

Spiritual Tensions and Paths of Self-Understanding in Contemporary China: A Jungian Psychological Perspective in Dialogue with Chinese Traditional Culture

Jinglun Wu*, Yue Zhang

Beijing Jingbei Vocational College

Abstract

Due to rapid social change, contemporary Chinese society is facing various forms of psychological stress and value-related tensions. Loneliness, identity confusion, and a sense of meaninglessness have become increasingly visible in recent years, especially among young people, and have attracted growing academic attention. Instead of treating these experiences simply as a “mental crisis,” this article suggests understanding them as part of an ongoing developmental process. Drawing mainly on Jungian analytical psychology, this study uses concepts such as individuation, the shadow, and the integration of opposites to interpret these experiences. At the same time, it places these ideas in conversation with Chinese traditional cultural resources, especially Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought, in order to form a more culturally grounded understanding. The article argues that many inner conflicts faced by contemporary young people are not signs of failure, but reflect a natural stage in psychological growth. Based on this perspective, the paper also discusses several practical paths of self-understanding, including reflective writing, creative expression, and everyday self-observation. Overall, this study attempts to provide a relatively accessible and localized framework for understanding psychological experience in contemporary China, combining modern psychological insight with traditional cultural wisdom.

Keywords: Spiritual Tensions; Jungian Psychology; Shadow; Self-Understanding; Chinese Traditional Culture; Contemporary China

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, China has experienced rapid economic and social transformation. Urbanization, technological development, and the expansion of higher education have significantly reshaped people’s living conditions and life trajectories. Everyday life has become increasingly convenient, and opportunities for personal mobility have expanded. At the same time, however, these structural changes have also altered the ways in which individuals understand themselves and relate to society, giving rise to a range of new psychological experiences, particularly among younger generations. In recent years, issues such as loneliness, competitive pressure, and uncertainty about the future have been increasingly discussed in both public discourse and everyday conversation. Many individuals report that even after achieving socially recognized goals—such as stable employment, higher income, or upward mobility—they still experience a lingering sense of confusion about the meaning and direction of their lives. In some cases, this may manifest as a subtle disconnection between external success and internal satisfaction. These feelings are typically not intense or pathological, but they are persistent, widespread, and difficult to dismiss, suggesting that they reflect broader structural and cultural conditions rather than purely individual problems.

Rather than simply framing these phenomena as a “mental crisis,” it may be more appropriate to understand them as part of a transitional condition. Contemporary Chinese society is characterized by the coexistence of multiple value systems. Traditional ethical frameworks continue to exert influence in areas such as family responsibility and social expectations, while newer value orientations—such as individual choice, self-realization, and personal fulfillment—are still in the process of formation. As a result, individuals often find themselves

navigating multiple, and sometimes conflicting, expectations—from family, society, and their own evolving aspirations. This situation does not necessarily produce acute crisis, but it can generate a more diffuse and enduring sense of tension, ambiguity, and psychological imbalance.

To better interpret these experiences, this study adopts the framework of Carl Jung’s analytical psychology. Compared with other psychological approaches that emphasize observable behavior or cognitive processes, Jung’s theory places particular emphasis on inner development, symbolic meaning, and the integration of different aspects of the self. Concepts such as individuation and the “shadow” provide useful tools for understanding internal conflict, self-division, and the gradual process of psychological integration. These features make Jungian psychology especially suitable for interpreting complex and often ambiguous psychological states that cannot be fully explained through purely external or instrumental perspectives. At the same time, this study does not apply Jungian theory in a purely universal or abstract manner. Instead, it situates these ideas within the context of Chinese cultural traditions—especially Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—in order to develop a more context-sensitive perspective. Rather than treating Western theory as a complete explanatory system, this approach emphasizes dialogue, adaptation, and selective interpretation. By bringing these perspectives into conversation, the study seeks to construct a more balanced analytical framework that is both theoretically informed and culturally grounded.

Based on this framework, the present study aims to explore how contemporary individuals experience and interpret psychological tension in a rapidly changing social environment, and how these experiences can be more adequately understood through the interaction between psychological theory and cultural context. In doing so, it attempts to provide a more nuanced account of psychological life in contemporary China and to contribute to ongoing discussions on the relationship between modernization, culture, and the formation of the self.

2. Contemporary Psychological Conditions: Some Common Tendencies

Building on the broader social context outlined above, changes in psychological experience are often subtle, yet they can be consistently observed in everyday life. These changes do not usually take the form of intense emotional disturbance; rather, they appear as gradual shifts in how individuals relate to others, organize their expectations, and interpret their own experiences.

One noticeable tendency concerns the transformation of social connection. With the rapid development of digital technology, communication has become more immediate and accessible than ever before. Individuals are able to maintain frequent contact, share information efficiently, and participate in diverse online communities. However, this increased connectivity does not necessarily translate into deeper interpersonal understanding. In many cases, interactions remain at a relatively surface level, structured by speed, fragmentation, and selective self-presentation. As a result, communication may become more frequent but less substantial, making it more difficult to establish stable and meaningful relationships. This creates a subtle tension between the appearance of constant connection and an underlying sense of interpersonal distance.

A second tendency can be observed in attitudes toward study, work, and the future. On the one hand, competitive pressure remains strong, and many individuals continue to invest significant time and energy in self-improvement in order to meet external expectations. On the other hand, some begin to distance themselves from this pattern of continuous competition. This may take the form of lowering expectations, slowing down life pace, or adopting a more cautious and selective approach to career and personal development. Such responses should not be simply interpreted as a lack of motivation. Rather, they often reflect a more complex process of adjustment, in which individuals attempt to negotiate the tension between external demands and internal limits, as well as between social evaluation and personal well-being.

Underlying these observable tendencies is a more fundamental issue concerning self-understanding and the

experience of meaning. In many cases, individuals are able to achieve externally defined goals, yet still experience uncertainty regarding the direction and significance of their lives. This suggests a partial disconnection between established systems of evaluation—such as academic achievement or career success—and the individual’s internal sense of value. When external standards no longer provide sufficient guidance, individuals are required to take a more active role in constructing meaning for themselves. However, this process is often incomplete and unstable, which can result in hesitation, ambivalence, and a diffuse sense of purposelessness in everyday decision-making.

Taken together, these tendencies do not necessarily indicate a clearly defined psychological “crisis,” but they do point to an increasing complexity in the structure of psychological life. Experiences of connection, pressure, and meaning are no longer organized within a single, stable framework, but are instead shaped by the interaction of multiple and sometimes competing logics. In this context, a theoretical perspective that emphasizes inner development and the integration of different aspects of the self—such as the analytical psychology of Carl Jung—provides a useful point of departure for further analysis. Rather than offering immediate solutions, such a framework allows for a more systematic interpretation of these emerging patterns and prepares the ground for a deeper examination of their psychological structure.

3. A Jungian Analytical Framework

3.1. Individuation and the Formation of Identity

In Jungian psychology, individuation refers to the ongoing process through which a person develops a more integrated and differentiated sense of self. Rather than implying isolation or pure individualism, it involves negotiating a dynamic balance between inner psychological tendencies and external social roles. This process is neither linear nor complete; instead, it unfolds through continuous adjustment as individuals respond to changing life conditions. In the context of contemporary China, the process of individuation is shaped by the coexistence of multiple value systems. As discussed in the previous section, individuals are often required to navigate between externally defined standards—such as academic achievement, career success, and family responsibility—and an emerging emphasis on personal interests, self-expression, and individual fulfillment. This situation creates a structural tension within identity formation: the self is pulled simultaneously toward social conformity and personal differentiation.

From a Jungian perspective, the uncertainty and hesitation that arise in this context should not be understood simply as signs of weakness or confusion. Rather, they can be seen as indicative of an incomplete but active process of individuation. When established value frameworks no longer provide sufficient guidance, individuals are compelled to participate more directly in the construction of meaning and identity. This helps explain why, as noted earlier, even individuals who achieve socially recognized success may still experience a lack of internal coherence or direction. The issue, therefore, is not the absence of achievement, but the partial disconnection between externally structured roles and the deeper process of self-integration.

3.2. The Shadow: Acknowledging the Unrecognized Self

A central concept in Carl Jung’s analytical psychology is the “shadow,” which refers to those aspects of the self that are not fully recognized, accepted, or expressed within conscious awareness. These elements are not inherently negative; rather, they often include emotions, desires, or potentials that do not align with dominant social expectations or with the individual’s conscious self-image. In contemporary Chinese society, the formation of the shadow is closely related to the strong emphasis on social roles and normative expectations. In order to function effectively within systems of evaluation—such as education, employment, and family structures—individuals tend to develop a socially acceptable persona. However, aspects of the self that do not fit within this framework—such as emotional vulnerability, unconventional aspirations, or non-instrumental interests—may be suppressed or marginalized. This dynamic provides a useful way to interpret the phenomenon, discussed

earlier, in which individuals remain highly “connected” yet still experience a sense of distance or inauthenticity in their relationships. When social interaction is primarily mediated through externally oriented roles and expectations, the expression of the more complex or less socially acceptable aspects of the self becomes limited. As a result, communication may remain functional but lack depth, contributing to a subtle sense of interpersonal disconnection. If such shadow elements remain unacknowledged over time, they may not disappear, but instead re-emerge in indirect forms, such as dissatisfaction, emotional fatigue, or a vague sense of inner conflict. Recognizing the shadow, therefore, is not about eliminating these elements, but about gradually incorporating them into a more comprehensive understanding of the self.

3.3. Integration of Opposites

Another key principle in Jungian psychology is the integration of opposites. Human psychological life is not organized around a single, unified tendency, but rather shaped by the interaction of contrasting forces—such as rationality and emotion, stability and change, or social obligation and personal desire. Psychological development involves not the suppression of one side, but the capacity to hold these opposites in a dynamic and productive tension. This perspective is particularly relevant to the ambivalent attitudes toward competition and withdrawal described in the previous section. On the one hand, individuals are embedded in systems that reward performance, discipline, and continuous self-improvement. On the other hand, there is an increasing awareness of the limits of such a model, especially in relation to personal well-being and long-term sustainability. The resulting responses—ranging from intensified effort to partial disengagement—can be understood as different ways of negotiating this underlying opposition.

From a Jungian viewpoint, these seemingly contradictory tendencies should not be interpreted as inconsistency or lack of direction. Instead, they reflect an ongoing attempt to reconcile competing demands within a single psychological structure. The difficulty arises when one pole—such as external achievement—is overemphasized, while the other—such as emotional or existential needs—is neglected. In such cases, individuals may experience the kind of imbalance noted earlier: outward stability combined with inward uncertainty or dissatisfaction. The integration of opposites does not imply a final resolution, but rather the gradual development of a more flexible and inclusive self-structure. This helps explain why tension itself is not necessarily pathological, but can serve as a driving force in psychological development.

3.4. Symbolic Expression and Self-Dialogue

In addition to these structural concepts, Jung emphasized the role of symbols and imagination as mediating processes in psychological development. Symbolic forms—such as dreams, images, and spontaneous associations—provide a way for unconscious material to enter conscious awareness in an indirect but meaningful manner. Rather than communicating through abstract reasoning, deeper psychological processes often express themselves through symbolic representation. This perspective offers a useful lens for understanding the diffuse sense of meaning uncertainty discussed earlier. When established systems of value lose their coherence, individuals may find it difficult to articulate their experiences in clear or fully rational terms. Instead, these experiences may appear in fragmented thoughts, recurring concerns, or emotionally charged but not fully defined impressions. Such phenomena can be understood as preliminary forms of symbolic expression, indicating that underlying psychological material has not yet been fully integrated into conscious understanding.

From this viewpoint, the task of psychological development is not simply to resolve confusion at a conceptual level, but to engage in a process of internal dialogue in which different layers of experience can gradually be brought into relation. Symbolic activity plays a crucial role in this process by creating a bridge between conscious reflection and less accessible aspects of the psyche. In this sense, the search for meaning is not only a cognitive task, but also a symbolic and experiential one, requiring time, interpretation, and the gradual formation of inner coherence.

4. Dialogue with Chinese Traditional Culture

4.1. Daoist Perspective: Balance and the Reconfiguration of Tension

Daoist thought offers a distinctive perspective for understanding the forms of tension that characterize contemporary psychological experience. As discussed earlier, many individuals find themselves caught between increasing external demands for performance and an internal need for balance and sustainability. This situation reflects not simply a practical difficulty, but a structural imbalance in how value and action are organized. The Daoist concept of “Wu Wei” (non-forced action) can be interpreted, in this context, as a way of reconfiguring such imbalance. Rather than advocating passivity, “Wu Wei” emphasizes a mode of engagement that avoids excessive control and overextension. From the perspective of Jungian psychology, this resonates with the idea of integrating opposites: when one pole—such as efficiency, competition, or instrumental rationality—is overemphasized, psychological tension tends to intensify. Daoist thought provides an alternative orientation that helps to moderate this one-sidedness, not by rejecting action, but by loosening rigid patterns of striving. This perspective is particularly relevant to the ambivalent attitudes toward competition described in the previous section. The tendency to either intensify effort or withdraw from competition can be understood as polarized responses to the same underlying pressure. Daoist flexibility, by contrast, suggests a third possibility—one that allows for participation without total identification. In this sense, Daoism does not resolve tension directly, but transforms how individuals relate to it, making it more manageable within the broader process of psychological integration.

4.2. Confucian Perspective: Self-Cultivation, Social Roles, and Their Limits

The Confucian tradition provides another important framework, particularly in relation to the formation of identity within social contexts. The concept of self-cultivation (“Xiu Shen”) emphasizes continuous moral development through reflection, discipline, and the fulfillment of relational responsibilities. This has clear points of contact with Jung’s notion of individuation, especially in its emphasis on ongoing self-development rather than fixed identity. However, the relationship between these two perspectives is not simply complementary. Confucian self-cultivation is fundamentally embedded in a network of social roles and expectations, where becoming a “complete” person is closely tied to fulfilling duties within family and society. While this orientation provides stability and direction, it may also contribute to the formation of a strong social persona, as described in Jungian terms. This dynamic helps to explain the sense of tension identified earlier between external success and internal uncertainty. When identity is primarily organized around socially validated roles, aspects of the self that do not fit these expectations may be relegated to the “shadow.” As a result, individuals may appear well-adjusted externally while experiencing a degree of inner fragmentation or unarticulated dissatisfaction. From this perspective, Confucianism both supports and constrains the process of individuation. It offers a structured path for self-development, but may also limit the recognition of less socially acceptable dimensions of the self. The dialogue between Confucian and Jungian perspectives therefore highlights a productive tension: between the need for social embeddedness and the need for deeper psychological integration.

4.3. Buddhist Perspective: Awareness, Attachment, and the Transformation of Meaning

Buddhist thought provides a different but complementary approach, particularly in relation to the experience of uncertainty and the search for meaning. As noted earlier, many individuals experience a gap between external achievement and internal significance, leading to a diffuse sense of purposelessness. This condition can be understood, in part, as a difficulty in stabilizing meaning within changing social and personal contexts. Central to Buddhist philosophy is the notion that suffering arises from attachment—especially the tendency to fix meaning, identity, or outcomes in a rigid manner. From this perspective, the instability of meaning is not simply a problem to be eliminated, but an inherent feature of human experience that becomes problematic only when individuals attempt to impose fixed structures upon it. This insight can be brought into dialogue with Jung’s emphasis on symbolic processes. When meaning cannot be fully articulated through established external frameworks, it often emerges indirectly through subjective experience, requiring interpretation rather than immediate resolution. Buddhist practices of awareness can be understood, in this sense, as facilitating a different mode of engagement

with inner experience—one that reduces premature closure and allows psychological material to unfold more gradually. In relation to the phenomena discussed earlier, this perspective helps explain why attempts to resolve uncertainty solely through external achievement or rational planning often prove insufficient. Instead, the transformation of meaning involves a shift in how experience is perceived and processed. Buddhist thought thus complements the Jungian framework by emphasizing not only integration, but also the capacity to remain open to ambiguity as part of psychological development.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Building on the preceding analysis, this study has examined the psychological experiences of contemporary Chinese youth as part of a broader process of identity formation under conditions of rapid social transformation. Rather than treating phenomena such as loneliness, competitive pressure, or uncertainty about meaning as isolated psychological problems, the analysis has suggested that these experiences are structurally embedded in the tension between multiple value systems and evolving forms of self-understanding. Within this context, the Jungian framework associated with Carl Jung provides a useful set of conceptual tools for interpreting these dynamics. Concepts such as individuation, the shadow, and the integration of opposites make it possible to understand psychological tension not simply as dysfunction, but as an inherent aspect of the process through which a more differentiated and integrated sense of self gradually emerges. This perspective helps to explain why external achievement does not necessarily lead to internal coherence, and why experiences of ambiguity and imbalance often persist even under conditions of material improvement.

Meanwhile, by placing these ideas in dialogue with Chinese cultural traditions, this study has proposed a more context-sensitive interpretive framework. Daoist notions of flexibility and non-forced action offer a way of moderating the overemphasis on performance-oriented values; Confucian self-cultivation highlights the importance of social embeddedness while also revealing its potential limitations for individual differentiation; and Buddhist reflections on attachment and awareness provide an alternative approach to the instability of meaning. Rather than forming a unified system, these perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the same psychological condition, and their interaction helps to capture the complexity of self-experience in contemporary China. From this theoretical perspective, the question of “self-understanding” can be reframed not as the achievement of a fixed or fully coherent identity, but as an ongoing process of negotiation and integration. Practices such as reflective writing, creative expression, and dialogical interaction can be interpreted not merely as practical techniques, but as forms of symbolic mediation through which previously unarticulated aspects of experience may gradually become accessible to conscious awareness. Their significance lies less in immediate problem-solving than in supporting the longer-term process of psychological integration, particularly in contexts where stable frameworks of meaning are no longer readily available.

However, it is also important to recognize the limitations of this perspective. The Jungian framework, while analytically rich, is not a comprehensive explanation of all psychological phenomena, and its application within the Chinese context requires careful adaptation. Similarly, traditional cultural resources should not be treated as fixed solutions, but as interpretive possibilities that may vary in relevance depending on individual and social conditions. Future research may therefore further explore how these theoretical insights can be refined, empirically examined, and applied in specific domains such as education or counseling, where questions of identity and meaning are especially salient.

In conclusion, this study suggests that the psychological tensions experienced by contemporary Chinese youth should be understood not primarily as signs of crisis, but as expressions of a transitional and developmental condition shaped by the interaction of social change, cultural resources, and inner psychological processes. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more nuanced understanding of the formation of the self in contemporary society, and points toward an approach that emphasizes integration, flexibility, and ongoing dialogue rather than definitive resolution.

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Author Biography

1. Jinglun Wu: PhD Candidate; Assistant professor at Beijing Jingbei Vocational College. His main research interests include architectural design, interior design, green building design, and commercial district planning and design.
2. Yue Zhang: PhD Candidate; Assistant professor at Beijing Jingbei Vocational College. Her main research interests include child psychological development and education, early childhood health education, and preschool physical education.