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Abstract

Empathy, as an interpersonal response, is profoundly shaped by cultural contexts. However, the specific ways in which Chinese culture molds empathy have yet to be elucidated. Using the “differential mode of association” as a theoretical framework, this paper explicates the mechanisms through which the two dimensions of intimacy–distance and hierarchy–superiority influence empathy. Along the intimacy–distance dimension, the high degree of interpersonal fusion in collectivistic cultures may blur the psychological boundaries necessary for empathy; along the hierarchy–superiority dimension, the stratified ethical order of Confucian culture may conflict with the egalitarian relationships required for empathy. Overall, empathy within Chinese culture exhibits three characteristics: implicit and indirect emotional expression, a holistic and rationalized cognitive style, and a problem-solving, action-oriented tendency. From a cultural perspective, this paper also offers recommendations for the practice of empathy in social life.

Full Text

Empathy in Chinese Culture: The Influence of Differential Mode of Association

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Abstract

Empathy, as an interpersonal response, is deeply influenced by cultural context. However, the specific ways in which Chinese culture shapes empathy remain insufficiently explored. This paper employs the framework of “differential

mode of association” (chaxu geju) to systematically examine the mechanisms through which the two dimensions of intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status influence empathy. In the intimacy-distance dimension, the high degree of relational interdependence in collectivistic cultures may blur the psychological boundaries essential for empathy. In the hierarchy-status dimension, the Confucian ethical order, grounded in stratified social relations, may conflict with the egalitarian stance required for empathic engagement. Overall, empathy within the Chinese cultural context demonstrates three key characteristics: indirect and implicit emotional expression, holistic and rationalized cognitive processing, and a problem-solving, action-oriented focus. This paper also provides culture-sensitive guidance and recommendations for empathic practice in daily life.

Key words: empathy, Chinese culture, differential mode of association, intimacy-distance, hierarchy-status

Empathy refers to an individual’s capacity to share and understand others’ thoughts and feelings, encompassing affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and behavioral empathy as its primary components (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Research demonstrates that empathy plays a crucial role in promoting interpersonal connection, increasing prosocial behavior, and enhancing mental health and subjective well-being (Ding Fengqin & Lu Zhaohui, 2016; Klimecki, 2019). Whether for individuals, families, or society, empathy is always expected to occur more frequently. However, typical Western expressions of empathy are not commonly observed in Chinese daily life. The empathy model under Western individualistic culture typically emphasizes direct emotional validation and verbal expression, with statements like “I understand how you feel” or “I can feel your pain” serving as common empathic responses (Hill, 2019). This mode of expression is built upon clear personal boundaries (Decety & Lamm, 2006), assuming that each person possesses an independent emotional world that empathy bridges through cognitive understanding and affective resonance. By contrast, Chinese empathic expression tends to be more indirect and embedded in action (Taylor et al., 2004). For instance, when noticing a friend is upset, we tend to invite them for a meal or go shopping together to show care; parents may lose emotional control when tutoring their children because they cannot understand the child’s perspective; elders and superiors are more inclined to provide advice and solutions rather than discuss feelings with juniors and subordinates in distress. These everyday differences suggest that empathy is not merely a universal psychological capacity but also a communication practice profoundly shaped by cultural scripts.

Existing cross-cultural research on empathy has primarily focused on comparisons between collectivism and individualism. Collectivistic cultures emphasize group harmony and interdependence, whereas individualistic cultures stress personal independence and self-actualization (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Some studies find that individuals in collectivistic cultures generally exhibit higher levels of empathy (Chopik et al., 2017), but this empathy demonstrates sig-

nificant relational boundedness and emotional complexity—that is, individuals tend to empathize more with in-group members while showing weaker empathy toward strangers (Cheon et al., 2011), and empathy components contain more self-oriented “personal distress” with avoidance motivation rather than other-oriented “empathic concern” that promotes altruistic behavior (Batson et al., 1987; Cassels et al., 2010). Other research reports that individuals in collectivistic cultures rely more on cognitive empathy and show lower levels of affective empathy than those in individualistic cultures (Atkins, 2014). These inconsistent findings partly stem from the conceptual complexity of empathy itself, with different studies emphasizing different components, and may also reflect that the binary cultural division between individualism and collectivism is overly simplistic and cannot adequately capture intra-cultural complexity. While the individualism-collectivism dimension provides a macro-framework for understanding cultural differences, research indicates variations exist within collectivistic cultures. For example, Japanese collectivism emphasizes social roles and situational adaptation; Latin American countries (such as Mexico and Puerto Rico) highlight family emotional bonds rather than universal group obligations; Chinese collectivism manifests as valuing group harmony, fulfilling family responsibilities, and respecting authority (Oyserman et al., 2002). These differences originate from distinct historical, social, and cultural backgrounds, shaping not only individuals’ self-construal, cognitive styles, and emotional experiences (M. Han et al., 2016; Kikutani et al., 2024) but also systematically influencing various aspects of empathy through internal norms and scripts, including how individuals understand, interpret, and respond to others’ suffering (Cheon et al., 2010; Woolrych et al., 2020). The nuanced shaping of empathy’s manifestations across cultures requires deeper ethnographic and empirical investigation (Hollan, 2012). However, research on empathy within the Chinese cultural context remains scarce.

A thorough investigation of empathy in Chinese culture first requires a theoretical framework that reflects Chinese cultural characteristics. Compared to collectivism, differential mode of association better captures the deep structure and practical rules of Chinese social relationships. Therefore, examining empathy phenomena within Chinese culture through the lens of differential mode of association offers greater cultural explanatory power and theoretical appropriateness.

2. Differential Mode of Association in Chinese Culture

The concept of differential mode of association was first proposed by Fei Xiaotong in *Rural China* (1948) to describe the core characteristics of traditional Chinese social structure. Using the metaphor of “the ripples created when a stone is thrown into water…pushing further outward and becoming thinner,” Fei argued that Chinese society centers on the “self,” forming an elastic, expandable network through blood ties, geographical connections, and ethical relationships. This concept embodies the Confucian cultural logic of ethics-based social

construction. Externally, it manifests as a hierarchical interpersonal network marked by differential intimacy and ordered status; internally, it internalizes this social pattern into individuals' cognitive and emotional schemas through ritual norms and role expectations (Yuan Xiaojin & Guo Siping, 2017; Zhai Xuewei, 2018). Thus, differential mode of association is not merely a description of social structure and interpersonal relationships but also a culturally rooted practical logic and internalized psychological characteristic (Zhang Jianghua, 2010).

Differential mode of association encompasses various relational states in Chinese society. Based on the principle of differential treatment toward individuals at different circles of the relational network, Huang Guangguo (1985) distinguished "affective relationships," "instrumental relationships," and "mixed relationships," noting that each follows different interaction rules. In differential mode of association, moving from inner to outer circles, the affective component continuously decreases while the instrumental component increases, with the intermediate zone representing a mixture of both. Yang Guoshu (1992) further refined relational categories, proposing the classification of "family relationships," "acquaintance relationships," and "stranger relationships," arguing that individuals adopt distinctly different cognitive and behavioral response patterns toward different relational targets.

Later researchers contend that Fei Xiaotong' s differential mode of association constitutes a three-dimensional structure, encompassing not only the horizontal dimension of "difference" (intimacy-distance) but also the vertical dimension of "order" (hierarchy-status) (Yan Yunxiang, 2006). Zhai Xuewei (2018) notes that although the water ripple imagery emphasizes intimacy extension, the theoretical construction of differential mode of association actually incorporates considerations of social vertical hierarchy, such as ruler-subject, father-son, noble-base, and superior-subordinate relations. According to Confucian ethics, when interacting with others, individuals should evaluate their role relationships along both intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status cognitive dimensions, providing differential responses according to the principle of "differentiated intimacy and ordered status" to "maintain proper ethical relations" (Huang Guangguo, 1995; Zhuang Yaojia & Yang Guoshu, 1997). This dimensional division also appears in Western research. For example, in Leary' s (1957) Interpersonal Circumplex Model, the Affiliation-Hostility dimension represents individuals' tendencies toward emotional closeness or distance, while the Dominance-Submission dimension reflects how individuals process "status" information in interactions.

In summary, intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status exist as two fundamental dimensions of interpersonal relationships in both Chinese and Western cultural cognition, yet they exhibit cultural differences in specific connotations, coupling patterns, and practical forms. Fei Xiaotong' s differential mode of association is a three-dimensional theoretical framework integrating "difference" and "order." It not only explains the Confucian "human relations" -centered, elastic intimacy network but also reveals the dynamic hierarchical order regulated by "ritual propriety," reflecting Chinese people' s relationship-based social cognition

and emotional logic characteristics. Therefore, the value of studying empathy from the perspective of differential mode of association lies in: first, moving beyond the general description of “collectivism” to reveal the specific shaping mechanisms of Chinese social relationship patterns and interpersonal interaction norms on empathy; second, by operationalizing “difference” and “order” into analyzable dimensions, it provides a foundation for dialogue with Western empathy-related theories and research. The following sections systematically explore the influence mechanisms of these two dimensions on empathy within the Chinese cultural context.

3.1 Influence of Intimacy-Distance on Empathy

The Chinese cultural concept of intimacy-distance corresponds to Western psychological research on in-group/out-group distinctions and relationship closeness. Existing research consistently demonstrates that “equal empathy for all” represents a moral ideal rather than psychological reality, as empathy exhibits a stable intimacy gradient: individuals consistently show greater empathy toward those with closer relationships, from family members to friends, fellow townspeople, and compatriots (Fowler et al., 2021). Population-related studies also find that in-group identity consistently influences the cognitive, affective, and motivational components of empathy, promoting empathy toward in-group members (Eres, 2022). Neuroscientific research confirms that individuals show faster, stronger, and more consistent neural responses to in-group members’ suffering (Azevedo et al., 2013; Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012; Han, 2018). This phenomenon is also corroborated in everyday experience: 57% of empathic experiences occur with individuals considered “very close,” while only 6% target “complete strangers,” with reported empathy levels increasing significantly with intimacy (Depow et al., 2021). Other studies, considering the cognitive costs of empathy, find that people sometimes avoid empathizing, but relational targets moderate this tendency. For example, individuals choose to empathize with their mothers significantly more than with strangers (Li et al., 2022); a more familiar or likable empathy target can effectively motivate individuals to empathize, similar to monetary rewards (Ferguson et al., 2020). Furthermore, different intimacy levels may involve different empathy modes. Although cognitive and affective components of empathy can mutually promote and transform (Vorauer, 2013), neuroimaging studies also show that empathizing with friends’ suffering primarily relies on affective sharing, involving the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and insula; whereas empathizing with strangers’ suffering relies more on the mentalizing system, activating the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, precuneus, and temporal poles (Meyer et al., 2013).

The intimacy gradient of empathy may be closely related to the degree to which individuals incorporate others into the “self” in cognitive representation. Aron et al. (Aron et al., 1991; Aron & Aron, 2010) propose that individuals achieve self-expansion by including relational others in the self, a process that generates intimacy while causing confusion between one’s own traits and memories and

those of others. As relationship intimacy increases, the boundary between self and other becomes blurred, explaining why affective sharing with close others directly activates brain regions associated with self-experience (Meyer et al., 2013) and why the brain shows vicarious pain responses to close others' suffering (Bucchioni et al., 2015; López-Solà et al., 2020).

Many Western scholars emphasize that empathy requires maintaining a certain degree of self-other distinction (Eklund & Meranius, 2021; Krol & Bartz, 2022), which determines that individuals can experience and feel others' mental states without confusing self and other (Coplan, 2011; Decety & Lamm, 2006). Maintaining clear cognitive and experiential boundaries between both parties is considered what distinguishes empathy from sympathy, compassion, and emotional contagion (Hollan, 2012; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Research finds that lacking self-other distinction leads to more personal distress during empathy (Krol & Bartz, 2022; Meyer et al., 2015), a self-centered emotional response considered the negative side of affective empathy that hinders rather than enhances prosocial interaction (Kim & Han, 2018). Since personal distress is typically accompanied by avoidance motivation, individuals tend to withdraw from empathic situations to alleviate their own emotional burden (Batson et al., 1987; Batson & Shaw, 1991). Therefore, some researchers propose that the ability to maintain or enhance empathic concern while regulating and alleviating one's own distress reflects "empathic resilience," which is key to sustaining empathic behavior (Lehmann, 2025).

However, within the cultural context of differential mode of association, Chinese interpersonal relationships, especially intimate ones, are often characterized by excessive fusion lacking self-other distinction. Chinese people do not carefully maintain personal boundaries like individuals in individualistic cultures (Triandis, 2001; Triandis et al., 1988). Instead, "intimacy" in Chinese culture often manifests as blurred, diminished individual boundaries and a state of "no distinction between you and me" between two people (Friedman, 2005; Yan, 2016). Some researchers argue that differential mode of association reflects not only external relational hierarchies but also internalized self-construal (Wang Zhendong, 2021). Empirical research also shows that compared to Westerners, Chinese individuals' self-concepts more extensively include intimate others such as mothers (Zhang Li et al., 2005; Zhu & Han, 2008). Moreover, mothers (Wuyun et al., 2014), spouses and children (S. Han et al., 2016), romantic partners (Zhou Li & Su Yanjie, 2008), and friends (Guan Yanhua & Chi Yukai, 2006) all share self-neural representations with individuals to varying degrees.

This pervasive self-other fusion in relationships may cause Chinese people to experience more personal distress due to over-involvement during empathy. Ma Luyao (2020) found that in Chinese cultural contexts, individuals more frequently respond to others' predicaments through advice and analysis, with relatively fewer typical empathic responses. Xia Meng (2022) demonstrated that Chinese college students' helping orientation is primarily problem-solving focused, with response patterns influenced by intimacy level—the closer the rela-

tionship, the more inclined they are to provide advice and analysis. Yang Xue (2023) found that when imagining different relational targets in unfortunate situations, intimate others elicited stronger personal distress emotions such as unease and anxiety compared to strangers and acquaintances. These findings suggest that Chinese people may use rationalized response methods like consolation and advice as substitutes for emotional responding, thereby avoiding the emotional### 3.2 Influence of Hierarchy-Status on Empathy

Hierarchy-status in Chinese culture resembles Western social hierarchy, which typically refers to individuals' relative ranking in groups based on one or more value dimensions such as material wealth or personal ability (Redhead & Power, 2022). Research on social hierarchy's influence on empathy indicates that social hierarchy significantly inhibits empathic processes in interpersonal contexts, including cultural power distance², individuals' Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)³, and hierarchical differences in specific situations (Cheon et al., 2011; Lucas & Kteily, 2018). Studies find that high power distance also increases interpersonal distance in society and reduces altruistic behavior (Fu et al., 2021; Lammers et al., 2012). Compared to egalitarians, individuals high in SDO show less neural activity in empathy-related brain regions (Chiao et al., 2009) and possess higher levels of the Dark Triad traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy that involve disregard for others (Ho et al., 2015). Research also finds that power holders in hierarchies show weaker mirroring responses to others' behavior, suggesting that power inhibits the neural basis of empathy (Hogeveen et al., 2014). High-power individuals regulate emotional responses through autonomic nervous system modulation, showing fewer responses to others' suffering (van Kleef et al., 2008), less perspective-taking (Galinsky et al., 2006), and lower empathic accuracy when judging others' emotions (Kraus et al., 2010). These results suggest the inhibitory effect of power and social hierarchy on empathy.

The core of hierarchical systems lies in distinction, which stratifies individuals or groups through clear criteria such as social status, power, and resource control (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). This distinction manifests not only in social structures but also in individuals' psychological and behavioral patterns (Lammers et al., 2008). Processing social status information involves brain regions including the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC), anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), and amygdala (Chiao, 2010; Zink et al., 2008), which also participate in emotion, self-referential processing, and theory of mind, providing potential neural coupling pathways for hierarchy-status to influence empathy. Changes in social status modulate activity and plasticity in brain regions related to reward, stress, and social cognition (Utevsky & Platt, 2014; Wang et al., 2014), suggesting that long-term exposure to specific social hierarchical structures may adaptively shape empathy-related neural functions.

Research finds that different social hierarchy levels cause trait differences in individuals' neural response patterns and stress responses. For instance, high-power individuals often show empathy deficits (Hogeveen et al., 2014), while

low social class individuals are more sensitive and attentive to others' behavior (Stellar et al., 2012). Additionally, individuals may consolidate and maintain their social hierarchy through specific behavioral and cognitive patterns (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), such as tending to perspective-take with higher-status individuals to accumulate resources and elevate their own status (Keltner et al., 2003), and showing less empathy toward low social class targets, tending to attribute their suffering to personal rather than external factors (Sidanius et al., 2013). Moreover, different positions and motivations within power structures cause individuals to perceive harm to different groups differently, leading to intergroup empathy differences (Lucas & Kteily, 2018). Many researchers note that individuals selectively empathize with some groups (e.g., in-groups) while showing counter-empathy (such as *schadenfreude*) toward others to maintain or suppress hierarchical differences (Hudson et al., 2019; Lucas & Kteily, 2018). As Keltner (2016) discusses regarding the relationship between power and empathy, empathic ability helps individuals gain others' support and elevate their status within groups, facilitating hierarchical gap formation, yet this hierarchical chasm in turn makes mutual identification and empathy between different status groups more difficult.

Contradicting this hierarchical distinction, empathy's occurrence often accompanies self-other fusion. Research finds that individuals can achieve fusion or expansion with another person through perspective-taking, increasing oneness and the overlap between self-cognitive representations and others' cognitive representations (Cialdini et al., 1997; Davis et al., 1996). Empathic behavior can increase perceived similarity with others, particularly with vulnerable groups (Oveis et al., 2010), and imagining oneself in others' positions reduces stereotypes both implicitly and explicitly (Galinsky et al., 2005; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Therefore, fusion with others during empathy not only horizontally reduces distance in the intimacy dimension but also implies the dissolution of vertical hierarchy and status differences.

Compared to Western social hierarchy, hierarchy-status in differential mode of association constitutes a more complex ethical system that exists prior to individuals and possesses mandatory binding force (Huang Guangguo, 2014; Yan Yunxiang, 2021). "Ritual propriety" (*li*) as the core of Confucian ethical norms requires people to fulfill different, hierarchical responsibilities in different relationships, maintaining hierarchical order through each person knowing their place and fulfilling their duties (Huang Guangguo, 1995; Ma Rong, 2007). For example, the *Book of Rites · Liyun* states: "The father is kind, the son filial, the older brother good, the younger brother respectful, the husband righteous, the wife obedient, the elder generous, the younger compliant, the ruler benevolent, the minister loyal—these ten are called human righteousness," emphasizing obligations corresponding to different roles. The *Mencius · Tengwengongxia* proposes the "five human relationships" concept of "affection between father and son, righteousness between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, order between elder and younger, and trust between friends," illustrating interpersonal norms to be observed in different relationships. In interpersonal in-

teractions, individuals must continuously measure the appropriateness of their words and actions according to their positional roles in specific relationships and adjust accordingly to ensure compliance with corresponding ritual norms (Hwang, 2001). Even against the backdrop of contemporary East-West cultural integration, these ritual norms continue to profoundly influence Chinese people's self-identity and social behavior patterns (Lu Luo, 2003). "Empathy" means entering the other's inner world and achieving a state of "fusion" or "oneness" with them for at least some time, which conflicts with relationship structures that emphasize hierarchical order. Emotional expressions that ignore role positions and ethical norms may not only be considered impolite but could constitute an offense against the existing relational order.

Yin Na (2024) investigated the influence of hierarchical roles in Chinese schools, enterprises, and families on empathy, finding that compared to relationships with traditional hierarchical identity differences (such as teacher-student, elder-younger, superior-subordinate), individuals show higher empathic willingness and capacity toward those with equal identities (such as classmates, peers, colleagues). After learning and expressing empathy, individuals' self-other fusion level with empathic targets increased, and their psychosocial hierarchical distance decreased. This finding corroborates the inhibitory effect of role identity and hierarchical order on empathy, demonstrating that empathy more often accompanies equality. The results also illuminate why empathy is difficult in traditional parent-child and superior-subordinate relationships—that is, maintaining an authoritative image in relationships hinders empathy and its expression (Zhu et al., 2025). When both interaction parties can set aside their roles and communicate as equals, empathy becomes more likely to emerge.

In summary, the Western concept of empathy requires maintaining a certain degree of self-other distinction and implicitly presupposes equality between both parties. However, under Chinese culture's differential mode of association, individuals in the intimacy dimension are overly fused with in-group members, especially in intimate relationships where "no distinction between you and me" makes self-other distinction difficult, causing empathic processes to always accompany personal distress. In the hierarchy-status dimension, individuals inherit traditional social hierarchical order and ethical norms, where role differences hinder mutual understanding and emotional expression. Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper] presents strategies for how individuals at different relational distances in the intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status dimensions of differential mode of association can achieve optimal empathic distance.

Figure 1 Optimal Empathic Distance in Differential Mode of Association

It should be particularly noted that the above sections separately elaborated the influences of intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status on empathy. However, many important interpersonal relationships in real life (such as parent-child, teacher-student) naturally integrate both dimensions. This means that empathy toward some relational targets, such as parents or authoritative elders, inevitably involves dual influences. When reviewing literature, we have attempted

to specify and differentiate the relationship types involved in studies to help more accurately understand their applicable scope. It should be pointed out that this dual influence may be more prominent in the East Asian Confucian cultural sphere. In relatively contextualized Western societies, intimacy and hierarchy are often viewed as dimensions that can operate relatively independently across different situations (Fiske, 1992), whereas Chinese relational cognition is more systematic and holistic. Zhuang Yaojia and Yang Guoshu's (1997) research indicates that intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status jointly constitute the basic framework of Chinese relational cognition, locating over twenty common relationship types such as parent-child, spousal, and friendships within this two-dimensional structure. Unfortunately, existing empirical research mostly focuses on the independent effects of single dimensions, with insufficient in-depth exploration of how the two dimensions interact to influence empathy. Future research should systematically examine the interaction mechanisms of these two dimensions to more completely reveal the sociocultural logic of Chinese empathy.

4. Chinese Empathic Expression

The intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status dimensions of differential mode of association provide an important theoretical framework for understanding Chinese empathy. However, to truly comprehend empathy in Chinese culture, we must delve into its cultural-psychological roots. Since the inception of the empathy concept, Western psychology has attempted to explain how one person understands another's thoughts and feelings through various physiological or cognitive mechanisms such as mirroring, simulation, and projection, forming a rich theoretical system (Batson, 2009). Within the Chinese cultural perspective, however, empathy is not viewed as an individual psychological mechanism requiring explanation. Influenced by the "unity of heaven and humanity" (tianren heyi) cosmology and the "qi transformation resonance" (qihua ganying) view of life, empathy is regarded as a natural manifestation rooted in existence itself, originating from the fundamental interconnectedness and shared feeling between humans and all things in the universe (Liang Shuming, 2011). This "resonant connection" (gantong)-based empathy transcends the subject-object dichotomy cognitive framework, presenting as an ontological and moral emotion. Whether it is Mencius' emphasis on the "heart of compassion" (ceyin zhi xin) or Wang Yangming's concept of "universal benevolence" (yiti zhi ren), their foundation lies not in inferring or simulating others' psychology but in direct experiential recognition and life resonance with the reality that "heaven, earth, and all things are fundamentally one." Additionally, within the Chinese cultural context, there are no shortage of concepts similar to Western empathy in emotional interaction and moral practice. For instance, cognitive empathy in Western psychology corresponds to "extending oneself to others" (tuiji jiren) and "the way of loyalty and reciprocity" (zhongshu zhi dao) in Confucian thought; affective empathy resembles "the heart of compassion" and "universal benevolence" (Li Wei et al., 2017); behavioral empathy can refer to principles such as "do not do to others

what you do not want done to yourself” and “establish others while establishing yourself, help others succeed while seeking your own success.”

Empathic practice in Chinese culture must be understood within concrete, differential human relationships, with its expression intensity, manifestation style, and moral responsibilities dynamically varying according to relationships’ intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status attributes. For example, sympathy and compassion often imply top-down caring connotations (Goetz et al., 2010; Oveis et al., 2010), and their expression must conform to identity ethics. “Benevolence” (ren’ ai) is not merely general emotional resonance but often follows the extension logic of “love your family first, then extend to the people” and “respect the elderly in your family as you respect other elderly, care for the young in your family as you care for other young,” demonstrating distinct differential characteristics (Yan Yunxiang, 2006). Confucian ethics uses “benevolence” (ren) as the internal emotional basis and “ritual propriety” (li) as the external behavioral norm, jointly shaping a unique empathy model in Chinese culture characterized by: indirect and implicit emotional expression, holistic and rationalized cognitive processing, and problem-solving, action-oriented practice. These characteristics are closely related to the operational logic of the intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status dimensions. The following sections systematically discuss these three features of Chinese empathic expression.

First, indirect and implicit emotional expression. In the intimacy-distance dimension, Chinese emotions are often considered private matters that are implicit and not openly displayed (Sundararajan, 2015/2019). In unfamiliar or public settings, individuals tend to restrain emotional expression; thus, empathy toward strangers often manifests as understanding respect, non-intrusive consideration, or implicitly kind assistance, while explicitly identifying and verbalizing understanding of the other’ s emotions may be offensive. For intimate others, intense personal distress may lead individuals to avoid accurately identifying and experiencing the other’ s emotional state, instead conveying understanding and support through rationalized or behavioral means. For instance, research finds that compared to expressing empathy, Chinese people more frequently respond to individuals in distress with consolation and advice (Gao Yalei, 2021; Ma Luyao, 2020). In the hierarchy-status dimension, ritual norms further constrain empathic expression, as direct emotional display may be considered impolite or disruptive to order. Therefore, the “emotion” in Chinese empathy often exists as an unspoken but understood background state, not necessarily manifested through explicit emotional representation and verbal expression. This implicit emotional nature and indirect expression style reflects characteristics of East Asian high-context culture (Sundararajan, 2015/2019).

Second, holistic and rationalized cognitive processing. The Chinese self is field-dependent, with individuals always situated within the differential mode of association network, requiring continuous attention to their relative position in the intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status coordinates. This makes empathy not only about sharing the empathic target’ s physical and mental experiences

but also requiring a holistic perspective that situates the target within an integrated context of roles, responsibilities, and situations (Wang Dongmei, 2022). Consequently, Chinese people tend to view social conflicts and emotional experiences through dialectical and eclectic thinking modes (Varnum et al., 2010; Yama & Zakaria, 2012). This holistic yet rational empathy approach represents a combination of “ritual” (li) and “reason” (li), reflecting Chinese society’s emphasis on interpersonal harmony and ethical order. On the other hand, rationalized response methods also spare individuals from directly discussing emotions, aligning with Chinese characteristics of implicit, indirect emotional expression.

Third, problem-solving orientation and action focus. This characteristic is closely related to the elastic and blurred self-other boundaries in Chinese relationships. The closer the relationship, the more individuals view the other as “one of us,” willing to take more responsibility for each other’s circumstances (Yu & Chaudhry, 2024), making empathy more likely to transform into concrete helping behavior (Gu Ruolei et al., 2025; Maner & Gailliot, 2007; Stürmer et al., 2005). As Sundararajan (2015/2019) states, this empathy essentially extends the “heartache” experience from intimate relationships to other relational targets, manifesting as behavioral impulses to perceive others’ suffering and provide care and protection. Xia Meng’s (2022) research further indicates that Chinese people’s relatively low empathic expression in intimate relationships relates to their perception that empathic expression is less helpful, reflecting the pragmatic characteristics of Chinese-style empathy. On the other hand, in the hierarchy-status dimension, ethical roles directly prescribe behavioral obligations for emotional expression. For example, “fatherly kindness and filial piety” are affective and behavioral norms with clear practical directions derived from role identities: a father’s “kindness” must be realized through dedicated nurturing and teaching, while a child’s “piety” must be demonstrated through respect and service. Empathy and understanding between father and child should not remain at the emotional level but must manifest in corresponding behavioral practices, as the saying goes, “actions speak louder than words.” Thus, whether through responsibility internalization in intimate relationships or behavioral norms in hierarchical order, both push Chinese empathic expression toward problem-solving orientation and action focus.

5. Summary and Outlook

Based on the intimacy-distance and hierarchy-status dimensions of differential mode of association theory, this study integrates major findings from Western empathy research to systematically explore the unique forms and internal tensions of empathy phenomena within Chinese cultural contexts. Specifically, the Western empathy concept faces dual challenges in the Chinese cultural context: first, the conflict between the widespread self-other fusion tendency in Chinese interpersonal relationships and the clear self-boundary required by empathy; second, the conflict between Chinese culture’s hierarchical order and ethical

norms and the egalitarian relationship required by empathy. These conflicts highlight profound differences between Chinese and Western cultures in empathy's conceptual understanding and practical methods, urgently requiring deeper theoretical reflection and practical exploration.

From a cultural psychology perspective, empathy research requires a more inclusive and culturally sensitive theoretical framework to truly encompass empathy diversity across cultural contexts. Although the physiological and neural mechanisms involved in empathy show cross-cultural similarities, its generation processes and expression modes in interpersonal interactions exhibit non-negligible cultural differences (Cheon et al., 2010). Therefore, empathy should be regarded as a contextualized practice embedded in specific social relationships and ethical orders. Ethnographic research shows that although social perception and emotional response methods similar to empathy exist across cultures, few concepts completely equivalent to Western "empathy" exist (Hollan, 2012). Empathy as an overarching category encompasses related yet distinct psychological processes such as emotional contagion, sympathy, and compassion (Batson et al., 1987; Cuff et al., 2016; Preston & de Waal, 2002). Ickes (2003) proposes that differences in such terminology basically concentrate on three dimensions: the degree of cognitive representation of the target's emotional state, the degree of emotional sharing, and the extent to which self-other distinction is maintained, with Western empathy typically occupying the middle range of each dimension. In contrast, empathy in Chinese cultural contexts occupies different positions on these three dimensions: lower cognitive representation with less emphasis on fine discrimination and expression of the empathic target's emotions; higher emotional sharing with easier passive involvement and high resonance for in-group members; and lower self-other distinction with a tendency toward blurred self-other boundaries. Future research needs more such inclusive theoretical frameworks to integrate empathy forms across cultures, promoting understanding and deeper investigation of empathy phenomena.

Meanwhile, there is an urgent need to advance truly indigenous psychological research rooted in Chinese cultural soil to construct an empathy theoretical system more compatible with Chinese cultural-psychological reality. As Huang Guangguo (2019) advocates, Chinese scholars should possess the cultural consciousness to engage in indigenous movements, constructing a "culture-inclusive theory" that can explain both universal human psychological mechanisms and specific cultural mentalities through developing indigenous psychology, thereby guiding psychological research from cultural comparison to cultural interpretation. The differential mode of association perspective proposed in this paper can serve as a reference framework for empathy research. Future studies can systematically examine Chinese people's empathy differences toward various relational targets—family members, acquaintances, strangers, superiors, equals, and subordinates—under the "intimacy-distance-hierarchy-status" dimensions. Through empirical research testing the theoretical hypotheses proposed herein, and based on deep understanding of Chinese people's unique empathic expression modes, researchers can design more culturally adapted empathy training

methods to promote empathic expression in specific contexts and populations.

In an era of cultural integration and diversified values, Western individualistic culture's person-self relationship construction and emotional expression paradigms provide Chinese society with new perspectives for reflecting on its own cultural traditions (Ren & Xie, 2022; Yan, 2016) while also bringing challenges to cultural identity and psychological adaptation. Uncritically applying Western theoretical frameworks can easily misinterpret cultural differences as "empathy deficits," thereby neglecting Chinese people's empathic expressions. In real life, such cultural misalignment has triggered numerous social-psychological problems. For example, intergenerational empathy gaps appear in families: younger generations influenced by individualism tend toward emotional expression and self-validation, while older generations still adhere to the traditional "actions speak louder than words" model. If the cultural logic conflict between the two lacks understanding and adjustment, it may transform into actual emotional trauma (Leung & Chen, 2009). Therefore, deeply understanding how culture shapes empathy not only helps flexibly adjust interpersonal distance and response methods in families, workplaces, and other contexts but also facilitates constructing more inclusive and mental health-promoting social environments in cultural dialogue.

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² Power distance refers to the degree to which a culture accepts and expects power inequality.

³ Social Dominance Orientation refers to individuals' preference for social hierarchy over egalitarianism as a guiding principle for social structure.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.