

An Analysis of Chinese Traditional Confucian and Taoist Views on Happiness*

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Abstract—Confucian school and Taoist school are two influential schools in traditional Chinese thought. Their interpretation of happiness still influences the contemporary Chinese view on happiness. The Confucian view of happiness in virtue the happiness of human needs not only material security but also spiritual satisfaction, and the perfect integration and unity of individual happiness and social happiness through the way of inner sage and outer king. Taoism believes that only by following nature's inaction can human beings achieve true happiness, and that the social happiness is to be self-satisfied with joy in life. Taking insights from the Confucian and Taoist understandings of happiness is of great significance to the remodeling of the Chinese concept of happiness in the new era.

Keywords—Confucianism; Taoism; happiness

I. INTRODUCTION

Human beings have been searching for and creating happiness since they were born on the earth. No matter at which corner of the world, and no matter it is individuals or groups, all human are searching for "happiness". Happiness has been a kind of value pursued by human society in all ages, which has formed a way of life and attitude corresponding to its living environment, and it even determined many "happiness views". As the ultimate value of human behavior, happiness has been perceived differently and has different development in the long history of China's social development. For example, "the five blessings (namely longevity, wealth, health, morality and a good death)", "fortune and virtue", "the more sons the more blessings", "offspring make achievements", "to glorify and illuminate the ancestors", "internal saints and external kings", "recovering the original simplicity through natural inaction" etc. are all its Interpretations. Among them, the happiness view of Confucianism and Taoism has important influence, so tracing the development history of the happiness view of Confucianism and Taoism in China can form the basic understanding of contemporary people on happiness.

II. THE CONFUCIAN VIEW OF HAPPINESS — HAPPINESS IN VIRTUE

Confucianism is the school that has the greatest influence on traditional Chinese thought and the mainstream school that has occupied Chinese thought for the longest time. Historically, Confucianism has become "national theory" since the Han dynasty. Its happiness concept was established in the spring and autumn period and has been constantly adjusted and supplemented with the development of the times. Thus it is of great study value. Among the Confucian views on happiness, there are the "happiness in virtue" view of Confucius and the happiness view of Mencius' "three pleasures". At the same time, Confucianism also believes that personal happiness comes from moral cultivation, which requires self-control of material requirements. Confucianism, of course, didn't limit itself to how individuals achieve happiness, but also advocates the life development theory of "cultivating morality, regulating family, ordering state, and peace will prevail throughout the universe", so as to achieve the social happiness of the great harmony of the world.

First of all, it firstly affirms the material level of happiness without excluding the satisfaction of basic human needs, and place happiness in the basic living and life. Confucianism affirms people's pursuit of legitimate material interests. It is said in *The Book of Rites* that food and sex are basic human desires. *The Analects of Confucius*, *Li Ren*, said, "To be rich and noble is what one desires." And in *Mencius*, *Jinxin II*, Mencius said "Everyone has a desire to be honorable". This fully shows that both Confucius and Mencius affirmed that people have natural material desire, so the satisfaction of external material desire is the internal motivation for people to pursue happiness. Confucianism holds that happiness requires "security without worry" (*The Analects of Confucius*, *Huo wen*), and at the same time, there are such contents as "both parents being still alive, and brothers are free from diseases and disasters, which contains the basic physical and mental security and peace of human. The need both for material contentment and for the freedom from sickness, anxiety, death, and other misfortunes are the basic material demand for happiness.

Secondly, it put emphasis on "happiness in virtue", which can also be called "moral happiness". While acknowledging the human nature of desire, Confucianism further proposed

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that human beings are noble animals with morality and rationality, and only human beings have ethics and morality, which is the important embodiment of the difference between human beings and animals. "There are three things men find enjoyment in which are advantageous, and three things they find enjoyment in which are injurious. To find enjoyment in the discriminating study of ceremonies and music; to find enjoyment in speaking of the goodness of others; to find enjoyment in having many worthy friends: these are advantageous. To find enjoyment in extravagant pleasures; to find enjoyment in idleness and sauntering; to find enjoyment in the pleasures of feasting: these are injurious." (*The Analects of Confucius, Ji Shi*) Confucianism believes that since people's desires cannot be completely satisfied, nor can they be completely suppressed, they should be moderately contained. And being "joyous but not indecent, mournful but not distressing" is emphasized. It can be seen that Confucianism highly advocates the principle of "moderation", and this kind of happiness is a kind of rational happiness. At the same time, in addition to ration, virtue is also emphasized. Therefore "the joy of Yan Hui" became a model of Confucian happiness concept, namely, a kind of moral happiness that is being content to lead a humble but virtuous life. The Master said, "Admirable indeed was the virtue of Hui! With a single bamboo dish of rice, a single gourd dish of drink, and living in his mean narrow lane, while others could not have endured the distress, he did not allow his joy to be affected by it. Admirable indeed was the virtue of Hui!" (*The Analects of Confucius, Yong Ye*) The Master said, "With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and my bended arm for a pillow; I have still joy in the midst of these things. Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness are to me as a floating cloud." (*The Analects of Confucius, Yong Ye*) This is a state of anxiety. Although food and clothing are not enough, for Yan Hui, this state is just "poverty". Poverty does not mean unhappiness. As long as one is contented to poverty he can be devoted to things spiritual and vice versa. The "Confucius and Hui's joy" sought assiduously by Confucians is a principle uplifting the moral happiness. It holds that people can be happy even when the basic material conditions of happiness are not met! That is to say, the "happiness" brought by the external material world can only be the primary happiness, while the lofty "happiness" is a kind of happiness of non-material desire satisfaction. In a word, Confucianism emphasizes more on the satisfaction of moral reason, believing that only virtue can bring people infinite and pure psychological pleasure and enjoyment. Human beings can get the greatest happiness only when they get the satisfaction of moral reason. Human beings seek for the sublimation of life and the perfection of virtue. Such a state of happiness can enhance their spiritual strength. Therefore, in the social turmoil and the lack of material conditions at that time, the Confucians could still feel the supreme joy and happiness brought by the cultivation of virtue despite the hardship of life.

Third, it advocates the unity and integration of individual happiness and social happiness that can be achieved by "inner sage and outer king". How can the moral happiness be acquired? According to Confucianism, one can get the

individual happiness through the promotion of his own ability, so as to make due contributions to the material and cultural development of the society. At the same time, individual happiness should be obtained in accordance with social norms and moral rationality as the logical premise. Therefore, one of the ways to obtain happiness of virtue is to achieve happiness through introspection, constant self-adjustment and continuous improvement of one's life state. "I will not be concerned at men's not knowing me; I will be concerned at my own want of ability." (*The Analects of Confucius: Xian Wen*) "I daily examine myself on three points: whether, in transacting business for others, I may have been not faithful; whether, in intercourse with friends, I may have been not sincere; whether I may have not mastered and practiced the instructions of my teacher." (*The Analects of Confucius: Xue Er*) "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are not given from the outside. People have them originally." (*Mencius: Gaozi I*) "The essence of learning is nothing but to find the lost kindness". (*Mencius: Gaozi I*) Pleasure and happiness can only be achieved after "turning inwards". Another way to obtain moral happiness is the Confucian theory of outer king. That is to say, on the level of social reality, practicing family ethics and engaging in moral career is the way to achieve moral happiness. The process of individual pursuit of happiness also carries the sense of mission to achieve social happiness. "The superior man has three things in which he delights, and to be the ruler over the kingdom is not one of them. That his father and mother are both alive and that the condition of his brothers is affords no cause for anxiety; this is one delight. That is, when looking up, he has no occasion for shame before Heaven, and below, he has no occasion to blush before men; this is a second delight. That he can get from the whole kingdom the most talented individuals, and teach and nourish them; this is the third delight." (*Mencius: Jinxin (I)*) "All things are prepared in me. If I reflect on myself and find myself sincere, shouldn't I be overjoyed?" (*Mencius: Jinxin (I)*)

In a word, the Confucian concept of moral happiness holds that human happiness needs not only material security but also spiritual satisfaction. It holds that people can achieve the ultimate goal of integrating and uniting the individual happiness and social happiness through the way of "inner cultivation of sage" and "exterior action of king". In short, the Confucian concept of happiness in virtue is the way for individuals to achieve happiness and then achieve social happiness since the overall interests of the society are far greater than the needs of individuals, so as to "cultivate morality, regulate the family, order the country, and make the world peaceful". In the contemporary society, although our material life is getting richer and richer, there are many crises in faith and morality. With the money worship and individualism widespread and rampant, some people may get their own interests unscrupulously, and resort to beggar-thy-neighbor policies. So how can we talk about happiness when everyone feels insecure? Therefore, the Confucian happiness in virtue is still of great enlightening significance to the contemporary concept of happiness. Today, people should pay more attention to our spiritual realm in the pursuit of

happiness, that is, maintaining the heart and cultivating the nature instead of lose the self in material desires.

III. THE TAOISM CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS IN PURE MIND AND INACTION

In terms of origin, various schools of thought all originate from "the Tao"! Of course, this "Tao" represents the general designation of the ancient traditional culture, not just the doctrines advocated by the various schools. Until the end of the warring states period to the beginning of the Han dynasty, various schools of thought began to elaborate on their own doctrines, and then divide into different factions. In *the Historical Records* it is said that when Sima Qian secured his official position from the year Jianyuan to Yuanfeng, worrying that scholars could not grasp the essence of each school and that what they learn was perverse, he discussed the gist of the six schools of thought: Yin and Yang, Confucianism, Mohism, Legalists, Legalists and Taoism. He said: Taoism makes people concentrate their mind and act in accordance with the invisible "Tao", which enriches everything." The differences between Taoism and Confucianism are also growing. It is inevitable to talk of Laozi and Zhuangzi when people speak of Taoism. It is the thought of these two sages that represents the main theory of Taoist view on happiness.

Taoism also believes that happiness has individual and social dimensions, but Taoism does not emphasize the progressive relationship between individual happiness and social happiness, that is, social happiness is higher than individual happiness. Taoism holds that inaction is the major premise of individual happiness and social happiness. Inactive individuals are happy, and inactive society is also happy.

What the view on individual happiness of Laozi is to cleanse one's heart and limit one's desires through natural inaction. What kind of people is happy? Laozi thinks to be happy is to cleanse one's heart and limit one's desires through natural inaction. Cleansing one's heart and limiting one's desires is a kind of lofty attitude towards life, which is based on a clear understanding of things and following the "Tao" it runs. It can also be concluded that whether in a chaotic state or in an orderly state, individuals should keep their hearts cool and free from greed to avoid the traps brought by chaos or desire. In the shift of blessing and misfortune, one needs to maintain a pure mind, otherwise blessing and misfortune can be capricious. At the same time "natural inaction" is required — "The student of knowledge (aims at) learning day by day; the student of Tao (aims at) losing day by day. By continual losing one reaches doing nothing (laissez-faire). One achieves action through inaction." (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 48) The Tao never does, yet through it everything is done. If princes and dukes can keep the Tao, the world will of its own accord be reformed. (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 37) The "inaction" mentioned here refers to the attitude and method of letting nature take its course, adapting to reality and not struggling with it. It is not doing nothing or striving for nothing and being with mediocre and unambitious in the face of life. So, in what state can one be happy? Laozi said, "There is no greater curse than the lack of contentment. No

greater sin than the desire for possession. Therefore he who is contented with contentment shall be always content." [1] Contentment itself can make people happy. Individual happiness can only be achieved through internal cultivation and external adaptation. And the supreme individual happiness is "being sage", that is, "The Sage does not accumulate (for himself). He lives for other people, And grows richer himself; He gives to other people, And has greater abundance. With all the sharpness of the way of Heaven, it injures not; with all the doing in the way of the sage he does not strive." (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 81) The universe is everlasting. The reason the universe is everlasting is that it does not live for Self. Therefore it can long endure. Therefore the Sage puts himself last, and finds himself in the foremost place; Regards his body as accidental, and his body is thereby preserved. Is it not because he does not live for Self? That his Self is realized." (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 7) "Shut out from site the things of desire, So that the people's hearts shall not be disturbed so that the people may be innocent of knowledge and desires". (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 3) Cleanse the heart and limit the desires and one can gain things from nothing and thus be happy.

Laozi's view on social happiness is to govern by non-interference in a small country with few people. "(Let there be) a small country with a small population ... Let them enjoy their food, Beautify their clothing, be satisfied with their homes, Delight in their customs." (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 80) This is how Laozi describes a happy society. The freedom realm that follows nature and the ordinary people's life where individuals live and work in peace and contentment is the true happy society. In such an ideal happy society, the social order does not need the state's violent machine to maintain, and there is no hierarchical oppression, heavy burden and war disaster. People enjoy their food, beautify their clothing, are satisfied with their homes, and delight in their customs. Individuals lead a happy life in natural harmony and beyond material gains. It can be seen that such a happy society is full of Utopian ideals. So how to build such a happy society? Laozi proposed to achieve this ideal by "governing through inaction". ".....Therefore the sage says: I do nothing and the people are reformed of themselves. I love quietude and the people are righteous of themselves. I deal in no business and the people grow rich by themselves. I have no desires and the people are simple and honest by themselves." (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 57) That is to say, the person managing society needs to act in a "non-doing" way — ignorant, undesirous, selfless, non-doing and keeping weak. If people governing the society do their jobs according to the way things work, without being greedy, looking for trouble, and setting extra barriers, then people's lives will be peaceful and happy, and they will enjoy the real happiness. In terms of national governance, Laozi believes that harmony is the fundamental concept of a country, and fame and wealth should not be regarded as glory. Therefore he advocates "exalting not the wise and prizing not rare objects", (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 3) "not striving with all the doing in the way of the sage" when dealing with affairs, (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 81), and learn to "retire after the work is done" (*Tao and Teh*, Chapter 9). He holds that fame is not "fortune" or "blessing", but a kind of bondage to people.

Zhuangzi's view of happiness, on the basis of Laozi, highlights the pursuit of individual happiness and further clarifies the supreme happiness — being freely above worldly considerations and in harmony with Heaven. The abilities of people in the world vary, but it is good to let them develop freely. On the contrary, when the nature of man is destroyed, the happiness will be destroyed, and pain rises. "Take, for instance, a man who creditably fills some small office, or whose influence spreads over a village, or whose character pleases a certain prince. His opinion of himself will be much the same as those lake sparrows." (*Zhuangzi, A Happy Excursion*) When people develop freely, they still need to follow the laws of Tao and harmonize with nature according to natural law. But man should remove the excess which he takes from nature with greed eliminated. "Don't let the heart be tired of false name, don't let the heart do strategic place; Don't let the heart be vulgar entanglement, don't let the heart be acquired knowledge of the master. To experience in silence the endless source, to play in it freely and leave no trace; It can be natural, never reveal never complacent, that is, the state of mind empty indifferent and nothing. A divine man's heart is like a mirror, allowing things to come and go without greeting them; reflects things truthfully without concealing, so he can withstand things without being damaged. (*Zhuangzi, Inner part, Ying Diwang*) It can be seen that Zhuangzi believes that true happiness is to be grateful for nature for everything it has given to human beings sincerely. Whether it is life or death, people should have sincere praise and acceptance. And surely that which is a kind arbiter of my life is the best arbiter of my death." (*Zhuangzi, The Great Supreme*)

In Tao and Teh, there is no discussion on happiness, but the "fortune" corresponding to "disaster" — "Disaster is the avenue of fortune, (And) fortune is the concealment for disaster. Who would be able to know its ultimate results?" This view of "disaster and fortune transformation" still influences the attitudes of contemporary Chinese towards the pursuit of happiness. Studies have found that individuals in Chinese culture, as the representative of collectivism culture, have lower subjective sense of happiness than individuals in individualism culture [2]; meanwhile, college students in mainland China rated happiness as less important than Americans and Australians did; compared with Americans, Chinese people also think less about whether their life is happy and satisfied or not. (Gao Liang et al., 2010; Diener, e., & Diener, M., 1995) [3] For Chinese people, happiness may not be the most important thing in life, because happiness and misfortune may go hand in hand.

IV. CONCLUSION

In a word, Taoism believes that only by following the natural inaction can human beings achieve true happiness. When seeking happiness, individuals should be indifferent to fame and wealth and pay attention to people's inner spiritual pursuit, instead of overshadowing the true inner experience with excessive chase of external things. The ideal state of society is people enjoying their food, beautifying their clothing, being satisfied with their homes and delighting in their customs. This kind of happy social life is a true

portrayal of completely returning to the state of nature, that is, the mental state of heart feeling happy while body suffering. This happiness ideal of returning to nature is also the spiritual transcendental power of the Chinese people in the new era.

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