefore, Chinese clients may look for a direct guidance or suggestion from professionals to solve their problems in no time. This requires counselors to play a more directive role. The directive role is especially important during the early phases of treatment, because Chinese clients are more passive and dependent (Ho, Chu, & Yeung, 1993). However, the directive role may be transformed into a nondirective one in accordance with the client's progress (Dwairy & Jagelman, 1998).

The third cultural feature is that Chinese rarely complain of anxiety, depression, and psychological problems (Bond & Hwang, 1990). It is argued that these feelings may be suppressed in ways of minimization or denial, and being substituted by somatic preoccupation (Kleinman, 1980, as cited in Cheung, 1990; see also Furnham & Li, 1993). Though there is very little evidence where this feature comes from, we believe that the social relation orientation could be a major cause. Because of the importance of social networks, individual psychological problems are regarded as a reflection of poor social relation. The way to recover from a psychological problem is to regain harmony in the relationship, which requires the clarification of the complex situation in a relationship, rather than the clarification of personal desires and feelings.

The above discussion sketches the particular cultural characteristics of the Chinese people. It further gives hints on the premises of the Experience Transformed Model, and will be employed to inform the establishment of the model.

The Experience Transformed Model

Premises

Two premises underpin the Experience Transformed (ET) Model: the relationship between individuals and society, and the time line of an individual client's life.

The Relationship Between Individuals and Society

We suggest that social obligation and social morality have to be emphasized to balance with individual freedom and individual desires. It is believed that society is open and dynamic and is changing constantly (see arrow D in Figure 1). Contemporary Chinese society is influenced by both exotic and indigenous cultures, and the societal environment could influence clients and in-group people. However, society is formed by individual people, and in return is influenced by them at the same time. Thus, the influence between individuals, in-group people and society is mutual. The universe is the unity of all things; counseling is a *dao* (a way/a guide) that leads a client to live in a group or society in a harmonious and balanced way, and also directs the client to a higher spiritual level. The counseling process should follow the course of nature to find a solution, and to transform experiences into solutions, knowledge, wisdom, virtue, and spirit in accordance with the needs of the client.

Time Line of an Individual Client's Life

We also believe that human beings live in the whole of the past, present and future (see arrow E in Figure 1). We cannot understand a person fully if we only look at part of the person's whole life progress. The past experiences can influence one's present and future; the present is influenced by the past and can also influence one's future; in the meantime, the future in return influences one's present through expectations, imagination, needs, and predictions. A clearer expectation of the future will have a great effect on the present behaviors, and will provide motivation and direction in

counseling. A client will generally experience the above three parts of the whole life progress together if the counseling is effective, although Chinese clients may wish to obtain guidance for the present and future issues at the beginning.

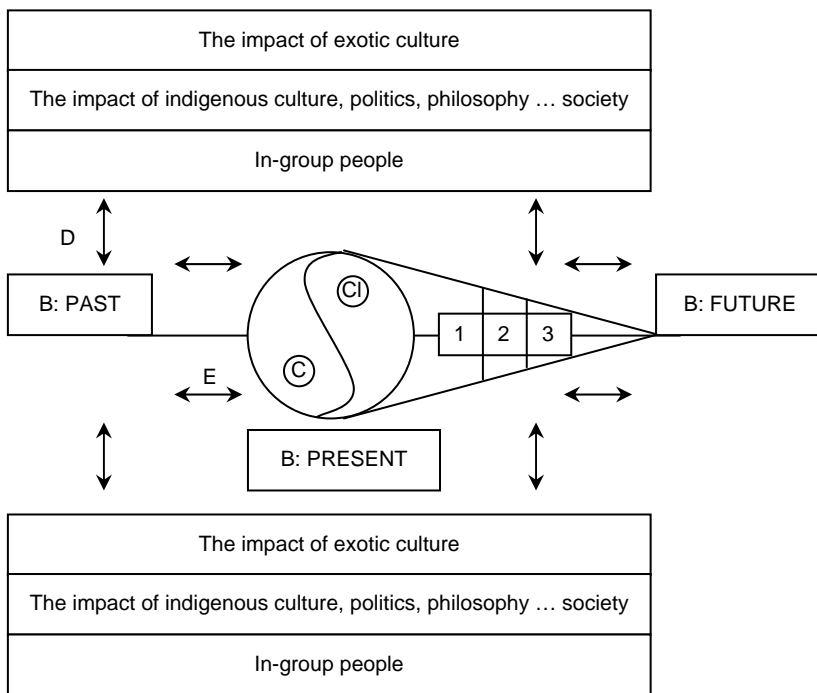
Based on these premises, the ET Model is developed. In the counseling process, a counselor working with a Chinese client is dealing with the “whole,” which includes the client’s past experiences, present situation, future expectations, in-group relationship, and contemporary culture.

The Development of the ET Model

Noticeably, culture and personal experiences are transmitted and diffused as the changing of time and space. This highlights the importance of a tempo-spatial framework for developing an indigenous model. Time is historical relevance, a continuous process of culture from the past to the present. The indigenous counseling is closely related to traditional ideologies and practice, and how they influence contemporary psychological factors, ideologies, lifestyles and politics in modern life. Space refers to both subjective space and objective space. Subjective space may relate to the individual client’s uniqueness, and objective space to the cultural structure, like political and economic background (Yang, 1993b).

The development of the ET Model (see Figure 1) is based on this tempo-spatial framework. As an open dynamic model, it is originated from the *Yin-Yang* principle with two constitutive components (i.e., *Yin* and *Yang*) in the counseling relationship, and the unity of *Yin-Yang* means that all things are completed. It integrates Chinese tradition with the concepts of Western counseling theories. The model is based on the grounds of Chinese philosophy and borrows the ideas of Western counseling theories to explain the structure. It should be noted that an indigenous model need not necessarily focus solely on traditional heritage, as this may risk the loss of the reality of acculturation in modern life and the valuable aspects of Western theories. A

Figure 1 The ET Model



C = Counselor

Cl = Client

D = \updownarrow The reciprocal influence between the contemporary society and the counseling process

E = \longleftrightarrow The mutual influence between the past, present and future in an individual's time line

1 = Problem-solving stage

2 = Knowledge and wisdom transformation stage

3 = Spiritual transformation stage

contemporary indigenous theory needs to find out the connections between Western and Chinese cultures in order to overcome the inadequacy of a single culture and be more flexible in working with clients under the influence of globalization. Therefore, it is argued that culturally responsive counseling

needs to find ways to incorporate cultural dynamics into the helping process (Lee & Armstrong, 1995). In the following section, the components of the model will be described briefly.

Components of the Model

This model suggests that three factors — the exotic culture, the indigenous circumstance, and in-group people — can influence an individual's experiences, beliefs and view of the world in the individual's developmental process. The “exotic culture” refers to the impact of other cultures, such as the impact of the Western culture to the Chinese culture. The “indigenous circumstance” points to the product of evolutionary process as involving societal, cultural, political, and other types of development in contemporary society. The “in-group people” refers to the influences of subcultures and norms in a particular group or network on the client or the counselor.

Within this frame of reference, the influences of individuals' experiences and the counseling process are reciprocal (the component D). Individuals will bring their experiences that are informed by the above three factors into the counseling process to affect the outcome of the counseling. On the other hand, the counseling process will influence the individuals' experiences by affecting their beliefs and values. In order to fully understand the individuals, the time line development (the component E) must be engaged in the process. This means that the individuals' experiences will be affected by the past experiences, present events and expectations toward the future.

In this model, the relationship between counselors (C) and clients (C1) forms the basis of the counseling process, the major purpose of which is to transform a client's experiences into the needs of problem solving, the needs of knowledge and wisdom, and/or the needs of spiritual fulfillment. Subsequently, the transformation will benefit the client's future life practice or social practice.

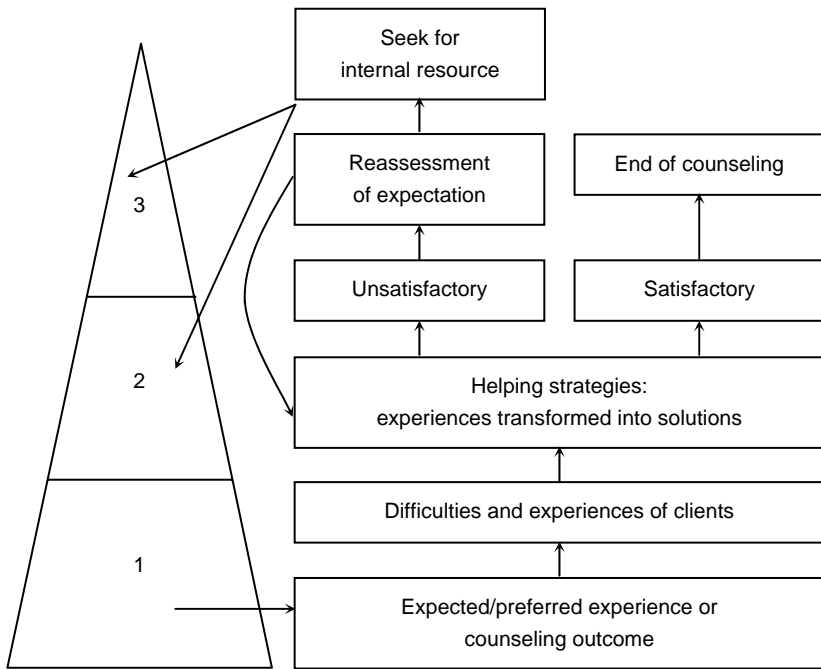
Counseling Stages

The process of counseling could be divided into three stages: (1) problem-solving for temporary daily practice; (2) knowledge and wisdom for permanent life and social practice; and (3) spiritual transformation for the ultimate harmony and balance with the universe (see Figure 2). These three stages are not in hierarchical order. They can be experienced separately, step by step, in reverse, or all together; their boundaries are not clear-cut. Generally, the higher the stage, the more difficult it is for a client to reach that stage; many clients might only experience the first and second stages. The progression of a client in these three stages depends on the course of nature and the client's needs.

In the problem-solving stage, clients learn from their own previous experiences or other people's experiences, then directly adopt or modify skills and techniques in order to solve their problems or meet the initial expectations in the forthcoming counseling. This is, under the influence of pragmatism, the most essential stage in which the counselor may respond to the client comparatively actively. In this stage, clients may require more help from the counselor in order to understand their situation. As Figure 2 shows, if a client is satisfied with the counseling outcome, then the counseling relationship will be terminated. Otherwise, the expectation will be reset, and helping strategies will be re-explored. If knowledge is required, counseling will enter into the second stage.

In the second stage, clients transform their own or other people's experiences in a more flexible and permanent way for their problems while the counselor gives less active intervention. This stage is concerned with knowledge and wisdom that extends to the present and future personal and social life practice. Clients might not be satisfied with temporary solutions. Rather, in this stage clients are aware that life is ever changing, hence adopting techniques or skills directly is not enough. They will seek outside experiences to cultivate their inner world in order to practice better in both

Figure 2 Counseling Stages



- 1 = Problem-solving for temporary daily practice
- 2 = Knowledge and wisdom for permanent life and social practice
- 3 = Spiritual transformation for the ultimate harmony and balance with the universe

life and social situations. Clients get benefits from this process, and the effect of counseling lasts longer.

In the final stage, individual clients who are seeking an holistic reawakening of the sense, spiritual, cognitive, and morality would be fully aware of the natural moral order of the universe, humanity, benevolence, and virtue, and free themselves from desires and strife. The spiritual side will be discussed and the virtue of humanity will be explored.

These three stages can also be followed in reverse order. In this case, counseling may start from the spiritual transformation stage in accordance with the client's expectations. If the client's ultimate goal is to seek a solution to a present situation or difficulty, then the client can be more flexible to deal with the difficulty. As we know, life is dynamic and ever changing, and there is no permanent or constant solution to a problem. Therefore, knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality are more powerful than a single solution.

Counseling Relationship

The relationship between the counselor and the client is seen as the most important constituent to determine the counseling outcome in this model. Chinese people are relationship-oriented. Yang (1993a) therefore argues that relationship, as a kind of interpersonal or social resource, determines treatment.

In the ET Model, *Yin-Yang* concept is employed to establish and explain the counseling relationship. Traditionally, *Yin* refers to the feminine side of dispositions, such as submissive, passive, and dependent, while *Yang* refers to masculine characters, such as dominant, active, and independent. It should be mentioned that an individual is possessed of both *Yin* and *Yang* dispositions to maintain balance, harmony, and social relationship in daily life. Here, we attribute the counseling relationship to three mannerisms.

Firstly, the relationship is interdependent and interrelated. The change of one person could influence another.

Secondly, the relationship is dynamic and ever changing. Although the ultimate goal of the relationship is to create unity of harmony and balance, the relationship is bounded by the flow of energy, such as power differences between a counselor and a client, and the client's input. The flow of energy is not static but kinetic. Either a balanced or unbalanced relationship will be

created through the interaction between a counselor and a client. For instance, a counselor may have more power than a client at the early stage of counseling because of such a cultural characteristic as paying respect to professionals and authorities. However, equal relationship can be created if the client is increasingly involved.

Finally, the counseling relationship is a compensation operation that both the counselor's and the client's *Yin* side and *Yang* side are completed through the interaction. When the client acts actively toward the counselor, the counselor needs to act comparatively passively in return in order to balance the relationship, and vice versa. Within this context, counselors must be able to recognize clients' weaknesses, strengths, and needs in order to help the clients achieve their needs. Moreover, the relationship must be adjusted in accordance with the three different counseling stages. As mentioned earlier, different stages have different goals of counseling. Counselors therefore need to be competent in adjusting their roles flexibly according to the needs of clients. For instance, counselors will be more directive when clients seek a solution. At the third stage, counselors should be nondirective, because clients are now more aware of their own issues and are more capable to explore the issues.

To sum up, counselors need to be more sensitive to the needs of clients in the counseling relationship. In order to move forward in the course of counseling, counselors may need to break the harmonious relationship at a certain point. For instance, moving from the first stage to the second or third stage needs to reframe the directive role of the counselor. This may cause a temporary loss of balance between the counselor and the client in the process of role reconstruction. Thus, the reconstruction can only be carried out safely on the foundations of trust, understanding, and preparation. It should be stressed that there is no absolute rule to formulate *Yin-Yang* relationship in the counseling process. Keeping sensitive and flexible is the most important.

Suggestions of Counseling Practice in the Chinese Cultural Context

In this section, four suggestions for counseling practice in the Chinese cultural context are made.

Firstly, a counselor's characteristics, knowledge, wisdom, flexibility, and training are crucial in an indigenous ET Model. The difference between Western and Chinese counseling is that, under the influence of the humanistic perspective, Western counseling views the counselor as a normal human being with weaknesses like other people. However, a counselor who practices in the Chinese cultural context may be subject to different expectations because of the social value of "setting a good example with one's own conduct." This means that if the counselor shows demerits of the human aspects to clients, clients might lose confidence in the counselor. In contrast, showing wisdom, virtue, and knowledge could gain respect, confidence, and trust from clients, and also could give credibility to the counseling progress. Clients may therefore have an inherent faith that the helping process will benefit them. In this sense, the counselor needs to demonstrate a good model to the client. Essentially, imitation as a means of learning is given little importance in the Western counseling field. However, Chinese people regard imitation as an important mode of learning. A successful counselor in the Chinese cultural context should present a positive image, showing virtue, humility, honesty, wisdom, and flexibility. Besides, giving clients appropriate behavioral guidance is important as well because appropriate guidance represents the counselor's intellect and knowledge.

Secondly, when clients ask for guidance to solve their immediate problem, it is important to clarify whether the problem is an underlying problem. There may be many contradictory issues before the underlying problem emerges. Wallis (1973) suggested that a counselor should keep an inner ear cocked in the clarifying process, and the inner feelings of the clients could sometimes inform the counselor what is going wrong. It is noticeable that Chinese people are not good at expressing their feeling as addressed

earlier. Therefore, counselors should be sensitive to their clients' nonverbal expression. As for the issue of clarifying underlying problems, we suggest that a counselor can offer some guidance to the client to solve the presented problem first before the underlying problem is clarified. This is because the clarification process may last for a long time. This helps the client release the immediate pressure, and contributes to the establishment of the counseling relationship at the beginning.

Thirdly, as Chinese clients emphasize the importance of social relationship and the harmony between individuals and the wider context, a practical point must be noted. Most people seek counseling to solve problems in relation to significant others. For the benefit of the client, it is necessary to question whether the client, after making a decision, may become more distressed. This is particularly important for traditional clients. As we know, the more a client feels safe, the more the client is willing to change. In particular, traditional Chinese doctrine asserts that all things should operate by avoiding one-sidedness and extremity, and maintaining the middle way (Mean, *Zhongyong*). Counselors working in the Chinese cultural context should always bear this in mind, and avoid pushing clients too radically to achieve personal growth or development, as the client may feel to be embroiled in a more confused and difficult situation. In other words, “balance” and “solution” are two important goals in the counseling process.

Finally, the concept of *Yuan* is also important. According to Yang (1997), *Yuan* is “the major social cultural device of relational fatalism (an important aspect of relationship orientation) that renders social (especially interpersonal) relationships harmonious and stable in Chinese social life” (p. 254). It is a concept widely used by the Chinese to determine a range of relationships, like social and interpersonal relationships as well as relations with objects. Traditionally, it is considered to be the basis on which interpersonal relationships are formed and dissolved. Yang further suggested that *Yuan* is still prevalent in contemporary Chinese social life. For example,

patients attribute *Yuan* to the doctor in therapy. This concept greatly determines whether a relationship is good or bad. For Chinese clients, the feeling of having *Yuan* with the counselor greatly determines whether the counseling relationship succeeds or not. Thus, the *Yuan* attribution could help to improve the relationship.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the differences in *Weltanschauung* and culture would give rise to different needs of counseling. Social obligation, balance, harmony, goal directiveness, time-limitation, the counselors' role and pragmatism are all important factors to achieve effective counseling in the Chinese cultural context. The ET Model is a framework based on the grounds of harmony and balance, the principle of *Yin-Yang*, tempo-spatial framework, and the assumptions of individual-society relationship and the time line of a client's life. It suggests that counseling should meet the needs of Chinese clients to solve their immediate and underlying problems, to reconstruct their morality and social sense, and to arrive at their inner soul at satori-mystical state. Here, the counseling relationship is seen as an important strategy to achieve the goals. Counselors have to adjust their role between directive and nondirective as well as active and passive in the counseling relationship in accordance with a client's desire and state.

However, the initiative of this model is strongly embedded in Chinese culture. Thus, it would be difficult to extend its implication to Western counselors and clients, because they might not have the adequate knowledge of Chinese culture to understand and operate this model. In addition, this model is presented as a conceptual framework, the argument of which is mainly based on logical reasoning. There is as yet not enough practical and research data to support its effectiveness. In this sense, further research is required. The essential issues regarding the extent to which the model is applicable, and the group of clients this model will be more suitable for, need to be investigated. Further, we suggest that an operational tool for

evaluating this model should be developed, particularly relating to the counseling relationship and the counseling stages. There is also a need to reconstruct the concept of *Yin-Yang* at the practical level. Research can be initially carried out by investigating Chinese clients' experiences in current counseling services, such as the self-disclosure and counseling expectations of clients, and their perceptions to the reactions of counselors and their own. Meanwhile, it is essential to investigate how counselors decide their intervention to specific clients in terms of the relationship establishment.

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中國文化脈絡下的本土心理輔導：經驗轉化模式

本文主張進行本土心理輔導的治療時，必須與文化相關。在中國文化的背景脈絡下，當事人對有引導性、目標為本、快速見效及務實的心理輔導有著極大的期待。此外，中國人特有的情緒表達方式和對輔導關係的不同需求，意味著西方心理輔導理論需要在中國文化架構中重新調整。經驗轉化模式是一個開放的互動模式，融合了時間和空間的轉變，以及現代心理輔導對文化需求的概念。這個模式主張，對中國人的心理輔導需要聚焦於當事人的生活及社會實踐上，以期達成個人、團體、社會和宇宙體系的和諧。因此，就本土心理輔導而言，必須重新調整現在的西方輔導關係理論，並重新編排輔導階段，以符合特定文化及族群的需求。