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UNIVERSAL VALUES AND CHINESE TRADITIONAL ETHICS

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Abstract: There has been debate in China whether China should accept Western values such as democracy, liberty, human rights, and equality. Critics of universal values argue that there are no such things as universal values and “absolutely applicable” ethics, but this essay argues that universal values belong to the whole mankind, and democracy includes universal values in its basic political theory. The two basic principles of universal values proposed by the Declaration towards a Global Ethics of Humanity and Reciprocity are the starting point of a just society and fair business in economic fields. In China’s traditional culture, some ideas proposed by Confucius, Mencius, MoTzu and other philosophers convey the humanity-oriented thought of the Chinese traditional ethics, such as “universal love” and “benevolence”, which will contribute to the common spiritual wealth of the whole mankind based on universal values in the context of market competition.

Keywords: universal values, democracy, China’s traditional culture

Introduction

Convened in Chicago in 1993, the Second Parliament of the World’s Religions was attended by 6,500 delegates from all around the world that approved a Declaration towards a Global Ethics drafted by Hans Küng. Two fundamental principles are determined by the Declaration: Everyone should be treated humanely and “Do not do to others as you would not have them do to you”. Based on these two principles, four irrevocable directives were determined, too, in the Declaration: 1) commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life; 2) commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order; 3) commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness; 4) commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women. In 1999, the UNESCO issued a draft of “Common Framework of the 21st Century Ethics” for discussion, which concerned such issues as the relationship between human beings and nature, the complete fulfillment of a person, individuals and community, peace and justice. A number of other organizations and individuals dedicated to world’s sustainable growth and peace and justice of human beings have also made their unremitting efforts to seek universal values and global ethics.

Universal Values and Democracy

With the rapid development of modern technology and economy, along with a fast growth in international trade and cross-culture communications, globalization has become an irreversible trend. Globalization brings benefits to people of all countries, but it also brings confrontations and conflicts. How to avoid confrontations and conflicts, or at least to minimize them, is a serious issue facing every Chinese that longs for the peaceful rise of the country. Efforts made in documents such as the “Declaration Towards a

Global Ethics and Common Framework of the 21st Century Ethics” show that people are evidently seeking the recognition of universally common values, so as to find a platform for dialogue and to share global ethics and universal values in order to form a solid foundation for lasting peace and sustainable development of the world.

It is quite significant that a number of articles criticizing universal values appeared in some newspapers and magazines in China in 2008, saying that advocating universal values is equal to imposing the Western values on China. In those articles, the so-called “universal values” referred rather to the author’s narrow understandings of the so-called universal values than to a thorough understanding of the complete concept of that term. What is under massive attack in those articles is the Western democratic system, which is considered to be a Western value being imposed on the Chinese in the name of universal value.

The word “democracy” originated from the West, but this does not mean that the Western democratic system would be the only true embodiment of the concept of democracy, and that it would embody a perfect system without the need for constant improvements. Moreover, it is not right to use the term “Western” here because it is too general in meaning. The West includes many countries and regions where a diversity of cultures exists, including a most unbalanced development of civilization. We cannot deny all Western democratic systems and further deny the whole idea of democracy just because, for example, the American one is not so perfect. Just as John Dewey says, “It is also true, as well as even more important (because it is a factor in causing this rigidity) that our institutions, democratic in form, tend to favor in substance a privileged plutocracy. Nevertheless, it is sheer defeatism to assume in advance of actual trial that democratic political institutions are incapable either of further development or of constructive social application.”

There are comparatively better democratic systems other than the United States, established on the idea of democracy, like that in Sweden. Democracy by definition is not divided into an Eastern one and a Western one; it could be rather defined as a practice or a principle of social equality, and “a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives” when it is referred to as a political system. Of course, though “the whole population” is mentioned here, it can only be represented by those people elected as representatives with a principle of “the minority subordinating to the majority”, according to which the minority have to accept the majority’s choice, but they still have the right to express their dissent and opinions. It is the majority’s duty to listen to these dissent and opinions. In fact, the principle of “the minority subordinating to the majority” is not enough to realize true social equality. The equality of democratic politics, however, is achieved through equality of rights and equality of opportunities, so that everyone has the right to elect, as well as to be elected and has the opportunity to be among the majority to elect the administrators that he prefers, or he could also be among the minority and has to accept the majority’s choice, but still maintains the right to speak. Whether he belongs to the majority or the minority, he maintains the right to watch over or even impeach the administrators, from which we can see that what the idea of democracy emphasizes is the equal rights and equal opportunities that everyone enjoys, and it is based on what Hans Küng has summarized: humanity and the principle of reciprocity. That is, “Everyone should be treated humanely,” and “What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.”

Hans Küng holds that these two principles are common among Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Confucianism. Representatives of different religions all over the world signed the declaration. Maybe the fact that the renowned theologian Hans Küng himself drafted the declaration for the parliament of the world's religions might cause some suspicion and challenge among the non-religious people who may disagree with him out of their instinct to suspect the religious values. After a careful reflection, however, both religious people and non-religious people would find the two principles acceptable, and modern people holding different political views may also find them acceptable. Basically, Marxists should have no difficulty in accepting them neither given the fact that the starting point of Marxism is the focus on the emancipation of the whole mankind. Of course, no principle could be identified with everyone, but if we look in our hearts we would admit that no one would like to be treated inhumanely. If this is the case, then we should have no doubt to treat others humanely, because others are human beings as we are. This idea is a common ideal and pursuit shared by people of different times, cultures and nationalities.

The disadvantaged need this universal value even more urgently since they are more likely to be subjected to inhumane treatment. Especially in some countries, political power is highly concentrated in the hand of one party or a ruling group, hence, also their power over discourse. In such countries, the advantaged groups are protected by political power and power of discourse, yet they are also afraid of being treated inhumanely once they lose their political power and power of discourse. They would do anything to defend and even impose inhumane treatment on others to maintain, terrorize people's mind so that they do not dare to resist. But those advantaged people are all the same afraid of being treated the same way some day, too. This is the way in which the totalitarians tend to think. They treat people inhumanely by abusing their power. Nevertheless, even those totalitarians committing anti-human crimes would try their best to cover the truth, basically because they are worried that revealed truth may arouse people's anger, so that they may lose the masses' support, which is gained through cheating.

With the end of the Cold War, the awareness of human rights is further aroused, and totalitarianism, as a political form, is increasingly under massive attack and is cast aside by people, and is retreating rapidly from the scene of history, which in turn provides a favorable environment for the proposition of universal values. The proposition of universal values can at least help to constrain the abuse of power and supervise the inhumane treatment covered by power of discourse. The significance of universal values is more evident in promoting justice for the disadvantaged in the society as well as for the minor nationalities and the third world countries in international relations.

A critic of universal values cites Engels' Anti-Dühring as a powerful weapon. Indeed, Engels' idea that ethics has no "absolute application" is an insightful statement. The above-mentioned critic of universal values argues that, according to Engels, ethics carries the imprint of the class, so there is no such thing as a set of "absolutely applicable" ethics that transcends classes. However, Engels' expression of "absolute applicability" is very clear here, doubtlessly suggesting that there is, of course, "relatively applicable" ethics. This critic has to admit that Engels has also made analyses on some common features in ethics of different classes, and common ethic commandments in different social forms, and that due to "common historical background" the ethics of different classes share something in common. This is enough, at least, for acknowledging that some principles could gain universal consent. The two fundamental principles proposed by Hans Küng in the "Declaration toward a Global Ethic" are two of

these common things. The reason why the two principles are proposed is that there is no “absolutely applicable” ethics, so we need to find universal values that are generally accepted by human beings and establish a platform for global dialogue in peace on the basis of ethics’ “relative applicability” and to seek common ground while reserving differences.

However, according to this critic, universal values and universal ethics are only possible when the Communist society is realized. Obviously, he has identified the few principles and ethics that are generally accepted with a certain specific value system. This confusion has also made relativity absolute. Through denying universal values, it denies the possibility of seeking common ground, while reserving differences in ethics in the context of globalization, and therefore, it denies the possibility of establishing a dialog platform in ethics. This is a dangerous and harmful tendency. In today’s world of globalization, if the dialog between different countries, different groups, and different individuals is only concerned with interests, then the trend of globalization would be negative to the development of developing countries like China, as well as to the disadvantaged groups and individuals. The peaceful rise of China requires a basis of universal values to be realized in the world which steps from conflicts to dialogs.

Of course, to achieve a reasonably just, modern society, it’s not enough only to have democracy in mind and practice. If we only had democracy, on the one hand, while monopoly, unfair competition, opaqueness of management, inequality of employment and pay between men and women, etc, and discrimination on the basis of race, sex, age, national origin, religion and physical state, and threats to the safety of workplace, products, environments, etc, and corruption, cheating and fraud, etc, are without control. On the other hand, our great ideals and practices of democracy, equality, freedom and universal love will become only a lip service. There will be more unemployment in developed countries, because more enterprises will be moving to the developing countries where the labor force is much cheaper. Monopoly and unfair competition may further increase instead of being reduced. Monopoly and unfair competition may continue to be used by a certain group of entrepreneurs in order to maximize their profits, while others lose their equal opportunities and equal rights to compete with them.

The alternative would be to consider creating conditions with the help of universal values as a basis for a healthy competition. In our terminology, equality is not an equality of wealth among all people, or that of an equal position among all people. This is just impossible, and numerous historical facts have proved it as an unrealistic way. By equality we mean the equality of opportunity and rights based on humanity and the principle of reciprocity. Then, how can we realize such equality? We should have universal values in mind, trying our best to treat every single person equally and require the same done to us by others. So, in the public sector and in the management of a company that has to do with the public, not only within, but also without the company, transparency is definitely necessary so that the administration and management can be watched over by as many people as possible. Then, if everyone has been given equal opportunities and rights or not will be more easily discovered, and further recognized and confirmed through dialogs and exchange of opinions. As long as our equal rights for the transparency of administration and management are realized, and we are granted the equal rights of discourse, the dark things such as monopoly, corruption, unfair competition, and all kinds of discriminations, inequality, and threats to the safety will be brought to the light.

Based on universal values, international business ethics is based on the principles of morality designed to brighten up these dark spots in the modern society, especially in the economic field, which plays such an important role in the modern society. It can help us on the way to a win-win situation based on the universal values through the hardships and difficulties. In general, development typically provoked in modern society by commercial wars and materialistic pursuits, the winner of which almost always benefits from unequal opportunities and rights for different people. Therefore, international business ethics helps to establish a new conception of business and humanity in the fields of business, based on universal values, which is emphasized especially in the fields of business where market is still considered “an invisible hand” and is sensitive for the government’s interference, and where democracy can only rely on the generally-accepted universal values to carry out its principles of equality and justice.

But to emphasize universal values does not mean that we talk about all of us being born equal. We just can do nothing about the inequality in the society with huge gaps between the rich and the poor, the advantaged and the disadvantaged. When we say all human beings are born equal, we only mean all human beings are born equal with man’s natural rights. As Robert Nozick says, “The particular rights over things fill the space of rights, leaving no room for general rights to be in a certain material condition.” So, how to ensure every person’s natural rights is most important for a democratic government to put in the first place in its agenda. But we have to recognize that by “to ensure” does not mean all man’s natural rights are ready for every person to enjoy. They need everyone to strive for in the name of equality, or as Confucius says, in the rectified name. “Human rights” just means they are rights for every human being. But for everyone to enjoy these rights in the real life, great efforts have to be made. Especially when democracy is something mainly in the political area, the economic field may still be characterized by the law of the jungle and the mafia, the crazy rush for profit-making and even despotism. Edward Mason feels that the modern large corporations have “management is in the hand of a few thousand men. Who selected these men, if not to rule over us, at least to exercise vast authority, and to whom are they responsible?” To wake up the sense of universal values and human rights in everyone’s mind, in every stakeholder’s mind, when they deal with business and make decisions, rediscovering Chinese traditional ethics may be most inspiring.

Universal Values and the Humanity-Oriented Thought of the Chinese Traditional Ethics

China’s traditional culture has cultivated a unique ethical system. The excellent part of it can actually be universally acknowledged, for example, the thought of “humanity-orientation”, which first appeared in *Kuan Tzu*, a book attributed to Kuan Chung (? – 645 B.C.), an illustrious prime minister who served under Duke Huan of the state of Ch’i in ancient China. On the basis of humanity, Confucius’ disciple Mencius developed his thoughts of “the people-orientation” and “the people as the most important/the sovereign as the lightest” represent the basic trend of thought of the Chinese intellectuals in terms of the importance of humanity other than that of a ruling position. These thoughts helped to raise the normal people’s status in rulers’ mind and to impose some self-discipline on the part of the rulers themselves. As Confucianism gradually became the orthodox philosophy in the following dynasties in China, Mencius’ thoughts of “the people-orientation” and “the people as the most important/the sovereign as the lightest” have been generally accepted. By “the people”, Mencius means the normal people especially when considered in relation to those who govern them, almost the same as the explanation of the word in

English dictionaries. This has left the space for the thought of “bureaucracy-orientation”, which has always existed in China’s tradition, to directly contradict the thought of “the people-orientation”. People of different status and position in China have shown different attitudes towards the contradiction; while virtuous people advocated the thought of “the normal-people-orientation,” many bureaucrats and some of their despicable followers who wanted to gain favor from them have insisted on the thought of “bureaucracy-orientation” in their minds. Nevertheless, the thought of “the people-orientation” has been agreed on, at least at the surface, among the bureaucrats due to the authority of Confucianism in the scholar-bureaucrat circle.

Profound changes have been taking place in bureaucracy-people relations in China’s society since China inaugurated the public servant system in 1993. Neither the “bureaucracy-orientated” thought, nor the “the people-oriented” thought fits in the modern public servant system because a real public servant system would, at least theoretically, no longer have the contradiction between bureaucrats and the people, thus beginning to form a realistic foundation for “humanity-orientation” in the real and modern sense of the term to be put into practice. Those who are public servants, and those who are not, are all human beings, so they are equal on the basis of “humanity-orientation”; they are only different in their spheres whether they are of the public or of the private. In the public sphere, the public servants should work for the benefits of normal people; while as normal people themselves, they are served by other public servants as well. The private sphere requires the privacy of every single person not to be infringed upon, by demanding more constraint on public power, while claiming increasingly better service from the government, which will strengthen its power in some sense to improve the service.

To strengthen the governmental power may imply to risk weakening the supervision over the public power. Without the possible participation of every person in the supervision, the public servants will have the liability to say that they are serving the people, when actually they are abusing the public power. Maybe, it can be said that they really have the people in mind, but you will never be able to say that they have humanity in mind. Because it would be easier for them to accept the concept of the people in the traditional sense, that is, the normal people in relation to those who govern them, so they would refuse to include every person in their concept of the people. They would either separate themselves from the people as the governing elites from the governed masses, or separate these people from those people.

No matter whom they are serving, they would be serving the people, because without the possible participation of every person in the supervision, either these or those people (even only a few) could be passed off as the people. It would be very difficult to submit a valid evidence to show that there is some problem in the public servants’ service to the people, when they say they are serving the people. But the people’s great expectations have been aroused. When they found out at last that the slogan “serving the people” might just simply be a lip service, or they found out that the government did not really serve them, which means that they were not included among the people that the government always declares to serve, they might get angry, and take drastic actions. According to the Annual Report on China’s Rule of Law No. 8 (2010) edited by the law institute of the CASS, last year saw a huge rise in the occurrence of mass disturbances throughout the country, behind which was evidently people’s suspicion over the credibility of the local governments. There is almost definitely some connection between the suspicion and the privileges enjoyed by the public servants, for example, the housing issues. The above mentioned annual report No. 7 (2009) points out that the particularly serious problems in housing: “After the ‘housing

reform' in 1998, though the state stopped the welfare-oriented public housing distribution, yet during the following 8 years, the Party and government offices throughout the country never stopped the so-called 'house-building based on fund-raising' and 'building affordable houses by the work unit itself'." Even three ministries including the Ministry of Construction demanded clearly to stop these projects in 2006, but to no effect.

So, on the one hand, public servants enjoy the privilege of low price for housing, only 20% or even 10% of the market price; on the other hand, normal people have to be victims of the skyrocketing price for housing, or of being forced to have their own houses pulled down. Governments in some poor areas even appropriate special purpose funds to buy cars and build houses. The striking example of the issue of housing can show that if the concept of the people does not really involve every person the people will always be separated into these people and those people, or into different interest groups and lobbies. Then more consideration will be given to the privileged people, and the rights and opportunities of the normal people will be neglected, so that there will be no equality, no fairness and no justice even in a very limited sense. Therefore, even if there is a functioning public servant system in place, it will not be as it should be in the right sense, if it is not humanity-oriented with the possible participation of every single person in the supervision over it. Since a public servant system is a sign of modernity, the concept of the people should become identical with that of humanity in a modern sense.

In general, the Chinese understanding of the concept of "the people" since recent sixty years, when it has been used very widespread with emphasis in media, official documents and the textbooks of ideological education, has also developed with time, moving from a historical stage of distinguishing "internal contradictions among the people" and "contradictions between ourselves and the enemy" in Mao's time, which is obviously contrary to humanity-orientation and is typically an embodiment of Mao's politics-orientation or his "politics in command", to a new phase that puts accent on "humanity-orientation" and the construction of democracy and law. Therefore, the understanding of "the people" in China is increasingly identified with the concept of "humanity". Now the commonness of all humanity is more emphasized, and even a criminal still maintains the dignity as a human being, has the right of man or of a woman, and should not be subjected to insults and abuse, though all these would not affect the penalty and punishment he should receive as a criminal in accordance with law. That is to say, on the basis of the commonness of humanity, all people, whether rich or poor, public servants or not, senior intellectuals or common laborers, should enjoy the same rights endowed by law, and their dignity should be respected and protected by law in the same way, and are all subjected to punishment of law if they commit crimes. Of course, anyone who fails to make a correct use of the part of rights endowed by law will be deprived of that part of rights, say personal freedom, or it may cause violation of other people's rights. However, the other rights of him or her as a human being should still be respected, which is a true demonstration of the principle of "all are equal before the law", the basis of which is the commonness of humanity, which should be the true meaning of "humanity" in what we call "humanity-orientation." This implies an overall concern and respect for everyone without any exception, because only when the commonness of all human beings is acknowledged, can they enjoy the rights and the duties they shoulder, so as to enable all people to give full play to their characters and personalities according to their own conditions when practicing rights and duties. This is to seek common ground while reserving differences in the issue of humanity.

It can be said that if we do not regard the commonness of humanity as the basis, then a safeguard can not be established to protect people's opportunities to give full play to their characters and to make law a deterrent to warn everyone off wrongdoing and bad behavior. From here we can clearly see the two principles that Hans Küng has emphasized: humanity and the principle of reciprocity, which are the universal values recognized by the whole mankind and on the basis of which different nations and cultures have developed their own value systems. These systems only differ from each other on some specific issues of their own, and sometimes may even contradict each other. The contradictions happen even in the same value system simply because people look at things from different perspectives or stand for different developing stages of civilization. Nevertheless, people can still avoid conflicts and contradictions and seek a peaceful way to solve the problems by finding something common through dialog and communication based on universal values.

Many great thoughts in China's traditional ethics are conducive to the identity of the Chinese with universal values, such as "universal love" proposed by Mo Tzu, and "benevolence" advocated by Confucians. Mo Tzu's thought of "universal love" stresses that relationships among people transcends confrontations and constraints of worldly interests. He proposed that human beings should "follow Heaven", because Heaven produces everything and makes lives flourish and continue, and Heaven holds the same attitude towards everyone without any special favor or prejudice, so "Heaven likes to see people love and help each other and dislikes to see them hate and harm each other." "Universal love" is realized through "following Heaven", so as to promote life and humanity, which includes a sense of non-violence.

The high value that Taoism and Buddhism place on life is a good demonstration of the non-violence and the respect of life in China's tradition. The Confucian ethic code "do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself," coincides with the latter principle proposed by Hans Küng, namely the "Golden Rule" of the West. The Confucian thought of "benevolence" emphasizes a good management of relationship between oneself and others of different identities and statuses. According to Confucius, the relationship between oneself and others is an interactive one, which is a form of inter-subjectivity, as expressed by him in "wishing to be established oneself, one seeks also to establish others, wishing to be enlarged oneself, one seeks also to enlarge others," and win-win is achieved through inter-subjective interaction. Confucius made a special emphasis on the point that in the relationship between two people, the stronger one should take the initiative to shoulder responsibility and treat the weaker one with benevolence in a good demonstration of ethics, so as to win respect from the weaker one and achieve harmonious coexistence. These thoughts of Confucius are especially illuminating in the highly competitive modern commercial society, and could help modern business step out of the dog-eat-dog commercial wars, "thinking of righteousness in the view of gain" and to achieve win-win.

Confucianism's accent on the principle of "forbearance" has cultivated the spirit of tolerance in the Chinese culture. Confucius once told Zi Gong, his student, that the word forbearance is an idea that one can abide by all his life. The principle of "forbearance" means, "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself," and means benevolence and tolerance. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, the three major beliefs in China, have their respective interpretations of truthfulness, which have all coincided with the three irrevocable directives based on the two fundamental principles proposed in "Declaration towards a Global Ethics".

The fourth directive concerns the equality of men and women. With the progress of society, women's status has gradually improved through their fights for equal rights all around the world. Confucius did make one statement about women, which is often denounced, that "Of all people, girls and servants are the most difficult to behave to", but nothing more. From what has been achieved in the Chinese women's equal rights in the last century, though the idea that "males are better than females" is still influential in China's traditional culture, we can see that the rapid change in women's status demonstrates that China's traditional thoughts of "benevolence" and "universal love" have the great potential to overcome the wrong idea of "males are better than females."

Universal values behind the humanity-oriented thought of the Chinese traditional ethics are especially helpful to promote business ethics in the context of fierce market competition, where the factors of humanity are often neglected. If the humanity-oriented thought could have influenced the decision making in the Ford Pinto case about 40 years ago, then the cost-benefit analysis would not have led the decision makers to have only profits in their mind while making decisions, neglecting the value of lives of their customers. And the lessons that can be drawn from the Sanlu milk scandal will also show that the management of the company has seriously neglected the value of lives of so many children, while the local government put the target of economic development above its target of supervision, striving for the former but neglecting the latter, which means the lives and the health of the victims of the scandal.

Though the humanity-oriented thought of the Chinese traditional ethics is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, disasters caused by the negligence of the value of life, of humanity, still happened quite often in China's history. Why? Because the temptation of great interests and political power is so strong that people with real power in hand simply throw away the universal values behind the humanity-oriented thought of the Chinese traditional ethics. They behave on the principle of interests and politics, and never bother to reflect if their behavior be harmful or not to the benefits of humanity. They do not keep the benevolence and righteousness in mind, which are the core of Confucianism, and are considered by Confucianism as something transcendent, much more important than the worldly gain. According to Confucius, wealth should be gained in a right way, that is, through the way of fairness and justice. Of course, the way of fairness and justice is in the first place the rule of law. But at the same time, law should be legislated and enforced by man. But if man has no cultivation, especially self-cultivation, then he would not reach the height of transcending the self-interests to insist on the fairness and justice in legislation of law and its enforcement. So the Confucian emphasis on the initiative taken by people in higher position is helpful for those who take charge either in administration or in management to behave well in the first place so that those who are in lower position will support and cooperate with them wholeheartedly and harmoniously.

Conclusion

To conclude, today when globalization has become a reality, if we are still entangled with the misleading debates whether "The East wind prevails over the West wind" or "The West wind prevails the East wind," or stuck in the dogmatic models and cannot find a way out, then it amounts to that we fail to do justice to the great cultural heritage passed down thousands of years, that we fail to share the great heritage with the whole world, and that we automatically give up our rights of discourse on universal values. The humanity-oriented thought of the Chinese traditional ethics belongs to the common wealth of the whole

mankind. We cannot enough value when people of different nations and cultures are contributing to this wealth from different perspectives based on universal values, the basic principles of which are humanity and reciprocity.

Notes

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