

Comparative Analysis on the Influence of Individualism and Collectivism on the Prevention of Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Western people are faithful guardians their political ideology individualism. Individualism empowers them freedom and human rights and takes care of personal benefits among that of the group. However, it is apparent that the western world, which is the representative nations of individualism, has been suffering from Covid-19 pandemic, while collectivism countries such as China, where the first cases were officially and openly reported, controlled the pandemic in two months. According to the Chinese people's experience in fighting SARS, quarantine, keeping social distance and wearing masks are the most effective ways to control the epidemic. The Chinese strictly abide by the regulations, while Westerners have organized large-scale demonstrations against the blockade of cities, shopping malls, restaurants, beaches, and entertainment venues and facilities. It is also questionable to some people that why western people do not have the common knowledge that masks can prevent the spread of viruses. On the other hand, individualism is still the most prevalent ideology among all the world, and it is still desirable in some aspect. Nevertheless, individualism, which is mainstream western political ideology, must mix with some ideas of collectivism on some aspects, so that it would be more effective to empower human rights and freedom.

Based on literature review and theories, this paper took China and the US as an example to compare the influence of individualism and collectivism on containing the pandemic. In addition, suggestions are proposed at the end of this paper. According to the research result, individualism has to mix with ideas of collectivism to cope with public health affairs such as pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, individualism, collectivism, China, the United States

1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the first patient infected by Covid-19 was diagnosed in Wuhan [1]. This infectious disease spread very quickly in China. However, western people believe that China would be greatly suffered from the pandemic, but the fact is that China controlled the disease only in two months. Until March 2021, total reported case in China is 90159, which is only 0.071% of total cases globally, with only 4636 deaths, which is only 0.167% of the total deaths around the world [2]. Western countries such as America has total cases of around 30.2 million with over 548 thousand deaths [3]. Compared with country China that first report cases and other western countries, it is miracle difference between the figures. Briefly, China successfully controlled the pandemic by lockdown of cities especially Wuhan where the pandemic is the most severe in China and

require all citizens to as much to stay at home as possible; people must wear a mask if they had to go out to purchase necessities. However, in western countries such as America, Germany, and The United Kingdom, governments locked down cities too, but the consequences were huge demonstrations to oppose lockdown of cities and public areas. In addition, in Western countries, although many people wear masks, because of the lack of systematic publicity on how to wear masks correctly and what kind of masks can effectively prevent infectious diseases, many people do not wear masks correctly or do not wear medical surgical masks. As a result, the effectiveness of wearing masks to prevent infectious diseases has been weakened. Why is there such a lack of publicity? Why is the effect of this kind of publicity unsatisfactory? The purpose of this paper is to find out the reasons behind the many infections and deaths caused by Covid-19 in the

Western world by comparing the ideologies of the Chinese and American people. At last, the author will put forward some suggestions.

2. INDIVIDUALISM FACTOR FACILITATING SPREAD OF THE PANDEMIC IN WESTERN WORLD

2.1. The impact of individualism on the people of Western countries

Individualism is a political ideology that individuals are considered to be independent from one another, whereas in collectivist countries, groups bind and mutually obligate individuals [4]. However, individualism does not necessarily mean that there is no strong bond and relationship between family members. According to Alessandro et al.[5], although Italy is also a country where individualism prevails, people attach great importance to family relationships. Many adults live with their parents or are used to meeting them often. It shows that individualism contains some sort of collectivism, that is, to connect closely with family members and close friends. This is usually a misunderstanding of individualism, but this factor also contributes to spread of pandemic.

In individualistic countries, economic or political systems are based on the principles of individualism favor policies that limit the control of the government and instead allow more freedoms for the individual person [6]. Therefore, it can be considered that the lockdown of cities is a restriction on human's freedom as it refines the area that people can move, or it disables people to enjoy in public areas for food, movies, and shopping, for example. There are hundreds of lockdown protests in western world. For instance, more than 20,000 people participated in the protest in the central German city of Kassel. The anti-lockdown protesters marched through downtown Kassel despite a court ban, and most didn't comply with infection-control protocols such as wearing face masks. Some protesters attacked officers and several journalists, according to German media[7]. The same scene also happened in other western nations such as the US and the UK, which are both typical individualistic nations.

In individualistic countries, citizens do not wish their behaviors to be prohibited by the government. They have the right to enjoy life, such as sunbathing on the beach, watching movies, having dinner and gathering with friends. However, to common sense, these conducts might facilitate the spread of the pandemic. There are lots of people in public areas that the possibility of spreading the virus drastically increases. Nebraska Medicine examined the speed of spread of pandemic in New York State where is the most severe areas affected by Covid-19 in America. When the

pandemic began, researchers estimated the R0 of the coronavirus to be 2.5. So, each person that got Covid-19 would infect approximately 2.5 other people. While in the New York State, the figure is underestimated that R0 was about 6.4 [8]. The research shows the disastrous speed of spread of the pandemic if people continue going out with friends and family members.

2.2. Factors that affect individualistic citizens not to wear masks

The reasons why individualistic citizens do not wear masks are also worth considering. It should be included in primary or middle school biology class that masks can prevent the spread of diseases. However, many westerners even against people wearing masks. Though a large majority of Americans believe wearing a mask is an effective way to protect themselves from Covid-19, many still do not wear them---including three in 10 Angelenos---even while engaging in higher risk activities, according to new findings from the USC Dornsife Understanding Coronavirus in America Study. Although 83% of American adults believe that wearing a mask can effectively prevent Covid-19 infection, many people still do not wear a mask. In addition, according to the survey, two-thirds of Americans had close contact with outsiders in December, and about half said that they mostly or always wear masks when doing so. Of the four in ten Americans who visit other people's homes, only 21% wear a mask most or all of the time [9]. Interestingly, the vast majority of Americans wear masks when shopping in grocery stores [9]. Among 81% of people who bought groceries in early December, 90% wore a mask [9].

As one key component of individualism is that to limit the ability of government to intervene in people's actions, people are not willing to be told to do things by the government, even scientifically it can protect their health. According to two nonresident senior fellows on governance studies Edward D. Vargas and Gabriel R. Sanchez, 40% of Americans who are not wearing a mask thinks that it is their right as an American to not have to do so as a reason for not wearing a mask. A combined 64% of Americans believe that their right to not have to be inconvenienced by wearing a mask or scarf over their face is more important than reducing the probability of getting sick or infecting others[10]. This is an important finding that suggests the core principle of individualism in American culture is leading to significant health consequences across the country. Even some Americans think that Covid-19 is a fraud and political tool. Therefore, the conclusion is that: first, individualists will not consider the possibility that they will be infected because the government ask them to wear a mask, and they will neither think of themselves spreading the disease to others. They pursue to enjoy themselves in public areas, but they never think of

others, which is a core value of individualism. Moreover, unlike the Chinese concept, some Americans would think that a person wearing a mask signifies that he is sick. In China, people only regard wearing masks as a way to prevent illness. US surgeon Jerome Adams said that people who have lost loved ones due to the coronavirus are also more likely to wear masks. His statement is reasonable, because only when people really lose their relatives and friends because of Covid-19, they will believe that Covid-19 is really contagious and deadly. It is important to wear masks.

3. COLLECTIVISM: EFFICIENT CONTROL OF PANDEMIC IN CHINA

3.1. The situation in China at the time of the covid-19 outbreak

China is a collectivism country. Collectivists are people with high collectivistic orientation who are characterized by conscientious personality traits and feel a strong sense of responsibility towards others and their community [4]. Chinese people deeply trust the government, and always think of the benefits of the whole folk. As the country with the largest population in the world, some people believe that the huge population base as well as the first official reported case will facilitate Covid-19 to spread in China rapidly. However, the truth is just on the contrary. China has effectively controlled the pandemic. In fact, the pandemic in China started with one of the most important festivals in China, the Spring Festival. During this period, there was a large amount of population migration. It is estimated that in the 40 days before and after the Spring Festival, the Chinese made a total of about 3 billion trips. Before the start of the lockdown policy on January 23, 2020, about 5 million people had left the capital city of Hubei, Wuhan, where the Covid-19 epidemic broke out. About one-third of them went to places outside Hubei Province. Therefore, some of them are potentially been infected but with no symptoms. Limiting the social contacts of these individuals was crucial for Covid-19 control, because patients with no or mild symptoms can spread the virus [11]. Therefore, it is a challenge for the Chinese government to control the pandemic, indeed. During the Spring Festival, the Chinese government issued a quarantine policy to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and reduce the number of infections. As part of these social distancing policies: People were encouraged to stay at home and avoid crowd gatherings; Gatherings in public places were strictly prohibited; Large public events were cancelled or postponed. What is more, schools, factories and companies were closed. Time to return to school and work was postponed [11].

Different from western countries, Chinese people are strictly following these instructions. People stay at home and do not go to work, or work at home; students have

online classes until the government thinks that it would be safe to study in school. Indeed, in the perspective of individualists, it is the restriction on their freedom. As a collectivism country, most Chinese are willing to sacrifice the reunion with their family member for the only time in a year during the Spring Festival when there is a vacation of one week. It all seems like usual: people express their blessings to their family members by live video; elder people can deliver red envelopes by digital money on WeChat or Alipay. The only difference is the physical contact with family members.

3.2. The anti-epidemic situation of government and individual during the epidemic

Different parts of China worked together to defeat the spread of Covid-19, on the base of all Chinese. The Chinese government ordered to build Huoshenshan and Leishenshan Hospital in Wuhan in order to quarantine possible infected people and cure patients who are confirmed to be infected. The "Chinese construction speed" surprised the whole world as the construction process was all on live stream: Wuhan Leishenshan Hospital was built by 15,000 construction workers in less than two weeks. Patients began to be admitted on February 8, with a total of 3202 medical staff and 660 logistics staff operating. Within two months, the hospital received 2,011 Covid-19 patients, of whom 1,078 were in serious conditions. A total of 1,918 patients recovered and discharged [12].

During an emergency time with a pandemic, Chinese nurses and doctors were willing to risk their lives to cure patients. Until Feb 8th, 2020, 11000 medical workers came to Wuhan to support the pandemic, with over 3000 doctors and nurses are professional in critical care [13]. Normal people with no professional knowledge to cure Covid-19 chose to donate assets to Wuhan such as masks and daily products, to support the hard-working nurses and doctors in Wuhan. On Feb 18th, 2020, the first round of assets donated from Kashgar Prefecture in Xinjiang include 15000 boxes of milk, 3516 boxes of instant noodles, 2376 boxes of red dates, and 3570 boxes of nuts, which valued 3.17 million RMB and weighted 100.49 tons [14]. That is the donation only from one province or region in China, though. The total value was much larger than this figure. Private firms also donated masks to support Wuhan. On Feb 4th, 2020, Hualinggang Iron donated 10 thousand masks to Hengyang in order to support front line nurses and doctors [15].

This shows two aspects of benefits of collectivism during the pandemic. First, Chinese people were strictly following government's instructions as government always put the benefit on the whole nation in the first place. Although it might block freedom of movement, in exchange it would bring more freedom in the future when the pandemic is controlled, and it is safe to go out.

Besides the government, Chinese also believe in other authorities such as experts in epidemiology. Dr Nanshan Zhong and Dr Wenhong Zhang gave advice and instructions on when school can be reopened, when shopping malls could be reopened. Different from Americans, epidemiology experts are very reliable in Chinese' minds, while because of individualism, some Americans do not believe in Dr Fauci because he also instructed people what to do on an authoritative ground, and they even want to fire Dr Fauci.

In addition, the interconnection between Chinese, which is a key aspect of collectivism that individuals give up their own benefits to support the group, contributed to the fast relief of the pandemic. Volunteered nurses and doctors risked their lives to come to Wuhan. If their lives can exchange the health of all Chinese, they would think it is worthy and glorious, which is their mission of being a medical worker. Normal people contributed their food and masks to support doctors and nurses. Thousands of construction workers work together to create miracle of building two large hospitals just within two weeks on the sacrifice of their Spring Festival vacation. They were very hard-working and tired, and some of them even chose to sleep for only short periods of time during construction. While facing the pandemic, Chinese are not thinking of only themselves. They quarantined themselves or stayed at home to protect not only themselves but also their family members and those strangers they do not acquaint although they sacrificed their freedom of movement, they successfully helped block the spread of pandemic. They help front line doctors and nurses in the pandemic by donating even the basic daily products to help them restore energy. Different from individualism, collectivists are very willing to help "strangers", but they are still a member of the whole group of Chinese. The personal sacrifice to benefit the group is also a reason why the Chinese are strong patriotists. They sacrifice themselves to the country they love, and everyone is strongly united with others for the same goal for the nation. Therefore, collectivism successfully helped China to overcome the pandemic.

4. CONCLUSION

Individualism and collectivism have long been two opposite political ideology. However, they are desirable at some aspects respectively. By the analysis and facts of western countries and China, we can easily observe difference between individualism and collectivism under pandemic. Under the pandemic, when collective cooperation is needed to achieve the goal of controlling the spread of virus, overemphasizing individualism and individual freedom will lead to inconsistent goals, which will create negative effects. If people only take care of benefits of themselves, neither themselves nor others will be better off. Compared with the strong

interrelationship between people and comply of government and authoritative instructions, collectivism can easily and spontaneously overcome the pandemic. Therefore, collectivism is more desirable on public health affairs. It sacrifices individual freedom to save more lives in the whole nation. While pertaining individualism in western societies, it is crucial to mix it with collectivism ideas, known as rugged individualism, so that it could be a more realistic political ideology to cope with pandemic.

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