

THE USE OF DUAL FILIAL PIETY AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE INTERVENTION MODULES ON MEANING IN LIFE AND SELF-REGULATION ABILITY OF CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: Due to the characteristics of strict access and relatively flexible graduation in Chinese higher education, many college students experience difficulties in stimulating intrinsic learning motivation. After entering university, some students show reduced goal clarity, accompanied by declines in meaning in life (MIL) and self-regulation ability (SRA), which are associated with increased psychological distress. This review examines the major sources of MIL and the key influencing factors of SRA, and clarifies the theoretical rationale for considering approaches that integrate dual filial piety (DFP) and self-acceptance (SA). Drawing on a systematic review of the literature, the findings indicate that MIL and SRA emerge from the interaction between environmental contexts and individual psychological processes. By synthesizing evidence on core sources of MIL, including social relationships, self-identity, and value systems, as well as primary determinants of SRA, this review further examines the roles of DFP and SA and their associations with MIL and SRA. The literature suggests that DFP and SA function as culturally salient environmental and individual factors, respectively, closely linked to meaning construction and self-regulatory functioning among Chinese college students. Integrating these two constructs provides a theoretically grounded perspective for understanding MIL and SRA in this population and offers implications for future research and intervention development.

Keywords: Meaning in Life, Self-Regulation Ability, Dual Filial Piety, Self-Acceptance, Chinese College Students

Introduction

Meaning in life (MIL) has been widely recognized as a fundamental psychological construct associated with well-being and adaptive functioning. Individuals with a clear life goal can possess stronger self-regulation ability to make a more beneficial decision to their health, thereby experiencing better mental health status (Kang et al., 2019). Additionally, having a clear life goal can help individuals to overcome stress and other psychological problems (Freedland, 2019). Suicide is essentially a sense of meaninglessness in life, hence MIL can be a good protective factor against suicide behaviour (Lew et al., 2020). Conversely, individuals with a low sense of MIL may lack internal goals and motivation, leaving a void that can be filled with harmful addictive behaviour, negatively impacting the physical and mental health of college students (Zhang et al., 2019).

Emerging adulthood, particularly the college years, represents a critical developmental period characterized by increasing autonomy, identity exploration, and the development of effective self-regulation abilities, all of which are essential for successful adjustment to adult roles (Arnett, 2000; Duckworth & Gross, 2014). SRA enables students to manage their behaviour, emotions, and goals in increasingly complex academic and social environments, making it a key predictor of successful adjustment to university life (Zuo et al., 2022). At the same time, the exploration and construction of life meaning becomes especially salient during this stage, with MIL playing a central role in facilitating a smooth transition into adulthood (Li et al., 2021).

Chinese college students face distinctive challenges in developing meaning in life (MIL) and self-regulation ability (SRA) that have been consistently linked in the literature to the country's cultural and educational context. Influenced by Confucian values that emphasize academic achievement as a means of fulfilling familial and societal obligations, students' motivation prior to university entry is often externally regulated, with success defined primarily through grades, evaluations, and parental approval rather than through intrinsic interests or autonomous goal-setting (Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Xun, 2023; Wu, 2024). Within the Chinese higher education system, characterized by relatively strict admission standards and comparatively flexible graduation requirements, students typically experience intensive supervision before university and a sudden reduction in external regulation upon entering college. This transition coincides with increased demands for autonomy and self-directed learning, which many students find difficult to navigate due to limited opportunities for autonomy development prior to university entry (Guo, 2023). As a result, studies have reported declines in learning motivation, increased procrastination, and heightened experiences of boredom and disengagement among students who lack clearly internalized goals, all of which are associated with weakened perceptions of life meaning and reduced self-regulation capacity (Guo, 2023; Tan & Li, 2019).

The lack of MIL can accelerate people's tendency to enter the online world, leading to internet addiction (Rammazi et al., 2018), decreased SRA, and exacerbated psychological problems. If the sense of meaninglessness or existential crisis is not resolved for a long time, it may lead to mental disorders such as depression, anxiety disorder, addiction, aggression, despair, apathy, decreased happiness, physical illness, and suicide (Glaw et al., 2016). These findings underscore the importance of enhancing both MIL and SRA among college students.

Although MIL and SRA are widely recognized as essential for emerging adults' psychological adjustment, existing intervention research exhibits notable limitations when applied to Chinese college students. Many meaning-oriented and self-regulation interventions have been

developed primarily within Western individualistic frameworks, emphasizing personal autonomy, self-directed goal setting, and intrapersonal meaning construction (Frankl, 2006; Park, 2010; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). However, cultural values, beliefs, and social norms play a critical role in shaping how individuals understand life meaning and regulate their behavior, which may limit the applicability and effectiveness of Western-derived interventions in Chinese cultural contexts (Lan et al., 2018). Approaches that prioritize individualistic self-exploration, for example, may not fully align with cultural emphases on familial interconnectedness and social harmony. This cultural misalignment is critical because the relationship between core well-being processes, such as meaning search, and positive outcomes like life satisfaction, is itself moderated by cultural orientation like collectivism (Yang et al., 2024).

Cross-cultural research further indicates that, for Chinese individuals, meaning in life and motivational regulation are deeply embedded in family relationships and filial obligations rather than being purely individual pursuits (Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Yeh, 2006; Wang & Li, 2011). This structural distinction raises important concerns regarding the cultural suitability of Western-origin intervention models. In addition, research on cultural adaptation consistently shows that psychological interventions lacking cultural alignment tend to demonstrate reduced effectiveness in non-Western populations, underscoring the importance of incorporating culturally salient values into intervention design (Bernal & Domenech Rodríguez, 2012; Hall et al., 2016). Despite this evidence, there remains a notable absence of systematic reviews or intervention frameworks that explicitly integrate filial piety and culturally grounded self-processes into interventions targeting meaning in life and self-regulation among Chinese college students.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap by conducting a systematic literature review that examines the theoretical rationale and potential effectiveness of an intervention framework integrating the indigenous cultural construct of dual filial piety—encompassing both reciprocal and authoritarian dimensions—with the psychological principle of self-acceptance. Specifically, this review aims to evaluate the appropriateness of utilizing intervention modules that combine dual filial piety and self-acceptance to enhance the sense of MIL and SRA among Chinese college students.

Methods

This review synthesized research on the relationships among dual filial piety, self-acceptance, meaning in life, and self-regulation in Chinese College students. A systematic search was conducted in Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed, and CNKI using keywords related to dual filial piety, self-acceptance, meaning in life, self-regulation, and Chinese college students. Studies published between 2015 and 2025 were prioritized, while earlier theoretical or empirical work was included when necessary for conceptual clarification. Although the focus was on Chinese university students, studies involving emerging adults or broader populations were included when theoretically or empirically relevant.

Studies were included if they (a) examined college students within Chinese cultural contexts, (b) addressed at least two of the four focal constructs, and (c) were published in peer-reviewed journals or authoritative academic books; studies with limited relevance or clinical samples were excluded. In total, 102 studies were retained. A narrative synthesis approach was adopted. First, theoretical frameworks and key findings related to each construct were summarized. Second, empirical studies examining interrelations among the constructs were compared and

integrated, with particular attention to convergent and divergent patterns and theoretically meaningful distinctions, such as differences between reciprocal and authoritarian filial piety. This synthesis provides a conceptual basis for understanding how these variables jointly relate to meaning in life and self-regulation among Chinese college students.

Literature Review

Conceptualization and Sources of Meaning in Life

What Is the Meaning in Life?

Meaning in life (MIL) is a core aspect of human motivation and mental health (Frankl, 1963; Maslow, 1968). Based on Frankl's theory, Steger et al. (2006) proposed two dimensions of MIL: Presence of Meaning, referring to individuals' understanding of life purpose and perceived meaningfulness, and Search for Meaning, referring to efforts to pursue or deepen life meaning. Presence reflects a relatively stable state of having found meaning, whereas Search reflects the ongoing process of meaning construction (Wong, 2014).

Building on this framework, Martela and Steger (2016) proposed a three-dimensional model of MIL consisting of significance (perceiving life as valuable), purpose (engagement in goal-directed activities), and coherence (perceiving life experiences as understandable and integrated). Coherence is considered a key cognitive component of MIL and is often activated when individuals encounter uncertainty or need to reorganize life narratives. When individuals recognize their goals and values, perceive personal and interpersonal worth, and construct a coherent understanding of their experiences, they are more likely to experience life as meaningful (Martela & Steger, 2022). Thus, meaning in life emerges from the integration of life narrative, valued goals, and existential significance rather than from a single source.

Primary Sources of Meaning and Their Underlying Mechanisms

The experience of MIL is sourced from multiple, interconnected life domains, each contributing differently to the facets of coherence, purpose, and significance.

Social Relationships as the Bedrock of Significance

Social relationships are a fundamental source of MIL and contribute to psychological and physical well-being (O'Donnell et al., 2014). Individuals with warm, supportive relationships report higher levels of MIL, whereas social exclusion or relational conflict undermines perceived meaning (Stillman & Lambert, 2013). Through processes such as empathy, forgiveness, and social support, interpersonal relationships promote sustained meaning, particularly among individuals who exhibit prosocial orientations (Krause et al., 2019).

Family relationships play a particularly prominent role. Lambert and his colleagues (2010) identified family as the most important source of MIL among multiple life domains, with closeness and support strongly predicting perceived meaning. Family functioning fosters belonging and security, which are closely associated with MIL, especially among women, with social support mediating this relationship (Goodman et al., 2019). Beyond the family context, broader interpersonal connectedness also contributes to MIL (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016), whereas thwarted belonging undermines purpose and coherence (Borawska, 2022).

Social exclusion further weakens the meaning-enhancing function of relationships. When belonging is threatened, individuals may compensate by reaffirming meaning through

autonomy or self-directed goals, reflecting a dynamic interplay between relational and personal resources (Zhang et al., 2019).

Cultural context further shapes these processes. In collectivist societies such as China, cultural identity and perceived social support jointly influence MIL (Zhou et al., 2025). Collectivist orientations also moderate how social relationships contribute to well-being and meaning (Yang et al., 2024). These findings indicate that relational quality alone does not determine MIL; rather, its effects depend on individual agency and broader cultural frameworks.

In summary, social relationships—particularly family connections—constitute a core foundation for MIL. They primarily support life meaning by fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness, while their influence is shaped by individual agency and cultural context. Understanding these dynamics provides a critical basis for interventions aimed at enhancing life meaning, particularly in collectivist cultures where relational obligations, such as filial piety, are highly salient.

The Self as the Architect of Purpose and Coherence

Each person possesses a distinct self that contributes uniquely to life meaning. Meaning-in-life theory emphasizes self-knowledge as essential for identifying meaningful goals and guiding purposeful behavior. Greater clarity and stability of self-concept enhance MIL by supporting purpose and coherence (Shin et al., 2016; Chu & Lowery, 2023). Developmentally, a coherent self-concept enables individuals to articulate goals and integrate experiences, thereby strengthening MIL (McAdams, 2013; Osin et al., 2013; Osin et al., 2013). al., 2023).

Empirical studies confirm this role. In collective contexts, both trait and daily fluctuations in self-concept clarity predict MIL through cognitive pathways involving significance, purpose, and coherence (Chen et al., 2024). Large-scale studies among Chinese adolescents further demonstrate a positive association between self-concept clarity and MIL (Yang et al., 2025). Self-disclosure also contributes to MIL by facilitating reflection, eliciting social support, and reinforcing personal meaning, particularly following adversity (Ryu & Suh, 2022).

Conceptually, MIL can be understood as satisfying four basic psychological needs—purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth—each closely linked to the self; fulfillment strengthens MIL, whereas unmet needs prompt individuals to adjust goals and behaviors to restore meaning (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014). Notably, individuals who pursue both self-directed and other-directed goals—balancing personal growth with responsibility toward others—tend to report higher MIL, greater life satisfaction, and stronger social support (Blau, 2019). This aligns with the conceptual logic of dual filial piety, suggesting that integrating personal development with relational obligations may provide a pathway to enhance MIL, especially in collectivist contexts.

Religion and Worldview as Existential Frameworks

Religion serves as a major source of meaning by providing guiding principles, moral frameworks, and life directives (Skrok, 2014). Intrinsic religious beliefs promote spiritual growth and support both the presence and search for meaning (Li & Liu, 2023), while regular religious practice enhances coherence by offering structure and predictability (Heintzelman & King, 2019).

Beyond formal religion, non-religious worldviews—including personal philosophies, political orientations, or ideological commitments—can also serve as meaningful frameworks. For

instance, right-wing authoritarianism has been associated with life meaning, illustrating that even beliefs not typically considered “spiritual” may provide existential significance (Womick, 2019). The persistence of maladaptive or rigid worldviews further underscores the role of overarching belief systems in providing a sense of purpose, even when such beliefs may constrain flexibility or well-being (Routledge & Vess, 2018).

Research among Chinese college students further indicates that MIL is derived from multiple domains, including self-development, social commitment, interpersonal relationships, and autonomy (Zhang et al., 2016). Studies distinguishing different meaning orientations likewise show that socially oriented and transcendent meanings are more strongly associated with mental health than materialistic or self-focused pursuits (Vos, 2023).

The challenge, therefore, is not a lack of a worldview but the potential tension between this traditional, collectivist worldview and the more individualistic, globalized narratives encountered in higher education and digital life. Current MIL interventions rarely possess the theoretical sophistication to help individuals critically examine, integrate, or negotiate between competing worldview elements, often defaulting to a Western, individualistic model of meaning-making that may disregard the salience and personal resonance of indigenous frameworks like filial piety.

Daily Life as the Arena of Meaning

Daily life provides an important context for meaning construction. Meaning arises not only from major life events but also from routine activities and everyday engagement. The ability to structure daily life and balance obligations with personal pursuits contributes to a sense of agency and purpose (Kreiss & Schnell, 2022). Even mundane tasks can foster meaning by providing continuity, structure, and opportunities for reflection (Mohideen & Heintzelman, 2022).

Daily actions aligned with personal goals are crucial for MIL. Individuals perceive greater meaning when their activities reflect personal values or contribute to life objectives. Even routine tasks, such as chores or work, can foster momentary meaning by providing structure and opportunities for reflection, extending significance beyond immediate content (Mohideen & Heintzelman, 2022). Engagement in everyday life generally sustains MIL, underscoring the interplay between personal agency, routine, and meaning perception (King & Hicks, 2021).

However, the capacity to extract meaning from the mundane is not uniform. In collectivist contexts, routines are often interpreted through relational duties—for instance, academic study may gain meaning primarily through familial expectations rather than intrinsic interest. This highlights a research gap: most studies on daily life and MIL originate in Western contexts and presuppose an individual who freely chooses and evaluates activities based on personal preference. The role of culturally mandated routines and their contribution to (or potential friction with) personal meaning is an underexplored area critical for understanding populations like Chinese college students.

Interventions for Meaning in Life

A range of interventions have been developed to enhance MIL. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that psychotherapy, psychoeducation, and narrative-based approaches effectively increase MIL, with narrative and meaning-centered interventions showing particularly strong effects (Manco, 2020). Mindfulness-based interventions have also gained popularity in recent

years due to their accessibility and simplicity; they appear to enhance MIL quickly and effectively, even in settings without professional psychologists. However, many mindfulness studies lack control groups, making it difficult to determine whether observed improvements are specific to the intervention or reflect placebo or expectancy effects (Chu & Mak, 2020).

Group-based programs have proven cost-effective for college students, improving both mental health and perceived meaning (Cheng et al., 2015). Reflective approaches that encourage individuals to reinterpret adverse experiences facilitate meaning reconstruction and personal growth (Vohs et al., 2019). Among older adults, life review, autobiographical work, and nostalgia-based interventions promote transcendence and meaning, especially when culturally adapted (Lan et al., 2018; Reker et al., 2012; Bohlmeijer et al., 2008; Abeyta & Pillarisetty, 2023).

Despite these advances, existing research remains limited by small samples, short follow-up periods, and insufficient attention to cultural and contextual variability. Few studies examine how interventions interact with individual differences or sociocultural values, leaving important gaps in understanding how to sustain MIL across populations.

Overall, MIL emerges from the dynamic interaction of social relationships, self-related processes, worldview systems, and daily experiences. Family ties, self-concept clarity, religious and secular frameworks, and everyday engagement consistently contribute to meaning, though their relative influence varies across cultural and situational contexts. Variability in findings reflects differences in cultural norms, relational environments, and methodological approaches. Together, these findings indicate that while the sources of MIL are relatively stable, their expression and impact are highly context-dependent, underscoring the importance of culturally informed approaches to understanding and promoting MIL.

Conceptualization and Influences on Self-Regulation Ability

Self-Regulation Ability and Its Significance

Self-Regulation Ability (SRA) refers to the capacity to monitor, control, and adjust thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in accordance with personal goals or external demands (Baumeister et al., 2007). Classical models, including Carver and Scheier's (1981, 1982) feedback-loop framework and Locke and Latham's (1990) goal-setting theory, conceptualize self-regulation as a cyclical, goal-directed process involving planning, monitoring, and behavioral adjustment. These models highlight that behavior is guided by internal standards but is vulnerable to failure when cognitive or motivational resources are depleted (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007).

SRA is widely recognized as a core human capacity associated with adaptive functioning. Effective self-regulation predicts positive outcomes in academic achievement, physical and mental health (Galla & Duckworth, 2015; Pandey et al., 2018), whereas deficits are linked to maladaptive behaviors such as panic buying (Billore & Anisimova, 2021), addictive behaviors (Király et al., 2020), depression (Coyne et al., 2019), aggression (Robson et al., 2020), smoking (Ludwig et al., 2020), and criminal behavior (Burt, 2020).

Given its pervasive influence, SRA is considered a cornerstone for personal development, goal attainment, and resilience in the face of challenges. Its significance extends beyond individual performance, contributing to socially adaptive behaviors and the capacity to align personal actions with broader life purposes. In this context, understanding the factors that shape self-

regulation, including personal, relational, and cultural influences, is essential for designing effective interventions aimed at enhancing life meaning and adaptive functioning.

Primary Influences on Self-Regulation and Their Underlying Mechanisms

The development and enactment of self-regulation ability (SRA) are governed by a dynamic interplay of factors operating at multiple, interconnected levels. This section critically examines these primary influences—spanning the self, relational contexts, and cultural-environmental systems—with a specific focus on their underlying mechanisms and, crucially, how these mechanisms are mediated by cultural factors, particularly within the Chinese context defined by filial piety. This analysis moves beyond a descriptive listing to demonstrate that SRA is not merely a set of universal cognitive skills, but a process whose goals, motivations, and strategies are deeply embedded in and shaped by specific cultural logics.

The Self as the Nexus of Regulation

The self-system serves as the central hub of self-regulation, integrating motivational, cognitive, and evaluative processes. Self-efficacy, for instance, has been widely studied as a motivational resource, although findings remain mixed. While some studies show that higher self-efficacy facilitates sustained goal pursuit (Russell & Warner, 2017), others suggest compensatory effects whereby lower self-efficacy prompts greater regulatory effort (Tibubos et al., 2019). Such inconsistencies likely reflect cultural variations in motivational beliefs and regulatory norms (Pasha-Zaidi et al., 2019).

Self-identity similarly plays a pivotal role. Identity-based motivation theory posits that individuals' personal and social identities dynamically shape their engagement in self-regulation, with salient identities increasing the likelihood of adopting regulatory strategies aligned with situational goals (Ghassemi, 2018; Oyserman et al., 2017). Empirical evidence further indicates that self-concept clarity predicts stronger self-regulation by supporting goal persistence and behavioral consistency, even when controlling for affect and self-esteem (Jiang et al., 2022).

Self-assessment, as articulated in self-regulated learning theory, provides the evaluative and reflective component essential for adaptive self-regulation. By comparing current performance against desired standards, individuals can adjust strategies, set achievable goals, and engage in corrective action (Butler & Winne, 1995; Yan, 2020; Yan et al., 2020; Andrade, 2010). Moreover, social feedback from peers, teachers, or significant others can enhance self-assessment processes, facilitating joint regulation and reinforcing the self-regulatory cycle (Panadero et al., 2017; Harris & Brown, 2018). This highlights that even the most "internal" self-process is shaped by the relational milieu, creating a continuous feedback loop between the individual and their social world.

Social Relationships as Regulatory Scaffolds

Social relationships constitute a key contextual factor influencing self-regulation, operating through both supportive and normative pathways. According to social learning theory, regulatory capacity develops through reciprocal interactions with parents, peers, and teachers (Bandura, 1991). Empirical studies confirm that higher-quality relationships are associated with stronger self-regulation, whereas relational conflict undermines regulatory functioning (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014).

Parental support, in particular, has been consistently associated with enhanced self-regulation among college students. Emotional, informational, and material support predict stronger self-

regulation, with parental education further amplifying these effects (Zuo et al., 2022). Family processes influence self-regulation both directly and indirectly by shaping motivational and cognitive resources (Kusdiyati et al., 2019).

Peers and friends further shape self-regulation through relationship quality. High-quality friendships provide opportunities for modeling, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving, which reinforce regulatory strategies, whereas low-quality peer interactions may erode self-control and persistence (Pahigianis & Glos, 2018). Teachers' feedback literacy also emerges as a critical factor, facilitating the development of students' self-assessment and, by extension, their regulatory capacity, suggesting that formal educational environments can complement familial and peer influences (Yan & Carless, 2022). However, this relational influence is dynamic and bidirectional; an individual's regulatory capacities also affect the quality of the relationships they form and maintain.

Environmental Structures and Systemic Influences

Environmental contexts exert a profound influence on the development and expression of self-regulation, shaping trajectories of both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes (Sapienza & Masten, 2011). Among these, early caregiving emerges as a particularly robust determinant. A meta-analysis of over 150 studies found that positive parenting styles and positive parent-child relationships are consistently (both concurrently and longitudinally) correlate with better self-regulation, while negative parenting styles hinder self-regulation, and this result is robust across gender and culture (Li, 2019). Importantly, these associations hold across genders and cultural contexts, underscoring the generalizability of environmental influences on regulatory development.

Family communication dynamics also appear to play a critical role. Enhancing students' academic self-regulation can, in turn, improve family communication patterns, suggesting a bidirectional and mutually reinforcing relationship between individual regulatory skills and family processes (Shahravi et al., 2022). Similarly, classroom environments and teacher behaviors exert measurable effects on students' regulatory capacities. Task-oriented learning environments, structured instructional support, and teacher feedback literacy predict stronger self-regulation, both directly and indirectly, by shaping students' engagement and motivation (Yerdelen & Sungur, 2019). These findings highlight that self-regulation does not develop in isolation but is embedded within nested systems, including family and school contexts, consistent with ecological perspectives on human development. These findings collectively illustrate that self-regulation is inherently scaffolded or thwarted by the systematic organization of the environments in which individuals live and learn.

Religion and Other Cultural Values

Religious beliefs and broader cultural values play a significant role in shaping self-regulation by providing normative frameworks and accountability mechanisms. Religious individuals are more likely than non-religious peers to prioritize goals oriented toward the welfare of others rather than immediate personal satisfaction, and they tend to engage in systematic self-monitoring to align behavior with religious norms and expectations (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Carter et al., 2012; Kim-Spoon et al., 2014). Empirical evidence indicates that shifts in religious commitment are positively associated with changes in cognitive and emotional self-regulation during adolescence and early adulthood, as reported by both adolescents and their parents (Hardy et al., 2020). These findings suggest that religion can

facilitate regulatory behaviors that are adaptive in both social and situational contexts by curbing impulsivity and fostering goal-directed persistence.

Beyond religion, the broader process of socialization and the internalization of cultural values are central to regulatory development. Individuals adapt their self-regulation in response to the expectations of relevant others—parents, peers, relatives, and societal role models—thereby embedding culturally shaped values into their motivational and behavioral systems (Trommsdorff & Chen, 2012). For example, cultural dimensions such as long-term orientation and uncertainty avoidance are positively linked to self-regulatory behaviors, whereas high power distance may hinder regulatory autonomy (Schlaegel et al., 2022). These findings underscore that self-regulation is not merely an individual cognitive skill but is deeply situated within socio-cultural frameworks, with cultural norms guiding both goal selection and the strategies used to achieve those goals (Li-Grining, 2012).

For Chinese individuals, the Confucian ethic of filial piety constitutes a master cultural schema that seamlessly integrates these functions. It provides a powerful normative rationale for self-control, linking daily discipline and academic striving directly to familial honor, intergenerational reciprocity, and social identity. This framework does not merely influence regulation externally; it is internalized to form a core component of the self-concept, making self-regulation for familial goals a matter of authentic identity expression rather than mere social compliance.

Interventions for Self-Regulation Ability

A wide range of interventions has been developed to enhance self-regulation, including curriculum-based programs, mindfulness- and yoga-based practices, family-focused strategies, exercise-based approaches, and other social or personal skills training (Pandey et al., 2018). These interventions demonstrate efficacy in improving SRA among children and adolescents, with many studies reporting concomitant gains in academic performance, health outcomes, and behavioral adjustment. Nonetheless, substantial heterogeneity exists in outcome measures, and standardized assessment tools are largely lacking, limiting cross-study comparability and the ability to draw firm conclusions regarding long-term efficacy.

Methods like mindfulness, which cultivates attentional control and non-judgmental awareness, have shown efficacy in improving specific facets of emotion regulation and executive function (Leyland et al., 2019; MacDonald, 2020). Another meta-analysis discovered that personalized feedback, goal setting, and self-monitoring are relatively reliable intervention measures for effectively enhancing self-regulation abilities, but each method is only effective for certain health behaviors and specific populations, thus their effects are not sustainable, calling for a more comprehensive approach (Hennessy et al., 2020).

Overall, self-regulation ability is a multidimensional capacity shaped by individual, relational, environmental, and cultural factors. Cultural elements, including religious beliefs and value systems, guide regulatory processes by establishing normative frameworks, accountability, and internalized motivation. Within Chinese contexts, filial piety functions as a master cultural schema that links self-regulation to familial obligations and social identity, thereby tethering self-control and goal pursuit to relational and cultural expectations, not merely individual aims. These insights collectively indicate that self-regulation extends beyond an individual cognitive skill to constitute a contextually embedded capacity, situated within relational and cultural frameworks. However, most existing interventions target cognitive or behavioral skills rather

than these culturally and relationally embedded processes, and their efficacy varies across populations, contexts, and outcome measures. This evidence establishes a foundation for examining how dual filial piety and self-concept processes interact with SRA to shape meaning in life and adaptive functioning.

Dual Filial Piety as the Integrative Framework for Meaning and Regulation

Conceptualization of Dual Filial Piety

Filial piety (*xiao*) refers to moral norms governing material and emotional obligations within parent-child relationships and has long been a core component of Confucian ethics (Ho, 1986). Traditionally, it was conceptualized as a prescriptive system regulating children's obedience, care, and support toward parents (Ho, 1996; Wong et al., 2010; Ho et al., 2012), forming the foundation of family socialization in Chinese society (Bedford & Yeh, 2019).

With social transformation and increasing individualization, such normative definitions have become insufficient to capture the psychological functions of filial piety. Bedford and Yeh (2019) reconceptualized filial piety as a contextualized personality orientation, leading to the Dual Filial Piety Model proposed by Yeh and Bedford (2003). This model distinguishes between reciprocal filial piety (RFP), characterized by affection, gratitude, and emotional closeness, and authoritarian filial piety (AFP), characterized by obedience, hierarchical obligation, and parental authority. At the individual level, filial piety reflects how psychological needs are negotiated within family relationships and shapes enduring relational patterns and developmental trajectories (Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Bedford & Yeh, 2019).

RFP and AFP coexist within individuals and exert joint yet distinct influences on psychological functioning, with their effects varying across developmental and cultural contexts (Yeh, 2003; Bedford & Yeh, 2019). Empirical studies indicate that RFP is positively associated with educational attainment, socioeconomic status, interpersonal competence, and perceived parental warmth, particularly among women (Yeh et al., 2009). In contrast, AFP is more prevalent among men, negatively related to education and socioeconomic indicators, and associated with traditional values and less adaptive adjustment patterns (Yeh, 2006). These patterns underscore the need to examine how different filial motivations are internalized and translated into self-regulatory processes and meaning-making in contemporary populations.

Divergent Pathways to Well-being and Meaning

RFP operates as a robust source of coherent meaning and satisfaction. Its positive association with life satisfaction is largely mediated by autonomy-supportive mechanisms, including both individual autonomy and relational autonomy, as well as gratitude toward parents (Sun et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2021). Through these processes, RFP strengthens meaning in life by enhancing social connectedness, emotional support, and alignment between personal values and familial roles (Sun et al., 2023). In this sense, RFP facilitates the integration of family obligations into a coherent and self-endorsed life narrative.

In contrast, AFP operates through more conditional and often conflicting pathways. Although it can provide structure and, under conditions of strong value alignment, even a sense of purpose (Li et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2020), its dominant psychological function involves constraint of personal autonomy. When external expectations conflict with personal goals, AFP is associated with reduced life satisfaction and heightened existential tension, thereby undermining meaning in life (Li et al., 2023). Cross-regional evidence further suggests that its effects are context-

dependent-positive in settings such as Taiwan and Hong Kong but neutral or weaker elsewhere—indicating that any benefit from AFP is highly contingent on external alignment rather than authentic personal endorsement (Chen et al., 2020).

Taken together, existing evidence indicates that filial piety encompasses two qualitatively distinct motivational systems. RFP generally supports integrated meaning and well-being, whereas AFP exerts conditional or even conflicting effects depending on contextual and relational factors, underscoring the non-unitary nature of filial piety.

Dual Filial Piety as an Organizing Framework for Self-Regulation Ability

The influence of Dual Filial Piety (DFP) on self-regulation ability is most pronounced in two critical functional domains for emerging adults: academic achievement and the management of problem behaviors. A synthesis of existing research indicates that RFP and AFP are not merely correlated with different outcomes but systematically shape an individual's capacity for sustained self-regulation through distinct motivational and cognitive pathways.

In the academic domain, RFP functions as an internalized motivational resource that promotes sustained engagement and achievement. By aligning academic goals with personally endorsed values and emotional bonds, RFP supports autonomous regulation and persistence (Jing et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2022). In contrast, AFP tends to operate through externally imposed pressure. Although it may motivate compliance in certain cultural contexts (Rózycka-Tran et al., 2021), such regulation is fragile and cognitively taxing, making it vulnerable to breakdown under stress or value conflict. Evidence further indicates that family context moderates these effects; for example, RFP amplifies the positive influence of fathers' "Guan" (a combination of nurturance and discipline) on sons' academic engagement, highlighting the interaction between filial motives and family dynamics (Wang et al., 2022).

Similar patterns emerge in the domain of problem behaviors. RFP consistently functions as a protective factor, whereas AFP is associated with elevated risks for both internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, addiction) (Yeh, 2006). Research on technology addiction elucidates this process: AFP contributes to maladaptive outcomes by fostering rigid and distorted cognitive patterns (e.g., maladaptive cognition, intolerance of uncertainty), thereby increasing vulnerability to impulsive and compulsive behaviors (Wei et al., 2019; Fu et al., 2024). This represents a regulatory pathway where attempts at control are effortful and depleting, often leading to paradoxical failure. Conversely, RFP facilitates adaptive self-regulation by supporting psychological need satisfaction and cognitive-emotional flexibility, which conserves regulatory resources and reduces susceptibility to addictive behaviors (Wei et al., 2025; Wan et al., 2024). Longitudinal data confirm that the protective effect of RFP is mediated by enhanced need satisfaction, a benefit that diminishes under conditions of high ego depletion, underscoring the resource-dependent nature of this positive pathway.

The convergence of evidence from self-regulation and filial piety research indicates that RFP and AFP are associated with distinct patterns of self-regulation. RFP is generally linked to an integrated regulatory style, in which goals align with personal values and sustained effort is observed. In contrast, AFP is associated with a regulatory style characterized by internal pressure, cognitive rigidity, and higher susceptibility to lapses. These findings are consistent across multiple domains, including academic engagement and management of problem

behaviors, and demonstrate that the two dimensions of filial piety exert differential influences on self-regulatory capacity among Chinese college students.

Self-Acceptance: Role and Pathways

Self-Acceptance and Its Significance

Self-acceptance refers to an individual's realistic and affirmative acceptance of the self, including personal limitations, past experiences, and perceived flaws, independent of external validation or achievement (Ellis, 2005). It constitutes a core dimension of psychological well-being, which also includes positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989, 1995). As such, self-acceptance plays a central role in mental health and relational functioning (Carson & Langer, 2006).

Empirical research consistently demonstrates its strong positive association with subjective well-being (Sanjuán, 2011) and its function as both a mediator and moderator in psychological processes. For example, self-acceptance mediates the relationship between mindfulness and well-being among university students (Xu et al., 2016) and buffers the impact of maladaptive personality traits on psychological distress (Jibeen, 2017; Tibubos et al., 2019). Conversely, low self-acceptance is closely linked to depression, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction (Popov, 2019). Recent psychometric evidence further identifies self-acceptance as a central component of psychological well-being (Blasco-Belled & Alsinet, 2022). Its importance is particularly salient in adolescence and emerging adulthood, where it supports emotional adjustment, social functioning, and the development of meaning in life and self-regulatory capacity (Qiu-Qiang et al., 2021).

Pathways to Meaning in Life and Self-Regulation

The pathways through which self-acceptance exerts its benefits are increasingly delineated. Research indicates that meaning in life serves as a significant intermediary, explaining the link between self-acceptance and broader psychological well-being, including the reduction of psychological symptoms (Zhou & Xu, 2019). This suggests that accepting oneself may facilitate the discovery or construction of a coherent life purpose, which in turn enhances mental health. Consequently, interventions targeting both meaning in life and self-acceptance may synergistically maximize improvements in life satisfaction (Zipagan & Galvez-Tan, 2023). A direct positive association between higher self-acceptance and a stronger sense of life meaning has been consistently documented (Rahmania et al., 2021).

Regarding self-regulation, self-acceptance is theorized to underpin behavioral coherence. Self-acceptance underpins effective self-regulation by promoting behavioral coherence and conserving psychological resources. Theoretically, it supports decisions and actions that align with an authentic self-concept, thereby enhancing regulatory consistency (Klussman et al., 2022). Empirically, lower levels of self-acceptance are linked to markers of regulatory failure, such as heightened aggressive behavior among university students (Li, 2020). Crucially, self-acceptance mitigates internal processes that deplete self-regulatory capacity, including harsh self-criticism and perfectionism (James et al., 2015). Its role in supporting self-regulation is further evidenced by the efficacy of interventions that cultivate a self-accepting stance, such as mindfulness-based practices, which are known to improve emotion regulation and executive function (Ma & Siu, 2020).

In sum, existing literature indicates that self-acceptance is a fundamental psychological construct closely associated with both meaning in life and self-regulation ability. Higher self-acceptance is consistently linked to greater psychological well-being, stronger life meaning, and more adaptive regulatory functioning. These findings highlight self-acceptance as a key psychological correlate in understanding individual differences in meaning construction and self-regulatory capacity.

Discussion

Interventions for Meaning in Life Require a Dual Focus on Social Environment and Individuals

Through a comprehensive review of the literature, it becomes evident that the concept of Meaning in Life (MIL) primarily consists of three dimensions: significance, purpose, and coherence. When individuals can perceive these three components across different domains, they will experience a sense of MIL. Moreover, MIL often emanates from our daily experiences and is universal. Almost anyone can experience a substantial sense of meaning in life if they correctly perceive and interpret their daily experiences. Individuals develop a sense of significance through their daily activities and interactions with others. They clarify their self-identity, establish clear life goals, and perceive alignment between themselves and their envisioned objectives, allowing them to experience and discover the MIL.

Therefore, to enhance MIL, it is crucial to initiate interventions that address multiple facets. Initiatives should begin by nurturing appropriate values within individuals. Elevating the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly within the family, is another vital step. Acquiring social support and fostering genuine acceptance of one's true self are fundamental. Furthermore, it involves identifying objectives that simultaneously satisfy societal expectations and personal aspirations, fostering holistic self-development, and ultimately realizing self-transcendence. Neglecting any of these aspects can result in a loss of coherence, ultimately impacting the realization of importance and purpose and, consequently, diminishing the sense of MIL.

Research has substantiated that adolescents who pursue both self-oriented and other-oriented goals exhibit significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, MIL, and social support. In comparison, individuals who exclusively adopt self-oriented or other-oriented perspectives tend to experience lower levels of MIL (Blau, I., et al., 2019). Therefore, while the methods for intervening to enhance MIL are diverse, they must account for both environmental and individual factors within a specific socio-cultural context to maximize their effectiveness.

Self-Regulation is a Product of Interaction between Environment and Individual

The literature further demonstrates that self-regulation ability (SRA) is not a purely intrapersonal skill but a dynamic outcome of continuous interaction between individuals and their social environments. Self-regulation involves the deliberate modulation of cognition, emotion, and behavior in pursuit of personally and socially valued goals. Because these goals are shaped by cultural norms and social expectations, SRA is inherently embedded within a cultural context.

Across studies, to enhance self-regulation, it must be situated within a specific cultural context. This is because both societal expectations and individual self-expectations are influenced by cultural values. Accurate and balanced self-assessment within one's environment is a

prerequisite for effective self-regulation. Otherwise, conflicts of motivation or self-depletion may lead to self-regulation failure. For instance, due to cultural differences, self-efficacy may be positively correlated with self-regulation in one context (Pasha-Zaidi et al., 2019) and negatively correlated in another (Russell, & Warner, 2017). This contradiction may arise from variations in motivational beliefs due to differing cultural backgrounds. Without considering both environmental and individual factors within a specific cultural context when intervening to enhance SRA, the results may be counterproductive.

Why Choose Dual Filial Piety?

Dual filial piety (DFP) offers a culturally specific yet psychologically nuanced framework for understanding how environmental expectations are internalized by Chinese university students. Rather than treating filial piety as a unitary moral norm, DFP distinguishes between reciprocal filial piety (RFP), grounded in emotional closeness and gratitude, and authoritarian filial piety (AFP), rooted in obedience and role obligation. This distinction allows for a more precise examination of how family-based expectations shape motivation, interpersonal relationships, and psychological adjustment.

The reviewed literature indicates that these two dimensions may operate through different regulatory pathways. RFP is generally associated with positive relational experiences, emotional security, and adaptive outcomes, whereas AFP is more likely to be linked to psychological strain, particularly when experienced as rigid or externally imposed. Importantly, both forms often coexist within individuals, and their effects may vary across gender, region, and developmental stage. In the context of MIL and SRA, some studies suggest that RFP and AFP can jointly support meaning pursuit under certain conditions, while others show divergent associations with emotional well-being and behavioral regulation.

These findings justify the selection of DFP as a core cultural-environmental variable in this review. DFP captures the central motivational tensions embedded in Chinese family relationships and provides a theoretically grounded lens through which the influence of culture, family, and social expectations on MIL and SRA can be examined.

Why Choose Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance is widely recognized as a core component of psychological well-being and a foundational resource for adaptive functioning. Across the reviewed literature, self-acceptance is consistently associated with higher MIL, better emotional adjustment, and greater resilience. In environments characterized by high performance standards and strong familial expectations, self-acceptance enables individuals to maintain a realistic and nonjudgmental self-evaluation, which is essential for sustained self-regulation.

Within family contexts, particularly those shaped by strong filial norms, unrealistic parental expectations may exacerbate self-criticism and internal conflict. The literature suggests that self-acceptance plays a critical role in mitigating these effects by allowing individuals to acknowledge personal limitations without disengaging from valued goals. In this sense, self-acceptance functions not merely as a general indicator of well-being, but as a regulatory resource that supports persistence, goal adjustment, and emotional balance. Research further indicates that interventions targeting MIL are more effective when self-acceptance is explicitly addressed, as it enhances life satisfaction and reduces maladaptive perfectionism (Zipagan & Galvez Tan, 2023).

When considered alongside DFP, self-acceptance appears particularly relevant. It provides a psychological mechanism through which individuals can engage with filial expectations flexibly—integrating reciprocal obligations while reducing the self-depleting effects of authoritarian demands. This balance is essential for both meaning construction and effective self-regulation among Chinese university students.

Implications for Intervention

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that both MIL and SRA emerge from the interaction between culturally embedded environmental demands and individual psychological resources. For Chinese college students, dual filial piety represents a central cultural context shaping motivation and behavior, while self-acceptance constitutes a key intrapersonal resource for navigating these demands. Interventions that address only one side of this interaction are therefore likely to be limited in effectiveness.

By jointly considering DFP and self-acceptance, this review provides a culturally grounded rationale for intervention development. Such an approach allows students to reinterpret familial expectations, reduce internal conflict, and align personal goals with culturally meaningful values, thereby supporting both meaning in life and self-regulation ability in a balanced and sustainable manner.

Limitations

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this review. Firstly, the literature search may not have been entirely comprehensive. Given the multitude of variables and vast volume of literature, selecting relevant sources can be challenging, potentially resulting in some information being overlooked. Additionally, the emphasis on peer-reviewed materials within a predetermined timeframe might have missed critical insights. The investigation of relationships between the four variables may not have been exhaustive, especially in the case of self-acceptance and its relationships with the other three factors, which were relatively simplified. The primary focus on cultural influences might have overshadowed cross-cultural factors.

Future Directions

Dual filial piety redefines filial piety as a situational personality trait, emphasizing psychological patterns in parent-child interactions. It possesses universal applicability and serves as a concept applicable to all cultural backgrounds, focusing on intergenerational relationships. Research on dual filial piety in non-East Asian cultures is a future development direction. Particularly in cross-cultural contexts, understanding the functions of dual filial piety and its impact on individual psychology and development warrants further in-depth study.

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