

# **THE ETHICS OF REVENGE AND FORGIVENESS: A COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL VALUES AND THEOLOGY**

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## **Abstract**

Various ways to solve the problems of hatred, and conflict resolution have emerged within cultural traditions, political environments, and religious belief systems. Since the emergence of human society, revenge had always been one of the methods to resolve conflicts. We can easily find that this perennial ethical issue affecting and troubling human society, especially families and communities. In the course of history, revenge was once considered as a kind of virtue and the idea of revenge was even honored and respected. However, with the passage of time, it is being gradually abandoned by the civilized world which embraces forgiveness. Each culture and religion has advocated forgiveness in different ways. This article examines both the Chinese and Western attitudes concerning forgiveness and revenge to allow for reflection on cultural dialogue and peace-making.

## **FORWARD**

Thomas Aquinas once said, “Human beings are social and political animals”. Indeed, living in families, communities and societies, conflicts between individuals, families, and races are unavoidable in the protection of one’s own interests. Thus, there exists the phenomenon of revenge. The resolution of conflicts is a problem for individuals and families on a smaller scale, and an ethical question for the society at large. In the attempt to control hatred and retribution in society, different methods of conflict resolution have emerged within ethnic and cultural traditions,

political environments, and religious belief systems.

Since the emergence of human society, revenge had always been one of the methods to resolve conflicts. Whether it was in the Eastern cultural tradition represented by the Confucianism or in the Western one represented by the ancient Greco-Roman tradition, revenge was once considered as a kind of virtue and the idea of revenge was even honored and respected. However, with the passage of time, it is being abandoned by the civilized world. In many countries, revenge has been outlawed. The nature of the law is to stop crimes, including the acts that can trigger retribution and acts of revenge. Nevertheless, when the law cannot provide a timely and just resolution of conflicts, people may still choose the method of revenge. But the result is nothing more than vicious cycle of violence and crime, eventually leading to division and anarchy, causing social instability and unrest.

What, then, is the best way to confront hatred? Nothing but forgiveness. Actually each culture and religion have discussed and advocated forgiveness in different ways. This article takes Christianity as an example, through critique, examination, and analysis on the ideas of “revenge” and “forgiveness” in both the Chinese and Western cultures, so as to provide some meaningful references for cultural dialogue and human peace-making. Obviously, this article is merely an introduction. My hope is to awaken wider discussion.

## **I. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS ON “REVENGE” AND “FORGIVENESS”**

“Revenge” and “Forgiveness” are two concepts in social ethics, and within the scope of sociology as well. The definition of “Revenge” in *Ci Hai* (《辞海》 Chinese encyclopedic dictionary) is “taking action against someone who did evil to you”. However, the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius justified revenge action under certain circumstance; “The King Tang started a war of revenge for a slaughtered child, not for the wealth and power” (Mencius---the legend of Duke Teng). On the contrary, “Forgiveness” is defined as “pardoning someone who did evil to you” in Contemporary Chinese Dictionary. However, Chinese culture has

a limited description of the concept of “forgiveness”.

Speaking from the perspective of psychology, revenge is impulsive behavior that is neither self-serving nor altruistic. Vengeance is also a subconscious emotion in human nature; the release of the suppressed feelings of stress, mental pain and other hidden emotions. On the appearance, revenge appears to be righteous expression. However, as a matter of fact, revenge is actually an irrational release of emotions. Psychological studies have shown that all human beings can display aggressive “impulse deviations”. Revenge is one of the four motivations that cause such “impulse deviation”. The other three are “concern, power and helplessness”.<sup>1</sup>

“Revenge” is an unhealthy condition hidden in human nature. Moreover, hatred is a deadly weapon of self-harm. Once a person is caught in great resentment, rational thoughts will eventually be clouded anger. Additionally, the person will be the first victim of his/her own anger, and the worst part is others will have no knowledge of it. Naturally, we would miss ourselves in this logical fallacy “I have been hurt, then I am not willing to forgive, therefore I always will be in the state of angry resentment that eventually leads “I” to get hurt again”. The act of retaliation hurts your “enemy”, but then there will be new tortures for you: “anxiety” from hurting others and “worries” about reprisals. In other words, revenge is a vicious cycle.

By contrast, “forgiveness” is a noble act and a form of wisdom. Forgiveness is hope for the opposite’s confession of wrongdoings as well, in order to make a progress towards becoming a “complete person”. A person who hurts others always denies the human nature of others; in fact, he or she is destroying their own human nature. But once a person bravely forgives, he or she will be blessed, for the forgiveness could liberate a person’s spirit from the shadow of anger and hatred. The reward of forgiveness for a person, family and community doing the forgiving will be the great relief and peace of heart.

Thus, forgiveness is wisdom and a virtue that is indispensable to modern civilization and a foundation for constructing social harmony.

## II. “REVENGE” AND “FORGIVENESS” IN THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURAL VALUES

In the recent years, some ancient Chinese fables, historical fictions and classical literature were made into movies and dramas. Besides manifesting as themes patriotism, social morality and romance, “revenge” is the main theme for the majority of action and historical films and television programs.

There are many thrilling stories about “revenge” in Chinese history. For example, Whipping Corpse, Revenge of Duke Gou Jian, the Assassination the King of Qin, The Orphan of Zhao, etc. All these stories are related to the same topic: “Revenge”.

This leads to the question: “Why are these “revenge stories” so frequently remembered by the people?” Revenge is still considered a virtue to many people. Therefore, I have to seek for the answer from the Chinese traditional culture.

### 1. Etymology of “Revenge” and “Forgiveness” in Chinese Tradition

“Revenge” has been highly commended since ancient times. Again, just as I mentioned above, much of Chinese literature and many idioms are related to “Revenge”, and related to three forms of revenge: “retribution for the evildoings” (general revenge), “family hatred” and “desire for revenge”.

#### 1) *Retribution to evil doings*

“Eyes for eyes, teeth for teeth”, “life for life, blood for blood”.

“We will not attack unless we are attacked; If we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack”. (Chairman Mao)

#### 2) *Family Hatred*

“A son should pay his father’s debts”; “a dutiful son shall take revenge for his father’s death”; “When a man kills another’s father, that other will kill his father; when a man kills another’s elder brother, that other will kill his elder brother”. (Mencius)

#### 3) *Desire of Revenge*

“If a man passes by revenge, he shall not be a human being”; “Revenge is a just action for a person”; “It is never too late to take revenge for a person”.

## 2. Revenge for Righteousness

Before the judicial system was set up during the ancient times, revenge was quite common. In traditional Chinese society, people used to hold to this creed “if a man passes by revenge, he shall not be a human being”. In Confucianism, “The gentleman knows what is righteousness (Yi); the mean man knows what is profitable”. However, Yi (Righteousness) implies the act of revenge which had been used as a measure for morality. In short, virtue and hatred of evil are realized through the act of “revenge for righteousness in the view of the public”. It is an act for justice, the reflection of the true quality of a hero, and the real spirit of a man. Zhao Dagong explained this Chinese “complex of revenge” as follows:

“The greatest acts of hatred of all are ‘killing someone’s families’, and ‘raping someone’s wife’. All these are implacable hatreds, and if someone passes by these hatreds, he or she has no different to animals”<sup>2</sup>

Regarding revenge, Wu Song, a character of fiction in “Outlaws of the Marsh” (《水浒传》), took revenge for his brother’s murder. He killed his sister-in-law and Xi Men Qing who colluded in the murder of his brother. Wu Song even killed all in the family of Zhang Du Jian (a corrupt official who covered up the crimes). Finally, Wu Song proudly declared his success at revenge by identifying himself on the wall with the blood of his victims. However, such a cruel murderer was highly respected and commended as a “hero” by the Chinese people in history.

This story leads to another question “How does revenge become a just act? Why wasn’t the appeal to law accepted by the people?” Mr. Zhao Dagong stated his opinion.

Since the rule of man has been greater than the rule of law in Chinese history, the people do not believe in the fairness of law. “The yamen (residence of a Mandarin) gate is wide open, yet with only right on your side but no money, don’t go inside”. (Chinese proverb) Obviously, justice of the law does not work ahead of the power of wealth, and eventually “revenge” became the only solution. Even now, personal revenge is common.<sup>3</sup>

Revenge has become in Chinese a tradition connected to the worship of individual heroism; and also a part of the public demand for justice.

### 3. The Virtue of Forgiveness

In traditional Chinese culture, although there are many words for describing revenge, there is very few for forgiveness. Nevertheless, there is no lack of famous sayings about forgiveness in Confucians, such as:

Human nature keeps ourselves away from those we hate, and makes us not commend those we dislike. However that is the cause of academic decadence, and the beginning of betrayal of Tao (truth) ---Minister Lu's Annals 《吕氏春秋》.

Some People asked Confucius "Why do someone people repay hatred with virtue?" Confucius answered "How do you repay the one treat that treats you virtuously? I think we shall treat hatred with justice; repaying virtue by virtue". Disciple Zi Gong asked Confucius "Is there any doctrine that I hold for the whole life?" Confucius said "Do not do to others what you would not like to be done to you (Golden Rule)"--- Analects 《论语·宪问》.

Confucius said "He who requires much from himself and little from others will keep himself from being the object of resentment".--- Analects 《论语·卫灵公》

The popular sayings in the daily life:

"Harmony is most precious" "Better to get rid of an enmity than keep it alive" "A smile at meeting and enmity is banished". "Repay injury with kindness" "When is the end of revenge?" "Take a step back and you'll see the boundless sky and sea"....

All these sayings show that the "social order" that Confucianism recommends does not include "revenge" alone, but also highly advocates "benevolence" and "forgiveness". Obviously, to compare with revenge, forgiveness is a noble virtue.

### III. REVENGE IN GRECO-ROMAN TRADITION

Although Christianity originally derived from ancient Hebrew culture, it is also imprinted with a Greco-Roman imprint. Before the birth of Christ until the Renaissance period, Greco-Roman culture was the mainstream culture in European civilization. Greco-Roman civilization led human beings to a cultural summit.<sup>4</sup> However, the idea of Revenge was quite common in ancient (pre-Christian) Greco-Roman culture. We can find typical examples in Greek literature and drama: Erinyes-the goddess of revenge was quite active in the war of Troy. Obviously, the theme of revenge had been a concern for society in general at that time.

For example “Orestes” – the “Agamemnon”, “Libation person” and “Revenge of God” – are a trilogy and the masterpieces of the great ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus (525-456BC). They were performed as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The main theme of the Orestes story is feuding. “Debts of the ancestors must be paid by their heirs with blood”.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the “Revenge Genie” ruled the whole of society.

Another masterpiece, “Medea” of Euripides tells another bloody revenge story between two families. An angry princess Medea killed the mistress of her husband, her father, and two sons, in order to punish her husband through cutting off his blood-line.<sup>6</sup>

Besides ancient Greeks and Romans, other European tribes, such as the Goths, Franks, Teutons and Anglo-Saxons had similar revenge traditions. Before those tribes were Christianized, they were quite hostile. When they conquered a new area, they would kill all the residents there and destroy the weaponry and properties of their enemies. “Sacrificing all living creatures to war-god”. In addition, the barbarian law system not only ascribed the punishment for crimes to an individual, but also to his/her families. Prof. Brian Tierney of Cornell University described it as, “Once a person was murdered, his/her families had natural right to take revenge on the murderer and his/her families”.<sup>7</sup>

#### **IV. “REVENGE” AND “FORGIVENESS” IN THE OLD-TESTAMENT**

During the period of Old Testament, “Revenge” was quite common in Jewish values, which had been clearly demonstrated in their “Lex Talionis”.<sup>8</sup> Under the influence of the ancient Mideastern nations, the Law of Revenge was once the standard Jewish way of revenge. That is “Blood for blood!” Therefore, what the ancient Jews wanted is revenge for shedding blood.<sup>9</sup>

“Lex Talionis” can be found in the biblical verses “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex 21:23-25). “Lex Talionis” can be found in “Code of Hammurabi”, Solon’s Law, and Roman Code. Obviously, a “justified revenge” was a “universal law” in these societies. Jews eventually took “Lex Talionis” as a principle in their lives.

The ancient Hebrews appealed to their laws for solutions, including “Lex Talionis”. However, in order to avoid the killing of innocents, Moses also set up the refuges according to God’s will (Num 35:9-15; Ex 21:13; Deu 4:41-42; 19:2-3). Although Lex Talionis existed in Jewish tradition, it could not be carried out personally without a trial by a judge. However, exceptions still existed in the scriptures; Joab murders Abner; Absalom murders Amnon (2 Samuel 3:26-27; 13;28).

We could also find references to “forgiveness” in Jewish tradition according the Old Testament. “You shall not take vengeance, you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). It would seem that “forgiveness” is a unique characteristic that other Mid-East nations did not have at that time. Another reason provoking Jews to “love their enemies as themselves” is to lift their “hope for justice and revenge” to the Lord, and firmly believe God will bring them justice (Ps 35, 59, 109).

#### **V. THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF REVENGE IN CHRISTIANITY**

“Forgiveness” has an important role in Christianity. Put simply, it

is one of the foundations of Christian faith and value. “Forgiveness”, “sympathy” and “love your enemy” are three particular concepts in Christian theology. Meanwhile, these three “concepts” even became principles in interpersonal relations, and have far-reaching influence for modern civilization.

## 1. “Forgiveness” and “Love Enemy” in the Holy Bible

According to the New Testament, Jesus completely rejected the concept of revenge which was a “corrupt custom” handed down from ancient time. He advocated a new value, “love”. (Caritas)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’. But I say love your enemy and do good to those who persecute you.”---(Mt 5:43)

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”--(Mt 5:23-24)

“So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt 7:12)

“Forgive us for our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”. “For if you forgive others for their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”, --(Mt 6:12,14)

“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” --(Lk 6:36)

“You shall forgive your enemies seventy times seven”--(Mt 18, 22)

“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” --(Mk 2:17)

“You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” ----Lev 19:16-18

“If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him”. (Ex 23:4-5)

“Show kindness and mercy to one another” ---(*Zec7:9*)

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” ---(*Is 1:18*)

## **2. Mission of Christ: Repentance**

When Jesus began his public life, he called people to repent for their sins: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17, Mk 1:15). Here Christ had demonstrated his redemptive mission: for the repentance and salvation of all sinners. Thus, Jesus pointed out that “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”. (Mk 2:17, Mt 2:17, Lk 5:32). Speaking from another perspective, the mission of Christ also demonstrated his concerns for most vulnerable groups in the society.

## **3. Christ’s Forgiveness Brings Hope and Peace**

Christ is life (John 14:6), His forgiveness bring us hope and new lives.

According to the Gospel of St. John, when the people caught a woman committing adultery, they attempted to stone her to death in order to honor the Jewish law. At that time, adultery was an unforgivable crime and death penalty was the consequence.

They said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let he who is without sin

among you be the first to throw a stone at her”. And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her”, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord”. And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more. --(Jn 8:4-11)

Jesus not only forgave a sinner, but also gave a person facing death penalty hope and new life. In the Gospel, when Jesus was in a rich man’s house, he met this woman who hungered for new life again. Though Jews could not accept her, and even scorned her, Jesus forgave her again, and granted her peace.

“Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Lk 7:48, 50)

#### **4. Christ’s New Annotation to the Law: Forgiveness and Sympathy**

The main line of Jewish history is the covenant between God and human beings:

“I am the Lord, your God, and you are my people”.<sup>10</sup>

God had been constantly trying to stress his promise. However, the Jews did not keep it well. They broke this covenant again and again, and finally their infidelity led to the breakdown of relationship between God and his people. But God always demonstrated his forgiveness to the Jews because “They are my people”. Therefore, Jewish history vacillated between “breaking covenant---setting a new covenant” (The Ten Commandments, Ex 34:10-28). However, the new covenant does not only establish a relation between God and his people, but also has consequences for relations among His people with each other.<sup>11</sup>

On their long journey of exile and return, the Jews strictly followed the law of their forgiving God. They emphasized repentance and law; they solved the problems arising from hatred by following this Law

and so developed a consciousness of forgiveness.

Due to the exile and rule of gentiles, the Jews followed the Law which prevented their assimilation. Before Christ, the Jews considered themselves a selected race, but also for various periods an exiled race. The relation between God and Jews was like “father and his son”. Even when they were in exile, they strictly followed the Law and preserved their characteristics as Jews. Any violation of the Law was a crime. Gradually, obedience of the Law became a characteristic of the Jews, though this came to deviate from its original meaning.

During the period of Old Testament, besides the sins that were defined by the “Ten Commandments”, Jews considered those who disobeyed and belittled the Law as sinners. The Law became the only standard for judging “sinfulness” or “innocence”, Obviously, the poor, shepherds and other marginalized people could not meet the requirements of Law, such as keeping Sabbath day, cleansing rituals and other rules. They became sinners. They lost all citizenship, and had no qualifications to join in social and religious activities. Compared to the marginalized communities, tax collectors, prostitutes and non-Jews were considered even more indecent. They would not comply with the Covenant and the Law. They were classified as gentiles and pagans, and did not belong to God.

It is in this historical context, Jesus Christ came. He taught the Jews of God’s love and redemption for all human beings, including sinners and gentiles. Jesus emphasized two key words in the Law: “justice” and “compassion”. No doubt, obedience to the Law was important; it needed to be complemented by compassion. Jesus was not against the Law, but against its interpretation by the Pharisees and scribes and the way they lived it out.

For the Jews, the key features of the law were holiness and purity.

For Jesus, the key features of the law were justice and compassion.

Jesus’ interpretation of the Law led to a religious tradition of repentance, and established “forgiveness” at the core of Christianity.

## **5. The Irrationality of Forgiveness, Celebration of Repentance**

The love and forgiveness of Christ are irrational. He “recklessly” loved others and ignored the results. In other words, the love of Christ

was not based on reasons, but love alone. Some of his deeds even violated basic common sense. A typical example is “parable of the lost sheep”

“When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”. --Lk 15:5-7

Here we think the shepherd must have made a mistake, because he should not have abandoned 99 sheep for one. Maybe the wolf could attack those 99 sheep anytime. If we judge this parable in accordance with common sense, 99 sheep obviously are more important than one lost sheep. If we think this way, we have totally misunderstood the meaning of Jesus’ parable. The theological meaning of “the parable of the lost sheep” is to welcome the so-called incurable sinners home, return them to the community, accept their repentances, for “it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (Mt 18:14).

## **6. Unconditional Love**

If forgiveness for Christ was not based on reason, it could only be based on love. This kind of love was interpreted as “agape”, which is unconditional. For unconditional love does not require any premise, any acquisition, any pay. From the perspective of secular values, it seems against common sense, a kind of “madness”. However, the Lord loves human beings with this agape (unconditional love). It does not matter how bad human beings are, the Lord wants to forgive us. He offers human beings a hopeful future that is even beyond what He experienced for himself. For the Lord, it is never too late to repent. Therefore, the motivation of God’ treatment of human beings is agape.

There is another famous parable in the New Testament – “Prodigal Son” (Lk 15:11-32). The Lord was like a father or a mother who could not deny love for their own child. Owing to their sinfulness, God

had sufficient reason to punish human beings with justice. “However, what can I do? You are like lovely infants emerging from wombs; I cannot allow you to perish, for I am the Lord and your father”. God is like mother who says to her child who has committed sin “I am angry for your deeds. I could kill you, and you deserved it. However, I could not do it, because I love you”. Thus, Christianity has forgiveness and agape (unconditional love) at its core. There is abundant love in the Lord. Forgiveness should not be a question.

## 7. Forgiving One’s Enemies

When Jesus Christ was on earth, he publicly forgave those who offended him, betrayed him and killed him. For example, when the Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus and his disciples, the disciples requested Jesus to destroy the enemies by bringing down fire from heaven. However Jesus rejected the proposal, and even severely chastised the disciples (Lk 9:53-55). Another example was when Jesus was arrested and his disciples escaped, betraying him one by one. St Peter, the leader of disciples even denied Jesus three times. (Mt 26:69-75). After his resurrection, Jesus Christ did not complain about their infidelity and “cowardice”. On the contrary, Jesus even encouraged his disciples to forget the wrong things they have done and to look for the light in future. Moreover, Jesus granted peace to them.

Christ tried to live the doctrine of forgiveness. He had forgiven the people who killed him on the cross. He practiced the most superior love that he taught – loving his enemies.

According to the Passion narratives, after he was arrested, Jesus also experienced inhuman abuse. He was humiliated and whipped. Finally, he was forced to carry a heavy cross to the hill of Calvary. However, before he died on the cross, Jesus totally forgave his killers, and prayed for them. It was totally beyond common sense.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

---LK 23:34

Since Christ set the pattern, “forgiveness” gradually became a religious tradition. Deacon St. Stephen was the first martyr, but he loved

his enemies. He was stoned to death by the Jewish authorities for spreading the Gospel. But he prayed to God to forgive the wrongdoers.

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them”. (Acts:7:59-60)

Theology and Spirituality teach that when we are willing to forgive others, the peace of God will come to our hearts. It will bring liberty and healing to our spirit. The pardoned person could experience the love of Christ that will lead to the confession of sin. Since the Lord has forgiven us with his unlimited love, He would like to see us forgiving others.

The ministry to prisoners in jail in Western societies is based on this thought. This is a new approach that should be considered by all in society.

## **VI. DIFFERENCES IN FAITH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF “FORGIVENESS”**

Generally speaking, the discussion of culture is conducted by attention to three factors: Values, Political Institutions, and technology & artifacts. Cultural values mainly indicate a nation’s psychological structure, ways of thinking and value systems. It is different form of philosophy and ideology, or something between those two. Culture is a deep-seated object.<sup>12</sup> This paper reflects one of these two concepts “revenge” and “forgiveness” with theological methods based on an historical perspective. Obviously, “forgiveness” can be easily found in the culture that is deeply Christianized. However, “Revenge” is highly stressed in Confucianized Chinese culture, and only in rare instances is any attention given to “forgiveness”. The ethical differences in these two cultures exist in our daily lives.

Here I would like to emphasize especially this point. Although every national culture is different, that does mean any national culture is high and another is low, one is good and one is bad. Certainly each national culture is limited and there are weaknesses in all from an ethical point of view. All need to be constantly purified.

## 1. “Forgiveness” and Traditional Chinese Culture

The clergy who serve in “grass-roots” Churches in parishes in China have experienced a common problem among the faithful in rural areas: “Forgiving enemies seems very difficult”. Because of the social settings in villages, the conflicts between relations, households and friends are inevitable. If a person is offended, the hatred starts. Under this circumstance, the public forgiveness among the people would be very rare. The fact is even that believers do not break away from the “tradition” of revenge because they have been highly affected by this tradition. As a result, their mind-sets are trapped in this traditional practice.

The small farmer mentality is alive and effective.. But, in fact, many intellectuals also cannot escape from the spirit of “revenge”. Even the famous scholar, Mr. Zhang Zhong Xing from Peking University, the author of “Human Characters” (Shun Sheng Lun) admits that he could not forgive some people, because even though they might have confessed their errors, “Some issues affect your whole life and lead you not to forgive”.<sup>13</sup>

Forgiveness is indeed far from easy for ordinary people deeply influenced by the Confucian culture. Since the separation across the Taiwan Strait for over half a century, full national reconciliation and national reunification have yet to be achieved. Apart from the political, economic, diplomatic and geographical reasons of the separation, the absence of the idea of forgiveness in Confucian culture becomes a great hindrance for reconciliation and national unity between the two sides.

Christianity stresses “sin, confession and forgiveness” which is difficult for Chinese to understand. In Chinese thought the tendency is to think, “I was born to be a good person, I never hurt anyone. Whence comes sin? Why do I need confession?” However, Christianity emphasizes, “human beings were born with sin, we do need the pardon of the Lord”. An adult does not necessarily have to do any evil acts, because even any evil thought is still sin. People are not sages, who can be without error? Therefore, Christianity also stresses that as long as we confess our sins, forgiveness of the Lord can still be granted. Jesus said, “Therefore, I tell you, every sin and blasphemy of the people will be forgiven, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven”. (Mt 12:31). For this

reason, Jesus established the sacrament of reconciliation (John 20:23) and so the Church highly stresses the importance of forgiveness.

Under this circumstance, autonomy has become a core topic in ethics and law. Compared to the Christianized western societies, Chinese prefers heteronomy.<sup>14</sup>

## **2. Two Attitudes Towards Death**

Western Christian faith takes “forgiveness” seriously, but Chinese Confucian culture emphasizes “value” which can be also interpreted as “fairness”. Confucians think “eye for eye” is a kind of fairness. A typical example is when a pious Chinese Catholic asks a priest for “last rites”. After confessing all sins, he or she would also say “please forgive those who offended me, and all the sins I still remember or have forgotten”. However a Chinese Confucian who is not baptized, before his or her death, if he or she was hurt seriously by enemies, would say “my child, remember our enemies and who they are and what they did evil to our family”. This is a strong cultural mentality in the East. “Eye for eye” simply means “fairness”.

## **3. “An Eye for an Eye”**

For thousands of years, Chinese have been considering “an eye for an eye” as reasonable. This thought seems to have become an indivisible part of Chinese tradition. To execute a murder will please the people. In ancient times, the revenger would carry the head of his enemy to sacrifice to his dead relatives. In modern society, revengers are happy to see the enemies being executed. They even think the souls of dead families can only be given peace in this way. When an evil murderer was sentenced to death, the news media or judicial officials would often say: “The anger of people can only be calmed by his death”.

Professor Qu Xin Cai from China University of Political Science and Law once gave an objective analysis of the death penalty.

Chinese people do not lack sympathy or humanitarianism, but tolerance as practiced by Chinese has never conquered the impulse of revenge in the name of justice. People have reason to dislike and to hate the

murderer, but the life of a murderer should be respected.<sup>15</sup>

The so called “anger of people” is just the emotional expression of revenge. Even though not every criminal is a murderer, he or she could still stimulate the “anger of people”. Thus, under the justice of the law, “anger of people” is another factor that should be considered. Finally, it is believed that only the death penalty can deter the whole of society. Meanwhile, it also carries forward a vicious cycle of revenge.

Abusive penalties also stimulate the criminals to revenge this society. In 2001, a man killed his girlfriend. He realized that the death penalty would be his only end. So he chose to take revenge on society by detonating a bomb. Hundreds of lives actually became the victims of this abusive penalty. However, we did not learn from this lesson. To comfort the families of victims many people were punished, even those who trafficked in the detonators were sentenced to death.<sup>16</sup>

The European Parliament had always considered death penalty as a form of torture. Therefore, those nations wanting to join the EU have to abolish the death penalty in their country. However, Chinese people believe the death penalty is a necessary means for maintaining justice, and a deserved punishment to the evildoers. Obviously, cultural differences lead to different opinions about the death penalty.

In fact, Christian ethics have offered the universal principles for many Christian nations.<sup>17</sup> It does not matter whether people believe in Christianity; its values have already become the guide for words and deeds. The spirit of Charity has become a value and the guide accepted by all people and whole societies.<sup>18</sup>

There is no perfect culture in this world. Every national culture is like a coin with two sides: the light and beautiful face; the dark color with limitations and even an ugly face.<sup>19</sup> We do not need to either commend or blame any particular culture, but we do need to create the future together, to critique our national culture, in order to contribute to human civilization through each culture.

The Dean of Taipei Ricci Institute, Mr. Wei Ming De once referring to modern times, especially stressed that the value of forgiveness needs to be cultivated, expanded and encouraged as the basis for current culture.

To give forgiveness a creative new expression, media presenta-

tions and other faiths can come into play through novels, movies and comics, in order to contribute to the establishment of a new model. It also depends on the experience of dealing with domestic disputes or solving the conflicts on campus. In fact, forgiveness had been in our hearts, as we walked through the past moments of conflict. The active memory of a society is its culture. In such a culture, the idea should be one of pursuing the future step by step. If a society's culture is growing under the ideal settings of dialogue, forgiveness, communication, trust, etc. and is based on "Sermon on the Mount", then this society, no matter what kind of conflicts it has experienced, would be able to reconcile with itself, so that each molecule of this society will create more trust, tolerance and creative relationships. In short, once a culture understands the importance of expanding the value of forgiveness, it could have an open mind to create new opportunities.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

If revenge is an instinct hidden in human nature, then the judicial system should be a remedy for resolving hatred. But forgiveness is the best solution of all. "Loving your enemy" is the highest value to eliminate hatred. Only the selfless Agape can create a really peaceful, harmonious, benevolent society.

In fact, law scholars have admitted that "Law has never been the best way to achieve social regulation; we can only be sure that it is not the worst system. Chinese traditional laws were directly related to the ethics and value system of their time. The Western law system derived from its religious culture. Chinese law in ancient time was not as perfect as ancient Jewish law, Greco-Roman ethics. Chinese traditional values and culture need to be more open and so advance the process to civilization.

Just as in the statement above, the topic about revenge used to be a strong feature of Greco-Roman culture. Fortunately, Christianity went beyond the thought of revenge. It even reformed Greco-Roman culture, and brought the value of "loving your enemy" into the soul of the people. Later, this value became a universal value.

Forgiveness should not only be a practice of Christians and the

believers of other religions, but also a common mission of global ethics for all human beings. There is a noted Chinese saying ‘vengeance has a way of rebounding upon oneself’ It is only when we learn how to forgive, and resolve conflicts with application of a just law that China will become a harmonious society. That is an indispensable factor of a civilized country and a harmonious society.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Thesis of psychologist Rudolph Dreikurs, 1964.

<sup>2</sup>赵达功, “中国人崇拜仇雪恨”, 2000年09月23日, 见《中国报道周刊》网, 赵达功“个人文集. Zhao Da Gong, “Revenge and the Chinese People”, September 23, 2000, *China Weekly Internet Edition*, Zhao Da Gong personal blog.

<sup>3</sup>Zhao Dagong, “Revenge and the Chinese People”.

<sup>4</sup>谷风, “古希腊文明的特征”, 参见“希腊古代文化”网, 2003年11月27日。Gu Feng, “The characteristics of ancient Greek civilization”, see also “Ancient Greek culture” Internet, November 27, 2003.

<sup>5</sup>Gu Feng, “The Great Drama Writers of Greece: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes”, see “Ancient Greek Culture” Internet Edition, Literature in Theatre page, November 27, 2003.

<sup>6</sup>Gu Feng, “The Great Drama Writers of Greece: ???”, see “Ancient Greek Culture” Internet Edition, Literature in Theatre page, November 27, 2003.

<sup>7</sup>甘·雅各与杰利·康合著, 《如果没有耶?》, ? 第十一章: 基督教? 道德的影? 。 D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, coauthors, “What If Jesus Had Never Been Born”, see Chapter 11: The Influence of Christianity on Morality.

<sup>8</sup>见“报复”条, 《圣经辞典》, 香港: 思高圣经学会。1975, 第1827—1829页。See “Retaliation” in *The Bible Dictionary* (Chinese Edition), Hong Kong: Studium Biblicum, O.F.M., 1975, pages 1827-1829.

<sup>9</sup>According to the laws of Babylon, whoever murdered a free citizen or a citizen’s wife or children, the same penalty would be imposed on them, the death penalty for murder (see the Code of Hammurabi, pages 116, 210, 230). If the crime was an offense against the king or a blasphemy against the gods, the punishment was more severe, not only was the criminal put to death but also his entire family, executed equally. Ibid., *The Bible Dictionary* (Chinese Edition), Hong Kong: Studium Biblicum, O.F.M., 1975, page 1827.

<sup>10</sup>Ex 6:7; Lv 11:45, 26:12; Dt 4:20; Nb 15:41; Jos 24:17; Is 12:6; 1K 8:21; 2K 17:7; Ps 81:10; Jr 2:6, 31:33; Ezk 37:27.

<sup>11</sup>“The LORD is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, ...”. “And Moses quickly bowed

his head toward the earth, and worshiped. He said, 'If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin...' He said: 'I hereby make a covenant'. (Ex 34:6-10)

"Yahweh, Yahweh, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining his faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin..." Moses immediately bowed to the ground in worship, then he said, 'If indeed I do enjoy your favor, please, my Lord, come with us, although they are an obstinate people; and forgive our faults and sins...' He then said, "Look, I am now making a covenant..." (Ex 34:6-10) Yahweh then said to Moses, "Put these words in writing, for they are the terms of the covenant which I have made with you and with Israel. "He stayed there with Yahweh for forty days and forty nights, eating and drinking nothing, and on the tablets he wrote the words of the covenant -- the Ten Words. (Ex 34:27-28)

<sup>12</sup>Gu Feng, "Ancient Greek Culture" Internet Edition, Culture Survey page, "Concepts and Classifications of Culture", November 27, 2003.

<sup>13</sup>张者, "张中行:绝不宽恕", 《书摘》, 2005年2期, 第41页。Zhang Zhe, "Zhang Zhong Hang: Never Forgive", "Book Extracts", 2005, issue 2, page 41.

<sup>14</sup>王瑞贤生活感言"《渝网》中的"情感顾问"页面。Since the very beginning of civilization, human beings have been dealing with two kinds of disciplines: self-ruled and other-ruled. Seeing from the historic-cultural context, the Chinese has been living most time in the condition of centralization and therefore easily gets used to other-governed life, but the West feels more comfortable with self-discipline. Therefore, other-ruled governance fits the Chinese more while the self-ruled life seems more suitable to the Western people. Self-ruled style is emphasizes on individual rights; other-ruled governance stresses on the rights of community. This fact can even be recognized from the difference of the Education system between Chinese and Western. (October 1999) "Wang Rui Xian's Impressions of Life" Feelings consultant page of Chong Qing Net.

<sup>15</sup>王闻, "中国死刑存废之辩:人道主义还是杀人偿命?"《国际先驱导报》, 新浪网, 2003年11月24日。Wang Wen, "China Death Penalty Debate: humanitarian or life for a life?" *International Herald Tribune*, Sina Net, November 24, 2003.

<sup>16</sup>Wang Wen, "China Death Penalty Debate: humanitarian or life for a life?"

<sup>17</sup>In history, Christians suffered from the religious wars which took place among Christian countries. We must learn a lesson from history so that religious wars shall not be allowed to happen again.

<sup>18</sup>It's like foreigners that also can celebrate the Chinese New Year, accepting Chinese New Year values. Most Chinese people do not believe in Christ, but also will celebrate Christmas, going to church to experience Christmas Eve's quiet and peaceful atmosphere.

<sup>19</sup>柏杨, 《丑陋的中国人》, 台北, 林白出版社, 1985年。高桥敦在其《丑陋的日本人》则深刻地剖析和揭了日本人的种种弊端。Bo Yang in "*The Ugly Chinese*" harshly criticized the Chinese people's "dirty, chaotic, noisy", "internal fighting", "failure to unite", "not admitting

any mistakes” and other national evils. Bo Yang, *“The Ugly Chinese”*, Taipei, Lindbergh Press, 1985. Takahashi offered in *“The Ugly Japanese”* a profound analysis and exposure of various Japanese defects.

<sup>20</sup>魏明德, “怒是创造与奋斗”, 原载《见证月刊》第285期。Benoit VERMANDER, S.J., “Pardon is creation and struggle”, the original set “Witness Monthly”, issue 285.