

# Self, Community, Nature, and Heaven Tao: The Source of Life Meaning for College Students—Research Based on Auto- photography and Photo-elicitation

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The meaning of life is the understanding of “what life means” formed in people’s life experience. The sources of life meaning refer to the experiences that give meaning to life, reflecting the dimensions of existence in which individuals tend to devote their attention. Exploring the source of life meaning of college students is helpful to understand the way of life existence of college students more profoundly. Through the research method of Auto-photography and Photo-elicitation, it is found that the life meaning of college students mainly comes from 11 items, such as “good friends”, “natural scenery”, “mind”, “body”, “plants and animals”, “lovers”, “life nature”, “spirit”, “relatives”, “teachers”, and “nation”. It can correspond to the framework of “Self-Community-Nature-Heaven Tao” proposed by Confucian “Spiritual Humanism”. The sources of life meaning of college students have the following characteristics: “friends”, “lovers”, “relatives”, “teachers”, “nation” which are the new “five ethic relationships” sources of life meaning of college students. The knowledge that can directly bring the sense of life meaning to college students is “knowledge of virtue” rather than “knowledge of sense”. “Affection” permeates all the source items of life meaning and all the dimensions of life existence, which is the key link of the occurrence of the life meaning of college students. College humanistic education should extend the understanding of “human life”, expand the “relation place” for the implementation of humanistic education, increase the weight of moral knowledge, guide students to intuitive, experience, and reflection of their own life, and cultivate students’ sensibility and moral sentiment to the life of universe such as self, others, and nature.

**Keywords:** meaning of life, college students, human life existence, spiritual humanism, humanistic education

## Introduction

Meaning in life is generated from human self-consciousness, which is the embodiment of human subjectivity. When people objectify their own life, the meaning of life also comes into being. The search for the meaning of life is the basic form of human existence, and the meaning of life is a “living” person must think about the problem. It is generally believed that the meaning of life refers to “understanding what life means or what the meaning of life is”, and it is “the experience, understanding and self-confirmation of the subject’s own life course” (Tong, 2022, p. 9). In other words, the meaning of life is a person’s understanding of “what life means” formed in the

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life experience. The meaning of a person's life is embodied in a set of interpretations he has made to his own life experience. Schneier divided the meaning of life into "sense of meaning of life" and "source of meaning of life" (Schnell & Tatjana, 2009). The sense of meaning of life refers to the degree to which an individual feels the meaning of life in the life experience. The source of meaning of life refers to the experiences that make people gain the meaning of life, including some event, some object, some relationship, some belief, some scenery, some emotional experience, etc. The "source of life meaning" reflects in which dimension of life existence an individual can feel "he is alive" more and in which dimension of life he tends to devote himself to and "commit himself" (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Since the 1980s, with the occurrence of human existential crisis, spiritual vacuum, and sense of meaninglessness, the exploration of the sources of life meaning of different groups (such as students, young people, the elderly, and the sick) has gradually attracted the attention of the academic community. Studies on the sources of life meaning of college students have also emerged in the past two decades, with the following representative examples: Michael F. Steger et al. selected 86 students as interviewees in an American university, conducted research using independent photography method, and found 16 categories of sources of the meaning of college students' lives: "interpersonal relationship", "interest/leisure activities", "nature", "education", "own", "specific space", "pet", "value", "religion", "technology", "the necessary living", "organization/activity", "the future", "career/work", "own", "other" (Steger, Shim, & Rush, 2013); Zhang Rongwei in three universities of Fujian Province in 2016 in the questionnaire survey to 1,087 college students of life found that college students' life meaning comes from "self-acceptance", "interpersonal relationship", "achievement", "justice", "self beyond", "intimacy", "religion", "self-acceptance", and the "interpersonal relationship" is the core source (Zhang, 2018); Shang Shijie surveyed 141 college students in Wuhan University in 2017, and the results showed that the life meaning of college students came from "relationship and family responsibility", "autonomy", "self-development", "social achievement", "life experience", and "social responsibility" (Shang, 2017); in 2017, Tan Man et al. conducted a questionnaire survey on 453 students from two universities in Chongqing and found that the life meaning of college students mainly comes from four sources: "self-actualization", "self-dedication", "belonging and love", and "life philosophy" (Tan, Zhang, Guo, & Li, 2018).

In terms of research methods, questionnaire, interview and measurement methods were used in most of the previous studies, but the preparation of questionnaire and interview outline and the use of scale should be carried out under a certain theoretical framework, which will limit the answers of interviewees within the existing framework, and the interviewees' language expression ability during the interview will greatly affect their interpretation space (Ho & Cheung, 2021). The auto-photography method used by Michael F. Steger and others provides a new reference for the research methods of the source of the meaning of life. This study uses auto-photography and photo-elicitation methods to explore the types and characteristics of the sources of the meaning of college students' lives, so as to have a deeper understanding of their way of life existence.

## **Research Design**

### **Research Method: Auto-photography and Photo-elicitation**

Auto-photography and photo-elicitation refer to interviews with participants by means of photos taken by researchers on specific topics or existing photos, both of which fall into participatory photography. This visualization method can "visualize invisible perception and experience into physical image data" (Tian & Liu, 2021, p. 12), which can more vividly express the "indescribable" ideas of the interviewees, and also enable the

researchers to understand the intentions of the interviewees more deeply. Auto-photography and photo-elicitation are often used in human geography research and have been paid more attention in children's research. In recent years, this method has also been applied to the research on the "source of life meaning", such as the study of Michael F. Steger et al. Ho Sweichu and Zhang Yingshan of the Chinese University of Hong Kong also used the same method to analyze the source of life meaning of Hong Kong youth and found results that were local and different from those of Michael F. Steger et al.

The advantages of auto-photography and photo-elicitation are as follows: First, the photo content can arouse the emotion and memory of the interviewees and help them express their ideas more vividly and concretely, avoiding the empty and abstract narration. Second, the process of taking or looking up photos is also a process of self-confirmation of respondents, which increases their sense of participation and subject status in the research. The third is to start with the photos to find topics, which can help break the ice between researchers and interviewees. In particular, topics such as "the source of meaning in life" are often "lost for words" or "don't know where to start", especially for those who are less talkative or reflective. Compared with questionnaire survey, scale measurement, direct interview, and other methods, auto-photography and photo-elicitation can obtain more specific and vivid materials, encourage interviewees to reflect on their own lives, and help researchers have a deeper understanding of the interviewees' ideas.

### Interviewee

The author looked for interviewees through acquaintance introduction and "snowball", and finally determined 40 undergraduates from 39 universities and 33 majors, including 18 male and 22 female. First of all, the author asked the interviewees to select three "things that bring meaning to your life" and send them photos. The contents of the photos could be people, events, objects, landscapes, abstract symbols, etc., and then described the meanings expressed in the photos and why they chose this photo. For photos related to privacy protection, the author has explained to the interviewees in advance that they can use mosaics or similar photos instead, such as photos of family members can use cartoons instead. Then, the author conducted a one-to-one interview with the interviewees, ranging from 40 to 70 minutes, and the interview content mainly focused on the interviewees' unclear descriptions.

### Material Analysis Process

Similar to the studies of Michael F. Steger et al., this study does not aim to generate theories, but only classifies the sources of the meaning of college students' lives. Therefore, compared with the general coding process of grounded theory, there is no selective coding in this study, and only open coding and axial coding are used.

Table 1

*Coding Results of "Sources of Life Meaning for College Students"*

| Spindle code (frequency) | Open coding (frequency)                                                                                |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Good friends (28)        | (1) Good friends (28)                                                                                  |
| Natural scenery (28)     | (1) Personal view (19)<br>(2) Tourist attractions (9)                                                  |
| Mind (25)                | (1) Emotional experience (20)<br>(2) Self-awareness (5)                                                |
| Body (16)                | (1) Food (6)<br>(2) Personal action (6)<br>(3) Health and disease (3)<br>(4) Appearance perception (1) |

Table 1 to be continued

|                         |                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Plants and animals (11) | (1) Pet (6)<br>(2) Plant (3)<br>(3) Stray animals (2)                                                     |
| Lovers (9)              | (1) In love (7)<br>(2) Not in love (2)<br>(1) Sincere (3)<br>(2) Aggressive (3)                           |
| Nature of life (9)      | (3) Love (2)<br>(4) Create (1)<br>(1) Hobby (4)<br>(2) Religious (2)<br>(3) Socialist (1)<br>(4) Idol (1) |
| Spirit (8)              | (1) Relatives (6)                                                                                         |
| Relatives (6)           | (1) Senior schoolmates (2)<br>(2) Teachers (1)                                                            |
| Teachers (3)            | (1) Patriotic feeling (1)                                                                                 |
| Nation (1)              |                                                                                                           |

### Research Results

This study finds that the life meaning of college students comes from 11 items such as “good friends”, “natural scenery”, “mind”, “body”, “plants and animals”, “lovers”, “life nature”, “spirit”, “relatives”, “teachers” and “nation” (Table 2 for photos and descriptions). “Good friends” are the primary source of life meaning for college students, and the friend relationship dominated by “like-minded” and “profound friendship” has become the most important ethical relationship for college students. “Good friends” for college students mean to accompany and grow together; parents, siblings, teachers for college students to bring a sense of life meaning are far less than friends. When asked “What do you consider a good friend? In other words, when something happens, you will feel that this friend is not in vain”, respondents basically answered around “sincerity”, “company”, “pour out”; “affective” friendship is far more important than “benefit” friendship.

Alongside “best friends” are “natural scenes”, which include things you can see around you (such as sunset on campus, a river on your way home) and things you can enjoy while traveling. “Natural scenery” usually triggers college students’ memories of childhood, self-reflection, and meditation on life. Some interviewees also describe their total immersion in the scenery. A scene does not necessarily arouse people’s rational thinking, but is an aesthetic experience for people. The pleasure in the depth of life brought by aesthetic experience is as important to college students as rational thinking.

“Mind” also plays a major role in the sources of life meaning for college students, including emotional experience (such as curiosity and boredom) and self-awareness. Emotional experience belongs to emotional and will aspects, while self-awareness belongs to cognitive aspects. The mind is followed by the body, which includes food, physical activity, health and illness, and appearance. To note that the body does not only refer to the physical body, it also refers to the behavior of the individual himself, and is also an important place for cultivation of individual life, such as crafting, cooking the satisfaction of “hands-on” activities, such as the respondents from the anxiety of “lookism” to “face” to “love yourself” sense of self, self-adjusting process. In fact, the “mind” and “body” are inseparable from two sources, “food”, “action”; “health and disease” and “appearance” are accompanied by feelings or cognitive, but in order to emphasize the body as a “place” for individual life cultivation, self-reflection and self-improvement, this study separately takes “body” as a type of life meaning source, intending to express the equal status of body and mind.

The fifth most important source of life meaning for college students was “animals and plants”, which included pets and stray animals. Pets often played the role of “family”, and the respondent said that pets relieved his depression (the respondent had dropped out of school for depression) and “tried to live” because he was responsible for his pets. The sixth place is “lovers”. The relationship between lovers not only has the significance of growing up together between friends, but also means the joint creation of a new life after graduation, such as going to school and getting a job. Alongside lovers is life nature, which refers to the inherent qualities of human life, such as upward direction, creativity, love, sincerity, and so on. The eighth is “spirit”, which includes hobbies, religions, doctrines, and idols. “Spirit” brings comfort, guidance, and sustenance to the interviewees.

The last three sources of the meaning of life of college students are “relatives”, “teachers”, and “nation”, which are generally considered to be extremely important for life and “teachers” who play an important role in the growth of students. From the perspective of this study, they are not the main sources of the meaning of life of college students. In a second round of interviews, the researchers asked, “What are some of your memorable experiences with teachers? What role do you think the teacher plays in your life?” Some interviewees think that the teacher has helped them a lot, but most interviewees think that “I have grown up, my values have been formed, and the teacher can’t change me” (SY-4), “After I fell ill (depression), the teacher didn’t take any care of me. I survived mostly by myself and my dog” (TG-4).

Table 2

*11 Examples of “Sources of Life Meaning for College Students”*

| The sorting | Category (frequency) | Photo sample                                                                        | Description of interviewee                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1           | Good friends (28)    |  | These are the flowers my out-of-town friends gave me for my birthday. She is my best friend. I was so happy to receive the flowers because it was the first birthday I didn’t spend with her after high school. After all, a person out of college, inevitably miss good friends. She will firmly tell me “I can” when I doubt myself, which gives me a lot of courage to “do it”. She is also the one I will share and confide in everything and anyone I meet. (TF-1) |
| 2           | Natural scenery (28) |  | This is the snow scene in the university. The snow scene in the northeast is really beautiful. Whenever I walk in the snow, I feel very peaceful. Looking back, some small things have great significance. I really like the snowscape taken in the university, a beautiful sunset, and the sudden sunshine through the window. That’s what I remember more than what I learned. (RY-2)                                                                                 |
| 3           | Mind (25)            |  | This is under our dormitory building, where a lot of things happen. Over the years, I have been curious about the university, then bored and then loved it. When I found that I liked this place, I was about to leave. Think of the past and myself, will never go back. (YZ-2)                                                                                                                                                                                        |

Table 2 to be continued

4 Body (16)



This is a picture of me and the girl I once had a crush on. Although we were not in love, I have grown a lot. I understand myself better. The other person has a very clear avoidant attachment, and I have an anxious attachment. I realized that the reason I was miserable in this relationship was that I had not faced up to my own emotional needs, had suppressed my own nature, had been following the needs of the other person, and in this relationship, I had lost myself. In the future, I will put my feelings first in intimate relationships. (AJ-1)



This is the photos of my daily meals. There was a time when I was crazy about making food pictures. Once my grandmother sent me so many lemons, I even made my own lemon sauce. Keep track of what you eat, and see pictures of your food and feel satisfied. (WI-1)



This is the zongzi I made on the Dragon Boat Festival in the university last year. That was my first time to make zongzi, the worst one is made by me. In fact, I do not love to eat zongzi, is to feel yourself do it is quite interesting. (GH-2)



This photo was taken when I went downstairs to do nucleic acid during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was hungry. Oh, I didn't know what to eat. The epidemic taught me to stock up, cook, and pay attention to my health. (XN-1)



This picture was taken by my roommate when I went out to dinner with her on National Day last year. I love this picture of my apple muscles and my mouth. It has a nice curve. I went through a long period of anxiety about my appearance, and then I gradually grew from a hollow person to one with inner thoughts and self-power. Now I am able to look at my appearance and feel confident wearing what I like to go out in. I love my pear shape and melon face! (AJ-3)

5 Plants and animals (11)



This is my dog. I took a picture of him the day I picked him up. After raising him, my depression eased so much that I put off my plan to die, thinking that at least I had to retire him. (TG-1)

Table 2 to be continued

6 Lovers (9)



There was a time when the college organized a sketching trip to the suburbs. I met this kitten on the road every day and often played with it with my roommates. It can be said that it was the most comfortable time in the sketching class. (ZY-3)



One evening, in the corner of the campus, I inadvertently saw the tenacious flowers of life. In an instant, I think I also want to work hard, strong life, like a flower bloom. (NZ-3)



This is the first fireworks I ever set off for my girlfriend in college. It's memorable. She is my life partner and we are very happy together and hope to work together and get married in the future. (TS-1)



He was probably the most important person in my life when I was 20 years old. We have a secret love for each other, but for many reasons cannot be together, so never burst. We are like very close parallel lines, seemingly intersect, but never intersect. Later, when we graduated, we avoided each other very deliberately. We never had a beginning nor an end. (YZ-3)



My love for life is just like hot pot. I am full of enthusiasm and feel that I have to live hard and tenacious. (GH-3)

7 Nature of life (9)



On my way back to my hometown, I saw the distant town shrouded in clouds and mists. It's a metaphor for my sequestered childhood. I miss the innocence of those days. Here, I temporarily escape from the intrigues of the city, enjoy a moment of peace and true self. (FH-1)



Love is very important to me. People need to grow up in "love" and reflect in "love". (WG-2)

Table 2 to be continued

8 Spirit (8)



This is my brush, which means “to create”. I think creativity is a very important thing in life. (PE-1)



This is my favorite cotton doll, Toto. The cotton ball looks easy to heal. I often take photos of her, and I also take her with me when I go out to play. It can be said that it is a kind of spiritual support. Although Cotton doll can't do anything, but when I dress her up, take photos for her, and take her out to play, I will burst with great joy. Maybe this is the value of companionship? Sometimes you can feel “needed and relied upon” and get up and get on with life. (TF-2)



I am a Christian. For me, my faith is very important and I will not give it up no matter what, and God has guided me to see the world through the eyes of love. (LL-1)



Although the university library is large, the most read works in the past few years are all kinds of feminist works. I insighted a lot of answers to the questions I had been asking, and raised a lot of new questions. There are many things I am not sure will be with me for the rest of my life, but this one certainly will not leave my spiritual domain until I die. (RY-3)



Kobe is my spiritual sustenance. I admire his way of life, persistence, and perseverance. (TY-3)

Table 2 to be continued

|    |               |                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9  | Relatives (6) |    | Last year I went back to the countryside to attend the autumn harvest and help my family arrange the corn. I was very tired, but I was very happy with my parents. I think my parents' love for me is the greatest and incomparable in the world. They always take care of me in every way. (XN-3) |
| 10 | Teachers (3)  |    | This is the photo of my teacher and me. She never gave me lessons, but she and I were like friends. She always gave me a lot of advice when choosing a career and encouraged me when I was confused. (YZ-1)                                                                                        |
|    |               |   | These are my four ministers, but also my good upperclassmen and studious sisters. They always give me help, teach me some office skills, and sometimes teach me how to behave. (QK-2)                                                                                                              |
| 11 | Nation (1)    |  | This is a patriotic tour organized by the internship unit in Xibaipo. It was my first time to visit the patriotic scenery, when my patriotic feelings arose spontaneously and I felt the greatness of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese. (QJ-3)                                         |

## Discussion

### Comparison With Previous Studies

In order to compare with other studies on the sources of life meaning for college students, this study classifies “friends”, “scenery”, “mind”, “body”, “animals and plants”, “lovers”, “nature of life”, “spirit”, “family”, “teachers”, and “nation”. For categorization, this study refers to Professor Tu Weiming (Modern New Confucianism)’s Spiritual Humanism. The division of the dimensions of human life existence, namely the four dimensions of “self”, “community”, “nature”, and “heaven Tao”, is also the basic framework for learning to be human. “Self” includes body, mind, soul, and spirit; “community” includes family, neighborhood, village, city, nation, and even the world; “nature” includes the animal kingdom, vegetation and rocks, mountains and rivers, and the air on which human beings breathe; “heaven Tao” is the belief of “the harmony of heaven and human”, that is, people should pursue the mutuality between the human and heaven Tao, and realize the benevolence and goodness endowed by “heaven” (Tu & Wang, 2021). If the sources of life meaning of college students are classified into this framework, then “mind”, “body”, and “spirit” belong to “self”; “friends”, “lovers”, “family”, “teachers”, and “nation” belong to “communities”; “natural scenery”, “plants and animals” belong to “nature”; the “nature of life” belongs to the “heaven Tao”.

Table 3

*Classification of Sources of Life Meaning of College Students Under the Framework of “Self-Community-Nature-Heaven Tao”*

| Life existence dimension | Axial coding             | Open coding                                                                                            |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self (49)                | Mind (25)                | (1) Emotional experience (20)<br>(2) Self-awareness (5)                                                |
|                          | Body (16)                | (1) Food (6)<br>(2) Personal action (6)<br>(3) Health and disease (3)<br>(4) Appearance perception (1) |
|                          | Spirit (8)               | (1) Hobby (4)<br>(2) Religious (2)<br>(3) Socialist (1)<br>(4) Idol (1)                                |
|                          | Friends (28)             | (1) Good friends (28)                                                                                  |
| Community (47)           | Lovers (9)               | (1) In love (7)<br>(2) Not in love (2)                                                                 |
|                          | Relatives (6)            | (1) Relatives (6)                                                                                      |
|                          | Teachers (3)             | (1) Senior schoolmates (2)<br>(2) Teachers (1)                                                         |
|                          | Nation (1)               | (1) Patriotism (1)                                                                                     |
| Nature (39)              | The natural scenery (28) | (1) Personal view (19)<br>(2) Tourist attractions (9)                                                  |
|                          | Plants and animals (11)  | (1) Pet (6)                                                                                            |
|                          |                          | (2) Plant (3)<br>(3) Stray animals (2)                                                                 |
| Heaven Tao (9)           | Nature of life (9)       | (1) Sincere (3)                                                                                        |
|                          |                          | (2) Enterprise (3)                                                                                     |
|                          |                          | (3) Love (2)<br>(4) Create (1)                                                                         |

Among the existing studies on the sources of life meaning for college students, we compared the results with those of four studies by Zhang Rongwei (2018), Shang Shijie (2017), Tan Man et al. (2018), and Michael F. Steger et al. (2013). This study is consistent with the above studies in that they both believe that “self” and “community” are important dimensions of the source of life meaning for college students. The “nature” dimension appears in this study and Stieg et al.’s study, both of which include natural scenes and pets. The “philosophy of life” proposed by Tan Man et al. is similar to the “nature of life” in this study. The difference lies in that this study finds that the “body” in the “self” dimension, other spiritual beliefs except “religion”, and the “nation” in the “community” dimension, which indicates patriotic and national feelings, are also the sources of meaning that cannot be ignored.

Table 4

*Comparison of Relevant Research Results of “Sources of the Meaning of College Life”*

| Life meaning source dimension | This research          | Zhang Rongwei (2018)                                                                         | Shang Shijie (2017)                                                  | Tan Man et al. (2018) | Michael F. Steger et al. (2013)                                                                    |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self                          | Mind<br>Body<br>Spirit | Self-acceptance<br>Achievement<br>Beyond the self<br>The fair treatment<br>Religious beliefs | Independent<br>Self-development<br>Social achievements<br>experience | Self-actualization    | Hobby/leisure<br>Education<br>Religious<br>Values<br>Future aspirations<br>Occupation/Work<br>Self |

Table 4 to be continued

|            |                                                      |                                                         |                                                                            |                                             |                                          |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Community  | Friends<br>Lovers<br>Relatives<br>Teachers<br>Nation | Interpersonal<br>relationships<br>Intimate relationship | Relationships and<br>family responsibility<br>The social<br>responsibility | Self-dedication<br>Of belonging and<br>love | Relationships<br>Organization/activities |
| Nature     | The natural scenery<br>Plants and animals            | /                                                       | /                                                                          | /                                           | Nature<br>Pets                           |
| Heaven Tao | Nature of life                                       | /                                                       | /                                                                          | Philosophy of life                          | /                                        |

### The Most Important Ethical Relationship of College Students' Life Meaning Source

Ethical relation is a kind of moral relation which is different from political relation and economic relation. It permeates all kinds of social life of people. Both sides of ethical relation are based on rights and obligations, responsibility or virtue. According to the narration of the interviewees in this study, the source of life meaning in the “community” dimension mainly refers to the ethical relationship, which is linked by emotion and based on self-improvement. According to a survey on the ethics of various social groups in China, the five most important ethical relationships of young intellectuals (including college students, postgraduates, young teachers, and young science and technology workers) include father and son (92%), superiors or teachers (60.9%), friends (53.2%), brothers and sisters (47.3%), and husband and wife (42.6%) (Fan, 2020). However, from the perspective of the source of the meaning of life, this study finds that the most important ethical relationships of college students are friends, lovers, relatives, teachers, and nation. Compared with the above research, the first priority of the new “five ethical relationships” is “friends” rather than “father and son”; “lovers” ranked second, with no “husband and wife”; there is an added dimension of “nation”. It is worth noting that “lovers” is a special source of life meaning for college students. When the interviewees talk about lovers, they believe that they have grown up in their “twenty years old of youth”, no matter they are in love, unrequited love, or lovelorn.

### “Affection” Is the Key Link of the Meaning of College Students' Life

Since the 20th century, with the development of philosophy of life and philosophy of existentialism, “Human is affective being” has gradually formed an ideological trend. “Human being is the existence of affection” means that “affection” is the original existence form of human life. In Chinese Confucianism, affection refers to “benevolence”, “compassion”, “conscience”, “be at ease”, “shame”, and other moral affection. Although this study classifies “affective experience” from meaning sources as “mind”, it does not mean that “affective experience” or “mind” is completely separated from other sources. In fact, “affective experience” occurs in all sources of meaning, such as friends, natural scenery, and body. Affective experience, such as “moving” when getting along with friends, “shocking” when enjoying beautiful scenery, and “satisfied” when making zongzi by hand, is the key link for respondents to generate a sense of life meaning. In addition, in the “nature of life” category, respondents said that the meaning of life occurs in the primordial affection such as “love”.

The reason why “affection” penetrates into all the 11 meaning source items and the four life existence dimensions of “self-community-nature-heaven Tao” is that affection is the origin of the mind. Affection is universal and congenital. Affection—specifically moral affection—is the original existence way of life, and the mutual trust, understanding and mutuality between human beings is due to this. Just as Michel Henry’s phenomenology holds that pathos-avec is the original way of being with others, pathos-avec is the true bond of community (Guo, 2014). Because of this, “affection” and the “sensitivity” formed on the basis of “affection”

become the link between self and community, nature and heaven Tao. The “closeness” between life and life comes from the most precious, sincerest, and good original affection of human being as a lively individual life.

### Conclusion

This study uses auto-photography and photo-elicitation about methods to explore the source of the life of college students and finds that the life of college students mainly comes from “good friends”, “natural scenery”, “mind”, “body”, “plants and animals”, “lovers”, “life nature”, “spirit”, “relatives”, “teachers”, “nation”. It can be corresponding to the life existence dimension of “self-community-nature-heaven Tao” proposed by “Spiritual Humanism”. Compared with previous studies, this study believes that in addition to self and community, nature and heaven Tao are also the dimensions that cannot be ignored as the source of life meaning for college students. This study also found that “friends”, “lovers”, “relatives”, “teachers”, “nation” are the most important ethical relationships of college students’ life meaning sources; “affection” permeates all the source items of life meaning and all the dimensions of life existence, which is the key link of the occurrence of the life meaning of college students.

This study also has implications for the current university humanistic education:

First, humanistic education should extend the understanding of “whole person”, and the whole person should include four dimensions: self, community, nature and heaven Tao. In the practice of humanistic education in universities, we tend to ignore the two dimensions of “nature” and “heaven Tao”, and ignore that the sustainable and harmonious intimate relationship between human and nature is also an indispensable part of the perfection of life. More importantly, we neglect the pursuit of the realm of life in which “heaven Tao” and “life nature” are integrated.

Second, we should expand the “place of relationship” for the implementation of humanistic education. At present, humanistic education in universities is mainly carried out between teachers and students, which is manifested as teachers “giving classes”, “giving lectures” and “doing psychological counseling” for students. The two most important sources of meaning, friends and lovers, have been neglected, so it is worth paying attention to how to infiltrate humanistic education into peer communication.

Third, we should increase the weight of moral knowledge, practical wisdom, personal knowledge, and self-knowledge in humanistic education, guide students to intuitive, experience, and reflection on their own life, and cultivate students’ sensitivity to self, others, nature, and other living things, as well as moral emotions such as “sympathy”, “shame”, and “love”.

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