

The Interaction of Cultural Genes and the Transformation of “Collectivism” in China

Pornpawis Lhapeerakul¹

¹ School of International Relations & Public Affairs, Shanghai International Studies University

Corresponding Author:

Pornpawis Lhapeerakul

School of International Relations and Public Affairs,

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai 200083, China

E-mail: 13032101636@163.com

Received: 03 Dec 2018

Revised: 06 Oct 2019

Accepted: 14 Oct 2019

Abstract

Individualism and collectivism are different depending on the social concepts represented by the West and the East. Within the realm of contemporary political philosophy research, there are attempts to compare the social characteristics of Individualism and Collectivism through the theory of history and social development. The West pays great attention to individual independence, freedom and personal benefits. Whereas in Asia, China represents a group-based society. Among the main reasons, there is the influence of socialism derived by Marxist ideology, and the focus that Confucian philosophy pays on communities and people in society. Nowadays, the rapid development in social, political, economic and technological spheres, has influenced the interaction of cultural genes and changed the Western concept of Individualism and the Eastern, Chinese-based concept of Collectivism.

Keywords: cultural genes, Collectivism, Individualism, China, transformation

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, globalization has had an impact on various aspects of our existence, such as high-tech, economic rise and political development. All these factors have brought about the society in to “the new era”.¹ In the social environment, people have been particularly affected. Through the study of social science and philosophy, there are increasing doubts whether the West truly embodies Individualism and the East is truly Collectivist. In fact, the two sides interact and change in both directions. According to Western and Eastern philosophical studies, the differences in Individualism and Collectivism, represent the differences between societies in the West and the East. Since 1990, Western culture has spread to the East, including science, technology and popular culture. The popularization of Western culture in the East can be seen in the film, fashion and food industries, leading to more individualism. At the same time, the rise of China in the 21st century, has also meant major representation for Eastern cultures and societies. Consequently, the world has paid attention not only to China’s economy and politics, but also to its people and culture. By spreading its culture at the global level, China has also influenced the Western society with the survival strategies of the overseas Chinese community. The interaction and transformation are mainly due to the Cultural Genes.² As this process affects both sides, it is necessary to understand what are their main changes and impacts.

THE OCCURRENCE AND EXISTENCE OF WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM

Western individualism originated in the middle ages, emphasizing a belief in human potential beyond destiny and respect for humanity. Western philosophers point out that individualism has great influence on the concept of humanism.³ Individualism believes that one person is as equally important as another, that no one is higher or lower, that no one is better or worse than others, and that everyone is equal. Starting from this concept, it is also the basic concept of democracy and capitalism, as well as one of the main concepts of human rights. The positive value of individualism lies in itself, with high confidence, free thinking

¹ According to 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the “One Belt One Road Initiative” Project to create international cooperation around the world. And it is considered a new century of changing power poles from the West to the East. It is considered that 2013 is a New Era of world true transformation.

² Cultural genes refer to non-biological genes relative to biological genes. They mainly refer to the minimum information units and minimum information links that are inserted into the human body consciously or unconsciously, which are inherited and acquired by nature or acquired by nurture. They are mainly expressed in beliefs, habits and values.

³ Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over established doctrine or faith (fideism). The meaning of the term humanism has fluctuated, according to the successive intellectual movements which have identified with it. Generally, however, humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of a “human nature” (sometimes contrasted with anti-humanism).

and creativity. In addition, extreme individualism regards humans as separate and unrelated, not social animals (Kongsri, 2015). They believe that happiness, misery, good and bad, fall under individual responsibility. According to such view, each person’s potential and ability depend upon himself and by accepting each other’s identity and personality, they conform to Individualism. Moreover, in western societies, having different thoughts, opinions or ideas, and bringing about differences and changes is not considered contradictory or wrong. Under this fashion, individualistic people respect each other’s rights and help shape individualistic societies. Therefore, different thoughts are the beginning of the development of new things in western society, and the rapid and leapfrog development of western society since ancient times. Notably, individualism is the basic concept of democracy—democracy focuses on and supports the freedom, rights and individual rights of everyone under the state system, pointing out that everyone in a democratic country must have equality, but actually, not everyone is equal.⁴ However, individualism is not the main cause of the defaults in a democracy, as inequities can be found in both prosperous democracies and communist societies. Additionally, individualism in the west has the advantage of supporting a person regardless of personal or social connections, and it also tries to safeguard its rights and freedom within a legal framework. As someone have different opinions from others, and there is no conflict between seeing new changes in the old kind and the moral goodness or continuing traditions that should exist.

CHINA REPRESENTS COLLECTIVISM IN THE EASTERN SOCIETY

Eastern society and traditional culture pay great attention to the relationship between people. The principle of collectivism is the most important moral principle in the feudal society of Asia. In the Asian region, the characteristics of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese cultures talk about “Yuan Culture”. Each individual is related and cannot be independent, but depends on others. Everyone has a destiny and values others. For East Asian countries, you cannot separate yourself from the group, and it doesn’t mean you lose your identity, but that you find your identity among people. Whether as a parent, a child, a teacher, an apprentice, all are able to maintain the same level of coexistence and harmony. This is the most valuable concept in Confucian philosophy. According to collectivism, Wu-Yuan culture is a good example of the Oriental collectivism and the concept of holism. In the “Wu-Yuan culture and the future of Asia”, Lin points out the differences of western and eastern groups (China)—“Western and European culture is individualistic and pursues individualism, it emphasizes human rights, personality, independence and freedom. Interpersonal relationship is mainly maintained by contract. Therefore, some people call western society a “contract society”.” Chinese culture is based on collectivism and the family as the center, emphasizing the family, clan, religion and country. Interpersonal relations emphasize ethics, so some people say that Chinese society is an “ethical society” (Lin, 1990, p. 119). In Chinese society, Marxist

⁴ Everyone must be equal, but not everyone is equal. As George Orwell, a British writer, pointed out in *Animal Farm* said “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others”.

socialism has cultivated the group value through the culture and Confucianism. Chinese traditional culture takes social group as the value subject, forming a kind of value relation of social position (Yang, 2010). In a collectivist society, moral values are a need for all to share, to be good, to be based on religious teachings, and to be based on traditional maxims or social norms. This also includes the following and respect of laws under the state system. Conversely, in a collectivism society, if you are alienated or different from most people in society, have different opinions or do things different from others, do not follow the social framework. You will be seen as divided and selfish, as individualistic. To be regarded as individualistic in a collectivist society is a serious opinion.

Why does Chinese society represent the Oriental collectivism? Firstly, the influence and cultivation of Chinese culture and ancient philosophy cannot be denied, making Chinese society and its people as collective. Chinese culture has a distinctive collectiveness (Wang Xi-Su, 2016). When Chinese people talk about their country, they don't say "my country", but they say "our country", which represents a country for everyone. In every aspect of Chinese society, we can find "we succeed together" instead of "I succeed because of your help". However, being a collective planner makes you a role and an identity in a society that is not isolated (Yang, 2010). These things show that we still depend on people in society. Family members, guests, or friends eat the same pot, and share everything no matter how much or how little. Collective culture encourages personal sacrifice and it is not a problem with the majority of the Chinese (Wang Xi-Su, 2016). All of which associate the Chinese people with the idea of collectivism. In retrospect, the adoption of collectivism and Marxism in China's political society has been fully reflected. Collectivism is not only the guide of our daily behavior, but also the guide of domestic and foreign policies, political decisions and economic development strategies that deserve our attention (Wang Xi-Su, 2016). The political system and management is thus based on socialism, and most of the benefits are in place for the service of all. The idea that everyone is equal, that all distributions are the same, emphasizes the importance of the majority in society. The combination of cultural longevity and socialist ideology has made China stronger today. The main and fundamental reason why China is able to build and implement such large-scale projects is not necessarily strict planning or good organization of some authoritarian regimes, but collectivism and Chinese culture itself. But we should also not forget that China's mixed political system of communism with capitalist ideas has changed the social environment across all country. Due to the big size of its population, the competitive pressure in society leads people to strive to be the first in society. However, in the quest to achieve economic security, it also leads to major individualism.

"COLLECTIVISM" AND "INDIVIDUALISM" IN MARXISM

The rapid changes in society are caused by two major causes, natural actions and human actions. Human behavior in society is still complex and deserves greater attention. It is undeniable that philosophy has sought to describe the nature of human society thoroughly, and political philosophy describes the existence of Western individualism and Eastern collectivist societies.

One of the most influential modern expression of collectivism in Western literature can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1762 work, *The Social Contract*,⁵ which argues that that the individual can find his real existence and freedom only by obeying the “common minds” of society (Britannica, 2017). In the early 19th century, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel argued that the real existence and freedom of an individual could be realized only by his unconditional obedience to the laws and institutions of the nation-state. This is what Hegel sees as the highest form of social morality.

How can we understand individualism and collectivism in Marxist thought? First, collectivism also conforms to the Marxist theory of two kinds of production. “The decisive factor in history, in the final analysis, is the production and reproduction of direct living”. Engels said in the introduction to the first edition of the book “*The Origin of Family, Private Ownership and State*”: “However, there are two kinds of production itself, on the one hand, the means of livelihood, food, clothing, housing and the production of the necessary tools; The other is the production of man himself, the multiplication of species”. Marx pointed out collectivism in the critique of political economy: “it is not human consciousness” he wrote. “It determines their existence, but social existence determines their consciousness” (Britannica, 2017).

Collectivism is the dominant spirit in communities where private property does not dominate, which includes poor working-class groups in modern capitalist societies; powerful social movements also tend to mask individualism and trade unions, and national liberation and akin struggles are often characterized by a strong collectivism. In the 20th century, collectivism was embodied in varying degrees in movements such as socialism, communism and fascism. The least collectivist is social democracy, which aims to reduce the inequities of unfettered capitalism through government regulation, income redistribution, and varying degrees of planning and public ownership. In communism, collectivism was brought to its most extreme, with minimal private ownership and maximum planned economy.

Speaking of which, how did Marxism tackle individualism? As the main idea of Marxism is socialism, in the industrial revolution the proletariat is exploited by capitalists or individual groups, therefore it needs to fight for its own rights for equality and social balance. For Marx and Engels, the individual was trivial in the eyes of the state, denying that the individual played a role in the evolution of history (Mises, 2018). Many people believe that Marxism is a purely socialist concept, which must be collectivist and thus oppose individualism. This concept may be only partially true. For those who have studied Marx’s theories, it is clear that he paid a lot of attention to individualism. Marx’s theories take inspiration from the mistake of individualism to create new thoughts on collectivism. Marxism holds the individuality, particularity and universality of things in practice and emphasizes

⁵ *The Social Contract (Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique)* is also the short title of a 1762 book by Jean-Jacques Rousseau on this topic. Social contract arguments typically posit that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of the ruler or magistrate (or to the decision of a majority), in exchange for protection of their remaining rights.

the understanding of social problems. Creationism also values individual rights and social equality. Marx pointed out, “true democracy is stateless. It is literally “the rule of the people” expressed through the presence of society and humanity” (Winn, 2014). Marxist democracy should not be exploited by anyone, and should represent all people equally. If a democracy is represented by some people or just one person, that refers to an individualistic democracy, not the real democracy that Marx envisioned. Marx was firmly opposed to individual capitalism - preserving only the welfare, considering his own interests and ignoring the majority. Such individual capitalism should be suppressed by collective socialism. Socialism is thus a substitute for capitalism and wealth, social equality, political and economic democracy, individual potential and security should be guaranteed in a reasonable and fair manner are guaranteed. At the same time, in order to describe individualism and collectivism, social and cultural principles must be used as a reference.

INTERACTION AND TRANSFORMATION FACTORS OF INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM

Collectivism can also be understood within the realm of a mutual-benefit framework. In this case, individuals pay more attention to the group goals than singular goals, and by relying on each other, people pay attention to the relationship between team members, and act in accordance with the rules set by the group. In Asian societies, for example exemplified by Chinese society, the leader, the minister, or the manager of a company knows about the private lives of his followers or employees and he would advise them on personal matters. The two sides share a close relationship in many aspects (Nutasarin, 2010). But in western and individualistic societies, an employee would be reluctant to tell a supervisor about the death of a parent, because it is viewed as a personal matter which should not be shared with a superior or leader.

Nevertheless, there is a mixture of individualism and collectivism in all cultures due to interaction among different people, and we can identify four dimensions between collective and individualistic groups.

Firstly, identity. In individual standards, the concept of identity is independent and free, and the focus rests on personal needs, feelings and actions. But the collective concept of identity relies on others. The self is considered part of a social relationship and cannot be independent, and it is based on the bonds of patriarchal clan, kinship and natural sex appeal. An Asian traditional culture like that of China emphasizes the restriction of individuality, the cultivation of group personality. Therefore, the “filial piety” and “loyalty” which take the whole world as the basis, become the core of traditional cultural values (Lin, 1990, p. 119).

Secondly, personal goals and collective goals. Collective societies value the group’s purpose, whereas the individualist focus on they own goals and they own success.

Thirdly, intellectual basis. The individualist culture attaches great importance to attitude, rights and contracts, but the collective one pays attention to norms and distribution of responsibilities. Lastly, relations. Individualist culture will focus on reasons, strengths, and

weaknesses to maintain a relationship with a person. In a collectivist culture, relationships with other people should be safeguarded regardless of the disadvantages they might bring forth.

Moreover, there is a growing debate on factors leading to changes on Eastern and Western societies. This comes as a result of a dynamic social environment and political system which has brought about the shift of collectivist and individualist behavior. Research has shown that the main factors leading to the shifting behavior encompass age, social status, way of upbringing, experience abroad and education.

CULTURE GENES AND THE CHANGES OF THE EASTERN COLLECTIVISM AND THE WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM

Major studies on culture by experts of humanities and sociology have pointed out that culture is the link between man and nature and it impacts changes on human habits and personality. However, many may wonder whether culture is spread only by word of mouth or if it can be transmitted through genes. Western scholars have focus much on this issue. They found that cultures can indeed be passed from one generation to the next one, and that genes and environment are undoubtedly responsible for some of the variation in human behavior, but the social transmission component of culture is also important (Laland, n.d., p. 2). There's a very clear case study of human gene transfer to offspring in which mothers breast-feed their babies. The scientific explanation is that this is normal and common for mammals -- humans are a mammal. But in sociological and cultural studies, it is a transfer of “cultural genes”. Cultural genes refer to non-biological genes relative to biological genes. They mainly refer to the minimum information units and minimum information links that are inserted into the human body consciously or unconsciously, which are inherited and acquired by nature or acquired by nurture. They are mainly expressed in beliefs, habits and values. The fact that children drink milk from their mothers is just one example of how traditions and cultural practices affect our evolutionary path. Culture and genetics have traditionally been thought of as two separate processes, but researchers are increasingly aware that they are closely linked. Each affects the natural process of the other. Scientists call it “gene-culture coevolution” (Goldman, 2014). Based on the above examples, the possibility of cultural translocation is described. The two of cultures and genes had to attack each other. It will affect human evolution and development. In addition, British cultural genetics expert Kevin N Laland pointed out that genes and culture are information entities passed from one generation to the next. He also pointed out that the study of cultural genes, rather than newly released ones, began in 1976 with the quantitative coevolution of genes and culture. When two population geneticists, Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Mark Feldman of Stanford University published the first simple dynamic model of genetic and cultural inheritance (Laland, n.d.). Wu Qiu-Lin, a Chinese expert, pointed out in “Cultural Genes: the commanding heights of national cultural competition” said “organisms are inherently selfish in the act of constantly replicating and spreading their genes. The act of copying and spreading one's own culture is also of such biological nature”. He created the word “meme” in his work, which was translated into Chinese

as “*Wen-Hua Ji-Yin*” or we kwon cultural gene (Wu, 2018, p. 1). It is not only the West that pays great attention to cultural gene, so does the East through traditional Chinese culture. In the East, the transfer of cultural genes is interpreted according to human beliefs. Religious belief is an awakening culture deeply rooted in the human mind and passed on from generation to generation through a deep cultivation process. Li He’s research on cultural genes, points out “subject classification belongs to cultural anthropology, which finds the carrier for cultural inheritance from the perspective of social heredity, just as the natural inheritance of human beings is realized through biological genes. Social inheritance is different from biological inheritance. It is not like that biological genes are duplicated in the form of template, but the transmission of the acquired ability of super life and super instinct peculiar to human (Li, 2018). Although the East and West have different starting points and principles for the study of cultural genes, the results are the same, that is, culture can be transmitted and changes are in genes.

In retrospect, through the transmission of cultural genes, Westerners inherit individualism across generations. The process is gradual, from families, communities and societies to the political systems. It cannot be denied that the same is true in the East, where community orientation is spread through cultural genetic reasons. However, in the past few decades, Western culture has poured into Asian society. The new generation of Chinese embraced western culture, and studying or living in the West, has turned them more westernized or individualistic in style. Individualism is gaining popularity among young people, but it is unlikely to become a dominant force. These are called examples of cultural genes from environmental behavior, and are gradually changing. Although some people do not live or fall into western environments, they can become more individualized. For example, in today’s China, although Chinese culture will shape them into collectivism from childhood, with the development and competitiveness of the country, in order to survive in society, they have to maintain themselves, so they must have more individual standard. The sense of pressure in schools and work environments makes others regard as competitors and adversaries, rather than peer.

At the same time, the flow of eastern capital, including the current rise of the east and its penetration in the west, has made westerners more interested in understanding Asia. As a result of more interaction with local cultures, social and environmental influences, they tend to become more collectivist. Today, the two sides interact and change because of the influence of spreading culture. However, changes occur over a long-time frame. Finally, every generation creatively accepts forms of institutional culture and spiritual culture from the past generation, and selectively absorbs and borrows some elements from foreign cultures too (Wu, 2018, p. 1).

CONCLUSION

The above study has seen that the interaction of individualist cultures from Western societies have impacted on the transition to new generations in China. While Chinese society is deeply rooted in Marxism, it also emphasizes the centrality of the collective group through Confucian teachings. It is also true that not only external factors have affected the Chinese society towards individualism. Internal factors play their part too, with some of the main subjects being political independence, concentration of power circles, and lack of public participation. Moreover, with stronger competition and pressure, people turn to self-reliance, self-interest, and often cut themselves out of society. This leads to think that in the future this behavior might be inherited by the next generations, making Chinese society conform to a large-scale individualism.

REFERENCES

- Britannica, T. E. (n.d). Sociology: Collectivism. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/collectivism>.
- Goldman, J. G. (2014, April 9). How human culture influence our genetics. *BBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140410-can-we-drive-our-own-evolution>
- Kongsri, P. (2015, January 6). Individualism. Retrieved from <http://worldcivil14.blogspot.com/2014/03/individualism.html>.(in Thai)
- Laland, K.N. (2006). Gene–Culture Coevolution. In L. Nadel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*. doi:10.1002/0470018860.s00720
- Li, H. (2018). *On cultural genes from the perspective of social heredity*. Jilin: Jilin Daily. (in Chinese)
- Lin, Q.-T. (1990). “Wu-Yuan” culture and the future of Asia. *Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Academic Journal*. (in Chinese)
- Mises, L. v. (2018). *Why Marx Hated Individualism*. Alabama: Mises Institute.
- Nutasarin, C. (2010). *Predicting liking for differently framed advertisements from individualism-collectivism as mediated by regulatory focus* (Master’s thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand) (in Thai).
- Wang Xi-Su, X.-S. (2016, June 5). Collectivist Culture, the key to Understanding China. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/collectivist-culture-key-understanding-china-xisu-wang>.
- Winn, J. (2014, February 16). Marx on individualism, equality and democracy. Retrieved from <https://josswinn.org/2014/02/16/marx-on-individualism-equality-and-democracy/>
- Wu, Q.-L. (2018). *Cultural Genes: the commanding heights of national cultural competition*. Beijing: China Nationalities Daily. (in Chinese)
- Yang, S.-L. (2010). *From the “Collectivist” and “Individualist” to understanding the differences between Chinese and Western cultural values* (Vol. 30). Beijing: Department of Social Sciences, China University of Mining and Technology Beijing Campus. (in Chinese)

