What are Reflected by the Navigations of Zheng He and Christopher Columbus

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The contrast of the navigations of Zheng He and Christopher Columbus shows two kinds of humanistic values: harmonious altruism reflected by Chinese culture and aggressive egocentrism revealed by the Western culture and their different effects on the world. This article explores the reasons for their different actions, trying to demonstrate that Western humanistic education is problematic.

Keywords: Western culture, Chinese culture, humanism, values

Introduction

There were a lot of articles and books discussing about Zheng He and Christopher Columbus separately. Columbus’s studies paid more attention to Columbus’s voyages and their impact to local people. The Tainos: Rise & Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus edited by Irving Rouse (1992) was a temperate and balanced description. Samuel M. Wilson (1990) illustrated the character and destruction of Taino culture in Hispaniola: Caribbean Chiefdoms in the Age of Columbus. The effect of the first encounters on the native populations was given by James Axtell (1992) in Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America. The debate over Columbus’s achievements was presented in Secret Judgments of God: Old World Disease in Colonial Spanish America edited by Noble David Cook and W. George Lovell (1991) on the disastrous effects on the native peoples. An anti-European treatment was shown in Ray González’s (1992) Without Discovery: A Native Response to Columbus (Flint, 2014). As to Zheng He studies, before the turn of the 21st century, in English little attention has been paid to the life and travels of Zheng He, except Louise Levathes’s (1994) work When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433. The 600th anniversary of his voyages prompted several studies, including Seven Epic Voyages of Zheng He in Ming China, 1405-1433 edited by Ming-yang Su (2005) and Peace Missions on a Grand Scale: Admiral Zheng He’s Seven Expeditions to the Western Oceans edited by Fang Zhongfu and Li Erhe (2005) (Lo, 2014).

In China, Liang Qichao (1985) initiated Zheng He studies by publishing “The biography of a great sailor of our country” in Xin Min Newspaper Series in 1904. Shi Ping (2003) divided Zheng He studies into five phases in “Zheng He studies in one century” and he also discussed “The extension and innovation of Zheng He’s cultural value” (Shi, 2008). There were three articles contrasting the different goals and impacts of the sailings of Zheng He and Christopher Columbus to the local people, such as “The contrast of the goals of the navigations of Zheng He and Christopher Columbus” (Liu, 2008). Liu unanimously illustrated that Zheng He...
peacefully traded with the local people and Christopher Columbus did harm to the natives.

This article will contrast different humanistic values reflected by the two events and try to demonstrate that Western humanistic education is problematic.

**The Two Navigations and Their Effects on the World**

Ordered by the Emperor Zhu Li of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE), Admiral Zheng He led a group of more than 27,000 people in 200 ships people and countries west of China, including more than 30 countries in the Middle East was Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the farthest place they arrived in Africa was the seaport of Beira in Mozambique. They went to these places seven times in 28 years during the years 1405-1433. They took with them for trading silk, porcelain, rice, tea, the compass, the technologies of agriculture, medicine, paper-making, and printing. According to the record of *Taizong Shilu* (the entry on 11 July 1405) about the dispatch of the fleet, Admiral Zheng He and others departed for the first expedition, bearing imperial letters to the countries of the Western Ocean and with gifts to their kings of gold brocade, patterned silks, and colored silk gauze, according to their status (Dreyer, 2007). After the return of their fourth voyage, rulers of 18 countries sent envoys bringing tribute to the Ming court (Chan, 1988). All together Admiral Zheng He and his fleet brought back to China about 180 kinds of tribute goods, such as silver, spices, sandalwood, precious stones, ivory, ebony, camphor, tin, deer hides, coral, kingfisher feathers, tortoise shells, gums and resin, rhinoceros horn, sapanwood and safflower (for dyes and drugs), Indian cotton cloth, and ambergris (for perfume). They even brought back exotic animals, such as ostriches, elephants, and giraffes. It is said that the treasure voyages helped the flourishing of the Ming economy (Finlay, 2008).

They peacefully and harmoniously traded with the local people, doing nothing harmful to these areas. Even though Admiral Zheng He and his fleet sailed through the South Asian and Indian oceans with a defensive force larger and stronger than any local power, they did not intend colonial conquests, but did help fight pirates. As Dreyer (2007, p. 31 & 79) said, “The fleet engaged and defeated Chen Zuyi’s pirate fleet in Palembang (Indonesia), Alakeshvara’s forces in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Sekandar’s (Indonesia) forces in Semudera (Indonesia)”, which “served as a reminder of the tremendous power of Ming China to the countries along the maritime routes”. Yet, as Dreyer (2007, p. 65) said, “There is no written evidence in historical sources that there was any attempt that they forcibly tried to control the maritime trade (rather than through exploration and promotion of trade) in the regions of the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean”. A documentary shows the archaeological excavation process (Hubei province, China) of the tomb of the youngest brother of two Emperors in the Ming Dynasty. In the tomb, they found two golden coins made of gold given by the Emperor, on which the Chinese characters clearly recorded that these were made of the golden materials purchased in the western ocean, which connected it only with Zheng He’s voyage. Later research showed that the coins were made after Zheng He’s fifth voyage (see Figure 1 and http://www.hbww.org/Views/Detail.aspx?PNo=Exhibiti on&No=CSZ L&Guid=6295ae72).
The text carved on one side of the coin (the left) says, The coin was made of the golden materials (eight karats) purchased in the Western ocean areas in April of Yongle 17 (April, 1420), weighing 50 liang (50.2355 oz) each. On another side of the coin (the right) shows the year (August, Yongle 14/August 1417) in which the golden materials was purchased, the quality of the golden materials (eight karats), and the name of two makers.

So, the voyages were diplomatic and commercial in nature but not a “military exercise” (Finlay, 2008, p. 330), which clearly shows that the voyages were conducted in accordance to Confucian ideals (Lee, 2010). How many people in the world know this?

But it is a common idea that, in search of China, Christopher Columbus “discovered” the American continent (1492-1502) using China’s invention of the “compass” 87 years later. Many Americans and Europeans are taught that Columbus’s voyages represent a good action of “discovery” and “progress” of the European civilization stretching to the “uncivilized” continent. But Bryan Strong strongly disagrees, arguing instead that, “For others throughout the world, his legacy is colonialism, slavery and the destruction of people and cultures”. Published in *The New York Times* on November 4, 1989, he wrote:

Two days after he “discovered” America, Columbus wrote in his journal that with 50 men he could force “the entire population be taken to Castile, or held captive”. On his second voyage, in December, 1494, Columbus captured 1,500 Tainos on the island of Hispaniola and herded them to Isabela, where 550 of “the best males and females”, were forced aboard ships bound for the slave markets of Seville.

Under Columbus’s leadership, the Spanish attacked the Taino, sparing neither men, women nor children. Warfare, forced labor, starvation and disease reduced Hispaniola’s Taino population (estimated at one million to two million in 1492) to extinction within 30 years.

Until the European discovery of America, there was only a relatively small slave trade between Africa and Europe. Needing labor to replace the rapidly declining Taino, the Spanish introduced African slaves to Hispaniola in 1502. By 1510, the trade was important to the Caribbean economy. (p. 24)

The author agrees with Strong. Since then, forceful Western imperialism began to segment and colonialize the whole world, China has not escaped from this disaster.

The contrast of the two events shows two kinds of humanistic values: aggressive egocentrism revealed by the Western culture and harmonious altruism reflected by Chinese culture. They contrast their different effects on the world, which suggests the failure of Western shallow humanistic education and the success of Chinese deeper humanistic education.

We will explore this problem through the different understandings of the relationship between the religious and humanistic values in Western and Chinese culture. These contrasting relationships between the value claims of religion and humanism reflect varied understanding of the universe, of the relationship between
human beings and the universe, and the attitude taken toward other people on earth, leading to the foreign policy that one country takes toward another country, harmonious or domineering.

**Material World Oriented Education in Western Culture**

It is well known that Western humanistic culture is based on ancient Greek-Roman culture. The importance of Plato is expressed by Alfred North Whitehead (1979), a modern British philosopher, who said, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato”. The core of Platonic thoughts lies in Plato’s doctrine of essences, ideas, or forms. According to Plato, ultimate reality, which he calls the one is spiritual and this spiritual realm consists of “ideal” forms or absolutes (e.g., justice) that exist, whether or not any mind posits their existence or reflects their attributes. It is this form that shapes our physical world and this physical world is just an imitation of the absolute forms of the spiritual realm. For example, the perfect sphere exists as an ideal form and earthly spheres are approximations of it.

Here, we can draw some conclusions: Firstly, the universe consists of two separated worlds: one is spiritual and the other physical. Secondly, the spiritual one comes first, the physical one second, and everything, even any concept in the physical world, is a replica of the original pattern of essences, such as logic in the spiritual world. Plato’s dichotomy became Western culture’s main thinking pattern, which is very dangerous because of its binary oppositions. A tricky point we should pay attention to is that, although Plato focused on the heavenly world as a guide for humans to become better, he is not regarded as a humanist by the Western culture. He seemed very spiritual because he tried his best to elaborate the spiritual realm, yet he devoted most of his life to teaching people how to construct an “ideal country” in his “the republic,” how to manage “the republic” in “the laws”, and how to educate people to maintain “the republic” which seemed very materialistic. Western people’s attitude toward him and his own thoughts and actions show the contradictions under the dichotomic way of thinking, which serves a good example of words in one way, actions in another from the beginning of the Western culture.

Aristotle’s humanism led to the study of the material-oriented world, resulting in the quick and profound development in every branch of human civilization technically since then, and technology brings the Western people confidence. Western technologies, such as “gunboat imperialism” gave them confidence to believe that that they should “educate” other “savage” human beings in their eyes and get profits from them, because they think wrongly that they are superior in every aspect to other nations.

This is especially a problem in the modern Western scientific world lack of the deep, spiritual study of the universe taught by Plato and religions. They know deeply the physical aspect of the universe, such as the exploration and the utilization of the energy of the sun, the stars, etc. But Western scientific techniques deny and suppress understanding the spiritual aspect of the universe fully and thoroughly, let alone its inhabitants’ proper relationships. That is why they cannot find harmony between the religious values and humanistic values in their practical life. Though this is also true to some of the Chinese nowadays, it was not true for the ancient Chinese.

**The Contradiction Between Humanistic Values and Religious Values in Western Culture**

According to Howard L. Parsons (2014),
For the most part humanists in Western Christian cultures have assumed certain, though not all, values assumed in Christianity. They have defined their positions either by a redefinition and reapplication of certain Christian values or by an absolute repudiation of those values.

To Brian Edgar (2014), Director of Theology and Public policy for the Evangelical Alliance, there are eight core Christian values:

1. Grace—a subversive value! Giving people more than they deserve;
2. Hope—not a guarantee of immunity from harm but a conviction that God is always present;
3. Faith—the means to real depth in relationships of all kinds;
4. Love—means to love the unlovely;
5. Justice—for all (not “just-me”). A concept biased in favor of the disadvantaged;
6. Joy—impossible to legislate for this but an essential social value;
7. Service—meaning is found in service rather than self-centeredness;
8. Peace—not just the absence of fighting but positive well-being.

For most of the time in human history, the majority of the Western people have defined their positions as Howard L. Parsons said, “by a redefinition and reapplication of certain Christian values”, which suggests that most Western people are educated in Christian values. Those who are theist can accept the Christian religious values easily, but what kind of value education is supplied to those who do not believe in God? Obviously, Western humanism came into being to play the role increasingly when modern science weakened Christianity’s influence. But while Christian on the surface, colonialists such as Christopher Columbus absolutely repudiated the eight fundamental social values in their crude, violent pursuit of slaves and gold, porcelain and silk. This aroused people’s questions about the validity of the Western humanistic value education because Christopher Columbus lived in the era of the beginning of the modern era, the European Renaissance (14th-17th centuries), characterized by humanism, began in Florence, Italy, his motherland in the 14th century (Burke, 1998). There is no doubt that he was baptized Christopher: the Christ-bearer who assumed himself “the messenger of the Holy Spirit to those who sat in darkness”, carrying Christian light to the west, he had taken the mission of dove (Hale, 2014) all these reveals the contradiction between religious values and Western humanistic values in Christopher Columbus.

Given an excuse that Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was an exception, then let us read some stanzas of the poem “Man” by George Herbert (1593-1633), a Welsh born English poet, orator and Anglican priest,

... 
For us, the winds, do blow,
The earth doth rest, heaven move, and fountains flow;
Nothing we see, but means our good,
As our delight, or as our treasure;
The whole is either our cupboard of food,
Or cabinet of pleasure.
...
All things unto our flesh are kind,
...
More servants wait on man
Than he will take notice of. In every path,
He treads down that which doth befriend him
When sickness makes him pale and wan.
Oh mighty love! Man is one world, and hath
Another to attend him.

This poem is the embodiment of Western humanism. It eulogizes man’s beauty, man’s power, and man’s central position in the universe, but Western humanism takes no notice of those who “attend him” and even regards them as “servants” who are inferior to them, and “in every path, he treads down that which doth befriend him when sickness makes him pale and wan”. This shows their strong anthropocentric view and their opposition against nature and universe, indicating that there is no real humanity and equality advocated by them, even if there exist, they have been narrowed down to the realm of human beings, excluding these they define as the heathens, therefore, humanistic humanity and equality are limited and narrow-minded. The author does not know why Charles Cotton, an English poet and writer, described Herbert as a soul composed of harmonies, but she does agree with Herbert himself that in a letter to Nicholas Ferrar, said of his writings, “They are a picture of spiritual conflicts between God and my soul before I could subject my will to Jesus, my Master” (Herbert, 2014).

From the above, we know the contradiction between the religious values and humanistic values has expanded into modern culture’s problems, among all kinds of people, from common people like Christopher Columbus, to scholars like Charles Cotton, even priests and parliament members like George Herbert. That is why there are always conflicts between what the Western humanism advocates and the actions they take in some events. They always try every means to do something only for the benefit of themselves, not caring about others, and if the others do not obey, they will resort to force, eventually there is no good even for themselves, and this still violently influences modern international world affairs, the situation in Libya is the result of this liberal interventionism.

**The Reasons for the Contradiction**

But, academically, little attention has been paid to the disparity between what the Western humanism’s advocates and the actions they take in some events. The self-interested actions are always regarded as special or particular cases, or even regarded as their rights, their freedom. Responsibilities are usually shifted to the government by some individuals. But seldom has it been realized that this is the failure of the whole Western humanistic education.

The American humanist Fred Edwards (2014) counts eight different branches of western humanism: literary humanism, Renaissance humanism, Western cultural humanism, philosophical humanism, Christian humanism, secular humanism, religious humanism, and modern humanism (also called naturalistic humanism), scientific humanism, ethical humanism, and democratic humanism. From the names of the eight branches, it seems that they give a thorough exploration of humanism from every aspect. Furthermore, there must have been some philosophers in each branch exploring the relationship between religious values and humanistic values in the western history. In my point of view, they all failed, though their discussion helped to bring about a lot of new subjects to be studied deeply, making the modern western human science far more advanced than the Eastern countries.

The first reason of the humanism’s failure is that these varieties did not clarify the definition of “human being.” They took it for granted that when a person is born, the person is a human, so everything the person does to satisfy his own needs is reasonable, representing his individuality, his rights, and his freedom. But this encourages the individual’s selfishness and self-centeredness, thus making Western humanism becomes extremely vulgar.
The second problem is that the distinction between religious values and humanistic values has been blurred, just as Howard L. Parsons (2014, p. 5) pointed out, “Whereas the rationalist humanist takes such social values of the Judaic-Christian tradition as love, compassion, fraternity, and mutual aid to be basic, the empirical humanist tends to subordinate these values in favor of individuality, liberty, and equality of rights and opportunities”. Therefore, they set the same moral standard for the religious and secular people, and the worst of all, they do not tell people how to achieve that spiritually. From the above eight core Christian values, we can see they are very demanding, not every one can abide by, only those people who endeavor to become a “saint”, “God”, or “Bodhisattva” spiritually have the potential to practice them, let alone to achieve these standards.

The third reason is that religious values have gradually lost their influence over the common people. As we know, from Renaissance to Enlightenment, People’s positions have been largely improved, while God’s position has been lowered, and gradually “died.” Since Nietzsche announced that God was dead, more and more people do not believe in God and pay more attention to human and the material values, such as wealth. The principle that people make laws for themselves and science discovered laws of nature in the 19th century indicate the Western wish for superiority to nature. Therefore, religious culture has lost its dominant place, while secular culture has become more and more prosperous. Hence Western civilization surpassed China in natural science and some aspects of social science in the recent 300 years. But excessive emphasis on secular culture leads to the ignorance of religious culture, producing a lot of social problems. For example, spiritual crisis caused by the belief crisis has allowed the destruction of the environment, dehumanization, etc. happened earlier in the Western countries, now happened also in China.

The fourth but the most important reason is that Westerners have not realized that the religious values represent divinity and humanism represents humanity. The two should be united together to make a holy human being, but Western culture makes them go in opposite directions, hence the split and fragmentation of the modern Western people. That is why some people from Western culture advocate democracy, equality, and fraternity on one hand, but separate, damage, and even invade other countries and kill their people for their own benefits, on the other hand. The most dangerous of all, many of them do not think this liberal interventionism is wrong and they are regarded as typical Western culture in the eyes of Eastern culture, especially the Chinese people’s eyes.

The contradiction between what they claim and what they do proves the Western humanistic education to be problematic.

**Spiritual World Oriented Education in Chinese Culture**

Before Sakyamuni’s Buddhism coming into China and taking some elements of Confucianism and Daoism and at last becoming the widely accepted Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism were the main culture in ancient China. Although Confucianism taught social harmony and Daoism mystical insight, they shared the same point of view about the universe: the unification of the universe and human beings. The real equality among the members of the universe has been added to Chinese culture by Buddhism. The three together later came to constitute Chinese traditional culture, which advocates harmony among the individual members, the country and the world; they only slightly differ in how much energy they devote to the practice of spiritual exploration.
That is why since ancient time, Chinese did not encourage competition and technology which brought present disasters to the world, especially they regarded weapons as bad, they just fight for defense and teach the other country a lesson in order to keep harmony, such as China’s Defensive War against India in 1962, the Defensive War against Vietnam in 1979, though the Chinese military occupied many places, they finally withdrew from both disputed areas without additional conditions. At present, most Western people think that China has invaded Tibet in 1959, few people know that Tibet has become a part of China since 1247 and in 1288 the central government of Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) changed the name of Xuan Zheng Palace where to meet Tibetan officials into Xuan Zheng Yuan, an institute directly managing Tibetan Buddhist and military affairs, such as sending military troops to stay in Tibet and protect the frontier, food and properties of the troops and common people, etc. (The biography of Sang Ge in The History of Yuan Dynasty, Vol. 205), which explains why PLA were sent to Tibet in 1959 to liberate the slaves of the upper class peacefully according to the negotiation, unfortunately they had been resisted by some landlords who hid into the temples which led to the destruction of the temples and death of the monks. If China had an invasive culture, with Zheng He’s high technology of sailing in the Ming Dynasty, they could have gone everywhere to colonialize that place, then the country named “the sun never set” would be China not Great Britain without doubt. So, Zheng He’s sailing is a sound proof of China’s peaceful development.

So, those who regard China as a threat do not understand Chinese culture at all, Chinese foreign policy of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence) in the modern times is the embodiment of Chinese traditional culture.

The Consistency Between the Religious and Humanistic Values.

As we know Chinese people have been influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism since ancient times. Few people know the real essence of the three, which have been regarded as “three religions” by the Western scholars and some contemporary scholars in China. Actually, only Buddhism has been regarded as religion in China since the very beginning. Part of Daoism became religion in the process of its rivalry with Buddhism for the influence over the country. Part of Daoism still exists together with Confucianism, and Confucianism has rarely been taken as a religion, which has usually been regarded as the teaching of becoming a “real human being”. So, in the academic field of Chinese history, the three have always been discussed as “the unification of three teachings”, because in Chinese, “religion” and “teaching” share one word “jiao,” so many people get confused. In modern language, we can say that Buddhism and Daoism aim to educate those people who have religious beliefs and pursue spiritual happiness, while Confucianism aims to educate those people who do not have religious beliefs and pursue worldly happiness.

But different from Western humanism, even though Confucianists guide people concerning how to pursue worldly happiness and success, they emphasize individual personality perfectness. Therefore, Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism are congruent in improving people’s spiritual world, especially, the humanistic qualities. For example, the first sentence of Daxue (《大学》/Great Knowledge for those who want to become great man), one of the famous Confucian works, illustrates three basic principles to get great knowledge (not just academic knowledge, but the knowledge covering every aspect of life): the first is to understand and pursue great virtue and make yourself accepted and praised by others because of your good virtue. The second is to love others and the third is to get to the perfect. We know the state of the perfect is what Daoism calls “real human being”,
what Buddhism calls “Buddha”. So, we can see there is little disparity between the religious and humanistic values in China, though the humanistic values come from different educational systems.

Then, what is the definition of “real human being” in China? A “real human being” himself/herself should be enlightened as a saint and have the ability to enlighten others, and at least do everything to benefit oneself and at the same time benefit others in the win-win sense. Otherwise, a selfish and self-centered person will be looked down upon and called a “non-human being” or an “animal with a human skin” which is the most shameful thing in the world in the Chinese point of view. This idea is enlarged to a country’s image, that is why China has been insisting on co-operation and mutual benefit and advocating win-win policy in the international affairs, never approving of solving dispute by wars except defense, because Chinese does not want China to be regarded as a country without humanity.

In Chinese, the word “humanism” comes from a Confucian book Yi Zhuan (《易传》/The Explanation of the Book of Changes). It says, “Yin yang jiao cuo, tian wen ye; fen ming yi zhi, ren wen ye. guan hu tian wen, yi ca shi bian, guan hu ren ren, yi hua cheng tian xia” (ben gua·tuan zhuan). It can be translated as the following,

The weaving of Yin and Yang is the civilization of heaven, the arriving of humanism is the civilization of people. Observe the civilization of heaven in order to observe the changing of worldly situations. Observe the civilization of people, changes are found to consist of the world.

From these sentences, we can see that ancient Chinese have realized the relationship between the heaven and human beings, and the mutual influences of what happens in heaven and among human beings. In China, heaven usually refers to the realm of spirits, who lives in the universe, here we can see spirits are for the people, so the relationship between people and nature is harmonious. This may sound rather religious to the people of scientific culture like the West, who usually hold a dichotomy attitude to everything though they know in mind that everything is interacted, when facing specific things they tend to divide everything into two parts without notice. Take Yin-Yang Diagram as an example, there is a white eye in a black fish, and a black eye in a white fish, the colors are changeable even in a same fish, the distinction between the white fish and the black fish is to see which color is the main color of the fish at certain moment. This helps to explain how Chinese understand the relationship between the heaven and human beings, and the mutual influences of what happens in heaven and among human beings.

China’s living philosophy regards the whole universe as a living totality. Human beings are only a part of it, though a very precious part. All members of the universe, including the plants, animals, insects, human beings, spirits, etc., have differences, but are ultimately equal. If human beings treat other members of the universe unfairly, they will be punished, this punishment is shown as serious natural disasters, fatal illnesses, such as Tsunamis, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, etc. So, all nations must stop our air and water pollution dangers, for example.

In the Chinese worldview, such problems are actually the rebellions of other members in the universe, who are usually called spirits by people, but their roles are not only to punish the wrongs, but also to produce everything, that is why Confucius sighed with deep emotion in the book Zhong Yong (《中庸》/Golden Mean):

How great virtues spirits have! Trying to see, you will see nothing, trying to hear, you will hear nothing; nourish everything and nothing will be left out...though they themselves are invisible, their achievements are obvious, which indeed cannot be concealed.
Here, we can see that Confucius revered spirits very much. But many Confucian scholars, both in China and out of China, maintain that Confucius himself did not believe in spirits, the proof they often cited is the last half of one sentence, “Respect spirits and be far away from them (jing gui shen er yuan zhi)”. What Confucius actually meant is that people should respect spirits, and do not annoy them and cause troubles. This can be seen from his answers to one of his students when asking about how to deal with ghosts, he answered “you even do not know how to deal with people, how do you know how to deal with ghosts?”(wei neng shi ren, yan neng shi gui?) When asking about death, he answered, “you do not even have enough knowledge about life, so how do you know the knowledge of the dead?” (wei zhi sheng, yan zhi si? from lun yu xian jin). That is why China’s philosophy has always held the thought of the unification of heaven, the earth, and human beings.

Though “human beings are the souls of everything” (ren zhe wan wu zhi ling from li ji) and “human beings are most precious among all things in the universe” (tian di zhi xing ren wei gui” from xiao jing), it does not mean that Confucians consider human beings to be the masters of the universe who can absolutely neglect other creatures’ existence. Instead, Confucians teach that human beings and the universe must be united. Human beings are the production of nature and at the same time the subject of nature. Originally speaking, nature is the source of human beings’ life and value, so nature is the master of human beings on one hand, but speaking from the perspective of realization of life, human beings make nature’s potential values be realized, so human beings are the masters of nature on the other hand. Here we can see nature is equal to human beings. But in the Western countries, human beings are the masters and law-makers of nature, which has no life, no internal values, only has external values that are beneficial to human beings. So, nature is seriously plundered and damaged, energy is madly dug, animals are cruelly killed during its early process of development, as we can see this from George Herman’s poem (He treads down that which doth befriend him).

George Herman’s eulogy to “Man” actually is shared by Chinese Humanism. Yet, the differences lie in that their different attitudes toward those “servants”, such as “herbs”, “fountains”, “winds”, in Herman’s poem who “attend” humanity. As for Chinese Humanism, they respect those who “attend” humans extremely, hold rites to thank them to express their awe and gratitude. And when they are ill, they will think about what wrong they have done, because they know human’s wrong doings will arouse nature’s punishments with natural disasters, or disease. Hence, Chinese humanism insists on the unification of heaven, the earth, and human beings. Heaven refers to Xuling (spirits in space), the earth refers to all that grows on the earth except human beings, such as insects, plants, and animals. Chinese humanism extends human love to the whole universe, which is the expression of real humanity and equality, because they have accepted Buddhism’s view that all creatures are equal (Wang, 2009). From this, we can see that Chinese humanism is more humane, more equal, and more open-minded than Western humanism.

From the above explanation of the unified relationship among the universe, human beings, and the earth, we can see China’s harmony between the religious and humanistic values and their performance in reality.

The Eight Processes to Get to the Perfect

We are not going to talk here about the ways to improve one’s spirituality to become a Buddha in Buddhism or a real human being in Confucianism and Daoism, because they are too complicated and too far away from the secular life. We will only talk about the Chinese Humanist methodology to get to the perfect.

In the Confucian book Daxue (《大学》/Great knowledge for those who want to become a great man), there are eight processes clearly demonstrated to teach people the ways to get to the perfect, namely how to become a
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person: internally a saint and externally a ruler. They are logically in sequential order: get rid of various greedy desires → get wisdom → put one’s intention in a right place → make one’s attitude sincere → cultivate oneself → manage one’s family and tribe properly → govern the country → balance the world. It says:

In ancient times, one who wanted to make their great virtue known to the public must govern his country properly first. One who wanted to govern his country properly, must manage his family and tribe properly first. Those who wanted to manage his family and tribe properly, must cultivate himself first; those who wanted to cultivate himself, must put his intention in a right place first; those who wanted to put his intention in a right place, must make his attitude sincere first; those who wanted to make his attitude sincere, must get wisdom first; those who wanted to get wisdom, must get rid of various greedy desires first.

Among the eight procedures, “cultivate oneself” plays the key role, which combines the former four and the latter three procedures, the former four prepare the requirements for the cultivation of oneself, and the latter three provide the positions for the cultivated one to display his ability.

About the last sentence in the quoted paragraph, there is a wrong explanation in Chinese held by many experts both in China and out of China for a long time. The initiator was Zhu Xi, the forefather of Idealist Confucianism in Song Dynasty. Zhu Xi explained it as, “The way to get knowledge is to make an endless study of everything” (yan yu zhi wu zhi zhi, zai ji wu er qiong qi li ye). Of course, people can never get an endless study of anything, and if it means just common knowledge, it would not meet the requirements to train a person internally to be a saint and externally a ruler. Actually, it means that people should reduce their excessive desires for materials, money, honor, etc. in order to obtain the state of peace and calmness, and then can wisdom appear. This explanation is in accordance with the latter passage in Daxue, “When you know where to reach you can become steady, being steady makes one become quiet, being quiet makes one peaceful, being peaceful makes one able to think, to think makes one gain wisdom” (zhi zhi er hou you ding, ding er hou neng jing, jing er hou neng an, an er hou neng lv, lv er hou neng de).

We can see that Zhu Xi confused wisdom with knowledge which can be got through study. While wisdom, which Plato called reason (logos), the author thinks, is intuition in philosophy. In Buddhism, wisdom is called the “emergence” of one’s self-Buddha, and can only be got by internally, meditatively becoming steady and free of desire. Many people suspect the correctness of intuition, yet regard logical reasoning as the most advanced thinking patterns. But actually, compared with intuition, logical reasoning is lower and indirect, because intuition (free of desire) get the correct results directly from the mind without the process of reasoning and reasoning propositions. Wisdom cannot be got easily, since only those people who are not greedy for money, honor, and wealth, etc. can have a peaceful mind which, just like a mirror, reflects what comes to the mind without distortion. These people are only a few, while most people rarely get intuition, and even if they do get intuition that is proven by facts, they regard them as coincidences. So the discussed sentence should be understood as “one should get rid of various greedy desires first in order to get wisdom”. This teaching coincides with Buddhism’s teaching of “principles makes people steady, which produces wisdom” (“she xin wei jie, yin jie sheng ding, yin ding fa hui” from da fo ding shou leng yan jing 《大佛顶首楞严经》, Vol. 6).

The eight-step process teaches people how to reach to the perfect and it has been practiced not only by great people, but also by the common people, so we can see Chinese culture is a self-reflective culture. It pays more attention to the cultivation of individual’s personality perfectness, and this education brings peace and harmony not only to the individual, but also to the society and the whole world.
Conclusion

Because China’s independent state was broken by the Western imported opium and gunboat imperialism since the middle of the 19th century, and this plunder left many countrymen killed. Hence, some intellectuals began to doubt the Chinese spiritual-world oriented educational system and its neglect of practical technology. Then, more Chinese advocated the Western material-world-oriented educational system, especially after the policy of opening China to the world. So, now Western culture has been partly introduced and partly fully accepted by young people and people have become more and more selfish and greedy and irresponsible under the education of pursuing for individuality and freedom and equality. Therefore, a lot of social diseases that happened earlier in the Western countries during their high development have now happened in China again, such as the plundering of the nature, the destruction of the environment, so many criminals and corruptions, no safety in food and life, etc. This would be impossible if under the influence of purely Chinese culture, that’s why some Chinese began to advocate the education of Chinese traditional culture in modern times to correct the tendency of materialistically-dominated pursuit.

Since it is a globalization time, the contacts and conflicts between countries are becoming more and more frequent, so we should know the characteristics of different cultures in order to have a better understanding and communication to solve disputes peacefully, but always remember what Confucius said, “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want” which is shared by Immanuel Kant’s “Golden Rule”.

References

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