Culturally Adapting Schema Therapy for Confucian Heritage Clients: A Practice-Based Integration of Confucian and Taoist Principles

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Abstract

This paper explores a culturally adapted approach to Schema Therapy by integrating Confucian values and Taoist principles to enhance therapeutic responsiveness for clients from East Asian cultural backgrounds. It examines how core Confucian concepts such as filial piety, emotional restraint, and relational obligation can shape maladaptive schema formation, often contributing to psychological distress. In contrast, selected Taoist principles, including "benefiting without harm" and "returning to innocence," are used to support healing and facilitate the development of the Healthy Adult Mode. Drawing on practice-based insights and a detailed case study, the paper demonstrates how therapeutic strategies can honor Confucian-heritage values while promoting individual emotional wellbeing. The integration model presented contributes to the growing field of culturally responsive psychotherapy and offers practical insights for counsellors and clinicians working with Confucian-heritage clients in multicultural settings.

Keywords: *Schema Therapy; Confucianism; Taoist Cognitive Therapy; Cultural Adaptation; Cross-Cultural Psychotherapy; Emotional Needs; Eastern Philosophy*

1. Introduction

Schema Therapy (ST), originally developed by Jeffrey Young and his colleagues (2003), is an integrative psychotherapy model combining elements of cognitive-behavioural, attachment, and psychodynamic approaches to address chronic psychological difficulties (Arntz, 2021). Extensive empirical evidence supports its efficacy, particularly for personality disorders and treatment-resistant conditions (Arendt et al., 2024; Arntz & Jacob, 2017). However, ST's foundational emphasis on autonomy, emotional expressiveness, and boundary-setting reflects Western individualist paradigms (Hotan, 2019; Brockman et al., 2023), which may conflict with the value systems of clients from Confucian-heritage backgrounds.

In Confucian-heritage societies—including China, Malaysia, Korea, and East Asian diaspora communities—psychosocial development is deeply rooted in moral-relational frameworks. Core Confucian principles such as filial piety (*xiào* 孝), emotional restraint (*nèiliǎn* 内敛), and social harmony (*hé* 和) govern identity formation, interpersonal duty, and self-worth (Yuen, 2019; Elsevier, 2025). While these values promote familial and social cohesion, they may also perpetuate rigid expectations, emotional suppression, and conditional self-worth, fostering the development of maladaptive schemas including Defectiveness/Shame, Self-Sacrifice, Unrelenting Standards, and Subjugation (Cui et al., 2022).

Taoist philosophy offers a complementary framework for addressing psychological distress in Confucian-heritage contexts. Principles such as *wú wéi* (effortless action), *zìrán* (naturalness), and *wú niàn* (non-fixation) provide culturally congruent strategies for regulating emotional distress and cultivating psychological flexibility. Emerging modalities like Taoist Cognitive Therapy (TCT) leverage these tenets to mitigate internal conflict and restore equilibrium (Ding et al., 2020; Zhang & Young, 1998; Zhang et al., 2002), offering promise for clients grappling with perfectionism or shame-based schemas.

Despite growing interest in cross-cultural adaptations of ST, scant literature examines its application in Confucian-heritage clinical settings. Standard protocols often neglect the nuances of intergenerational obligations, stigma around emotional distress disclosure, and cultural prioritisation of harmony (Devenish & Sullivan, 2024; Wong, 2021). This study addresses this gap by:
1. Analyzing how Confucian cultural norms shape the formation and maintenance of specific maladaptive schemas;
2. Proposing a culturally integrated ST model synthesizing Confucian values and Taoist Philosophy to enhance the cultural responsiveness of Schema Therapy.

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Drawing on schema theory, cultural psychology, Taoist Cognitive Therapy, and a detailed clinical case study, this paper advances a conceptual and practical framework for working effectively with Confucian-heritage clients in multicultural practice.

2. Overview of Schema Therapy in Confucian-Heritage Contexts

Schema Therapy (ST) is a comprehensive psychotherapeutic approach targeting Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs), defined as enduring psychological patterns rooted in unmet core emotional needs during childhood (Arntz, 2021; Brockman et al., 2023). These schemas are perpetuated through maladaptive coping styles (surrender, avoidance, overcompensation) and schema modes (e.g., Vulnerable Child, Punitive Parent, Guilt-Inducing Parent) across the lifespan (Arntz, 2021; Brockman et al., 2023).

The International Society of Schema Therapy (ISST) has refined Young's original core emotional needs into a more nuanced, developmentally sensitive framework (ISST, 2023). This revision underscores the interplay between attachment security, autonomy development, and cultural-contextual factors.

Key updates include:

- Connection needs: Explicit inclusion of unconditional acceptance, critical for addressing Defectiveness/ Shame schemas.
- Safety needs: Integration of fairness and predictability, aligning with trauma-informed initiatives (Arntz et al., 2021).
- Autonomy is bifurcated: Bifurcated into *Autonomy Support* (competence affirmation to counter Failure schemas) and *Autonomy Granting* (respect for individuality to challenge Subjugation schemas; Lockwood, 2022).
- Healthy role modeling: Addresses intergenerational schema transmission, particularly salient in Confucian-heritage families where hierarchical authority is seldom questioned (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Yin, 2021).

This expansion aligns with neuroscientific evidence on secure base scripting and growth mindset (Louis et al., 2024; Roediger et al., 2018), while offering clearer clinical targets for unmet core emotional needs across cultures.

Cultural Nuances in Confucian-Heritage Contexts

Although ST's core needs are universal, their interpretation diverges markedly in Confucian-heritage societies, where emotional needs are often secondary to:

1. **Familial loyalty** (e.g., filial piety as a moral imperative; Cheung et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2019).
2. **Role-based obligations** (e.g., gendered expectations in caregiving).
3. **Social harmony** (e.g., avoidance of conflict to preserve *miànzi* 面子, 'face').

Within these contexts, the inability to meet rigid familial or societal expectations can precipitate the development of schemas such as:

- **Unrelenting Standards (Perfectionism)**: Often driven by societal and familial pressures to achieve excellence.
- **Defectiveness/Shame:** Emanating from chronic criticism, social comparison, or fears of losing face.
- **Self-Sacrifice:** Arising from culturally sanctioned obligations to prioritise others' needs above one's own.
- **Subjugation:** Reflecting a habitual suppression of personal autonomy to maintain social harmony.

Additionally, family structures within Confucian-heritage societies—particularly those characterised by authoritarian or hierarchical dynamics—frequently reinforce the Punitive and Guilt-Inducing Parent modes, wherein affection is conditional upon achievement or compliance. Emotional restraint is valorised as a marker of maturity, reinforcing both Emotional Inhibition and Subjugation schemas. Socially, the construct of *miànzi* (face) functions as a powerful psychological regulator, perpetuating internalised shame and heightening sensitivity to social evaluation (Liu et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2023; Yeh & Bedford, 2003).

In response, Schema Therapy must be adapted to address these culturally embedded dynamics. Therapists working with Confucian-heritage clients should develop an awareness of the cultural meanings ascribed to specific schemas, validate clients' lived experiences, and tailor interventions—such as reparenting and imagery rescripting—to honor cultural values while fostering emotional authenticity and psychological flexibility.

3. Confucian Cultural Values and Their Psychological Implications

3.1 Intergenerational Transmission of Schemas

Confucian values are often transmitted through parenting styles that emphasise discipline, obedience, and hierarchical respect. A salient example is "tiger parenting," characterised by strict discipline, high expectations, and conditional reinforcement aimed at fostering achievement (Chua, 2011; Zhang & Wang, 2024). Research indicates that such parenting styles are associated with the development of schemas including Punitiveness and Unrelenting Standards (Arntz, 2021; Kim et al., 2011; Zhang & Wang, 2024).

In Confucian-structured households, affection is frequently intertwined with performance, reinforcing the Guilt-Inducing Parent Mode which significantly contributes to a collective culture of shame (Cheng & Rossner, 2023; Kim, 2016; Jacob et al., 2014). Authoritarian parenting—more prevalent in Confucian heritage society—has been linked to the development of Self-Sacrifice and Subjugation schemas, particularly among daughters (Gunty & Buri, 2008; Zhang & Wang, 2024). Children raised within these dynamics learn to suppress their individual needs in favor of preserving family honor and relational harmony, internalising beliefs that self-expression is disruptive or selfish.

Clinical observations support these findings. In a sample of ten clients across a wide age range, all demonstrated schemas related to Defectiveness/Shame, Self-Sacrifice, Perfectionism, and Guilt-Inducing Parent modes. Many clients described their emigration as an act of self-liberation from restrictive familial roles, underscoring how entrenched cultural schemas can drive significant life choices.

3.2 Cultural Dissonance: ST Principles and Confucian Values

Schema therapy's emphasis on autonomy, emotional articulation, and assertiveness (Arntz et al., 2021; Arntz, 2021) often contrasts sharply with Confucian ideals of harmony and deference. This dissonance may lead clients to experience therapeutic techniques as uncomfortable or culturally inappropriate.

For instance, clients may resist imagery rescripting exercises that involve confronting critical parental figures or may avoid assertiveness training due to concerns about filial disrespect. Such resistance often manifests as guilt when clients engage in therapeutic activities that question or challenge familial authority. Therapists must navigate these dynamics with cultural humility, reframing assertiveness as relational honesty and using metaphors to facilitate emotional exploration indirectly.

Moreover, the pervasive cultural emphasis on *miànzi* (face) intensifies clients' fears of vulnerability and perceived weakness, sustaining the Defectiveness/Shame schema. Therapists should anticipate shame-induced withdrawal, provide consistent validation, and create safe relational experiences that gently challenge internalised norms.

3.3 Formation and Perpetuation of Maladaptive Schemas in Confucian Contexts

Confucian cultural values and relational structures contribute to the formation and perpetuation of several core maladaptive schemas:

- Unrelenting Standards (Perfectionism): This schema is often driven by familial pride and fear of bringing shame. In Confucian culture, the concept of *miànzi* (face) ties family honor to individual performance (Jun et al., 2022). Academic success is frequently framed as a moral obligation, rather than a personal goal (Chen, 2023). Clients with this schema may equate self-worth with flawless performance, leading to burnout and a pervasive fear of failure (Lavrijsen et al., 2023). The schema is maintained by all-or-nothing thinking patterns, such as: "If I'm not perfect, I'm a disgrace" (Smith et al., 2017).
- Defectiveness/Shame: This schema emerges from chronic emotional invalidation, critical parenting (Arntz, 2021; Calvete et al., 2013), and internalised social surveillance. Shame-based socialisation practices (e.g. "Do not embarrass the family") teach children to monitor their behavior for signs of social judgment (Bedford, 2004; Wu et al., 2023). Emotional needs are often dismissed as selfish, reinforcing beliefs of inherent unworthiness (Arntz, 2021; Bach et al., 2017; Kaufman & Jauk, 2020). Clients frequently report chronic self-criticism and hypervigilance to criticism (Chung, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2004; Zaccari et al., 2024). Emotional inhibition exacerbates this schema, as expressing vulnerability is perceived as a source of shame (Abdelrazek et al., 2024; Butler et al., 2007).
- Self-Compromising (Self-Sacrifice/Subjugation): This schema reflects the prioritisation of collective harmony and familial duty over individual needs. Confucian collectivism emphasises group harmony above personal desires (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yang, 2024). Gender roles further amplify this schema, particularly for women who are expected to subordinate personal aspirations to familial obligations (Chen, 2023). Clients with this schema often neglect self-care, resulting in resentment, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of invisibility (Chiao, 2017; Clinton, 2023). Moral framing, such as "Good people put others first," perpetuates these patterns (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009; Wang & Miller, 2020).

In addition to these schemas, the Punitive and Guilt-Inducing Parent modes are frequently observed in Confucian-heritage clients. These modes are reinforced by high parental expectations, performance-based affection, and the moral imperative of filial piety (*xiào* 孝). Parents may use guilt-inducing tactics (e.g., "We sacrificed everything for you") to enforce compliance, linking love to achievement (Fung & Lau, 2012; Jun, 2022; Wu et al., 2023). As a result, clients internalise a punitive inner critic that generates guilt for pursuing autonomous goals, such as prioritising personal needs over familial obligations (Kim, 2016; Wang & Miller, 2020). Clinical research indicates that these schemas and modes contribute to chronic anxiety and prolonged adolescence in Confucian societies, as adults fear parental disapproval and struggle to individuate (Chung, 2017; Zhang & Wang, 2024).

These schemas and modes often coexist, forming deeply entrenched personality structures. Schema therapists working with Confucian-heritage clients must therefore foster cultural sensitivity, navigating the complex interplay between cultural norms and schema dynamics to implement effective, culturally attuned interventions.

4. Clinical Implications and Cultural Duality in Therapeutic Practice

Effectively applying Schema Therapy with clients from Confucian-heritage backgrounds requires more than a theoretical understanding of schemas. It demands a culturally responsive clinical approach that acknowledges the moral, relational, and emotional frameworks internalised through upbringing. While traditional Schema Therapy emphasises autonomy, emotional expression, and the challenging of internalised parental voices, such interventions may inadvertently clash with Confucian values of filial piety, social harmony, and moral modesty. Therefore, therapists must adapt their strategies to respect these cultural imperatives while facilitating psychological growth.

This adaptation can be informed by the dynamic interplay between Confucianism and Taoism in Chinese cultural psychology. Confucianism serves as the dominant and explicit moral framework, emphasising relational obligations and societal achievement, while Taoism offers a complementary, often implicit, philosophy that promotes acceptance, balance, and effortless action (Chang et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2020; Zhang & Young, 1998; Zhu & Young, 2013). Many individuals from Confucian-heritage cultures draw on both traditions across the lifespan—Confucianism during periods of active striving and Taoism during times of adversity, such as failure, illness, or existential uncertainty (Chang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2002). This duality functions as a cultural coping mechanism; Confucianism guides ambition, while Taoism offers solace and acceptance (Chang et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2020).

Clinically, this dual framework suggests that therapists should validate Confucian values—such as filial piety and moral responsibility—during goal-oriented phases of therapy while drawing upon Taoist principles—such as *wu wei* (effortless action) and *ziran* (naturalness)—to address distress arising from unmet expectations. For instance, a Confucian-driven Critic mode (e.g., "You must excel to honor your family") can be gently balanced by a Taoist-informed Healthy Adult mode (e.g., "Growth unfolds naturally when rigid striving is released"). This integrative approach aligns with the Taoist emphasis on harmony and effortlessness, enabling schema restructuring without directly challenging deeply held cultural ideals.

This duality also complements the expanded core emotional needs framework proposed by the International Society of Schema Therapy (ISST, 2023). While Confucian values emphasise connection and role fulfillment, Taoist principles promote autonomy and self-acceptance. Culturally attuned therapists can thus validate Confucian-derived schemas while introducing Taoist-informed perspectives to meet unmet emotional needs in a culturally coherent manner.

4.1 Building the Therapeutic Alliance

Establishing a strong therapeutic alliance is particularly critical for clients from Confucian-heritage backgrounds, who may approach therapy with ambivalence, shame, or fear of emotional exposure (Badanta, 2022; Lui, 2019). Therapists must adopt a stance that is both authoritative and benevolent—akin to the "wise elder" archetype within Confucian relational models. This stance combines warmth, guidance, and structure, positioning the therapist not as an adversary to cultural values, but as a mentor who facilitates emotional growth within those values (Ding, 2024; Lee, 2018).

Within Taoist Cognitive Therapy (TCT), the therapist's role further embodies principles of balance and non-fixation, fostering a relational style that emphasises acceptance, flexibility, and alignment with natural rhythms (Chang et al., 2016, 2020). By modeling *wu wei* (effortless action), therapists create a therapeutic environment that encourages clients to align their personal growth with organic processes, rather than imposing rigid or confrontational interventions (Ding et al., 2020; Young & Zhu, 2008). This approach complements Confucian values by framing the therapist as a non-intrusive, guiding presence who facilitates emotional authenticity while maintaining relational harmony.

To reduce cultural dissonance, therapists should use language and metaphors that align with Confucian worldviews (Wong, 2021; Hwang, 2009). For instance, instead of framing assertiveness as defiance, it can be described as cultivating "inner integrity" or "honest communication for mutual respect" (忠诚沟通). Similarly, autonomy work can be linked to Confucian ideals of moral self-cultivation (修身) and the pursuit of "effortless action"(无为), emphasizing personal growth as a path to contributing more meaningfully to family and society (Ding et al., 2020; Analects 4.18; Zhu et al., 2012).

4.2 Working with Modes and Maladaptive Coping

Many clients from Confucian-heritage backgrounds present with Critic or Guilt-Inducing Parent Modes, which echo the disciplinary tones of moral obligation and perfectionistic expectations ingrained by caregivers (Nadene, 2023; White, 2022). These modes are often internalised not just as parental voices, but as extensions of moral conscience. Directly confronting or challenging these modes may trigger resistance or self-criticism. Instead, clinicians can use Imagery Rescripting or Mode Dialogues that validate the original intention of these voices (e.g., protection, promotion of achievement) while gently renegotiating their intensity and scope (White, 2022).

For example, in working with a harsh inner critic rooted in filial expectations, the therapist might guide the client to reimagine the "parent mode" evolving into a more compassionate mentor who acknowledges the client's humanity and intrinsic worth. This approach reframes cultural values not as pathological, but as potential sources of resilience, while addressing their psychological costs.

4.3 Supporting Vulnerable and Inhibited Parts

Confucian values often discourage open emotional expression, fostering the suppression of vulnerable or authentic needs (Cui et al., 2022). Clients may present with schemas of Emotional Inhibition, Subjugation, or Defectiveness/Shame that have become so normalised that they remain invisible to the client's conscious awareness. Therapists must explicitly validate and normalise emotional expression, using metaphorical or somatic techniques to bypass shame and facilitate access to vulnerable parts (Cui et al., 2022; Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003).

Culturally attuned reparenting strategies should avoid framing parental values as inherently dysfunctional. Instead, therapists can employ dual imagery—visualising both the inner child and an idealised, compassionate parent acting in harmony. This approach preserves cultural ideals of harmony and relational duty while simultaneously addressing unmet emotional needs. In clinical practice, this approach has demonstrated positive outcomes.

4.4 Addressing the Migration Narrative: Cultural Duality in Transition

For immigrant clients, migration represents not only a geographical shift but also a profound psychological turning point. The rupture from the cultural context—whether voluntary or imposed—can serve as a catalyst for reexamining maladaptive schemas rooted in Confucian familial expectations (e.g., filial piety, perfectionism). Many clients conceptualise migration as an act of emancipation, framing it as an opportunity to "escape the weight of family duty" or "finally breathe freely" (Mao et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2024).

Schema Therapy provides a structured framework to explore these narratives:

- Reclaiming Autonomy: Migration often reflects a quest to meet autonomy needs. Therapists should validate these needs while acknowledging the client's loyalty to their cultural heritage.
- Dual Cultural Identity: Clients may oscillate between Confucian-driven schemas (e.g., "I am selfish for prioritising myself") and Taoist-informed perspectives (e.g., "My worth is not defined by productivity"). Therapists can facilitate the integration of these identities into a coherent sense of self.
- Symbolic Reparenting: Imagery rescripting can reframe migration as an act of self-protection (e.g., "The part of you that left was seeking safety, not betraying your family").

These interventions enable clients to reconcile cultural loyalty with the pursuit of psychological well-being, fostering a nuanced, culturally attuned healing process.

Clinical Example:

The following cases illustrate how Schema Therapy navigates the tension between Confucian obligations and migrant self-actualization.

Case 1: Male client, 49 years old

A 49-year-old male client who immigrated from mainland China a decade ago presented with profound guilt over his decision to leave, framed through a Confucian lens as "abandoning familial duties." Despite acknowledging the emotional burden that necessitated his departure ("I had no choice"), he struggled with self-perceived moral failure. The therapist integrated Taoist tenets (e.g., *wu wei*, effortless action) and Confucianism's emphasis on self-cultivation to reframe his migration as a natural response to systemic imbalance—validating his autonomy needs while honoring his cultural values. This approach softened his punitive self-narrative and fostered self-compassion without demanding rejection of filial piety.

Case 2: Female client, 50 years old

A 50-year-old female client reported immigrating seven years ago primarily to meet her mother's expectations of academic

and social achievement ("I came to prove my worth"). Though she preferred to remain in China, her mother framed emigration as a performance of familial honor. Therapy uncovered a Guilt-Inducing Parent Mode ("You must excel to validate our family") and a Subjugated Child Mode ("My desires don't matter"; "I should listen to my mum".). The therapist employed limited reparenting to reconcile her unmet needs for autonomy with Confucian loyalty, while Taoist principles (e.g., *ziran*, naturalness) helped her disentangle self-worth from external validation.

5. Case Studies and Clinical Applications

Patterns Across Cases

A review of ten clinical cases involving clients from China, Malaysia, and Korea (ages 16–49) revealed consistent activation of maladaptive schemas shaped by Confucian family dynamics. All clients exhibited schemas of Defectiveness/Shame, Self-Sacrifice, and Unrelenting Standards, alongside persistent Critic and Guilt-Inducing Parent modes. These patterns emerged within familial environments characterised by authoritarian parenting, high achievement expectations, and the cultural primacy of filial piety (*xiào* 孝) and face (*miànzi*面子). Notably, each client conceptualised migration as an act of psychological liberation—an attempt to escape oppressive familial obligations and reclaim autonomy. This recurring narrative underscores how cultural and intergenerational dynamics shape schema formation and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive interventions.

Case Study: A 29-year-old Chinese woman with complex trauma

The client, a 29-year-old Chinese woman, presented with symptoms consistent with complex trauma, including chronic insomnia, frequent panic attacks, pervasive self-blame, emotional suppression, and difficulties establishing interpersonal boundaries. Her developmental history was marked by significant emotional neglect, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, and chronic criticism from both parents and extended family members. Despite this history of maltreatment, the client maintained a deeply internalised belief that her parents loved her and that their abusive behaviors were justified by her perceived inadequacy. Shame pervaded her self-narrative, as reflected in statements such as, "They treated me like that because I was bad," and "I feel ashamed and guilty for upsetting my entire family." These expressions revealed entrenched Defectiveness/Shame and Guilt-Inducing Parent schemas, as well as a rigidly internalised punitive inner critic.

Embedded within this schema constellation was a culturally reinforced sense of filial piety (*xiào*, 孝), compelling the client to prioritise her parents' well-being over her own. As an adult, she devoted substantial emotional and financial resources to supporting her parents, despite enduring severe Self-Sacrifice, Emotional Inhibition, and Unrelenting Standards schemas. She reported persistent difficulty in setting boundaries across multiple relational contexts and described herself as "never good enough," despite objectively high levels of achievement.

Cultural-Schema Formulation:

- Defectiveness/Shame Schema: Reflected in self-statements such as "They treated me badly because I'm not worthy and I deserved it," this schema was reinforced by the Confucian ethic of filial piety, which conflates obedience with moral worth.
- Self-Sacrifice Schema: Manifested in her prioritization of her parents' well-being at significant personal wellbeing cost.

- Critic and Guilt-Inducing Parent Mode: Internalised punitive self-criticism linked to unfulfilled parental expectations (e.g., "I'm selfish for having or prioritising my own needs").

Culturally Adapted Interventions:

Therapeutic Alliance: The therapist adopted a "wise mentor" stance, consistent with Confucian relational hierarchies, to validate the client's loyalty while gently challenging maladaptive schemas. Early sessions focused on establishing a safe and attuned therapeutic alliance, acknowledging that reflections on her parents' emotional failures initially evoked intense feelings of shame, as such acknowledgement were perceived as acts of disloyal or violations of filial piety. Rather than directly confronting maladaptive schemas, therapy began by fostering safety and trust.

Taoist Cognitive Therapy (TCT) Integration: Guilt was reframed through the Taoist principle of effortless action (*wu wei* 无为), prompting reflection on whether true love necessitates endless self-sacrifice—a question aligned with the Confucian tenet of "Respect, but do not obey blindly" (Analects 4.18; Chang et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2024).

Metaphorical Storytelling: The therapist used metaphorical storytelling as an indirect intervention, drawing upon the client's well-established nurturing relationship with her pet dog as a therapeutic analogy. This narrative technique served three key functions: (1) providing a culturally congruent vehicle to externalise her unmet needs for unconditional love and safety, (2) normalizing core emotional needs (affection, validation, autonomy) through non-threatening displacement, and (3) creating psychological distance from familial loyalty conflicts. The pet caregiving metaphor particularly resonated with Confucian ideals of benevolent care (*rén* 仁) while circumventing shame triggers associated with direct need expression (Ding et al., 2024; Ding et al., 2020). This approach successfully facilitated access to Vulnerable Child and Healthy Adult modes while preserving the client's sense of filial integrity.

Imagery Rescripting: The client revisited traumatic childhood scenes through imagery rescripting, not to condemn her parents, but to cultivate intergenerational empathy by recognising their own unmet needs and limitations. The therapist validated the client's filial piety while gently challenging the shame schema through Taoist-informed effortless action (*wu wei* 无为) and following nature (*ziran*, 自然). Over time, the client developed a more balanced perspective—one that acknowledged both her parents' hardships and her own developmental needs.

Limited Reparenting: Modeled self-compassion as "moral self-cultivation" (*xiu shen*, 修身), aligning autonomy with Confucian values (Ding et al., 2024).

Limited reparenting was instrumental in this process, as it offered a corrective emotional experience where needs for nurturance, autonomy, and affirmation could be directly met within the therapeutic space. Boundary-setting skills were gradually introduced as acts of integrity and mutual respect, reframed not as rebellion but as part of a healthy, adult relational dynamic. This case underscores the importance of cultural adaptation in schema work, particularly when working with clients shaped by Confucian ideologies. By embedding schema interventions within a culturally coherent framework, therapists can promote healing without rupturing the client's core identity or values.

Developing the Healthy Adult Mode: A Taoist–Confucian Synthesis

The Healthy Adult Mode was cultivated by anchoring eight core Taoist principles, each carefully framed to complement—in place of contradiction—the client's Confucian

value system. Drawing on the culturally adapted schema therapy framework and the clinical study on the application of Taoist Cognitive Therapy (Young et al., 2008; Zhu & Young, 2013; Ding et al., 2020), these principles were intentionally embedded into the therapeutic process to foster a culturally coherent and emotionally balanced sense of self. Zhu and Young (2013) outlined eight core Taoist principles relevant to schema healing. These include:

- Benefiting without harm (利而不害)—acting in ways that benefit both self and others.
- Do your best without competing (为而不争)—Striving for excellence without engaging in unhealthy comparison.
- Know harmony and embracing humility (知和居下)—maintaining balance while occupying a modest position.
- Moderating personal desires and limit selfishness (少私寡欲)—reducing self-centeredness and over-fixation/ excessive ambition.
- Knowing when to stop and being content (知足)—Recognising sufficiency and releasing perfectionistic striving.
- Hold to softness to overcome hardness (守柔)—cultivating flexibility and gentleness as strengths.
- Return to childlike innocence (复归婴儿)—accessing vulnerability and authentic emotional expression.
- Following the way of nature (道法自然)—living in accordance with natural rhythms and one's true nature.

Each principle contributed to the reshaping of maladaptive schemas. For instance, **Benefiting Without Harm** helped the client reconcile self-care with familial responsibilities, reframing boundary-setting as an ethical and sustainable act rather than a betrayal of family duty. **Doing One's Best Without**

Competing softened the grip of the Unrelenting Standards schema, allowing room for achievement grounded in self-acceptance. **Moderating Desires** preserved filial piety while enabling the client to negotiate between parental expectations and personal needs. **Knowing Contentment** countered perfectionistic striving by fostering an appreciation for "enough," reducing the drive for unattainable standards.

Metaphorical grounding enhanced emotional resonance: for example, **Holding to Softness** was likened to the client's nurturing care for her dog, illustrating how strength can manifest through gentleness. **Returning to Innocence** allowed the Vulnerable Child mode to emerge without shame, while **Following the Way of Nature** affirmed autonomy as an organic extension of family harmony, rather than a threat to it. **Knowing Harmony and Maintaining Humility** facilitated interpersonal balance, enabling the client to assert her needs respectfully while maintaining family cohesion.

Through this integrated approach, the client's Healthy Adult mode emerged not as a rejection of cultural tradition, but as a synthesis—one that embraced filial piety while fostering self-compassion, balancing discipline with emotional flexibility, and honoring both cultural identity and individual psychological needs.

To illustrate how Confucian and Taoist principles can be integrated into schema therapy, Table 1 contrasts Confucian values and Taoist principles with culturally adapted therapeutic strategies, demonstrating their integration into Schema Therapy to meet the unmet core emotional needs (Lockwood, 2022). This framework highlights potential synergies between cultural values and clinical interventions; however, it is not exhaustive. In practice, addressing a single emotional need may require flexibly combining multiple principles from both traditions to ensure culturally responsive care.

Table 1: Culturally Adapting Schema Therapy: Integrating Confucian Values and Taoist Principles to Address Unmet Core Emotional Needs

Confucian Value	Taoist Principle	Culturally Adapted Therapeutic Strategy	Core Emotional Needs Addressed
Filial piety (孝)	*Wu wei* (无为) - effortless action ：Doing one's best without force;	Reframe autonomy as moral self-cultivation, allowing growth without violating family loyalty. Focus on relational boundaries and ethical self-protection.	Need for respect in developing autonomy (Autonomy Granting); Need for connection (Unconditional love, nurturance)
Face (面子)	*Li Er Bu Hai* (利而不害) - benefit without harm	Balance shame with self-compassion; honor social roles while expressing vulnerability. Reframe self-assertion as 'benefiting all' (including oneself); challenge overcompliance as harmful long-term.	Need for support and guidance in expressing needs; Need for affirmation of capability (Competence development); Need for a parent/caregiver who is experienced as confident and competent
Emotional restraint (内敛)	*Shou Rou* (守柔) - Holding softness	Model gentle assertiveness; foster safe expression of feelings.	Need for support and encouragement of play, emotional openness and spontaneity; Needs of safety and consistency.
Social harmony (和)	*Dao Fa Zi Ran* (道法自然)-Following nature	Support authenticity within collectivist norms; allow emotional needs to unfold naturally.	Need for compassionate, firm guidance (Realistic limit-setting); Need for connection Role Model Presence

High moral standards (礼 / 义)	*Zhi Zu* (知足)-Knowing contentment	Counter perfectionism by redefining success; promote satisfaction and balance.	Need for affirmation of capability (Competence); Need for support and encouragement of play/spontaneity
Suppression of personal needs (克己)	*Shao Si Gua Yu* (少 私寡欲)-Moderate desires	Reframe self-care as ethical moderation; challenge overcompliance without rejecting duty.	Need for support in developing a sense of intrinsic worth; Need for compassionate limit-setting
Rigid self-discipline (自律)	*Wei Er Bu Zheng* (为而不争) -Benefit without harm	Reducing perfectionistic rivalry. Help clients differentiate self-improvement from compulsive striving; redefine success as alignment with inner values (not external benchmarks).	Need for compassionate, firm guidance (Realistic limit-setting); Need for respect in developing autonomy Need for affirmation of competence
Obedience and role conformity (顺从)	*Fu Gui Ying Er* (复归婴儿)- Return to innocence	Allow the Vulnerable Child to be seen without shame; nurture spontaneity, playfulness and emotional openness.	Need for support and encouragement of play/spontaneity; playfulness; Need for support in developing a sense of intrinsic worth Role model presence

6. Discussion

This paper underscores the complex interplay between Confucian cultural values and the development of Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) among individuals of East Asian descent, particularly within Chinese communities. The clinical case and thematic analysis highlight how schemas such as Defectiveness/Shame, Self-Sacrifice, Unrelenting Standards, and Guilt-Inducing Parent mode are not merely intrapsychic phenomena but are reinforced and maintained within culturally sanctioned relational norms. While Schema Therapy (ST) provides a robust and integrative framework for addressing chronic emotional difficulties, its foundational emphasis on autonomy, emotional expression, and the confrontation of internalised parental modes reflects Western individualistic paradigms (Martin et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2022). These values may conflict with the moral-relational frameworks of Confucian-heritage clients, underscoring the need for thoughtful cultural adaptation.

6.1 Cultural Fit and Gaps in Empirical Validation

Despite growing interest in culturally adapted psychotherapy, empirical research on the efficacy of ST in Asian populations remains sparse. Few randomised controlled trials (RCTs) have evaluated ST's applicability in East Asian settings, limiting its generalisability beyond Western clinical populations (Mao et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Existing studies suggest promising results, but the lack of large-scale, culturally specific validation studies poses a significant challenge for widespread adoption. This gap is particularly critical for clinicians working with immigrants and culturally hybrid clients who must navigate the tension between Confucianism cultural values and the individualistic assumptions embedded in ST interventions.

Furthermore, the normative moral frameworks embedded in Confucianism may mask maladaptive schemas, making clients less likely to identify their patterns as problematic. For example, what Western psychology may interpret as pathological perfectionism or excessive guilt may, within a Confucian lens, be seen as moral diligence or familial devotion. This cultural framing can obscure the severity of symptoms,

delay help-seeking behaviors, and foster therapeutic resistance when clients perceive schema interventions as disloyal to family or tradition.

6.2 Integrating Hybrid or Complementary Models

To enhance the cultural fit of Schema Therapy (ST) for clients from Confucian-influenced societies, the integration of Taoist-informed models alongside ST offers a promising avenue for therapeutic adaptation. While direct empirical studies on combined Taoist-Schema Therapy models remain scarce, existing research on Taoist Cognitive Therapy (TCT) provides substantive theoretical and clinical foundations for potential synergies with schema-based treatment paradigms.

Taoism philosophy has profoundly influenced Chinese culture for centuries, emphasising principles of harmony, balance, effortless action (*wu wei*, 无为), and acceptance of natural processes. These Taoist concepts provide a vital counterbalance to the achievement-oriented, self-critical schemas commonly reinforced in Confucian cultural contexts. Taoist principles—such as yielding, accepting impermanence, and embracing non-fixation (*wú niàn*, 无念)—may provide clients with culturally resonant strategies for emotional regulation, particularly in addressing schemas related to Perfectionism, Defectiveness/Shame, and Self-Sacrifice (Zhu & Young, 2013; Ding et al., 2020).

For example, integrating Taoist concepts of acceptance and effortless action into Schema Therapy could help clients reduce emotional inhibition and soften self-criticism. The Taoist notion of *wu wei*—"effortless action"—aligns with therapeutic goals of reducing overexertion and perfectionistic striving, fostering a mindset of balance, self-compassion, and natural growth. Specifically, Taoist Cognitive Therapy (TCT; Zhang & Young, 1998) presents a theoretically coherent adjunct to Schema Therapy through its systematic incorporation of Taoist philosophy with cognitive-behavioral techniques. TCT's emphasis on cognitive non-fixation and authentic self-alignment provides a specific therapeutic framework to reframe rigid thoughts, promoting cognitive flexibility, and fostering alignment with one's true nature. This integrated approach could provide a culturally congruent therapeutic framework, which may be particularly efficacious for clients grappling with the tension between filial

duty and personal autonomy (Zhang & Young, 1998; Ding et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2024).

Expanding this integration further, mindfulness-based approaches, drawing from Taoist principles of awareness and acceptance, can synergistically complement imagery rescripting and limited reparenting techniques in Schema Therapy. Such an integrative approach may reduce resistance to schema interventions, as Taoist principles encourage embracing all aspects of the self—including imperfections and vulnerabilities—without judgment or shame.

In practice, this hybrid model could be implemented through:

- Incorporating Taoist concepts (e.g. balance, harmony, effortless action) into schema dialogues to address internal conflicts between self-critical modes and compassionate self-states.
- Combining Taoist mindfulness and acceptance practices with mode work in Schema Therapy helps clients gently observe and accept their emotional states without judgment, thus reducing tendencies toward self-punishing behavior or emotional suppression.
- Using indirect narrative techniques such as storytelling, metaphors, or guided imagery rescripting that align with Taoist techniques, allowing clients to explore their schemas without the need for direct confrontation, which may feel culturally threatening or disrespectful.

While Schema Therapy offers an effective framework for addressing entrenched maladaptive patterns, the integration of Taoism's acceptance-based philosophies can help bridge the cultural gap and enhance the therapeutic process for clients Confucian-influenced backgrounds. Such integration could be particularly beneficial in helping clients navigate the tension between filial duties, social obligations, and their own psychological needs for autonomy, self-expression, and emotional safety.

Other culturally congruent modalities, such as mindfulness-based interventions, Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT), Morita Therapy or filial narrative reconstruction, may also serve as adjunctive tools to reduce resistance and enhance schema healing without undermining cultural identity (Craig et al., 2020; Gilbert, P. 2009).

Future research is essential to empirically examine these hybrid approaches. Randomised controlled trials and longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the clinical efficacy and cultural relevance of integrating Taoist principles into Schema Therapy for East Asian populations.

6.3 Therapist Role and Culturally Competent Delivery

Clinicians working with Confucian-heritage clients must cultivate a nuanced and culturally informed therapeutic stance. This includes not only adjusting interventions but also embodying relational qualities that resonate with clients' moral and cultural frameworks. Therapists are often perceived not merely as reparenting figures, but as moral guides—akin to the *junzi* (君子, noble person) archetype in Confucianism—who model integrity, balance, and compassionate authority.

Therapeutic interventions such as imagery rescripting, limited reparenting, and mode work must be conducted with attunement to the client's internal conflict between individual needs and social obligations. This requires therapists to hold space for both loyalty and liberation, for shame and self-compassion, for critique and care—thus enabling a dialectical integration that respects cultural values while promoting psychological healing.

6.4 Future Directions

Future research should prioritise:

- Conducting randomised controlled trials and longitudinal studies to assess the efficacy of Schema Therapy among diverse East Asian populations.
- Undertaking qualitative studies exploring client narratives around cultural identity, family dynamics, and schema themes.
- Developing training frameworks to cultivate cultural competence among therapists working with Confucian-heritage populations.
- Creating culturally adapted assessment tools, such as modified schema inventories that capture culturally normative but potentially maladaptive beliefs.
- Systematically studying hybrid Taoist-Schema Therapy models through rigorous empirical designs.

Strengthening both the empirical evidence base and clinical applications of culturally responsive Schema Therapy is essential for equipping clinicians to meet the complex needs of a diverse and increasingly multicultural client population.

7. Conclusion

The interplay between Confucian cultural values and the development of Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) is a complex and critical area of study in cross-cultural psychology and psychotherapy. This paper has explored the intricate relationship between Confucian cultural values and the development of Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs), underscoring how core principles—such as filial piety, emotional restraint, and shame-based social regulation—contribute to the formation and perpetuation of schemas, particularly those related to Guilt-Inducing Parent, Perfectionism, Defectiveness/Shame, and Self-Sacrifice. These schemas are not isolated intrapsychic phenomena; rather, they are inextricably linked to moral, familial, and societal expectations that shape the self-concept and emotional functioning of individuals from Confucian-heritage cultures. For clients from Chinese or East Asian backgrounds, the internal struggle between personal autonomy and familial duty often results in the internalisation of patterns that impair emotional regulation, self-worth, and interpersonal relationships.

While Schema Therapy has demonstrated efficacy in treating various psychological conditions in Western contexts, this paper has emphasised the critical importance of culturally adapted interventions when working with Confucian-heritage clients. The traditional Schema Therapy model—rooted in values of autonomy, emotional expressiveness, and direct confrontation of internalised parental voices—may not fully resonate with clients whose schemas are deeply embedded in relational obligations and respect for family hierarchy. Culturally sensitive adaptations are thus essential. These adaptations include reframing reparenting techniques to reflect Confucian relational structures, employing indirect therapeutic methods such as metaphorical storytelling or dual-awareness imagery to maintain cultural respect while fostering emotional insight, and integrating Taoist-informed principles—such as *wu wei* (effortless action) and *ziran* (naturalness)—to promote acceptance, balance, and self-compassion.

Furthermore, the integration of Schema Therapy with Taoist Cognitive Therapy holds promise as a hybrid model for clients navigating the tensions between Confucian moral imperatives and individual psychological needs. While early research has examined the clinical application of Taoist Cognitive Therapy among Chinese immigrant populations in the United States (Zhang et al., 2002) and clinical samples in Mainland

China (Ding et al., 2020), further empirical validation, including randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and longitudinal studies, is essential to empirically assess the efficacy and cultural fit of such integrated approaches. The development of culturally specific assessment tools—such as a Confucian Schema Inventory—would also enhance the precision of schema measurement and facilitate targeted interventions that reflect the unique cultural configurations of schemas within Confucian contexts. Research should also explore the integration of Schema Therapy with other culturally relevant therapies and interventions, refining hybrid models that enhance cultural fit without compromising therapeutic integrity.

In conclusion, the development of culturally competent Schema Therapy practices offers significant potential to support the psychological healing and empowerment of clients affected by the internalised demands of Confucian values. By respecting cultural contexts while adapting therapeutic methods, clinicians can help clients reclaim autonomy, cultivate emotional well-being, and develop a healthier, more integrated sense of self within the context of their cultural heritage (Martin et al., 2024).

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