

# *The Impact of Zhongyong Thinking on Employee's Mental Health*

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**Abstract:** Zhongyong is a moral standard set forth by Confucian culture, meaning maintaining neutrality and moderation. Many people tend to have a misunderstanding of Zhongyong thinking, believing that Zhongyong represents compromise and the middle position. They might consider that such thinking is detrimental to healthy mental development. However, Zhongyong thinking is not the same as compromise, and instead it allows the coexistence of contradictions and opposites. After reviewing a series of previous articles on Zhongyong thinking and mental health, it is shown that Zhongyong thinking plays a moderating role in the employees' psychological state. Moreover, the factors affecting the influence of Zhongyong thinking on employees' mental health include psychological resilience and psychological security. Ultimately, the review found that one of the main reasons for the moderation of psychological states in the workplace is because it affects emotional regulation and alleviates symptoms of depression and anxiety. Plus, Zhongyong thinking related training also was shown some benefits. A limitation of previous studies is that subjective questionnaires were used to measure the level of Zhongyong thinking and other psychological variables, which could be less accurate. Future research directions could explore how to accurately demonstrate dynamic Zhongyong thinking processes through experimental and longitudinal design.

**Keywords:** Zhongyong thinking, work stress, mental health, depression

## **1. Introduction**

Employees' mental health is critical to both business and personal development. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 15% of people of working age suffer from mental problems in 2019 [1]. Depression and anxiety are estimated to cost about 12 billion workdays globally each year, resulting in an annual loss of productivity of nearly \$1 trillion [1]. Thus, employees' mental health is crucial to developing an organization or a company. First, a large part of employees' mental health is affected by work stressors [2]. Work stressor is considered one of the most serious occupational injuries in modern society [2]. The Yerkes–Dodson law suggests that when faced with a simple job task, employees' work productivity and performance increase with work stressors [3]. However, when a certain peak is reached, the increasing work stressors lead to a decrease in employees' work efficiency. In other words, when faced with one or more overly complex tasks, it can lead to work stressors having a negative impact on employees' work performance. To alleviate anxiety and improve employees' well-being, people need to learn to regulate work stressors. A key

factor in regulating work stressors is mindset [4]. Crum et al. proposed the concept of stress mindset [4]. It is the degree to which individuals believe that stress enhances or debilitates stress-related outcomes (performance, productivity, etc.) [4]. Research suggests that changes in mindset may improve an individual's response to stress and that a stress mindset affects outcomes such as mental health and job performance under stress [4].

One possible way to regulate the stress mindset is to use Zhongyong thinking. The Zhongyong comes from Confucianism in traditional Chinese culture and was first proposed by Confucius. Confucius regarded the Zhongyong as the highest state of morality. It emphasizes treating people, maintaining neutrality and stability, and adapting to the time, the thing, the matter, and the place. This thinking style can also be understood as "Yin-yang balance thinking". Yin-yang thinking captures the simultaneous existence of conflict and complementarity between opposites [5]. This shows that anything contains opposites, which means itself and its opposites coexist and interact as a whole. In other words, at the cognitive level, contradictory opposites are supposed to be partially conflicting and complementary, whereas from the behavioral analysis, it is partially separating and integrating [5]. As an old Chinese saying goes, a tangerine grows in Huainan and tastes like a tangerine, but if it grows in Huaibei it grows into a shrub-like plant and tastes bitter and sour. The same thing may produce different results in different places. Zhongyong thinking is characterized by a balance of values but is not the same as a settled point lying in the middle position of opposites [5]. The "Zhong" depends on the situation, more like a dynamic balance [5]. Wu and Lin believe that Zhongyong thinking refers to thinking in detail from different perspectives and choosing an approach that can take care of oneself and the overall situation [6]. Whether it is dealing with interpersonal relationships or practical issues, it tolerates the existence of contradictions, does not favor the left or the right, and thus leads the mind to a state of equilibrium [6]. It is like searching for the fulcrum in a balance beam, just stabilized at this point. Therefore, this way of thinking can change the way people cope with stress.

According to the above-mentioned, a possible way to alleviate the psychological problems of employees is to intervene to improve the state of mind in the face of stress and thus reduce the occurrence of psychological problems. The value of balance between yin and yang, which is emphasized in medieval thinking, provides a feasible intervention method to alleviate the stressful state of mind. However, most of the previous psychological interventions are based on values of the Western culture, which may not be accurate and effective in treating psychological problems in a multicultural context. In Western culture, people tend to think analytically, whereas, in Chinese culture, people tend to think holistically [5]. An example based on analytical thinking is the ABC model [5]. The ABC model is a modeling tool for cognitive behavioral therapy in psychology [5]. A refers to antecedent, B refers to behavior, and C is the abbreviation of consequence [5]. When analyzing a certain situation, the ABC model divides the causes of behavior into three parts [5]. First, analyze what happened before the behavior occurred, then look at the specific behavior, and finally observe the consequences of the behavior [5]. Based on this, corresponding methods are made to help people deal with challenges rationally. It breaks down events into three parts to observe but Zhongyong thinking will treat the event as a whole system. Zhongyong thinking goes beyond focusing on changes in the whole system and suggests strategies for integrating these changes and harmonizing in the face of the change [5]. ABC model views psychological resilience, self-management, etc. as individual capabilities, while Zhongyong thinking is more inclined to view individual willingness as having little to do with capabilities [5]. Therefore, the ABC model may not be as effective as expected in treating individuals with multicultural backgrounds. The following review will first introduce the core concept of rumination. It will then review how Zhongyong thinking affects the employees' work stress, job satisfaction, and employee well-being by influencing

psychological factors in terms of the three dimensions of Zhongyong thinking. Finally, directions and implications of the review for future research will be presented.

## **2. The Relationship between Zhongyong Thinking and Mental Health**

### **2.1. The Potential Roles of Zhongyong Thinking at Work**

The business environment in the internet era is characterized by uncertainty and dynamism. To thrive in this environment, companies need innovation coming from their employees. The innovative behavior is influenced by personal factors such as openness to knowledge, self-efficacy, and self-awareness. Therefore, in addition to ensuring that the company's environmental climate is favorable, it is also necessary to concentrate on the personal development of employees. One of the characteristics of Zhongyong thinking is the need to look at problems objectively from a multi-faceted perspective, which will allow the individual to look at a problem not as a possibility of seeing only one extreme but as a possibility of seeing more extreme aspects. To avoid extremes, individuals with Zhongyong thinking will synthesize all extremes and take a non-extreme approach to events. This gives the individual more flexibility in their thinking and brings more creative inspiration. A greater outpouring of inspiration is more likely to stimulate creativity in employees. Data from the previous study shows that hidden knowledge behaviors in the workplace negatively impact innovative behaviors whereas silent behaviors are positively correlated with knowledge hiding [7]. After the introduction of Zhongyong thinking, individual with high-standard Zhongyong thinking did not have a significant connection between silent behavior and hiding behavior [7]. In contrast, low-level Zhongyong thinking positively influenced silent-behavior and knowledge-hiding behavior [7]. It suggests that Zhongyong thinking can weaken the association between the concealment of knowledge and silent behavior. A possible reason is that Zhongyong thinking is characterized by integration and dialectic. High-level Zhongyong thinking individuals are more flexible and may have higher self-efficacy to generate more ideas. Employees with a high level of Zhongyong thinking are unlikely to use silence to protect themselves from being outdone by other employees. Please remember that all the papers must be in English and without orthographic errors.

Under the premise that modern business models are inherently uncertain and dynamic, COVID-19 has dealt a heavy blow to various industries in recent years, leading to a dramatic increase in the stress of uncertainty in the workplace for employees. In the face of such great challenges, the development of the individual employee is vital to the organization's growth. The flexibility of Zhongyong thinking not only regulates the innovative behavior of employees but also possibly plays a positive role in maintaining the mental health of individual employees. According to Chiu, Zhongyong thinking can be behaviorally divided into three dimensions: harmony as the goal of action, recognizing the complexity of interrelationships, and achieving equilibrium in action [8]. Evidence suggests that when faced with the high pressure of COVID-19, Zhongyong thinking negatively affects stress [9]. It also shows that employees with a low level of Zhongyong thinking could be more creative by developing high self-efficacy [8]. It may be because the environment of job uncertainty makes high self-efficacy individuals more eager to demonstrate their abilities and commit to more creative tasks. People in high standard Zhongyong thinking would be preoccupied with not being overly aggressive. It may instead reduce the desire of people with high self-efficacy to express themselves and thus not significantly increase their creativity with high-pressure job uncertainty. This means that even though high self-efficacy employees' creativity may be limited at high levels of Zhongyong thinking, their psychological well-being is better protected. The higher the Zhongyong thinking, the lower the level of stress may be, and the psychological well-being of the employees may be alleviated.

Based on the viewpoint mentioned in the previous paragraph, Zhongyong thinking plays a positive role in maintaining the mental health of employees because it can provide relief and inhibit stress

when faced with the stress caused by illness. Zhongyong thinking is not only related to work stress but also to work promotion. Opportunities at work are ultimately materialized in the form of employee promotions. Leader-member exchange theory suggests that quality relationships between members and leaders can increase team members' well-being and effectiveness at work [9]. Therefore, the reason for the increase in team members' well-being and efficiency at work may be due to the increased opportunities for job advancement that come from having a quality relationship with the leader. However, establishing a good relationship with the leader can lead to an increase in ingratiating behavior and an uneven distribution of positional promotion opportunities. In the long run, both employees who have been given promotion opportunities and those who have not been promoted because they have remained impartial may face great psychological pressure or develop psychological problems. In this context, the neutralizing properties of Zhongyong thinking can play a role. Keeping it neutral will not make people impatient or do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. Zhongyong thinking can reduce this increase in psychological stress. Evidence suggests that the Leader-member exchange theory has a remarkably positive effect on bonus allocation for low Zhongyong thinkers, but not significant for high Zhongyong thinkers [9]. It may be because people do not emphasize a single-minded pursuit of promotions or bonuses and may be more inclined to smoothly seek out opportunities to gain promotions, due to the influence of high Zhongyong thinking. An increase in Zhongyong thinking reduces the transmission of the leader-member exchange theory [9]. This supports the argument that Zhongyong thinking can reduce bad competition and creates a better work environment.

According to the previous paragraphs, Zhongyong thinking can be effective in relieving work stress and creating a better working atmosphere. However, there is another challenge related to work, family adaptation. Family adaptability refers to the ability of family members to cope with challenges, i.e., the ability to change patterns of rules within the family, etc., to face challenges [10]. Work can place certain demands on individuals, such as working more than eight hours. Families will also have demands on individuals, such as taking care of children. When the demands of the job and the demands of the family are in conflict, a Zhongyong big-picture view can alleviate the conflict between the two. It will allow employees to choose appropriate work hours in advance to avoid conflicts with family time and allow employees to adjust their wishes in advance. Balance the relationship between family and work to avoid conflict between the two. Evidence shows that Zhongyong thinking was positively correlated with a willingness to self-regulate but negatively correlated with anxious behavior [10]. The regression model indicated that family adaptability and Zhongyong thinking had a significant positive correlation [10]. Family adaptations are enhanced and thus Zhongyong thinking with increased self-awareness of regulation, and conversely, they are weakened [10]. Therefore, a higher sense of self-regulation among vocational teachers will lead to higher family adjustment, which will improve the logic of the teaching profession. family adjustment, which will improve the logic of Zhongyong thinking in the self and reduce the production of anxious behaviors. This supports an important factor influencing Zhongyong thinking level is related to the family.

## **2.2. Relevant Factors in the Relationship**

Family adaptation emphasizes the family environment and life that the employee is living in now, but the influence on the previous family situation is not included. The previous family environment, i.e., when the individual spends time with his or her parents, also has a great influence on the development of the employee's thinking before entering the workforce. Before entering the workforce as employees, they are college students and in a family environment with their parents. During this time, parenting styles, i.e., the attitudes that parents convey to their offspring, develop different perceptions and thinking in college students [11]. Zhongyong thinking emphasizes maintaining neutrality, but the prerequisite for people to maintain neutrality is a stable emotional state of mind. The development of

a stable emotional state has a great deal to do with nurturing in one's family of origin. If the parenting model is constant rejection, the child does not feel warmth and becomes too sensitive in mind. Children who are overly influenced by the outside world have a hard time stabilizing their emotional and mental state. Hence, good parenting styles contribute to the formation of Zhongyong thinking. From Wu and Lin's definition, Zhongyong thinking can be categorized into three dimensions: harmony, integration, and multiple perspectives. The research showed that parental overprotection and parental rejection were detrimental to the development of Zhongyong thinking whereas parental emotional care favored the development of Zhongyong thinking [11]. Zhongyong thinking, on the other hand, harmed Parental overprotection and parental rejection had a negative effect on children's psychological state [11]. This may be because the development of Zhongyong thinking has a negative effect on children's psychological state. Parental overprotection reduces students' independent thinking, making it difficult for them to develop a pattern of looking at problems from multiple perspectives. And parents who often reject their children's requests can form an extreme thought for their children. For example, whether the parents do not love the child and other issues. Over time, the child's mindset can easily develop into a negative mindset and make it difficult for the child to see things from a holistic perspective. Therefore, a good parenting style, meaning not overprotective and less rejection, could help college students develop higher Zhongyong thinking and reduce anxiety and other psychological problems.

Based on the above arguments, apart from finding that the external factors affecting the formation of Zhongyong thinking are related to family, Zhongyong thinking is also related to internal factors. One of these endogenous factors is rumination. Rumination is the repetition of thinking or dwelling on the causes and consequences of negative emotions [12]. It has a positive correlation with depression. Rumination is characterized by dwelling in negative emotions brought on by negative events. It is an obsession with negative situations and an extreme. Whereas one of Zhongyong thinking's characteristic of avoiding extremes can help individuals avoid obsessions and reduce the appearance of rumination behavior. Ho and Li's article used Li and Chen's Zhongyong Thinking Scale to categorize Zhongyong Thinking into three dimensions: interpersonal relationships, events, and self-evaluation [12]. The Self Zhongyong Thinking was used to measure a reflection on oneself after the participants received external and internal news [12]. The Incident Mediumship measures how individuals use the logic of Zhongyong thinking to deal with incidents in their lives [12]. Interpersonal relationships measure the use of Zhongyong thinking in interpersonal interactions [12]. The data showed that three dimensions of Zhongyong thinking, no matter which one, played a negative correlation for contemplation. Zhongyong thinking can have a direct inhibitory effect on depressive symptoms, and it can also alleviate depressive symptoms by reducing the production of rumination [12]. This is supposedly due to the balanced dynamic of avoiding extremes pursued by high Zhongyong employees. This dynamic would require people to excel at using the Zhongyong thinking to avoid interpersonal conflict, and not to be overly reflective.

In addition to the factor of rumination, another internal factor associated with Zhongyong thinking is regulatory. Regulatory theory suggests that people can pursue desired goals by either promoting or preventing focus. The feature related to balance of Zhongyong is likely to reduce reduce external influences by balancing promotion and preventive focus to achieve desired goals while maintaining mental health. The data showed that Zhongyong thinking has a facilitating influence on employees' occurring behaviors and is moderated by coworkers' supervision [13]. Compared to low promotional coworkers' focus, the occurrence behaviors of employees with high promotional coworkers' focus increase with increasing levels of Zhongyong thinking, while low promotional coworkers' focus shows no significant change [13]. Therefore, the preventive focus of coworkers attenuates the degree of the positive association between Zhongyong thinking and voice behavior, whereas the promotion focus strengthens the positive connection between Zhongyong thinking and voice behavior [13]. The

reason for this may be because the prevention focus colleague with a high Zhongyong Thinking level thinks that the simpler things are, the better, so chooses not to voice the behavior to avoid things, while the promotion focus colleague with a high Zhongyong Thinking level thinks that, from the perspective of Zhongyong Thinking's pursuit of harmony in the Big Picture, not to voice the behavior would have a bad effect instead, and so chooses to voice the behavior to maintain a harmonious work environment.

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) is also an internal influence. ESE is a type of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the individual's ability to achieve a desired goal through their behavior in a situation. As Zhongyong fosters a big-picture perspective and multiple perspectives, which can lead to more solutions, it is likely to increase employees' confidence in achieving their work tasks, i.e., increase ESE and job satisfaction. This paragraph argues that Zhongyong thinking can increase employees' job satisfaction by enhancing ESE, which puts them in a happy psychological state. Evidence suggests that entrepreneurial self-efficacy can significantly and positively influence job satisfaction in high Zhongyong thinking, while the relationship is not significant at low Zhongyong thinking [14]. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy positively predicted innovative behavior and job satisfaction partially mediated innovative behavior [14]. This suggests that individuals with high levels of Zhongyong thinking will experience higher job satisfaction and produce more innovative behaviors at higher levels of entrepreneurial self-efficacy [14]. Thus, Zhongyong thinking can positively regulate the psychological state of employees due to which it positively predicts ESE [14]. People with self-efficacy usually have positive psychological cues such as "I can do it". A high-standard Zhongyong thinking brings high self-efficacy and high job satisfaction. It leads to a better psychological state, less stress, and less emotional exhaustion for high Zhongyong thinking individuals. Zhongyong thinking can significantly alleviate the emotional exhaustion and psychological stress caused by work pressure, reduce the damage caused to employees, and increase individual job satisfaction. This kind of thinking may be a viable cognitive model for maintaining employee mental health.

However, the external environment will not be perfect. When one is in adversity, it is not enough to have the inner strength to believe in oneself, psychological resilience is also an important factor. Most of the current interventions for psychological resilience mention cultural factors but do not indicate the mechanisms involved. Resilience refers to an individual's ability to recover from adversity, to learn from failures, and to believe in themselves that they can overcome stress and difficulties. Factors that affect psychological resilience are negative biases that develop in the brain. Like rumination, the negative bias can be overly focused on bad news and ignore the overall context. The nature of Zhongyong thinking of contradictions coexistence allows good news and bad news to coexist, reducing the need to focus too much on the bad news. By avoiding over-focusing on bad news and reducing the formation of negative bias, psychological resilience may be increased. Evidence showed that the level of Zhongyong thinking affected positively on participants' level of psychological resilience and cognitive reappraisal [15]. Moreover, cognitive reappraisal had a significant positive effect on positive affect [15]. The data suggest that the impact of Zhongyong thinking on an individual's level of psychological resilience is mediated through cognitive reappraisal and positive affect [15]. This also implies that there are two ways in which Zhongyong thinking can influence psychological resilience other than directly [15]. It can be that Zhongyong thinking directly enhances positive effects and then increases psychological resilience [15]. It can also positively predict cognitive reappraisal and then directly enhance psychological resilience. Positive effects play a greater mediating role than cognitive reappraisal [15]. Cognitive reappraisal is when individuals construct new cognitive appraisals and then change their emotions to reinterpret events [15]. It is an emotion regulation strategy to effectively manage emotions, change an individual's emotional response to events and increase psychological resilience [15]. Positive effect refers to the adoption of



positive emotions and attitudes by individuals in all their dealings [15]. Both are directly related to emotion regulation, and Zhongyong thinking is characterized by inclusiveness and avoidance of extremes. his characteristic allows for the coexistence of happiness and sadness, which increases emotional complexity. Therefore, it makes a positive effort to regulate emotions, which in turn plays a positive role in cognitive reappraisal and the positive effect.

Psychological safety in the workplace means that individuals speak up and do so without fear that they will be penalized for their statements. A high level of psychological safety allows employees to openly express dissenting opinions and take interpersonal risks, even if there may be negative repercussions. If a person is not psychologically secure, it is very difficult for him to use Zhongyong thinking to balance the extremes. Because Zhongyong thinking in this case would no longer be a practical concept. An example of this is the fear that arises in an employee when he presents an idea that is supported by more coworkers. He will fear that the idea will be opposed by the authority. To avoid conflict with his leader, even with Zhongyong thinking, it is difficult for him to voice in fear. Evidence shows that Zhongyong thinking was a positive predictor of psychological security [16]. The association between the level of Zhongyong thinking and vocal behavior was not significant but psychological security had a significant positive correlation with vocal behavior [16]. The final confidence intervals indicated that psychological safety was a mediator influencing Zhongyong thinking and voice behavior [16]. The psychological pressure they face when trying to vocalize becomes less and vocal behavior increases [16]. Thus, there are two roles that Zhongyong thinking plays in the workplace. The first is that it can weaken the negative impact of hidden knowledge on IB (innovative behavior). The second is that the higher the Zhongyong thinking, the higher the stress tolerance and the easier it is to stabilize the mental state. The mediating factors affecting the relationship between the standard of Zhongyong thinking in the workplace are family factors (family adjustment and parenting patterns) and intra-individual factors (contemplative rumination behavior, self-efficacy, cognitive reappraisal, and psychological security). After scrutinizing the specific ways in which Zhongyong thinking affects the individual psyche at work, mediational thinking may offer a multicultural psychotherapeutic approach to alleviating the anxiety and depression associated with stress.

### **3. The Effectiveness of Zhongyong Thinking Related Training on Mental Health**

Having already clarified the direct impact of Zhongyong thinking on psychological factors such as psychological security, the next thing to understand is exactly how Zhongyong thinking for psychological problems works. Psychological interventions aim to optimize an individual's control over their resources by facilitating better adaptation to a given situation. Zhongyong thinking as a type of thinking can be used as a specific cognitive development to allow participants to better use this type of thinking to regulate emotions. Yang et al.'s experiment took repeated measures, and the experimental group underwent a four-part treatment [6]. First, participants were introduced to Zhongyong thinking then identified Zhongyong thinking, then the treatment began with positive feedback, and finally, participants were encouraged to use this thinking more in their daily lives [6]. The final results showed that participants in the experimental group showed an improvement in anxiety and depressive symptoms, but not significantly, compared to the control group [6]. After Zhongyong thinking intervention, the increase in the level of Zhongyong thinking was significant for the improvement in satisfaction with relationships, and the key causes of depression include the handling of relationships [6]. For reasons that significantly affect the individual's satisfaction with relationships, increased cognitive reappraisal contributes to enhanced emotional regulation and psychological resilience. Positive effects help to foster optimism while psychological safety allows employees to feel safe in the work environment and to be vocal and communicative. One possible reason for the lack of significant improvement in depression and anxiety is because the treatment only

trains cognitive conceptual changes but does not manipulate the effects of internal factors such as psychological security, resilience and rumination. Controlling for the positive influences of resilience and security in Zhongyong thinking may have led to significant improvements in depression and anxiety.

#### 4. Conclusion

This review found that Zhongyong thinking has a facilitating effect on innovative behavior at work. Zhongyong thinking is more flexible. It brings a higher sense of self-efficacy and willingness for employees to self-regulate, so they will avoid adding to their psychological burden through silent behaviour and leader-member exchange theory. In addition, four mediating factors affect the association between Zhongyong thinking and psychological health. The first one is the parenting model of the family of origin. The more warmth and the less rejection the individuals experienced in their family during childhood, the higher the standard of Zhongyong thinking and the less prone to negative emotions. The second is that people with high levels of Zhongyong thinking are adept at using the middle balance to avoid interpersonal conflict, and reduced rumination behaviour inhibits the development of mental health problems, such as depression. Third, Zhongyong thinking can enhance an individual's entrepreneurial self-efficacy because of the flexibility of this thinking style. The last one is that Zhongyong thinking can increase emotional complexity by improving cognitive appraisal and positive effects. This can further enhance psychological resilience and psychological security. All in all, the use of Zhongyong thinking enhances psychological and other factors after which interpersonal relationship management can be improved and symptoms of depression and anxiety can be alleviated.

However, previous studies still have some limitations. First, in the articles covered in the review, the samples taken by the studies were almost exclusively derived from a questionnaire format. Participants can be subjective when returning questionnaires, and it is difficult to determine whether individuals will exhibit behaviors consistent with those answered in questionnaires in certain situations. Almost all of these studies have visualized Zhongyong thinking as an operational static definition. Still, in reality, Zhongyong thinking is a dynamic mindset, so it is difficult to determine whether a static definition can fully reflect dynamic thinking. The second point is that the culture background of previous studies' samples is too homogenous, with all the participants coming from China. In the context of globalization, the impact of Zhongyong thinking on employees' mental health still needs more cross-cultural samples. In addition, most of the studies involved participants who were either college students or faculty members. Whether the impact of Zhongyong thinking is different for people who have been working for different lengths of time remains to be investigated. It may have a different impact on managers or individuals who have been on the job for a long time. In light of these limitations, future research could explore the dynamics of Zhongyong thinking by modelling the dynamics or documenting the course of events. Finally, future research should also explore whether people across different cultures develop Zhongyong thinking to the same extent and whether their manifestations of being influenced by Zhongyong thinking are different from the results of the current study.

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