

# Comparison of Chinese and Western Cultural Traditions from the Perspective of Triple Visions

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**Abstract**—In the process of modernization, the transformation and development of culture is an important part and theme. China and the West have contributed wisdom and strength to the modern transformation and development of culture. How they deal with and answer the question about the relations between human and nature, between human and society and between humans constitutes the main difference between Chinese and Western cultures. In the relation between human and nature, the West has a rational cultural tradition, while Chinese traditional culture has a natural view of harmony between heaven and human; in the relation between human and society, the West has a humanistic tradition, while Chinese traditional culture has the view of harmony between humans; in the relation between human and him/herself, the West has an ascetic tradition, while Chinese traditional culture has a view of reason-based desire control.

**Keywords**—Chinese and Western cultures; cultural traditions; harmony between heaven and human; harmony between humans; harmony between desire and sense

## I. INTRODUCTION

In many interpretations about culture, although the research perspectives, the theoretical themes, and the subject matters are different, it is the consensus that culture and people must be inseparable. Culture is inseparable from human beings. Culture is the essential provision of human beings and the way people live. The survival of human beings is nothing more than the treatment of the relations between human and nature, between human and society, and between humans. Therefore, from those three dimensions, it is available to relatively completely view the Chinese and Western cultures. Culture is in fluid development. Culture changes its traditions to modern times in its evolutionary history. A comparison of the differences between Chinese and Western cultural traditions at the roots of Chinese and Western cultures is conducive to the mutual dialogue and integration.

## II. COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL VIEWS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE

### A. Western Rational Cultural Tradition

Western thinking about the relation between human and nature is inseparable from its rational culture. It is precisely

its rational cultural tradition that contains an answer to the question about the relation between human and nature. As early as in ancient Greece, philosophers had tried to answer the question about the relation between human and nature, which laid the important elements of the Western view of nature: reason and number. Reason and number are also important elements of modern science. The development of modern science has urged the Western view of nature to pay more attention to accurate analysis, take nature as the object separated from human and analyze and anatomize it, and form a scientific method. Therefore, the Western thinking about the relation between human and nature, on the one hand, is infiltrated by the rational cultural traditions of the West, and on the other hand, follows the scientific spirit as established after the industrial revolution.

The Western view of nature reflects the rational tradition of Western culture. Human and nature are always in a state of dichotomy between subject and object. People rationally analyze and anatomize the natural world, explore the laws of nature, and form scientific methods and systems for understanding the world. In addition, the scientific view of nature in the West is deeply affected by the industrial revolution and the technological revolution. The West opened the process of industrial revolution and technological revolution. In this process, machine, as a great invention, became a symbol of industrial civilization. Basically, machine is the intermediary of the relation between human and nature. Due to the intervention of machine, people and nature also fell into new dilemmas.

The rational tradition of Western culture has an important influence on the consideration of the relation between human and nature. Of course, this influence is reflected in two dimensions. First, it promotes people's awareness of nature. When enlightenment rationality begins to sprout, people awake from religious reform and begin to generate self-awareness, treat nature as the object of recognition, and increasingly deepen their understanding of the laws of nature in the development of science, so that people can be freed from the state of obscurity of nature. Secondly, enlightenment rationality has also turned to its opposite. People realize that they are the masters of all things and can change the world, especially can conquer nature. Then with the rapid development of science and technology, nature has become the object of scientific analysis and anatomize made

by people. People and nature are caught in the dilemma of binary opposition. People's excessive exploitation and utilization of nature has caused the destruction and exhaustion of nature.

### *B. The Natural View of Harmony Between Heaven and Human in Chinese Traditional Culture*

China's thinking about the relation between human and nature is contained in the most important proposition of "harmony between". It emphasizes that nature and human are the real life community; the lives of human and nature are closely related; human and nature are in the whole of life; and the relation between human and nature is coexisting and harmonious. The reason why Chinese traditional culture can produce the natural view of harmony between human and nature is closely related to the natural geographical environment of the traditional society of China. The development of agricultural civilization has always taken the natural geographical conditions as the material premise; the production and living of human are inseparable from natural environment; agricultural production activities depend on the quality of natural conditions to a large extent; and people's production and living practices are largely dependent on the natural environment. At the same time, due to the limited level of productivity, human beings in the early days lacked scientific nature in thinking about the relation between human and nature. However, in case of natural phenomenon, especially when natural disasters occur, human beings seem to be powerless and ignorant. For nature, they are more in awe. Under the awe to nature and the desire to communicate with nature, people put forward the idea of harmony between human and nature, and established the ruler's idea of matching the heavens with morality, respecting the people and protecting the people, making the harmony between heaven and human become an important ideological conception in traditional culture.

The harmony between heaven and human emphasizes that human are inseparable from heaven, earth, all things, and nature. Wherein, the heaven has multiple meanings. It refers to both the god having the will of personality and the heaven of justice; it has moral attributes and is also related to destiny. Of course, its most basic meaning is nature. Human and heaven are inseparable. Humanity must follow the ways of heaven; and the ways of heaven is the basis of humanity. Man and heaven are not only inseparable, but also have a common way of obeying ethics. The reason why the "harmony between heaven and human" can be achieved, and heaven and human can communicate with each other is that human nature comes from heaven, and human beings have instinct. The sayings that people are good or evil or neutral are all based on the instinct; human's nature is derived from heaven. Secondly, people have transcendence; and harmony and communication with heaven is the inner ideal and pursuit of human beings. The ways of heaven also need to be realized and practiced by people.

The harmony between nature and human also means that people must follow the objective laws of nature and "use the resources of people at proper time" to maintain the symbiotic development of human and nature. The harmony between

nature and human affirms the role of human in transforming nature. Human and nature are interdependent; and people can participate in natural activities. However, it is necessary to respect the laws of nature and rationally develop and transform the nature; and the purpose that people use and occupy the nature should not be purely for self-interest, but for the common interest of human and nature. Laozi also emphasizes that it is necessary to follow the Taoism and imitate the nature, so that all things can live endlessly. If people violate and destroy the laws of nature, people's development will be hindered and restricted.

## III. COMPARISON OF THE CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL VIEWS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN HUMAN AND SOCIETY

### *A. Western Humanistic Tradition*

Western humanistic tradition has a long history of development. In its course of development, both the concept of category and the theoretical basis have undergone great changes. Especially after modern humanism came to an end, modern humanistic transformation was raised. The main problem that Western humanism tries to solve is people's dilemma in modernity. People gradually degenerate into tools in real social life. Especially, the ruling of instrumental rationality on social life has aggravated people's anxiety about their situation. Based on this social reality, people began to rethink the nature of human beings and the relation between human and society. Different from rationalism, irrationalism proposed to construct the relation between human and society based on the factors such as will, instinct and desire.

Modern humanism began in the period of Renaissance, and inherited the praise and attention to people in this period. This kind of revival mainly solved the problems of human nature hidden in the darkness and obscurity since the Middle Ages. Human beings are rediscovered during the Renaissance. After further enlightenment, rationality and freedom became the theme of the times. In German classical philosophies, modern humanism reached its peak. Represented by Kant, many scholars advocated the epistemology with self-consciousness as the core, namely human-centered epistemology. In which, human is the national legislation; "Copernican revolution" was realized on the basis of human's status; "If there is no human, all creations will be useless and have no ultimate purpose."<sup>1</sup> Feuerbach developed modern humanism into a systematic theory. He emphasized that "the essence of God is the essence of human"; humanism focuses on all secrets.

Western humanism constantly strengthens people's self-awareness, develops people's understanding of themselves. From discovering people, to awakening of rationality, to the rising of irrationality, people's freedom and value are constantly affirmed, human's social existence and social life are constantly concerned; to some extent it reflects humanistic care.

<sup>1</sup> Zhao Dunhua. On the history of western philosophy [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1996:455. (in Chinese)

### *B. The Social View of Harmony Between Humans in Chinese Traditional Culture*

Chinese traditional culture pays attention to "harmony". Its thinking about the relation between human and society also focuses on "harmony", and tries to achieve the ideal state of harmony between humans; and this ideal state has become an important thought resource of a harmonious society in the development of modern society. In "The Analects of Confucius · Learning", Confucius emphasized that "harmony is valuable", and thought that social development should be based on "harmony", and the relation between human and society should also focus on "harmony".

The relation between human and society is largely reflected in the relation between loyalty and filial piety in traditional society. The "the five cardinal relationships" radiated by filial piety became the main content of social relations. "The filial piety is the source of the benevolence". The core of social relations lies in the word "benevolence". Filial piety is the foundation of benevolence. Benevolence stipulates the basic connotation of social relations and is also the basic principle for people in dealing with social relations. The four cardinal virtues (humanity, justice, propriety and wisdom) put forward by Confucius have become an important principle in dealing with the relations between human and society and between humans in traditional culture. Humanity means love and loving people, and the love for society and others; justice is the virtue of a gentleman, and the essential difference between a gentleman and a villain; propriety is the context of "humanity"; denying self and returning to propriety is an important way to realize benevolence; wisdom is the ability to identify good and evil. The social concept advocated by Confucius also possesses the characteristics of the mean, that is, moderate, and resolves the contradiction in harmonious way and admits the difference. That is the so-called "coexisting of harmony and difference". In the relationship between human and society, the coexisting of harmony and difference reflects important value. The most important aspect of social relations is the relation between self and others. How to realize the harmony between humans is an important proposition for the relation between human and society. The coexisting of harmony and difference provides the basic principles and methods. Chinese traditional culture pays attention to the discussion on and the harmony in the relation between self and others. For example, with respect to the interpretation of human relations, Mencius proposed that the relations between father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, the young and old, and between friends are called five relations; in order to maintain a good relations between them, it is necessary to maintain intimate and filial between father and son, maintain loyal between ruler and subject, maintain rational division of labors between husband and wife, maintain mutual respect and love between the young and old, paying attention to ethical order, and maintain faithfulness between friends. The norms and regulations of each relationship are precisely for regulating people's social relations and the relation between people and society. Others and self are always different, but they coexist in the same objective environment and social atmosphere. To achieve a harmonious and symbiotic development between people and society, it is necessary to

deal with the relation between self and different people, in the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences

Chinese traditional culture also attaches importance to the significance and value of the collective. Individual should obey the benefit of the collective. The harmony between the collective and individual is the ethical value advocated in Chinese traditional culture. In the process of modern cultural transformation and reshaping, this kind of ethical value still exist, and has been granted new connotation over the cultural development since modern times. The revolutionary culture developed in modern China also advocates the spirit that individual's benefit may be ignored for the benefit of the collective. The so-called collective is the "harmony" that the society wants to achieve, while the individual is every difference. The diversification of society is an extremely prominent issue nowadays. In order to face and tackle the diversity of society, it is needed to affirm the unity, harmony and difference between self and others. Today, the relation between self and others has a more complex real environment, and it also raises higher requirements. The relation between people and society also requires for further reflections. How to deal with the contemporary social relations and how to realize a harmonious and coexisting development between contemporary people and society are important issues to be answered.

## **IV. COMPARISON OF THE CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL VIEWS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN PEOPLE AND THEMSELVES**

### *A. Western Asceticism Tradition*

Capitalist culture is a typical and dominant representative of Western culture. In the source of capitalist culture, asceticism is of great significance to the formation and development of capitalism.

The West had paid attention to the restraint of desire since the ancient Greek period. Heraclitus said that "it is more necessary to eliminate indulgence than put out a fire"; temperance is also included in the four main virtues as noted in Plato's "Utopia"; The hedonist Epicurus also advocated to abandon unnaturally and unnecessary desires. Throughout the history of ancient Greek philosophies, there are many theories of rational restraint and self-control. Up to the Middle Ages, religious theology was often characterized by asceticism. Although there are different levels of abstinence life in ancient and modern worlds, asceticism as the basic cultural factor of modern capitalism, is mainly derived from the contribution of Calvinism during the Reformation. In Calvin's predestination theory, it is believed that any work of God's "electors" in this world is subject to God's instruction. Wealth is not sin but a sign of grace; and it is not encouraged to waste wealth but accumulate wealth. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber pointed out that Calvinists' Protestant ethics most clearly illustrates the origin of the capitalist spirit; wealth is accumulated by fulfilling vocation, working diligently, not squandering, and restraining desires; and the initial accumulation of wealth is



the result instead of the goal pursued. Despite the prevailing situation in which wealth is pursued instead of working diligently in the economic environment of the present era, and restraint and self control are also for being benefited, asceticism is still the basic element in capitalist culture.

### *B. The View of Harmony Between Desire and Sense in Chinese Traditional Culture*

The relation between people and themselves is one of the important themes of Chinese traditional culture. Confucius emphasized "knowing destiny" and "living it up". Those sayings are both emphasizing self-awareness and the thinking about the relation between people and themselves. The most important way for people to determine their relation with themselves is to think and learn, that is to reflect and cultivate them selves. The "harmony between desire and sense" is also a reflection and answer to the relationship between body and mind. From the perspective of the historical development of Chinese traditional culture, the heavenly principles and human's desire are an important proposition, and have different connotations and characteristics in different historical stages. The development and change of this theory also properly reflect the thinking and answer to the relation between people and themselves in Chinese traditional culture.

In Chinese traditional culture, there has been a long and arduous discussion and research on the relation between desire and sense. During the pre-Qin period, thinkers had noticed the problem of human desires. Confucius emphasized that "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you", "wealth and rank are what people want", but he also put forward his own ideas, namely "one can desire but not be greedy", "What the gentleman values is morality, while the villain values the interests". Therefore, in Confucius's opinion, desire is needed to be controlled and restricted. Mencius proposed that "There is no better way to cultivate good character than by reducing desire"; and the Confucius's choice of morality and interests is unified with Mencius's view of emphasizing on righteousness and weakening desire. Xunzi, on the basis of his theory of original evil of human nature, affirmed the rationality of erotic feeling, and advocated that desire is the nature of human beings. Therefore, it is impossible to reduce desire but only possible to guide the control and restriction of desire in the light of its general trend by measures and means such as rituals and laws. During the period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, Pei Wei proposed that the desires of people could not be completely eliminated; however, indulgence is against the heavenly principles, so the desires should be controlled. Wang Bi advocated no desire. His opinion continued the core ideas of Taoism and opened up the thoughts of asceticism and extinction. Neo-confucianism discussed the issue of sense and desire in the most detailed and intense way. Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi believed that the heavenly principles refers to the principle of justice and for the public, while people's desire refers to popular feelings and selfish motives; the two elements are opposites; it is necessary to advocate heavenly principles, deny people's desire, and advocate preserving heavenly

principles and eliminating people's desire. Zhu Xi's view of "preserving heavenly principles and eliminating people's desire" is further developed from this proposition. He strictly classified the demand of human beings. In detail, the demand is hierarchical; the most basic demand is survival needs, namely diet; and the demand for living quality is another level of demand; too much desire will indeed become harmful; desire also includes people's pursuit for self-interest — this level of desire can be regarded as evil. Basically, neo-confucianism affirmed the rationality of desire to some extent. As long as the desire is within the scope of sense, it is needed to be affirmed; but the human desire is extremely easy to go beyond the boundary of sense, so that it becomes the source of evil. Therefore, it is necessary to limit the desire by way of sense. The thinkers since Ming and Qing Dynasties continued the discussion of the issue of desire and sense. For example, Dai Zhen redefined the sense and desire; wherein, sense is the thing itself, while desire is the natural demand of human nature and the important element in human's seeking for survival. The relation between sense and desire can be regarded as the relation between general rules and specific things. It is the relation between inevitability and nature. Sense lies in desire and is intrinsically the "moderate" state of desire. Therefore, he actually wanted to unify the sense and desire so that people can reconcile to themselves. The characteristics of the views of sense and desire in Ming and Qing Dynasties were that it expanded the connotation of desire, affirmed the rationality of people's desire, and emphasized that sense is not innate but an object in desire, and is generated provided that the demand of desire is regulated. Wang Fuzhi's view of sense and desire reached a certain high level. He put forward that "sense is contained in desire", sense and desire are unified, and people should "guide the desire to be rational" and correctly regulate the desire.

## V. CONCLUSION

Chinese culture and Western culture both have sprung up in the process of cultural modernization, forming respectively distinctive cultural theories. The development of world history is also the development of world culture. In this course, no culture can "develop independently". It will be inevitable to realize the dialogue and integration in cultures.

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