

Enlightenment of Excellent Chinese Traditional Culture Based on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism on the Development of Modern and Contemporary Hypnosis Techniques

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Abstract: *Objective:* To explore the enlightenment of excellent Chinese traditional culture based on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism on the development of modern and contemporary hypnosis techniques. *Methods:* Using literature review and theoretical analysis, the relationship between the core content of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and modern and contemporary hypnosis techniques was systematically sorted out. *Results:* The Confucian thoughts of benevolence and the golden mean, the Buddhist wisdom of emptiness and Zen metaphor, and the Taoist naturalness and purity bring deep inspiration to the reconstruction of modern and contemporary hypnosis relationships, technical improvement, understanding of essence, and healing influence. While improving the development of Western scientific hypnosis techniques, including the difficulty of integrating hypnosis theories, it further promotes the construction of a Chinese hypnosis technique system that emphasizes integrity and harmonious balance. *Conclusion:* The excellent Chinese traditional culture based on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism brings profound theoretical guidance and effective practical guidance to the development of modern and contemporary hypnosis techniques.

Keywords: Traditional culture; Hypnosis; Review

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1. Introduction

Chinese hypnosis, with a long history, is an indispensable part of world hypnosis research. Historically, hypnotic practices can be traced back to ancient China, and the “Zhuyou technique” during the Shang and Zhou dynasties is considered the earliest form of Chinese hypnosis with evidence available ^[1]. In terms of content, excellent traditional Chinese culture, dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, contains abundant hypnotic ideas, concepts, theories, and techniques (collectively referred to as hypnotic methods). By the end of the Qing

Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, individuals such as Tao Chengzhang, Yu Pingke, and Bao Fangzhou, based on excellent traditional Chinese culture, pushed the development of Chinese hypnosis to a historical peak^[2]. However, just as research on Chinese hypnosis was becoming more refined, the hypnotic theory that had developed in the West for over 500 years encountered an insoluble contradiction: “There is an endless debate between statisticians who emphasize altered states of consciousness under hypnosis and non-statisticians who hold the opposite view, and consensus on the question of ‘what is hypnosis’ remains elusive”^[3]. Nevertheless, when researchers break free from conventional thinking and reconsider this contradiction through the lens of excellent traditional Chinese culture, particularly the inclusive wisdom of harmony, they discover a solution: The Confucian doctrine of the mean suggests that researchers should avoid a binary opposition of “either this or that” — statism and non-statism may not be mutually exclusive within the framework of traditional Chinese culture: Buddhist wisdom of emptiness encourages researchers not to fixate on states — “both can be seen as deep communication or influence characterized by trance”: while Taoist governance by non-action indicates that healing can occur even without defining or naming hypnosis - natural law gives birth to vitality^[3-4].

2. Confucianism

2.1. Reconstructing hypnotic relationships through the idea of benevolence

As the core value of Confucianism, the idea of benevolence emphasizes loving others as oneself and extending oneself to others^[5]. Confucius often answered his disciples’ doubts with a gentle and patient attitude, while Mencius said, “Respect my elders and extend this respect to the elders of others: love my children and extend this love to the children of others.” This not only profoundly influences social ethical concepts but also provides strong support for the reconstruction of hypnotic relationships in modern and contemporary times. According to traditional Western views on hypnosis, hypnosis occurs primarily based on the hypnotist “controlling” or “dominating” the hypnotized individual^[6]. However, the idea of benevolence, based on deep compassion and respect, brings a new understanding: simple “control” and “being controlled”, “domination”, and “being dominated” no longer align with contemporary values and aesthetics. Instead, hypnosis shifts from a one-way “control” or “domination” to an equal two-way dialogue, and communication transforms from verbal instructions to negotiated co-construction. Similarly, psychologist Abraham Maslow’s humanistic theory advocates that therapists should unconditionally focus on clients, fully stimulate their potential, and help them realize their values. However, compared to the idea of benevolence, which aims to construct a harmonious life order through the dual interaction of internal and external environments and shape an ideal moral realm of “universal benevolence”, providing a new source of value for achieving individual and social perfection and happiness, the latter obviously emphasizes both ethical guidance and the cultivation of social responsibility, with a broader horizon and deeper foundation^[7]. The hypnotic relationship derived from this, with a strong humanistic care, will also surpass the contractual connection under the traditional treatment model. In other words, the new relationship shaped based on the empathy of hypnotic participants will be smoother and last in emotional resonance and spiritual connection. Facts have also proven that when the empathy of hypnotic participants is awakened, hypnosis becomes more effective, and healing is more powerful^[8].

2.2. The doctrine of the mean balances the scale of hypnotherapy

The Doctrine of the Mean is a Confucian classic on how to conduct oneself in life. It “embodies the practical

wisdom of ‘adapting to changing times’ and reflects the careful consideration, weighing, and grasp of the universe’s order and proper behavior by the ancestors of the Chinese nation... Only by acting differently according to the times and taking action at the right time can one achieve the best practical results”^[5]. This provides inspiration for the scale of hypnotherapy. In the context of hypnosis, traditional Western viewpoints suggest that deeper levels of hypnosis lead to better therapeutic effects^[9]. However, this contradicts the Doctrine of the Mean. The Doctrine of the Mean emphasizes handling issues just right, meaning that deeper hypnosis is not necessarily better, as too much can be as bad as too little. In fact, when a person enters a too-deep hypnotic state, they may not be able to better recall relevant details, and the therapeutic effect may not be ideal, sometimes even counterproductive. Similarly, if the depth is not enough, the effect is often difficult to manifest^[10]. The Doctrine of the Mean also suggests that the intensity of hypnosis should be moderate — it is necessary to provide a moderately intense therapeutic strategy based on the severity of symptoms while avoiding secondary trauma and over-defense caused by excessive exploration; and the therapeutic impact should be sustainable — proposing unbiased countermeasures based on the individualized and diverse issues of different clients, and allowing them to maintain good psychological resilience and corrective inertia after leaving the hypnosis room. In this regard, Western psychotherapy systems also value the art of “balance.” Systematic desensitization is a therapy that grasps the “balance” well. It is worth noting that the Doctrine of the Mean brings not just a technique or speculative guidance to hypnotherapy, but more of a systematic wisdom of balance.

3. Buddhist interpretation

3.1. Insight into the true nature of hypnosis through the wisdom of emptiness

“Emptiness” is a fundamental concept and core category of Buddhist philosophy, and it is also the highest category of Buddhist doctrine^[11]. The wisdom of emptiness emphasizes that all things arise from causes and conditions and cease to exist when these causes and conditions dissipate, and there is no fixed and unchanging entity. Although different sects within Buddhism have different views on this, the non-attachment to emptiness is commonly recognized by them. So, does hypnosis have an entity? Is it an attachment to use the wisdom of emptiness to gain insight into the true nature of hypnosis? For the former, hypnosis, as a phenomenon, seems to have an “entity” in form, but its understanding as an “entity” of communication or influence is relative and changeable, belonging to “emptiness.” Conversely, hypnosis is also “emptiness.” For the latter, it is worthwhile as long as we do not obsess over the form itself, but seek to understand the impermanence and egolessness of things by pursuing answers. Next, how to pursue “emptiness”? In the “koan” teaching of Zen classics such as “Bi Yan Lu” and “Wu Men Guan”, Zen masters often guide their disciples to break through attachments and understand the true meaning (inspire insight) through a series of seemingly absurd questions and answers (activate confusion). This unique and profound perspective (confusion-insight) helps to transcend the surface of things and reach the true nature. Hypnotic guidance for cognitive and experiential reconstruction shares a similar approach. Under highly focused hypnotic guidance and state maintenance, external words or suggestions can penetrate deeply into the mind of the hypnotized person, triggering insights of varying degrees. The hypnotic confusion technique, originated by Erickson, has the effect of insight^[12–13]. This orientation and process, which emphasizes the reconstruction of individual experience, is often understood by Western researchers as constructivism. However, compared to constructivism, the wisdom of emptiness provides a broader perspective that emphasizes both construction and deconstruction. This helps to reveal the true nature behind the phenomenon of hypnosis: impermanence

and change — different contexts correspond to different hypnotic states, hypnotic roles often change due to uncertainty, and the object of hypnotic healing is not always the hypnotized person, etc. At the same time, the application of hypnosis from the perspective of emptiness is not limited to the field of life or healing, but rather, hypnosis is everywhere in life. Thus, the Buddhist concept of emptiness brings a deeper Chinese wisdom to hypnotic techniques and interactions.

3.2. Meditation metaphors enhance hypnosis techniques

The Zen meditation metaphor is an important practice method in Buddhism. Zen meditation emphasizes cultivating inner peace, awareness, and concentration through methods such as sitting meditation, breath control, and the simultaneous practice of “stopping and observing” (止觀), thereby purifying the mind and enhancing self-control. This shares significant commonalities with the process of hypnosis, which guides individuals into a relaxed state, improves concentration, and adjusts physical and mental states. Similarly, mindfulness training also bears a high degree of resemblance. Studies have found that mindfulness training is effective in reducing negative emotions and improving sleep quality, and the treatment effect is even better when combined with hypnosis^[14-16]. Interestingly, mindfulness originates from Zen meditation^[17]. As a result, modern hypnosis research seems to have returned to the ancient exploration of meditation. In fact, this is not surprising, as more and more Western scholars view the essence of traditional Chinese culture, such as Tai Chi and Qigong, as “ancient wisdom” that can be used for reference in physical and mental healthcare^[18]. Of course, the enlightenment of meditation on the development of modern hypnosis techniques not only focuses on clear thinking and concentrated attention, but also emphasizes holistic physical and mental adjustment, and provides deep spiritual growth and wisdom, such as the concepts of “impermanence” and “no-self.” These can also provide new perspectives and solutions for dealing with phenomena such as resistance and post-hypnotic suggestion that may arise during the process of hypnosis. In terms of metaphor, Buddhist metaphors and hypnosis metaphors are highly similar. The former has existed since ancient times and is rich and profound, while the latter was pioneered by Erickson in the field of hypnosis and focuses on psychological treatment, especially the treatment of mental illness. Anyway, the countless meditation metaphors in Chinese history will continue to provide endless inspiration and motivation for the development of modern hypnosis techniques in terms of content and form.

4. Taoism

4.1. The natural way of Taoism lays a solid foundation for hypnosis

The natural way of Taoism, as the cornerstone of Taoist philosophy, emphasizes that all things follow natural laws and coexist harmoniously. Its inspiration for modern hypnosis techniques first lies in the concept of “letting nature take its course.” This is one of the core philosophies of hypnosis, highlighting the artistic expression of hypnosis and focusing on the timing, circumstances, and trends of its occurrence^[13]. For example, in hypnotherapy, when an individual’s conscious activity decreases and subconscious activity increases, the therapist should guide them to recognize problems and make changes naturally and non-coercively, based on the unique psychological needs of each client, rather than controlling the individual or the change. This is also one of the classic hypnosis techniques of Erickson, who was not understood by his contemporaries but was followed by later generations. In the treatment of Betty, Erickson profoundly and brilliantly demonstrated the thought and power of the natural way of Taoism: using natural laws to adjust the deviated mind and body of humans^[19]. In this regard, the Western Acceptance and

Commitment Therapy (ACT) is widely known. ACT encourages people to accept facts or feelings that cannot be changed while focusing their attention on controllable aspects and achieving personal values through positive action. Secondly, the natural way of Taoism brings ecological factors to hypnosis techniques. The “nature” in the natural way of Taoism refers to the domain opened up by Tao, heaven, earth, and humans, which connects them ^[20]. This suggests that hypnosis does not only occur between humans but also between humans and objects, animals, environments, cultures, etc. This brings a non-traditional rebirth to traditional hypnosis, which previously lacked an “ecological soul.” This is also the focus of the first author of this article: based on the previous definition of “hypnosis as a deep communication characterized by trance, further proposing “hypnosis as a deep influence characterized by trance” ^[3-4]. The third principle is “governance by non-action.” Taoist philosophy believes that the best way to manage is through “non-action” — not inactivity, but rather not forcing intervention and allowing things to develop naturally. In the practice of hypnosis, allowing the hypnotized person to self-discover and self-grow in a natural state, and finally achieve an optimal physical and mental state, is a more advanced form of healing. Finally, Taoism’s emphasis on naturalness also reminds us that hypnosis and its healing process are sometimes not achieved immediately and often involve uncertainty. By following the natural way of Taoism, people can avoid getting lost.

4.2. Purity and virtue facilitate the improvement of hypnosis

“Purity is the uprightness of the world” comes from the Tao Te Ching, resonating like a loud bell. Taoists believe that reducing selfish desires, eliminating distracting thoughts, and pursuing peace can lead to purity. “This is a very profound state, or what could be called the ‘sage’s realm’, because purity fosters inner virtue, allowing one to follow the nature of all things and respond to the changes of all events” ^[21]. The state of purity is very similar to the state of deep hypnosis in a form, with the former manifesting as “maintaining oneness” and the latter as “single-mindedness.” In terms of content, both have distinct characteristics and strengths. The state of deep hypnosis puts the individual in a highly sensitive state with reduced conscious alertness, which is conducive to accepting suggestions and implications, while the state of purity emphasizes harmony between consciousness and subconsciousness, facilitating the individual’s ability to see through the surface and essence of things. The former tends to be passive, while the latter tends to be active. The inspiration from this is that allowing the hypnotized person to experience more states of purity can aid in healing, or combining the state of hypnosis with purity can also have positive effects. Numerous studies have shown that hypnosis is suitable for combination with other therapies or states to enhance healing ^[22-24]. Additionally, if the hypnotist experiences more states of purity, it can also facilitate the transmission and influence of positive values. This is related to professional ethics and morality, which Taoism emphasizes as the importance of virtue. In Taoist philosophy, virtue is the carrier and concretization of the Tao, “the implementation of the ‘Tao’ in human beings, mainly including tolerance, acceptance, gentleness, and non-contention” ^[25]. It is the foundation of personal self-cultivation and the standard of social atmosphere. If those skilled in hypnosis can also value virtue, incidents like the Heidelberg hypnosis crime are bound not to occur, and the continuously improving hypnosis techniques will also become purer.

5. Others

Besides Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), as an excellent traditional culture, has also brought important enlightenment to the improvement of hypnotic theory and technology.

Theoretically, the Yin-Yang theory believes that the growth and decline of Yin and Yang, which maintains a dynamic balance within a certain scope, limit, and time and space, is one of the forms of Yin-Yang movement and change. It can guide the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases^[26]. That is, when the balance of Yin and Yang in the human body is lost, it not only causes physiological diseases but also triggers psychological imbalances, such as anxiety, depression, and other emotional disorders. The “anger hurts the liver, joy hurts the heart, thinking hurts the spleen, sadness hurts the lungs, and fear hurts the kidneys” in the “Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon” refers to the fact that excessive emotions destroy the Yin-Yang balance of the internal organs and cause diseases. In this regard, the health concept of TCM advocates a holistic view of “harmony between nature and humanity”, a harmonious view of “integration of body and spirit”, a people-oriented value, and a balanced view of Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang. Then it can prevent diseases, regulate emotions, and follow nature^[27]. This Chinese therapy, which restores physical and mental harmony by adjusting the balance of Yin and Yang, provides a reference for modern and contemporary hypnosis: whether it is for therapeutic or non-therapeutic (communication or influence) functional orientations, it is advisable to improve the balance between consciousness and subconsciousness, hypnotic and non-hypnotic states, hypnotic participants, and their culture. Technically, based on the meridian theory of TCM and combined with the popular hypnotic techniques at that time, Dr. Ma Weixiang innovatively proposed the meridian hypnotic technique. This technique has been tested over many years of practice and has shown certain efficacy. It is an innovation and contribution to cultural confidence in the field of hypnotic therapy. At the same time, many frontline hypnotists have begun to pay attention to acupuncture hypnotism and have made a lot of attempts from a practical level.

6. Summary and outlook

The excellent traditional Chinese culture, dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, contains abundant hypnotic techniques. However, in ancient times, it had not yet formed a “system” in the eyes of Western scientific psychology researchers. Therefore, we cannot simply judge Chinese hypnotic techniques based on Western modern and contemporary hypnotic standards. The Western hypnotic system is mainly established based on logical reasoning and scientific experiments, while the Chinese hypnotic system is primarily built on intuitive insights. It is worth noting that although the paths are different, the ultimate truths are interconnected. From the perspectives of research objects, theories, techniques, state expressions, and healing effects, Western hypnotic researchers represented by Erickson have intentionally or unintentionally constructed a set of hypnotic techniques that implicitly align with the essence of excellent traditional Chinese culture in nearly a century of exploration. Conversely, the profound thoughts, especially the unity of heaven and humanity, in the excellent traditional Chinese culture dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, can provide rich nourishment and profound guidance for Western scientific hypnotic techniques. Therefore, mutual learning between the two is extremely beneficial for future in-depth hypnotic research. Additionally, with increasingly frequent and deep cross-cultural exchanges, we can fully draw on the latest research achievements in fields such as Western cognitive neuroscience and brain science, combine the essence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and explore hypnotic theoretical models that are more aligned with human psychological development laws. Furthermore, people can innovate at the technical level: develop hypnotic guidance techniques based on emotional resonance by combining Confucian benevolence, enhance the depth and quality of hypnotic experiences through Buddhist meditation, and design more natural and smooth hypnotic moderate control strategies by drawing on the Taoist concept of governing by non-action.

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