

# Research on the Connotation of Chinese Traditional Self-cultivation Culture

Chunyan Wu

College of Educational Science  
Bohai University  
Jinzhou, China

**Abstract**—Chinese traditional self-cultivation culture, as a rich cultural phenomenon, has its own perfect system. It originated from Chinese philosophy: Confucianism. It takes human nature theory as its theoretical basis, moral self-discipline as its basic model, and spiritual realm as its ideal pursuit, thus forming a trinity of human nature theory, moral self-discipline and spiritual realm. The philosophical connotation of Chinese traditional self-cultivation culture runs through the ancient and modern times of China and the West, and is rich in content. The contemporary connotation of Chinese traditional self-cultivation culture is profound and has strong practical guiding significance.

**Keywords**—Chinese traditional self-cultivation culture; connotation; aspiration; learning; thinking and action

## I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese traditional culture has a long history. After thousands of years of development, a cultural phenomenon with universal significance for everyone has gradually formed, that is, self-cultivation culture. Our ancestors and sages of past dynasties not only constructed a wise life growth prospect and a mode of dealing with people for us, but also deduced a set of cautious and rigorous life trajectory and social ethics for us through self-cultivation. The culture of self-cultivation is a culture of self-cultivation for human beings, a principle of adapting to society and historical development. It takes the ideas of "human beings are born with good nature" (*Mencius: Gao Zi Shang*), "all human beings can be Yao and Shun (ancient sages)" (*Mencius: Gao Zi Xia*) as its starting point, and takes "the virtue of sages" (*The Chapter Variorum of the four books: Doctrine of the Mean*) and "the ancient sages" (*Dream of Red Mansions*) as individual self-cultivation goal, which shows an abundant connotation cultural system of self-cultivation. As a rich cultural phenomenon, Chinese traditional self-cultivation culture has its own perfect system. It takes human nature theory as its theoretical basis, moral self-discipline as its basic model, and spiritual realm as its ideal pursuit, thus forming a trinity cultural space of human nature theory, moral self-discipline and spiritual realm.

## II. PHILOSOPHICAL CONNOTATION OF CHINESE TRADITIONAL SELF-CULTIVATION CULTURE

Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are the three most influential schools in Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism, which is deeply engraved in the spirit of the Chinese people. It can be said that the culture of self-cultivation originated from Confucianism in Chinese philosophy and was deeply influenced by Confucianism. Chinese philosophy analyses man and the universe from the composition of individual life. It holds that many components of a life are closely related to the big universe through existential little universe, which is the body. [1] After thousands of years of historical wash and accumulation, the culture of "respecting oneself as a great person" (*The Book of Rites: Ai Gong Wen*) has finally reached the philosophical abstraction of "integration of spiritual accomplishment and physical growth" (*Book of Documents: Yin Yi*). The spiritual and cultural connotations of "If there is morality and justice in the world, it is necessary to use it to restrain ourselves. If not, it needed to pursue it" (*Mencius: Jin Xin Zhang Ju Shang*) are the cosmological outlook of "the unity of heaven and man" and also the body outlook of Confucianism.

The unity of heaven and man is the unity of humanity, heaven and earth are my parents, people are my compatriots, and all things are my friends. Everything in the world is related to me. All moral activities are the obligations that individuals should bear and realize. "The benevolent and all living things are one" (*He Nan Cheng Shi Yi Shu*), man and the heaven are inherited together, into one, the individual and the universe as a whole. For self-cultivation, only by transcending individual ego, doing benevolence and justice, and doing humanity, can it is necessary conform to the heavenly way and enter the Holy realm. Therefore, once the "supreme goodness" is implement to the "body respect", the worship of the body becomes life-like, cosmic and philosophical, and the mottos of "no harm the body of a gentleman, no punish the body of a gentleman" (*The Book of Rites: Ji Yi*), and "both wise and philosophical, to preserve the body" (*Book of Songs: Da Ya: Cheng Min*) are put into practice. The mottos of "respect for the body, noble body, upright body, keeping one's integrity and dedication" are put forward. Raise the philosophy of (*Mencius: Jin Xin Shang*)

"When you lose your ambition, you should control your moral cultivation. When you gain your ambition, you should try to benefit the whole world" to the level of philosophy of life. Chinese philosophy regards self-cultivation as the process of body-cultivation, takes self-cultivation as the way of general heaven, and emphasizes that self-cultivation is the way of understanding the universe and the realm of harmony between man and nature. It can be seen that Chinese philosophy has a profound and innate influence on self-cultivation culture. Chinese philosophy and traditional culture attach great importance to self-cultivation, which has a profound tradition in China.

Unlike Chinese philosophy, western philosophy separates the two when discussing the relationship between heaven and man. In the view of Western philosophy, individual man strives for survival and development in the struggle against the universe and nature, which forms the sense of opposition between man and nature. Since then, Western philosophy has derived a series of binary juxtapositions, such as the juxtaposition of mind and matter, the juxtaposition of man and God, the juxtaposition of subject and object, the juxtaposition of God rights and human rights, the juxtaposition of nature conception and life conception, the juxtaposition of reason and irrationality, the juxtaposition of fact and value, freedom and necessity, and so on. It is based on this point of view that western philosophy studies the natural noumenon and human understanding separately. Western philosophy pays more attention to the real people in the ideal world. What is human? Man is a rational animal, man is a political animal, man is an animal that makes tools, man is an animal of culture, etc.

It is precisely the difference between Chinese and Western philosophy about the relationship between heaven and man that determines the difference of the research content and method between Chinese and Western philosophy. In western philosophy, "self-cultivation" generally refers to moral cultivation, and is always inseparable from ethics. Kant, a German philosopher, said, "There are two kinds of things. The deeper and lasting I think about them, the more lasting the wonder and awe they evoke in my heart. One is the vast starry sky above us, the other is the moral law in our heart." [2] Socrates believed that it should use reason and thinking to seek universal morality. He believed that "virtue is knowledge". He believed that good comes from knowledge, evil comes from ignorance, and the improvement of personal moral accomplishment is the knowledge that human beings should pursue. Although this is the teleology of idealism, which holds that everything is created and arranged by God, reflects the wisdom and purpose of God, and puts forward the proposition of "knowing oneself ignorant", from another perspective, western philosophy also attaches importance to personal moral cultivation and ethical system, and is also an important manifestation of attaching importance to the function of traditional self-cultivation. The self-cultivation foundation of western philosophy originates from the relativity between heaven and man, from the advocate and pursuit of personal morality, and from the profound understanding of self-improvement.

In the contemporary era, Marxist philosophy summarizes the essence of human beings as the sum of all social relations, so "self-cultivation" means "self-transformation" in the process of transforming the objective world, that is, to change oneself through personal practice, so that one's ideology and behavior can better adapt to the objective world.

Through the analysis of Chinese philosophy, Western philosophy and Marxist philosophy, it can be seen that self-cultivation has a strong philosophical foundation, and that self-cultivation culture originates from philosophy. It can even say that self-cultivation culture is an important part of the philosophical system; on the contrary, the development of philosophy has played a very good role in promoting the development of self-cultivation culture, especially the development of Chinese philosophy. The development of self-cultivation culture has played an important role. The rich historical accumulation of Chinese philosophy has played a solid foundation for the development of self-cultivation culture. Moreover, the culture of self-cultivation in Chinese philosophy highlights and emphasizes the practice from beginning to end, namely "ritual, performance" (*Origin of Chinese Characters*), which is compatible with the connotation that the essence of human beings in Marxist philosophy is formed and developed in production practice. Therefore, the culture of self-cultivation originates from philosophy, and also runs across Chinese and foreign philosophy and ancient and modern philosophy.

### III. CONTEMPORARY CONNOTATION OF CHINESE TRADITIONAL SELF-CULTIVATION CULTURE

In the chapter of *The Great Learning*, it is said that the ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy. From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides. Theorists call "Eight Items" as "study the objects, gain the knowledge, accumulate the sincerity, upright the mind, self-cultivation, family harmony, country management, make the world peace", and the core content of "Eight Items" is "self-cultivation". Zhu Xi said in *The Chapter Variorum of the four books* "Integrating one's own knowledge, feelings, and intentions with the outside world is self-cultivation. Under the family unity, it is necessary to act accordingly." It can be seen that only

through self-cultivation can the content of "Eight Items" be put into practice. In *Volume 14 of Zhuzi Language Category*, it is believed that the essence of "study the objects, gain the knowledge, accumulate the sincerity, upright the mind" is for self-cultivation, which can be attributed to self-cultivation. In contemporary times, self-cultivation not only contains rich cultural content, but also has broad practical significance.

#### A. *The Ideological Foundation of Self-cultivation Culture*

Chinese traditional self-cultivation culture is a rich culture with solid ideological foundation. This solid ideological foundation is the theory of human nature. Human nature theory has a long history. Due to the limitations of historical development, it is impossible for ancient Chinese human nature theory to make a scientific and reasonable explanation of human nature, but human nature theory is indeed a common concern of thinkers of all dynasties. Confucius said: "By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart" (*The Analects of Confucius: Yang Huo*). He deduced the theory of human nature that, whether saints or ordinary people, human nature is similar, but because of the different growth environment acquired, human nature also changes with it. Mencius' theory of "good nature", Xunzi's theory of "evil nature" and Dong Zhongshu's theory of "three qualities of nature" all pay much attention to the importance of personal acquired moral cultivation. Whether the nature is good or evil, whether morality is high, middle or low, the role of acquired cultivation is extremely important. Li Ao of Tang Dynasty, Zhang Zai and Zhu Xi of Song Dynasty also discussed human nature from different aspects. In ancient China, the content of the theory of human nature is very rich, and with the development of the times, it becomes more and more profound. In a country that pays attention to moral modification, this is a prominent and characteristic problem. The reason why the theory of human nature is so rich is that the cultivation of self-cultivation in ancient China. The debate between good and evil in human nature from the Pre-Qin Dynasty to the Han Dynasty is, in the final analysis, to put forward a way for acquired self-cultivation, either to maintain the inherent good nature through acquired self-cultivation or to modify the evil from good through acquired self-cultivation; the distinction of human quality levels in the Han and Tang Dynasties is also to demonstrate that people are from low-grade to high-grade self-cultivation; to the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, the two theories of human nature emphasize the acquired good accomplishment, change the impure side of acquired habits, to the point of perfection. These abundant theories of human nature in ancient China laid the ideological foundation for self-cultivation. [3]

#### B. *The Basic Model of Self-cultivation Culture*

Chinese traditional culture of self-cultivation emphasizes the improvement of self-cultivation, moral self-discipline consciousness and mind control mechanism as the basic mode of self-cultivation. Confucius pays attention to moral self-discipline and self-restraint, self-cultivation regulation and self-cultivation, emphasizes self-cultivation, that is, to

improve self-cultivation and become perfect through his subjective efforts. Confucius said, "Restraining oneself and restoring courtesy is benevolence. If you do like that, the world returns to benevolence. For the sake of benevolence, it depends on you, not others." (*The Analects of Confucius: Yan Yuan*) At the same time, Confucius believed that moral self-discipline is a long and unremitting process in one's life. He once said, "When I'm fifteen, I determined to engage in scholarship, when I'm thirty, I got on in the world, when I'm forty, I no longer confused, when I'm fifty, I knew the destiny of heaven, when I'm sixty, I got to obey the destiny, when I'm seventy, I can do anything I want and not exceed the rules." (*The Analects of Confucius: Wei Zheng*) This is a set of moral cultivation from inner self-cultivation to moral practice, that is, a consistent process from learning to thinking, and finally to doing. Mencius inherited Confucius's "introspective" cultivation method and emphasized inner cultivation. "Gentlemen have benevolence in mind and courtesy in mind" (*Mencius: Li Lou Xia*), "I am good at nourishing my noble spirit" (*Mencius: Gong Sunchou Shang*), "Gain ambition and add it to the people; Undesirable, keep going on self-cultivation. If you have not succeeded yet, preserve your moral integrity and cultivate your morality. If you do, make the world go like this." (*Mencius: Jin Xin Shang*) emphasizes the mode of self-cultivation from the following aspects: the standard good heart, the subjective image of inner benevolence and the subjective cultivation of motivation and patience. Xunzi's thought of moral self-discipline can be summarized as "to reform human nature so that sets up moral concepts", educating people with etiquette and morality, and changing people's viciousness. "The sage changes the evil of human nature and raises the artificial good, and the artificial good raises the propriety and righteousness" (*Xun Zi: Xing E*). Zhu Xi's moral self-discipline thought mainly talks about the method of "study the truth thoroughly", namely "respecting". His inner self-cultivation reaches a cautious state. He can't indulge his own selfish desires at any time, and he should always be respectful. This is a way of inner self-cultivation, the essence of which is to extinguish human desire for the sake of heaven. Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Shouren also discussed the thought of moral self-discipline from the ideological system of mind science, forming the theory of cultivating the mind. They believed that benevolence is the foundation of the mind, and that it is necessary to remove the selfish desires of people and maintain the inherent benevolence and knowledge. "Benevolence and righteousness are the essence of the heart". (*Yu Zeng Zhai Zhi*) "The supreme goodness is the essence of the heart" (*Chuan Xi Lu: Shang*) and achieve self-cultivation through the moral self-discipline of the mind. In traditional Chinese culture of self-cultivation, the consciousness of moral self-discipline and the regulation mechanism of individual mind are a kind of self-consciousness. Self-restraint and self-discipline are the long-standing and rich self-cultivation thoughts and the basic modes of self-cultivation.

### C. Ideal Pursuit of Self-cultivation

The Chinese nation is a nation with ideal pursuit, which pays attention to the pursuit and perseverance of spiritual realm. In ancient China, the theory of spiritual realm was concerned with the pursuit of noble spirit and the realization of ideal realm of life. This theory of spiritual realm clarifies that the essence of an individual is good, or can be good, or can be restored and maintained by acquired self-cultivation, or can be changed from evil to good. In order to achieve the spiritual realm of personal ideal, the main answer and solution is what the goal of self-cultivation is and what the spiritual realm of life ideal is. This theory of spiritual realm points out the pursuit goal and direction of individual life, and fully presents the ideal pursuit of self-cultivation. Confucius put forward the theory of spiritual realm with "benevolence" as the core, and took "benevolence" as the ideal goal of self-cultivation. He believed that when individuals reach the realm of "benevolence", they can not only maintain their noble moral character of keeping benevolence, but also establish ideal interpersonal relationship with "benevolence" as the interpersonal criterion. Benevolence is the ideal spiritual realm, namely "a man of virtue is content with virtue" (*The Analects of Confucius: Li Ren*). Mencius combined "benevolence" with "righteousness" and put forward the theory of "benevolence and righteousness" as the highest ideal spiritual realm of individual life. "Benevolence is the heart of the people; righteousness is the way of the people" (*Mencius: Gao Zi Shang*), "Benevolence is the spiritual home for man's soul, and rightness is the right path for man's life." (*Mencius: Li Lou Shang*). The people's heart is benevolence, the way of the people is righteousness, and the inner cultivation reaches the highest level. Benevolence is stuffed in the heart, and people follow the road of justice, regardless of relatives and human relations, behave and dealing with affairs, they fully reflect the realm of benevolence and righteousness. This realm theory is based on the goodness of human nature and takes the cultivation of human nature as the path to reach the spiritual realm of the thought of benevolence and righteousness. Li Ao put forward the theory of "sincerity" spiritual realm, believing that "sincerity" is a kind of spiritual realm of saints, reaching this spiritual realm, people will not be burdened by material, not be attracted by emotional, all human actions will be in good faith, which is a spiritual realm that inner spiritual cultivation mostly needs to achieve. Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Wang Shouren and Wang Fuzhi all put forward the spiritual realm of "harmony between man and nature". As long as the individual's inner self-cultivation reaches the realm of integration with heaven and earth, it is the realm of saints, "benevolent people, integrating heaven and earth with all things" (*Volume 2 of He Nan Cheng Shi Yi Shu*). The above-mentioned theory of spiritual realm clarifies the ideal goal and pursuit of self-cultivation, makes the individual clear the direction of self-cultivation and is inspired by spirit. It has abandoned the lower level of pursuing material desire, but pursued a higher level of spiritual realm. Spiritual realm is the ideal pursuit of traditional self-cultivation culture.

### D. The Interrelation of Ideology and Practice in Self-cultivation Culture

Confucius said, "At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what the biddings of Heaven were. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right". (*The Analects of Confucius: Wei Zheng*) This is Confucius' self-narrative course of life accomplishment, which is discussed from four perspectives: aspiration, learning, thinking and action. Fifteen years old determined to learn, thirty years old can do things independently, forty years old encounters things without confusion, fifty years old knows what cannot be controlled by human resources, sixty years old can widely listen to a variety of opinions, seventy years old can be free, easy to accept but not beyond the rules. At the age of fifteen, he aspired and began to learn; at the age of thirty, he achieved success; at the age of forty or fifty, he was not puzzled and knows his destiny; at the age of sixty or seventy, he obeyed his destiny. This process of life is a whole set of self-cultivation process from inner self-cultivation to moral practice, that is, the way of self-cultivation.

Professor Zeng Shiqiang, a Taiwanese scholar, also spoke about Confucius in his Lecture Room of the book *the Secrets of the Book of Changes*. Another meaning of these words is: at the age of fifteen, one decides the direction of study; at the age of thirty, one determines the principles of life; at the age of forty, one does not waver in the goal of life; at the age of fifty, one understands that one's destiny is made by oneself; at the age of sixty, listen to a wide range of opinions, so that when you are seventy years old, you can do what you want to do, and you will never do anything out of order. Similarly, whether it is *the Analects of Confucius* or *the Book of Changes*, the traditional Chinese culture of self-cultivation has a strong discussion about aspirations, learning, thinking and doing, and from the perspective of the relationship between the four to study the way of self-cultivation.

Confucius regards set up ambition as the starting point of learning and moral cultivation. Later Confucian Chen Chun explained "aspiration" as "aspiration, where the heart is. If you want to chase it, you must put all your positive part on it. If your ambition is morality, you are wholehearted in morality, if you aspire to learn, you are wholehearted in learning. If you keep asking for it, you will get it, which is aspiration" (*Bei Xi Zi Yi: Zhi*). Confucius's "ambition" refers to the pursuit of morality. Only by setting up ambition can it be possible to cultivate ourselves and achieve good results, otherwise it can't "pursue benevolence and promote goodness". Confucius emphasized the importance of moral pursuit, believing that moral pursuit is the unique ability of human beings and the key to individual morality. No matter what their social status is, anyone can achieve the moral pursuit of "benevolence" and the goal of "benevolence" with his own positive efforts and perseverance. Confucius's "will" is a will emanating from "benevolence". It has the character of "benevolence". It emphasizes the will's adherence to

morality and its control over emotions, desires and interests. It is a will to suppress evil and eliminate evil. In essence, it is also a will to seek good thing.

So what needs to be done when an individual aspires, and how to achieve "aspirations"? Next is learning. Confucius's "learning" refers to strengthening self-cultivation and learning etiquette well, so as to be a man. Confucius believed that moral learning should first be determined and aim high. Secondly, moral knowledge should be learned. Only by learning etiquette can people cultivate moral consciousness and improve moral accomplishment. "Learning needs to set up a high ambition, if not, it is easy to be complacent, with complacent, it is difficult to make progress. Learning needs to have courage, lacking of courage, people will think they can understand everything, even there are something they do not understand, will think they have learnt everything, even there are something they haven't learnt." (*the second volume of Jin Si Lu Ji Zhu*). It can be seen that set up a high ambition can promote better etiquette learning.

Confucius demanded that moral learning should be combined with self-reflection. Think in learning, learn in thinking. If one ask questions honestly and think about the current situation, moral will sure be in him. (*The Analects of Confucius: Zi Zhang*) Confucius advocated "Nine Thoughts" (When you look at it, think about whether it is clear; when you listen, think about whether it is clear; when you face people, think about whether your face is mild; when you treat others, think if you are respectful of others; when you speak, think about loyalty; when you do things, think about seriousness; when you have doubts, think about how to consult others; when you are in trouble, think about the consequences; when you are profitable, think about legitimacy.) (*The Analects of Confucius: Ji Shi*). The principle of "Nine Thoughts" is to self-examine one's thoughts, words and deeds, and check whether one's thoughts, words and deeds meet the moral requirements. Confucius said that a gentleman "after self-reflection, the heart is not guilty, then what should worry and fear?" (*The Analects of Confucius: Yan Yuan*) means that a gentleman should have a clear conscience through self-reflection, be worthy of the gods of heaven and earth, and be worthy of the conscience of the world. What worries or fears are there? It is this kind of thinking and reflection that is the cultivation method of introspection and promotes the progress of inner thinking through external learning activities. The function of "thinking" is to reflect on whether one's own words and deeds are checked by moral norms and examine one's words and deeds by way of thinking, which is an important way and method of moral cultivation.

Through learning and reflection, individuals can better fulfill their moral standards by verifying the gap between cognition and aspiration. Confucius attached great importance to personal practice and thought that the ideal personality and moral will quality originated from personal experience and practice. Confucius's "action" refers to moral practice, which is a kind of moral practice. He believes that words and deeds should be consistent. In order to achieve physical practice and see a person, people must see whether

his behavior conforms to moral standards. He regards "action" as an activity of moral practice, and "action" becomes an important way of self-cultivation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Through the above discussion, it can be concluded that "aspiration" is the goal of moral cultivation, "learning" is the method of moral cultivation, "thinking" is the feedback of moral cultivation, and "action" is the purpose of moral cultivation. Aspiration, learning, thinking and action are a cycle process from beginning to end, and a process of individual moral cultivation. This process is an infinite cycle process from beginning to end and from end to beginning. At the same time, Confucius endowed " aspiration " with the connotation and significance of moral value, embodied the efforts of "learning" as " aspiration " at the conceptual level, reflected the feedback of "thinking" as "learning" at the practical level, and tried his best to achieve the value goal, and obtained the ultimate value significance of "action" in the combination of this concept and practice, and fully experienced human beings from it. It is available to fully experience the pursuit of moral value of life and the dignity and happiness of life in samsara.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Kang Huaiyuan, "Harmonious Implication of Chinese Self-cultivation Culture and Contemporary Educational Value," *Journal of Chongqing Institute of Education*, vol. 5, pp. 85-88, May 2010.
- [2] Deng Xiaomang (trans.), Kant (author). *Criticism of Practical Reason* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2004: 237.
- [3] Cao Deben, "Research on Chinese Traditional Self-cultivation Culture" *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, vol. 5, pp. 17-23, May 2004.