

CULTURAL TRADITION AND CULTURAL RENEWAL

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Abstract

One of the important paths to renew traditions of Eastern culture and of Western culture in the era of globalization is to selectively retain, absorb and identify with rational elements or quintessence in both sides' traditions, into which organic integration and creative development are added. The path contains the following four aspects: integrating the rational elements of Eastern holism with the positive elements of Western individualism; integrating the values of respecting family in Eastern cultural tradition with the values of respecting self-dependence of individual in Western cultural tradition; integrating the positive elements of the values of "rule by morality" in Eastern cultural traditions with the values of "rule by law" in Western cultural traditions; integrating Eastern "static civilization" with Western "dynamic civilization".

National cultural traditions are long-standing and historically accumulated entities which act as foundations on which national characteristics and status are preserved. However, the tradition is not merely a simple continuation of past history or an unchanging heritage but something that changes with time and requires the injection of new contents so as to be necessarily renewed and gain vitality.

One of the important paths towards the renewal of the traditions of Eastern culture and of Western culture in the era of globalization is to selectively retain, appropriate, and identify with the rational elements or quintessence of both sides' traditions, which allows for a certain level of

organic integration and creative development. The basic principles for the selection of and identifying with rational elements or essential elements in traditional cultures should be: First, whether it is beneficial to social progress of one's own nation; and second, whether it is beneficial to harmonious dealings with other nations and to mutual development.

I believe that the process of renewal of the traditions of Eastern culture and Western culture through the selection of values have the following four aspects.

1. The integrating of the rational elements of Eastern holism with the positive elements of Western individualism

For those involved in Chinese New Cultural Movement in the early 20th century or those involved in contemporary Neo-Confucianism after the New Cultural Movement in the 1980s recognized that one of the major differences and particularities of Eastern and Western cultural development was that the former paid attention to the whole, the latter to the individual.

It was the representative actors of New Cultural Movement who had firstly pointed to the positive meanings of “individual as an entity” and “individuality development” in Western culture. Chen Duxiu believed, in the West “all ethics, politics, and laws, the orientation of society, what the country is hoping for, advocate the right of individual freedom and welfare. The freedom of speech and thinking is the search of individuality development; everyone is equal before the law; the right of individual freedom is written in the Constitution that even the state can't deprive the people of that right”. Eastern thought is characterized as a patriarchal society which relies on holistic cultural tradition “disgraces the independent and respectable personality”, “suffocates the freedom of individual thinking”, “deprives people of equality before the law”, and “encourages dependence upon others and mars the productive capacity of individuals”.¹ Li Dazhao also believed, “The Easterner regards sacrificing oneself as an obligation of life while the Westerner regards satisfying oneself as a demand of life. And therefore Eastern morality keeps on suppressing individuality while Western morality is to pursue the movement of liberation of

individuality”. Eastern nations “very seldom respect individual authority and power” but “often regard individual as an incomplete part of a whole so that the value of individual survival is entirely gulfed by the whole”.²

Neo-Confucianism also recognized the positive connotations of the concept of “individualism” in Western culture. Du Weiming, a noted American scholar of Chinese origin, remarked, “In the course of the development of Western democracy, a major force which had started since the Middle Ages and evolved from Enlightenment to Modernization, by degrees, to become an irresistible trend in 19th century was individualism. Up till today, it is still hard for us to apprehend Western individualism by whatsoever translation. Now some even think the correlate of ‘individualism’ in Chinese language shouldn’t be connected to the English word because it becomes too easily associated with Western ideas of self-concern. Yet Western ‘individualism’ in its original sense is a deeper concept, which doesn’t merely relate to individual’s independent personality, individual’s honor, or individual’s right, free from coercion, but also relates to the individual’s indomitable spirit of justice, equality before God, and equality before the law. All these basic values are implied in the original meaning of ‘individualism’ in Western culture”.³

Those who participated in comparative studies of Eastern and Western culture in the mainland of China in 1980s questioned in-depth the relationship between “individual” and “community”. Some noted scholars suggested that the *Theory of Man* in Western humanism believes “man is an independent individual who possesses reasoning, sentiment, and will, and the understanding of above concept of Man includes love, friendship, freedom, equality, dignity, and right”, “everybody is a creature with his own intrinsic elements and responsible for his own fate”. However, the *Theory of Man* in Chinese humanism sees it this way: “From relationship to everything to feeling for everything, man is seen as a part of a community, having a role in a community, not only an individual; so man is seen as an interacting individual which entails a responsibility for the survival of the community he belongs, consciousness of its ethics and morality. Moreover, the understanding of above concept of Man includes kindheartedness, justice, leniency, harmony, obligation, and contribution so that each man is a derivative of the relationship he belongs to where his fate is closely linked to the community”.⁴

Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* points out that individualism is one of the eight major characteristics that differentiates Western civilization from other civilizations. The value of this individualism involves the support of the individual's right of choice, known as "the Romeo and Juliet revolution", a value which claims equal rights for all individuals.⁵

Eastern people often condemn "individualism" in Western culture and equate it with "egoism". Actually, connotations of such "individualism" are very complicated as it also contains such values as self-respect, self-confidence, self-dependence, self-determination, self-striving, self-consciousness, self-discipline, self-responsibility, self-improvement. This is vastly different from mere "egoism" which remains "self-interested" and "self-centered".

The gravity of "individualism" is the emphasis of individuality and uniqueness of an individual. Contemporary society is fraught with diverse opportunities for development. Scientific and technological explorations of the possible world, and diverse inventions and innovations need to encourage each human being to bring his or her individuality, uniqueness, initiatives, and creativity into full play. This requires the respect for personal interest, courage and decision. Moreover, the difference, diversity and free development of the individual must be treated and accepted as a valuable thing or a form of wealth. The pioneers of American high technology enterprises by Microsoft and Intel conspicuously embrace vivid individuality with self-determined and self-dependent spirit so that they could initiate their unprecedented undertakings. The proportion of American expression of willingness to establish or having established self-owned businesses not only is far higher than that of Non-Western countries, but also higher than that of the EU by three times. These facts prove that the American cultural tradition of "individualism" mainly connoting self-confidence, self-dependence and self-striving has become one of the great sources of cultural innovation which has led to national scientific and economic strengths. The negative side of Eastern or Chinese tradition of "holism" is that it stifles individuality and creative development, and regards "esteeming and pursuing commonness" and "echoing and obedience" as virtues, hence suffocating independent thought and uniqueness of opinion. Some Western people said, "The Chinese are usually concerned about

what the others are doing but unaware of what they should do by themselves; American care naught for what the others are doing but know what they will have to do”.⁶ This saying may belie some degree of prejudice, but it points to the truth that the concept of personality in the Chinese cultural tradition lacks a self-determined and self-dependent individuality and supports a submissive mentality. It is beneficial for us to reflect upon this lack of independent innovation and entrepreneurship in the fields of sciences and technology.

However, in Eastern holism what is worth the whistle and should be passed on are its underlying positive values including its emphasis on the interests of the majority, appreciating fraternity, friendly and harmonious relations, promoting concern about the overall situation, intensifying social responsibility, feeling for and aiding the have-nots, implementing public equality, overcoming egoism and law-of-the-jungle competition, maintaining social stability and improving living standards for all. In 1989 the Singaporean government publicized four basic values for its citizens: “placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic building block of society, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony”. This led to extensive discussions in Singapore concerning the values which emphasize holism. The result was an additional addendum respecting the “regard and community support for the individual”.⁷ A Singaporean legislator had expressed that the philosophy of their government didn’t only rest on the foundation of Confucianism but on the philosophy of Western democracy. He specifically highlighted, “Our institution of public administration is built on the concept of the Western individual rights, and on the foundation of a kind of special understanding of individual”.⁸ As a result, Singapore has created economic miracle and realized a modernization which owed its success to the rational elements of Eastern holism, integrated organically with the progressive individualist values which originated with the Western Enlightenment movement.

2. The integration of the values of respecting family in the Eastern cultural tradition with the values of respecting self-dependence of individual in the Western cultural tradition

Eastern nations have been based upon an agrarian society for much of their history. Such a society relies on the family acting as a production unit, and families as a community. This social structure pays special attention to patriarchal blood relationships and respects the authority and standing of the patriarch. China leaders of the New Culture Movement highlighted that one of the differences of fundamental thoughts between Eastern and Western nations is that the former takes family as an entity while the latter takes individual as an entity. Likewise, representative personnel of contemporary Neo-Confucianism expressed, “The standing of ‘family’ in Chinese social life is of importance without comparison”. Under the influence of the New Culture Movement (May 4th Movement of 1919) the progressive intellectuals in literature and art circles opposed the feudal cultural traditions, and crusaded fiercely against “family” which disabled individual freedom of choice, freedom of thought, even life. *Family*, a magnum opus of Ba Jin who was a remarkable writer in China, gained extensive influence upon society because it had exposed the decay of the traditions of feudal family culture and criticized it without reservation. Many intellectuals at that time attempted to “get away from family” which subsequently became the starting point for democratic revolution.

In the industrialized society, family no longer is a unit for basic production, the members of family often receive equal education opportunity and gain relatively equal opportunity in terms of economic and social standing. The power of patriarchy and power of husband has substantially faded. This can be considered a part of the phenomenon of social progress. Yet on the other hand, some social problems also come to light. Along with the fading of the family, individuals’ independency increases, cases of divorce increase, numbers of single-parent families increase, children of the single-parent families don’t have proper guidance and family education from their guardians. Along with the numbers of three-generation families decrease, increasingly the aged live isolated, without care or attention from their offspring so that they are lonely and pessimistic. Some well-educated and high-income single females prefer not to marry, or prefer to conceive through artificial insemination.

For Eastern society, to avoid the problems which arise with the abrupt introduction of individualist values - drawbacks which developed

gradually in Western society through modernization - it is important to selectively retain and identify with those positive elements in their own cultural traditions that attach importance to family. While Singapore identifies with the Western concept of individual rights, it also stresses the ethical norms that define the rights and obligations of father and son, husband and wife, and siblings, the responsibility of taking care of and teaching the next generations, filial piety to seniors, honesty to peer groups, and placing family interest above individual interest. Japan also extols the virtue of women who, when they acquire a certain academic credentials and social standing, still act as a good assistant for their husband and guardian for their children, be a filial daughter-in-law, loving wife, and respectable mother.⁹

When Eastern countries are moving forward on their path towards industrialization, family-style corporations brought the positive elements of their traditional cultures into full play. For example, some Japanese firms blended family-style human warmth and loving care into their business management. It adopted lifetime employment and salary paid according to seniority that was beneficial to enhance employees' sense of belonging and loyalty to the firms and boosting of team spirit. The result was an increase in product quality, growth of market shares, and increase in brand loyalty. But upon entering into the era of information revolution, for some industries the Japanese family-style corporation's culture was found disadvantageous to innovation and created difficulties in competing with their Western counterparts. Right now, some famous manufacturers including Matsushita (Panasonic) are in the process of transforming their corporate culture, "they are shifting to put a premium on employees who are enriched with individuality and remarkably talented as the global society in 21st century is going to be more individualized, irrespective of which industry or profession, only those corporations with talents full of individuality can survive to remain in the international competition".¹⁰ Matsushita (Panasonic), Fujitsu and others have set off to reform their management and distribution system, and encourage employees to bring their individual talents into full play. Other giant Japanese corporations like Honda also make effort to fade out the color of family-style management by stressing that the corporations are not family businesses, and must forsake the past hereditary system which "passes the managerial right on to son not to

capable successor”. These corporations select the virtuous and talented persons for office, and appoint people on their merits in order to intensify their competitiveness.¹¹

Asian emerging industrialized countries have also awoken to the fact that the values linked to the patriarchal system such as nepotism, decision-making according to seniority rather than ability, have been a handicap for meeting the requirements of the information age. Lee Kuan-Yew, Minister Mentor of Singapore, blamed the catastrophic losses in Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s to the emphasis placed on nepotism, so that the decision-making in their investments depended not on validity and soundness of the investments themselves, but on whether they were connected with someone the decision-makers were familiar with. He decreed that the Singaporean government and financial institutions must adhere always to transparent economy and rule of law so they could ride out the financial storm. He also pointed out, in the information ages a certain limitation exists in the values of Confucianism of “respect the aged”, and success in information technology requires “persons in the prime of life, full of vitality, wisdom and courage. A father is not necessarily most knowledgeable, perhaps a grandson has more knowledge”. “In the times of information, the youth and quick-witted mind are in a position of tremendous superiority”. If decision-making is conducted only by the older generation, many opportunities will slide away.¹²

3. Integrating the positive elements of the values of “rule by morality” in Eastern cultural traditions with the values of “rule by law” in Western cultural traditions

The Qin Dynasty practiced a general policy of “relying on extremely harsh penal laws to govern the nation” and “entirely using laws to replace morality to govern the nation”. It lasted for just two generations until its fall. With the Han Dynasty ancient China began to adopt a Confucian general policy which stressed “rule by morality” in governing the nation. Chinese tradition of “rule by morality” consists of “morality politics” and “morality education”. Morality policy itself also consists of two layers of understandings: first, in governing a country, it puts people first, en-

hances people's welfare; second, for government officials, only men of virtue, of justice, and of honesty and cleanliness are suitable. Confucianism stresses that officials must see themselves as an example and conduct their behavior to educate others. They must set top-down examples of what a rightful social climate should be. This old tradition deserves to be passed on to future generations. But the Confucian idea regarding the "virtue and morality" of rulers of a country as a premise of governing a country and advocating "the politics of virtuous person" gradually gives way to "rule by man" - as long as it is ruled by virtuous person, even if laws are imperfect, the government and society will be fair; when the virtuous person is gone, even if the laws are perfect, they will be of no help. Therefore, the values of "the virtuous person is superior to 'perfect laws' and 'rule by man' carries more weights than 'rule by law'". The Confucian traditional concept of "rule by morality" is negative, is different from today's political situation whose core is democracy and rule by law.

Both laws and morality have the function to normalize and regulate human's behavior but within a different scope. Chinese traditional "rule by morality" boundlessly magnified the regulating function of morality so as to enable political life to become ethical, to become "ruled by man". But our today's construction of politics civilization requires us to rid ourselves of the negative influences of the traditional "rule by morality" and to practice the institutionalized, normalized, and proceduralized "rule by law" in the political life. In China, many people believe that the Western "rule by law" boundlessly applied, is becoming increasingly complicated. The costs of legislation, enforcement and litigation are high, and the functions of moral regulation, moral education, and moral norms are often neglected. Moral education in traditional Chinese "rule by morality" emphasizes persuasive and inspiring effects of morality to raise people's moral quality and often relies on literature and the arts, such as poetry and music, to nurture and cultivate people's moral sentiments and lofty ideas. This is the inherited cultural capital that is still required to boost our social progress for today. But experiences tell us that merely relying on education and cultivation to make morality capable of regulating people's behavior and inter-relationship is not sufficient, we still require institutional arrangements and institutional protections (such as morality pacts, morality guidelines, regulation systems, credit systems, supervision systems, and

evaluation systems, incentive and punishment systems) that take shape based on laws and “rule by law” so as to enable the integration of moral education with social management, and of self-governing with being governed-by-other. In reality, the experience of today’s Western society in the establishment of morality institution, and in the measures for “rule by morality” that based on “rule by law” should be blended into Chinese contemporary culture of “the rule by morality”.

It is worth noting that in Chinese traditional concepts of “Both law and punishment are synonymous” and “morality and law are separate”, from which some people misunderstand that “rule by law” is merely to punish evils and governed-by-other and take stopgap measures whereas “rule by morality” is to promote virtue and self-control, and take radical measures. This improper conception that “rule by law” is passive and “rule by morality” is positive distorts the understanding of the essence and function of contemporary laws and “rule by law”. In essence contemporary laws and “rule by law” also embrace the function of promoting virtue and self-control, and taking radical measures. In history, as Chinese people long lived in the feudal society of “rule by man” and the more pernicious elements of this tradition still haunts people’s mind today. What contemporary China is facing is the insufficiency in the construction of new, but not too complex, legal systems. In general, in the makings of the people of our nation one of the major problems is that the concept of “rule by law” is so weak that our ethical climate and social order is undermined by the lack of protection by laws. For China, lacking the contemporary spirit of “rule by law” for so long, the only way for the nation to continue to govern and prosper is to continue to invest in our legal system, such a process has brought about huge returns of economic prosperity and social stability. Conversely, any construction of morality without protection from a proper “rule by law” is merely a “rule of morality” with no ground to support it, and eventually leads to high costs and low returns. Therefore, integrating Chinese sentimental, art-style and poetic traditional morality education with Western contemporary rational, institutionalized morality construction and legal construction is important for boosting social progress.

4. Integrating Eastern “static civilization” with Western “dynamic

civilization’

In the controversy regarding Eastern and Western culture before the eve of the May 4th Movement of 1919, some well-known scholars pointed out that the fundamental difference between Chinese civilization and Western civilization is that the former is a “static civilization” and the latter is a “dynamic civilization”. Life in a “static civilization” is inward, it values less competition, and advocates a relaxed mindset whose normal state is being at peace. But the life of “dynamic civilization” is outward, it values victory in competition, and whose normal state is at war. Li Dazhao, one of the pioneers in the New Culture Movement at that time, basically agreed with this perspective and believed: “For the Easterner, their daily life is oriented in a static state, whereas a dynamic state is an exception. For Westerners, their daily life is oriented in a dynamic state, whereas a static state is an exception”. The Easterner believes “nothing is worth competing for” and the Westerner seeks for “progressive evolution, firmly believing that human society can progress, irrespective of one’s purpose, is forward-looking and respects advancement and struggle”. In the controversy regarding Eastern and Western culture after the May 4th Movement of 1919, Liang Shuming, a representative actor of contemporary Neo-Confucianism, published a famous literature entitled *The Eastern & Western Cultures and Their Philosophies*, in which he believed that Chinese and Western culture represents different directions: “Western culture’s fundamental spirit shows that its intention likes to go forward, and look to the future”, “The fundamental spirit of Chinese culture shows that its intention always looks for harmony and moderation”.¹³ The West’s “dynamic civilization” sees unlimited progress and unlimited development as the highest value, and endless exploration and adventures as *joie de vivre* leading them to ceaseless efforts to try to conquer nature, to transform environment, and make every effort to get the things they want. Chinese “static civilization” takes the attitude of “harmony between humanity and nature”, “feel at ease under all circumstances”, “contentment brings happiness”. It was the West’s “dynamic civilization” that had brought about sailing around the earth and discovery of new continents, and immeasurable developments in the fields of sciences and technologies in the past four centuries, and created an industrial civilization with astounding pro-

ductive capacity, and which pioneered the ages of economic globalization and ubiquitous association for human beings. Chinese “static civilization” condemned us to remain stagnated in our history. Worse than that is that from the late period of Qing Dynasty till 1940s our laggardness and poverty have pushed us to a predicament, where we have become passive and vulnerable to bullying. “Progress” has been a core concept in the West since the Enlightenment in the 18th century. Yu Ying-Shih, a famous American scholar of Chinese origin, pointed out that the Chinese culture characterized by stability and tranquility can no longer adapt itself to contemporary life, and Chinese modernization can’t afford not to “act” or adopt a conception of “progress”.¹⁴ I would further believe that the makings of the Western “dynamic civilization” such as ceaseless exploration, ceaseless progress, ceaseless exploitation, and ceaseless innovation are exactly what we need to speed-up our modernization. The transformation of Chinese culture must involve the accommodation of “act” and “progress” which are spiritual elements in Western civilization.

On the other hand Western modernization has also led to spiritual decadence. Anxiety, fear, a feeling of homelessness, and alienation and loneliness occurred in the hearts of many Western people accompanying their over-abundance of desires, competition, efficiency-orientation, speed-orientation, and striving for growth of material wealth. Liang Shuming in his comparison of Eastern and Western culture and their philosophy writes: “Western people strive forward at great speed like gale and lightning and have made them feel a loss of spiritual fulfillment so that they sink into a depressive mood; they achieve a lot but in fact they have not the time to enjoy the fruits of their own labor”.¹⁵ Yu Ying-Shih profoundly remarked, The West’s current crisis is that they can “act” but can’t “calm”, can “progress” but can’t “still”, can “prosper” but can’t “tranquilize”, can “bustle” but can’t “stabilize”. “If it is said that in the early stage of modernization the values such as ‘tranquility’, ‘stability’, ‘calmness’ and ‘stillness’ are unsuitable, when entering into the stage of post-modernization such values are worthy of our attention”.¹⁶ Therefore contemporary Western people need to change their mindset so they “can reach the higher ideal of frugal living”, “can maintain a peaceful mind and possess lofty aspirations”, “can adopt a simple and unadorned style of life”, and “can reduce excessive desires for material profit”. Following the Chinese cultural tradition, they

need to mollify their “search for wealth”, “search for movement”, and “search for progress” as these are values that diminish one’s humanity. Finally they need to heal their spiritual anxiety which is caused by excessive competition.

For China, while we are in the process of accelerating modernization, we must cool-headedly rethink the values connected with Western “progress, must rely on dialectic wisdom of our own national cultural tradition to calculate the proper relationship between “act” and “calm”, “progress” and “stillness”, “prosperity” and “tranquility”, and “bustle” and “stability” in this age of economic, scientific and technological development, and realize that social progress, with humanity and poetic life as a foundation, will lead to a society possessing a harmony between human and nature, harmony between human and human, and harmony between mind and body.

Endnotes

¹Chen Duxiu: “Fundamental Differences of Thoughts between Eastern nations and Western nations”, edited by Chen Song: *Analects of Controversies about Eastern and Western Culture around the May 4th (Movement of 1919)* (Additional Issue), Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1989. pp.13-14.

²Li Dazhao: “Fundamental Differences Points between Eastern Civilizations and Western Civilizations”, *Ibid.* pp.67-68.

³Du Weiming: “Confucian Humanism and Democracy”, *Contemporary Transformation of Confucian Traditions*, Beijing: Chinese Broadcast Television Publishing House. p.381.

⁴Pang Pu: “The Humanism Spirit of Chinese Culture (Outlines)”, *Re-Estimation of Chinese Traditional Culture*, Shanghai: The People’s Press, 1987. pp.50-51.

⁵Samuel P. Huntington: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Rockefeller Center, New York, First Touchstone Edition 1997. p.71.

⁶Lu Qiutian: *Differences-Eastern and Western Thought in the Eyes of a Chinese Ambassador*, Shanghai Three Joints Book Company, 2003. p.103.

⁷Samuel P. Huntington: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Rockefeller Center, New York, First Touchstone Edition 1997. p.319.

⁸Tu Wei-ming: *Singaporean Challenge*, Shanghai Three Joints Book Company. p.183

⁹Lee Kuan Yew: “Speech made in the third meeting of Humanity Forum of Chinese Scientists-Eastern Culture in the Process of Globalization”, *Wen Hui Daily*, May 7, 2004.

¹⁰“Denial of Extreme Equalitarianism by Matsushita (Panasonic)”, Beijing: *Reference for News (Chan Kao Xiao Xi)*, October 26, 1999.

¹¹“Realization of Managerial Innovation of Japanese Families Businesses”, Beijing: *Reference for News (Chan Kao Xiao Xi)*, May 25, 2001.

¹²“Behind-the-Times of Confucian Values in the Era of Information”, Beijing: *Reference for News (Chan Kao Xiao Xi)*, March 2, 2001.

¹³Liang Shuming: “Eastern and Western Culture and their Philosophies”, *Analects of Controversies about Eastern and Western Culture in and around the May 4th (Movement of 1919)* (Additional Issue), Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1989. p.423.

¹⁴Yu Ying-shih: “Contemporary Meanings of Chinese Culture in the Sight of Values System”, *The Path of Intrinsic Transcendence*, Beijing: Chinese Broadcast Television Publishing House.

¹⁵Liang Shuming: “Eastern and Western Culture and their Philosophies”, *Analects of Controversies about Eastern and Western Culture in and around the May 4th (Movement of 1919)* (Additional Issue), Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1989. p.424.

¹⁶Yu Ying-shih: “Contemporary Meanings of Chinese Culture in the Sight of Values System”, *The Path of Intrinsic Transcendence*, Beijing: Chinese Broadcast Television Publishing House. pp.24-25.