

The Differences of Confucianism and Individualism on the Development of Chinese and American Personalities

Chao Yue

School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University Xian, China, 710062

331574001@qq.com

Abstract

Different personalities are shaped by different cultures. Chinese Confucianism and American Individualism took totally different developing routes. Understanding and contemplating their differences in personality can greatly enhance inter-cultural communication between these two countries. Based on the present researches and studies, this paper discusses the differences and current situation of Chinese and American personalities. Relevant suggestions are initiated aiming at learning from each other's strong points and bridging the gap as to enhance the development of healthy personality and harmonious world.

Keywords: Chinese Confucianism; American individualism; Personality development

1. Introduction

Different cultures shape people's personality distinctively. Chinese, practicing Confucianism behave and handle problems in a divergent way with Americans who honor Individualism. Chinese attach great importance to interdependence among family members and the social community; however, Americans give high priority to independence. Getting an insight into these two cultures' influence on the development of personality is beneficial to a better communication and understanding between Chinese and Americans.

Most Americans believe that they must be self-reliant in order to keep their freedom. If they rely too much on the support of their families or the government, they may lose some of their freedom to do what they want (Datesman, 1997). Instead of stressing the importance of the individual independence and autonomy, Confucianism emphasizes the individual obligation to family (Dunn & Waller, 1997). In this way, Chinese are relatively interdependent and value more about the virtue of bringing honor to the ancestors and family. As far as social relation is concerned, what beneath each family name is the responsibilities and obligations each individual should fulfill (Xue & Feng, 2007). Compared with harmony-oriented Chinese, Americans bear in mind that everyone has the duty to try and compete. Learning to compete successfully is part of Americans' growing up (Su, 2006). The future development of these two typical personalities arouses many scholars' concern. Individualism is the core of American culture and personality, while it is also a potential illness of American society (Dong, 2006).

What previous scholars have done is short of a systematic organization for people to understand systematically the differences between Confucianism and Individualism, especially their influence on shaping two people's personalities.

2. Introduction of Confucianism and Individualism

Confucianism and Individualism serve as the soul of Chinese and American personality respectively. When it comes to Chinese, modesty, conservation, and filial piety flash upon people's mind; while talking about Americans, people will be reminded of open-mindedness, competitiveness, and freedom. It is essential to penetrate the discrepancies of Chinese and American personalities from the cultures they belong to. Thus, understanding the backgrounds of Confucianism and Individualism is imperative.

2.1 Confucianism---Chinese result of inheritance

Confucianism meets Chinese people's mental needs in personality. Confucianism had become the orthodox philosophy in China till the Han Dynasty.

Chinese feudal society had lasted for thousands of years, thus hierarchy influenced people's personality a lot. Different from Americans, Chinese inherited Confucianism from history without fighting against it. Chinese thus gradually got used to obeying the authority since any sort of rebellion against authority was not admired. People made great efforts to bring honor to their families, thus, saving face was essential in Confucian culture, for a person represented his whole family. This is just Rectification of Names emphasized by Confucius. As far as social relation is concerned, what behind each name are the responsibilities and obligations each individual should fulfill (Xue & Feng, 2007). On one hand, this kind of conscience makes people bear sense of responsibility in mind; on the other hand, it makes Chinese interdependent on government and family. Chinese did not choose to be interdependent, but inherited this kind of characteristic from the history and past generations.

2.2 Individualism---American result of fighting

Dating back to the early colonial time and frontier period, Datesman (1997) explained that those first settlers' historic decisions on limiting the power of government, churches created a climate of freedom where the emphasis was on individual.

The first settlers fought for freedom against the British rulers, religious prosecution, and specifically they should conquer their mental uncertainty. To forsake everything for a new and unknown life was by no means an easy job. Demanding environment and complicated inner struggle made Americans strong and adventurous.

From the late 17th century, a large number of Americans started a new journey---Westward Movement. During that period of time, Americans became more independent, friendly and ambitious. People may say that Americans are often restless, however, this meaningful history made Americans never satisfy with the state of being. Even today, Americans are proud of this period of time, and the spirit those frontiers possessed of became a relevant part of American values. They concluded that Americans' national pioneering spirit and workhorse spirit were derived from frontier spirit.

Individualism was expressed in these two periods of American life incisively and vividly. Su (2006) observed that all the historic decisions created a climate of freedom where the emphasis was on the individual, which had a profound effect on shaping American character.

3.Differences between Chinese and American personalities under the Context of Confucianism and Individualism

People share basic human nature. However, different geographical environment, historical backgrounds, and paths of development differentiate people's personality. It is intriguing to observe the different personalities Chinese and Americans have in the context of Confucianism and Individualism.

3.1 Low-context vs. high-context

Low-context and high-context culture patterns are popularized by Edward T. Hall in 1976. People from low-context culture pattern tend to be introvert, indirect, and implicit, in contrast with people practicing high-context culture who are usually extrovert, explicit and direct. Confucius advocates Mean referring to being

moderate, which contributes to Chinese introvert character. Language is the carrier of culture. The characteristics of Chinese low-context culture pattern are mirrored in a lot of idioms, such as, “bu yan er yu” (speak for itself); “chen mo shi jin” (silence is gold). Additionally, Confucianism educated Chinese to be undemonstrative in order to show one’s refined self-cultivation. Contrary to Confucian’s keeping low-profile in social communication, Individualism-based American culture tends to be high-profile.

Taking Americans and Japanese (here Japan is more persuasive and classic to exemplify this point) making business negotiation as an example: Americans misunderstand Japanese saying at the end of negotiation, such as “we prefer go back to Japan first”. However when Americans call their counterpart to make things done, Japanese says “we’ve already rejected your proposal when we were on negotiation”. In this story, Japanese use an implicit way to turn Americans down, but explicit Americans take it wrong, and they actually think “go back to Japan ” means Japanese have emergencies to go back soon. Japan and China are both from Confucianism-based culture---high-context culture pattern. Americans may think Chinese or Japanese always beat around the bush when talking; in fact, different culture backgrounds are attributable to all of these misunderstandings.

3.2 Past-orientation vs. future-orientation

It seems that being nostalgic has been a national complex of China. Senior people recall the old time from time to time; pop singers constantly cover old classic songs; the TV show *Journey to the West* has been remade many times; people are fond of costume dramas and Kungfu fictions. There’s no other language which has more words on thinking about the old days than Chinese. Confucianism values ancient traditions, such as the institutions of Western Zhou, and gives great respect to ancient sages like Yao, and takes their rules as the model for all ages (Zhang, 2004). Reviewing history has already been a national habit of Chinese.

Scarlet’s catchphrase “tomorrow is another day” has been regarded as a typical American saying. It is said that the spirit *GONE WITH THE WIND* voiced representing American national spirit. In the novel, the heroine Scarlet never looks backward. Moreover, we can see clearly the divergences between Confucianism-based culture and Individualism-based one from children’s preference to TV shows. Monkey King is as popular to Chinese children as Superman to American children. Many film makers are concerning about Chinese film industry’s competitive forces since China has not produced science fiction movies yet. This concern is unnecessary, because most Chinese prefer *The Legend of White Snake* to *Star Wars*.

3.3 Collectivism harmony vs. competitive self-accomplishment

Regulated by Confucianism, Chinese put individual goal and accomplishment second to the interest of community. The ultimate state of being from Chinese eyes is to stand aloof from worldly success. Chinese highlight Mean so much as to name the country as “Zhong Guo” (a country in the middle). Confucianism values the idea of “nothing too much” and restraint which in Chinese means “jie”. Confucius told his disciples to restrain themselves and abide by the propriety, which is to say to keep a modest profile and respect teachers, elders and be subject to them. In this way a society can be a harmonious one. As a result, Chinese people usually hold a relatively benign attitude towards competition. A red banner almost hangs on every wall of contest field, on which a famous Chinese saying goes like “Friendship First, Competition Second”. Chinese dislike those who are too competitive like a proverb goes “shoot the bird which takes the lead”. Collective harmony is more important than anything else in China.

Individualism lays emphasis on individuality. This concept may have been embedded in Americans’ personality since Westward Movement. Individualism highlights self-initiative. Americans are supposed to be enthusiastic enough toward careers and lives. To demonstrate this point, the best way is to gain material wealth and personal fame in society. Americans have recklessly exploited their natural resources to make more money. They used to believe that the natural environment is the only thing to overcome and improve (Su, 2006).

3.4 Family-honored success vs. self-made success

Confucianism emphasizes social hierarchy and propriety. These philosophies can be seen in family life. Confucian “propriety” actually means “difference”, which means there are particular behavior norms among different classes, like noble and humble, respectful and lofty, senior and junior (Gao, 2009). Every class has its particular obligation. For instance, junior one in family should shoulder the responsibility to honor his ancestors and the seniors. Thus no matter what he does, what fame he graces, and what achievements he gets, they all represent the whole family’s fame and achievements. That’s why China has so many patrimonial careers and industries. Someone is born to inherit some kinds of special skills and keep it alive.

To carry on the family line is of vital importance in Confucianism-based countries. Confucianism advocates the Rectification of names. As a result, to keep a family name alive is every generation’s obligation. Thus to get marry is mostly because of this obligation instead of love. That’s why in ancient China, men were superior to women. A person’s marriage is not something of himself but a big event of the whole family. Of course, a successful and happy marriage glorifies the family. This family-honored success problem covers every corner of life in China.

For Americans, they represent themselves and there’s no particular obligation to fulfill for their family. They strive for a better life, career, family success, and material wealth just for themselves. Generally speaking, they no longer depend on their parents when they grow to 18 years old. They choose their life partners according to their own will. Their parents could have different opinions, but usually can do nothing to change their mind. This doesn’t mean Americans don’t care about family fame or success, it’s because they believe that only when every individual obtains success can the whole family be a success. Bill Gates determines to leave not any penny to his children since he believes that his sons and daughters can achieve more without his help or almsgiving.

3.5 High power distance vs. low power distance

Confucius said that let the emperor be an emperor, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son. Hierarchy philosophy is grounded in Chinese mind. In China, the junior should obey the senior. To subject to the authority maintains an admired virtue in China. Koreans and Japanese (Confucianism-based culture) use honorifics when talking with elder people. This proves that Confucianism belongs to high power distance culture.

Contrary to China, Americans value individuality. Indeed they respect the old, authority, and teachers, while they believe this is about mutual respect. Many Americans call family members their given name most of the time. In this way, they feel they are equal without thinking about the titles. This is attributed to the fact that America has never experienced hierarchy society. The first settlers fled from a hierarchy society for freedom and equality. A low power distance culture makes American contain that everyone shares the equality. People may think this shows American informality, while Su (2006) observed that it’s because they believe that treating everyone the same, though informally, is ultimately respectful.

The culture in which people are born and brought up shapes them (Zhang, 2004). Accordingly, people from different culture backgrounds have different habits and individual personalities. Knowing these differences promotes understanding between people from different cultures.

3.6 Interdependence vs. independence

Culture that fosters Confucianism offers more support to one and another. People are dependent on each other emotionally and economically. The author had mentioned in previous part that Confucianism-based Chinese belongs to the concern culture, so Chinese feel that they are not alone in this world because they can depend on parents, relatives of in-laws, and friends. Chinese children learn the social skills necessary for group harmony, family togetherness, and interdependence in relationships (Zhang, 2007). Confucianism is against

religion. That's why most of Chinese are not religious. Many westerners hold the opinion that Chinese have no mental support, while actually for Chinese, their mental support is the tangible family members, friends, etc.

Unlike Chinese, Americans and their parents seldom live in the same dwelling and rely on one another financially. In Michigan of America, nearly two thirds of the young are opposed to having their aged parents live together with them. Americans acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hand (Tocqueville, 1830). Though the welfare system in America is pretty complete and comprehensive, it is never admired to receive financial support from the government, or even charity and family.

Understanding the discrepancies of Confucianism and Individualism-based personalities facilitate the analyzing of their status quo.

4. Current Situation of the Development of Chinese and American Personalities

Differences of personality should be analyzed under the specific cultural context. In the process of development, side-effects are emerging.

4.1 Chinese young people lacking traditional Confucianism

People's nature changes uneasily, while, personality differs with the mingling of cultures. Influenced by the western world's outlooks and values, most of today's young people in China think about only themselves and their own future, complain all the time and feel lonely. It is obvious that, the young generation today misunderstands Individualism as hedonism and egoism. They call their isolation and indifference as special individuality, and blame it on the fact that they don't have brothers and sisters to share. Confucianism makes people interdependent on each other but definitely different from total reliance on parents. Today's younger generation is called as NEET (young adults who are actually capable to feed themselves while still depend on parents financially) and moonlight clan (young adults who spend all the salary or money given by parents at the beginning of a month). In their personalities, fragility, coldness, emotional isolation account for a large part. Especially the children after 1990s, they treat weirdness as beauty, and misbehavior as uniqueness. It is very common in colleges that young couples cohabit together before marriage. Free love is totally suitable for Americans, because they are educated to be independent when they are very young; therefore they won't depend on their partners emotionally too much like Chinese do. They treat dating different people as different experiences, and having sex with different dating partners as a trip of wonder. An American girl once said to a Chinese professor that she believed that sexual intercourse is the best way to get to know the dating partner (Yu, 1992). However, Chinese children lack education of being independent mentally. Once they fall in love, they depend on their partners like parents. Besides, Confucianism-based Chinese belong to concern culture. On most of the occasion, having sex means commitment. Cohabiting before marriage and then breaking up make many young people lonelier mentally and be at a loss about future life. Americans are too ready to move, while Chinese are too ready to commit (Yu, 1992). Chinese young people accept the values of Individualism without truly understanding them clearly and throw away traditional Confucianism ignorantly. Actually, traditional Confucianism is in line with Chinese disposition.

Different cultures, of course maintain different values and habits. Chinese young generation is born into a Confucianism-based culture. Unfortunately, propriety, benevolence, Mean, morality and righteousness, these old doctrines are what today's young people are short of.

With the rapid development of economy, unhealthy personality has been arising in American society which is largely caused by extreme Individualism.

4.2 Americans playing excessive importance on individualism

Under the influence of Individualism, Americans' satisfaction rate of life, marriage, work are relatively higher than Confucianism influenced culture; while rate of divorce, suicide, unemployment are also high in America. This is explainable since as long as Americans are discontent with their marriage, it's more probable for them to get divorce; if they are in bad mood, they are more easily to commit suicide (Wang & Xi, 2008).

American sub-prime crisis in 2008 extended to every corner of the world. It is far more difficult for Americans to accept shared sacrifice for the common good and well-being of the entire country (Su, 2006). As a result, many of them use the credit card unlimitedly and take out the overdraft casually thinking this will be paid through tomorrow's work.

Individualism is very much likely to develop unlimitedly, and most of Americans showed worry, insecurity, loneliness, and alienation (Bellah, 1985). The status quo and future development of Americans' personality make scholars worried. Lacking of sense of closeness among people, many Americans highlight too much on their own benefits and become cold to people around them. Extreme Individualism will turn into egoism which will erode people's heart.

5. Conclusion

Chinese and Americans can further their mutual understanding and disperse misunderstanding. Chinese young people are short of traditional virtues and self-discipline; Americans are going too far on the way of Individualism. To solve these problems, Chinese and Americans should contemplate their own cultures thoroughly and re-understand them to have them better instruct their personalities' development. By learning each other's advantages, healthy personality will be developed so as to make contribution to the harmonious world building. More importantly, in this process, intercultural-communication and mutual understanding between Chinese and Americans are improved.

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Biography

Chao Yue, Lecturer and Master of School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University, Research interests: British and American literature.