

The Unique Values of Chinese Traditional Cultural Time Orientation: In Comparison with Western Cultural Time Orientation

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The field of nonverbal communication has been given more and more attention in the academic circle of intercultural communication. However, as far as the time issue is concerned, it requires a thorough study. Particularly, the time orientation of the Chinese traditional culture has not been fully covered. This paper makes a special effort in the exploration of the unique values underlying the traditional Chinese culture time orientation by making a comparison with the western time orientation. It analyzes the subjective, flexible and relative features of traditional Chinese culture time orientation by specifically investigating the unique values of past-time focus. It will discuss the pursuit of the right occasion in Confucianism's time orientation, as well as the relativity view and carefree manner of spending time in Taoism's time orientation. The paper finally concludes that the subjective, flexible, and relative approaches of the traditional Chinese culture time orientation can provide meaningful revelations to the western world, which has laid much emphasis on the objective, absolute, and future-focus time orientation.

Edward Hall once regarded nonverbal communication as a hidden dimension people had often ignored and now the field of nonverbal communication has been paying greater attention in the academic circle of intercultural communication. However, at the present time, the study of nonverbal communication in China mainly concentrates on the kinesics, and the time issue is often overlooked. The study of Chinese traditional cultural time orientation in the western academic circle has not yet been taken into full account. This paper will attempt to investigate the unique values of the Chinese traditional cultural time orientation in contrast with the western cultural time orientation.

Cultural setting is a key element in intercultural communication, as Wood (1994) noted: "The largest system affecting communication is your culture, which is the context within which all your interactions take place" (p. 29). There are numerous cultural variables worth studying in intercultural communication but time dimension is one of the most important ones. For this reason, the American time research scholar Bureau (1990) used the concept of cultural time to describe the cultural differences in time orientation (p. 309).

Cultural time orientation is of vital importance to the intercultural communication research since it acts as a mirror, reflecting a culture's deep value structure and life philosophy, as well as life style. Particularly, the traditional Chinese cultural time orientation has its unique values, which has a striking feature contrast with the popular western cultural time orientation.

The Time Perception in the Western Culture

In a sense, time is a kind of philosophical issue, which has something to do with the essence of human being's existence. The famous Greek philosopher Heraclites once

compared time to a boy who was playing games. However, he regarded the boy not as an ordinary boy, but the authoritative king in the game. Thus, according to Heraclites' interpretation, human beings were subordinated to time and time was the real king of the world, playing a dominant role in controlling human beings' lives.

The concept of the overwhelming power of time is pervasive in the western culture, which has deep roots in western civilization. Ever since the ancient Greek times, time had often been perceived from the physical aspect. Plato classified the world into two categories: the phenomenon and noumenon. He perceived the phenomenon world to be unreal, which was only the shadow of the absolute logos world, since it symbolized the mutable realm of reality, while he believed the noumenon world to be real, since it stood for the immutable realm of eternal form (in Greek, *idea*). Although Plato had debased the value of the phenomenon world, he considered the phenomenon world to be controlled by the mutable movement of time. Aristotle, in his famous book *Physics*, defined time as a measurable object in motion, but unlike Plato, he began to accept the authenticity of the phenomenon world and further probed into the physical, objective features of time.

The scientists and philosophers after the Renaissance followed Aristotle's suit, and they thought of time as a kind of object in linear motion as well. The famous scientists such as Galileo and Newton regarded time as a certain quantity, which was used to calculate the speed of the object in motion, and most philosophers at that period, such as René Descartes and John Locke, also interpreted time from the physical aspect. Among them, Newton's perception of time was the most influential and far-reaching. In his famous book *Natural Science* Newton emphasized the concept of the absolute time. As a result, the physical interpretation of absolute time as the object in motion has been the main time orientation in the western civilization.

The physical interpretation of time established by Aristotle and Newton underscored regularity, absoluteness, and progress of time, and these features of time were reinforced in the process of western industrialization. As Mumford (1962) stated: "The first characteristic of modern machine civilization is its temporal regularity.... From the moment of waking, the rhythm of day is punctuated by the clock. With regard to time, he claimed that irrespective of strain or fatigue, despite reluctance or apathy, the household rises close to its set hour" (p. 269). What's more, we see in the western culture, time is often believed to be something definite, absolute, and valuable, which is even used to measure profit and achievement, and there are many famous sayings which express the importance of time: "The early bird catches the worm" (the United States), "Never put off to tomorrow what you can do today" (England), "Lose an hour in the morning, chasing it all day long" (Jewish culture). Time has become an absolute, determinant force in the western culture. As Edward Hall (1959) noted: "People of western world, particularly Americans, tend to think of time as some thing fixed in nature, something around us and from which we cannot escape; an ever-present part of the environment, just like the air we breathe" (p. 19).

The physical interpretation of absolute time in linear motion, together with industrialization civilization progress, helps cultivate the future-time orientation in most countries of the western world. Take American people as an example, who particularly value the future and believe they can control the future.

Hall used *M-time* to describe the characteristics of western cultural time orientation mentioned above. Of course, M-time orientation has its own advantages, and according to

Hall (1990), M-time people concentrate on the job, take time commitment (deadline, schedules) seriously, adhere to plans, are concerned about not disturbing others, and follow rules of privacy (p. 15). In general, M-time culture places more emphasis on efficiency and promptness.

However, it has its disadvantages and limitations, which we have become gradually aware of, and even some scholars have sharply criticized. As Kim observed (2001): “Life is in constant motion, people consider time to be wasted or lost unless they are doing something” (p. 115). M-time people who are under the great pressure of time are often controlled by the invisible hand of time and their individuality and freedom have been severely damaged. As what had been sharply pointed out by Wright (1968): “This is the history of increasing, unchecked, and now intolerable chronarchy. That word is not to be found in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Its coiner should be entitled to define it. Let chronarchy, then, be not merely ‘rule by time,’ but ‘regimentation of man by timekeeping’” (p. 7). The famous Chinese writer and scholar Lin Yu Tang (2005) used another term, working animal, to describe the wretched situation in which people in a more civilized world have been confronted. He thought of civilization as a matter of seeking food: “But the essential fact remains that human life has got too complicated and the matter of merely feeding ourselves, directly or indirectly, is occupying well over ninety percent of our human activities” (Lin, 2005, p. 144). What Wright and Lin Yu Tang revealed was that in the modern industrial society, people were more and more controlled by time and material things, and their freedom and individuality have been greatly damaged by a materialized world.

Meanwhile, the Chinese traditional cultural time orientation reflects quite a different attitude towards life and it can help resolve some problems the western culture is confronted with. Unlike the western time orientation that accentuates the objectiveness, absoluteness, and fixation of time, the Chinese traditional cultural time orientation conceives time to be subjective, relative, and flexible.

As is well known, the Chinese culture is greatly influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Among them, Confucianism and Taoism are native religions that will be the main discussion in this paper. The two schools of thoughts differ in time orientation in some aspects; however, they have some common grounds, and both hold an open-minded attitude towards time and regard it as relative, limitless, and flexible.

The Time Orientation in Confucianism

Confucianism has played a major role in shaping the Chinese culture for thousands of years. As Barry, Chen, and Watson noted (1960), “If we were to describe in one word the Chinese way of life for the last two thousands years, the word would be ‘Confucian’” (p. 17).

Confucius was a sage who advocated good virtues and manners in which *Ren* (humanity) and *Li* (ritual) were two main concepts. His entire life was engaged in the perfection of one’s virtue as well as the prosperity of his state, thus he maintained a very positive attitude towards life and considered time to be valuable and to be made good use of. According to *Confucius Speaks* (Tsai, 2005), Confucius once stood by a river and made a deep sigh in front of the passing water: “All things that pass are just like this! Night and day it never stops” (p. 79). However, he kept a very calm mind before the endless flow of time and thought he had done quite well by making positive remarks towards the life he had spent: “At fifteen I set my heart

on learning. At thirty, I could stand firm. At forty I had no doubts. At fifty I knew the Decree of Heaven. At sixty, I was ready obedient (to this decree). At seventy I could follow the desires of my mind without overstepping the boundaries (of what is right)” (Pan & Wen, 2004, p. 11).

Another aspect of time orientation in Confucianism is the past-time focus, which should not be simply understood as a kind of conservativeness. Confucius lived in the spring and autumn period, a time when wars broke out frequently and there was a decline in social morality. Hence, he was very dissatisfied with the situation and intended to reform society by looking back to the past for a good model. Although Confucius seemingly pointed out some shortcomings of the ancient men in the following passage, his real intention was to express his appreciation of the ancient men and pass criticisms upon the moral degeneration of the men in his time:

In old days, men had three failings, which have perhaps, died out today. The impetuous of old days were impatient of small restraints; the impetuous today are utterly insubordinate. The stern dignity of old days was stiff and gravely reserved; the stern dignity today is touchy and quarrelsome. The simple men of old days were straightforward; the simple men today show themselves in sheer deceit. (p. 215)

Confucius and other philosophers of his day had different approaches to the solutions of the problems. The dominant view of that time espoused by Legalists was for strict law and severe punishment, while Confucius resorted to Zhou Rituals by delivering himself of the following famous saying: “The rituals of the Zhou dynasty are inherited and developed from the two preceding dynasties Xia and Shang. How complete and elegant its rituals are! I follow upon Zhou” (p. 25).

Confucius interpreted the rituals of the Zhou dynasty as a cultural legacy inherited from the former dynasties Xia and Shang, which developed through generations of human wisdom, thus he addressed himself as a “transmitter” but not “an originator” because of his “believing in and loving in the ancients” (p. 65). There was no doubt that Confucius was a great sage who had established a unique system of social and ethical philosophy and whose thoughts had exerted a profound influence on the Chinese culture for thousands of years; nevertheless, he frankly attributed his thoughts to the Zhou Rituals. Therefore we see the past-time orientation in Confucianism contains many more positive connotations than negative ones. It was due to Confucius’ preference to the Zhou Rituals that he developed his own concept of *Li*, a term not only referring to outside rites and ceremonies but also denoting graceful and civilized manners in one’s personality. *Li* has been one of the most important Confucian teachings.

Lastly, Confucianism holds a flexible attitude towards time. It accentuates “the right occasion” and “the right opportunity” in dealing with affairs. Whatever things they might be, whether they are issues concerning big events of the state or trivial household matters, they should all be performed on a right occasion. Confucius’ follower, Mencius, further promoted Confucian thoughts. The text, *Mencius Speaks*, relates the fable “Helping Rice Grow,” which is a good example; the text illustrates the importance of handling affairs on the right occasion. It goes as follows: There was once a man in Song Kingdom who was terribly worried that his rice had grown slowly; he was so impatient that he went to the field to help his rice out by pulling them up a bit; the result was conceivable when all the rice died. The flexible handling

of time in Confucianism has exerted a profound influence on the Chinese culture. Even at the present time the Chinese people are good at seeking the right occasion for dealing with affairs in business, politics, and daily life.

In short, the time orientation in Confucianism is multidimensional: its past-time focus enables its ethical core to be established upon the rich legacy passed down from the former dynasties and its positive and agile attitude towards time is also enlighten.

The Time Orientation in Taoism

Lin Yu Tang (2004) thought Confucianism was not sufficient for the Chinese people since it was “too decorous, too reasonable, too correct” (p. 113), hence arose Taoism in Chinese culture. He also made a comparison between Confucianism and Taoism by stating: “Confucianism, through its doctrine of propriety and social status, stands for human culture and restraint, while Taoism, with its emphasis on going back to nature, disbelieves in human restraints and culture” (p. 114).

Taoism in essence is a philosophy of perusing the limitless freedom by breaking through various boundaries and restrictions. Being one of the most famous sages of Taoism, Zhuang Zi pursued freedom in his entire life and resented worldly fame. Because of his great talent, he was once asked whether he was willing to be the prime minister of the Chu Kingdom of his time, and he did not reply directly; instead, he told the two messengers sent by the king of Chu Kingdom a story. It was said that there was kept in Chu Kingdom’s temple the bone of a wonder tortoise which had been dead for three thousand years, and Zhuang Zi asked them a question: If they were the tortoises, would they want to be killed and have their bones kept in the temple to show off their nobility, or swim freely in the mud with their wobbling tails? The messengers’ reply was the latter. Zhuang Zi said he would also prefer swimming freely in the mud with his tail wobbling like the tortoise to enjoy a happy life without restriction. He further wrote another famous prose *The Dream of the Butterfly*, imaging he had turned into a carefree butterfly and wondering: “Maybe Zhuang Zi was the butterfly, and maybe the butterfly was Zhuang Zi” (Tsai, 2005, p. 27). In fact, the butterfly had become Zhuang Zi’s unique perception of freedom.

In Taoism, Tao is one of the most important concepts reconstructed by Zhuang Zi after he adopted the main idea put forth by Lao Zi, who was actually the founder of Taoism. Lao Zi regarded Tao as the origin of the universe while Zhuang Zi treated Tao as the highest principle of the world, in which there was no clear division between life and death, beauty and ugliness, past and present, etc. Thus, based upon the concept of Tao, Zhuang Zi had established his unique philosophy of relativity towards life.

As far as time dimension is concerned, because of Zhang Zi’s pursuit of freedom and his unique philosophy of relativity towards life, Taoism advocates the relativity and limitlessness of time. Tsai Chih Chung (2005) wisely interpreted: “It is a philosophy which takes life and hurls it into the limitlessness of time and space in order to be experienced to the fullest” (p. 5).

In his famous prose *Carefree Travel of Zhuang Zi*, Zhang Zi tried to illustrate his relativity view concerning time by citing a series of metaphors. Here is one excellent example of his prose:

People say that once there was a man named Peng Zu, who at 800 years old had lived the longest life ever. In contrast, there is a small bug called Zhaojun that was born in the morning and dead by nightfall. There is also an insect called the winter cicada, which is born in the spring and dies in the summer. However, in the southern part of Chu, there lived the giant wonder tortoise, to whom five hundred years was a mere Spring. And a long, long time ago, there lived the geri-tree, to which eight thousand years was a mere autumn. The Zhaojun and the winter cicada are called 'short lives,' while the wonder tortoise and the geri-tree are called 'long lives.' To the wonder tortoise and the geri-tree, wasn't Peng Zu just another 'short life'? People see Peng Zu as having lived a long life, but wasn't he really just another tragic 'short life'? (Tsai, 2005, p. 6-7).

Considering what has been discussed above, according to Aristotle and Newton's view, time was an absolute physical concept: eight thousand years and five hundred years were real physical time, and their lengths were definitely longer than one spring or autumn or a day. Nevertheless, in Zhuang Zi's eyes, there was no clear division among them when compared with the endlessness of time and space. Hence, what Zhuang Zi pursued in his entire life was the limitless freedom beyond various restraints: either they were the limitations of the definite time and space, or the bondages of a mundane world. Time, to Zhuang Zi, was no longer the dominant force in the control of human beings' lives, but rather the issue being freely handled at the hands of human beings, which could enable human beings to enjoy more freedom of easy-going time. Thus, in terms of Zhuang Zi's perception of time, the problem of chronarchy put forth by Wright above could be easily resolved.

Furthermore, the time orientation in Taoism which places more emphasis on the subjectivity and relativity of time has helped cultivate the unique Chinese temperament as well as the carefree life style of the traditional Chinese culture. In his book *The Importance of Living*, Lin Yu Tang (2005) spoke highly of "this divine desire for loafing in China" and "that carefree, idle, happy-go-lucky—and often poetic—temperament" (p. 145) in the Chinese scholars as well as the Chinese ordinary people, and he thought the temperament could be traced back to "the Taoistic Blood" (p. 150). Indeed, Taoism's carefree philosophy towards life has made a great impact on the Chinese carefree manner of spending time, which has been well reflected in a large number of the Chinese ancient poems.

In the famous *An Anthology of Popular Ancient Chinese Poems* (Guo, 2004), there are poems here and there depicting pictures of an easy-going and idyllic life for the Chinese scholars and ordinary people. For instance, the first poem, entitled "An Impromptu Poem Composed in Spring," is one good example:

Pale clouds and gentle breeze near midday,
I pass the stream by the willows and flowers.
You folks don't know my heart young and gay,
And say I follow a lad to enjoy his free hours. (Guo, 2004, p. 2)

When the poet Cheng Hao, who was also a great philosopher, wrote his poem, he was no longer young; however, a spring outing had made the poet forget his real physical age and his heart became "young and gay." Another famous Chinese poet, Su Shi, in his poem *Spring*

Night, even expressed the feeling that, “A moment of joy on a spring night is better than gold.” (p. 7). Thus, Lin Yutang (2005) showed his great appreciation of the Chinese scholars’ and poets’ easy-going manner of spending time and stated that, “The wisest man is therefore he who loafs most gracefully” (p. 148).

The cult of idle life can also be observed in the ordinary Chinese people’s lives at the present time although more and more Chinese people, especially people in the big cities, are beginning to have a quicker life pace. Nevertheless, many ordinary Chinese people of older age still prefer to spend some time in chatting with their friends, relatives, or neighbors to enjoy the carefree life.

In consideration, there are unique values underlying the time orientation in the traditional Chinese culture. The past-time focus in Confucianism reminds us about the importance of the inheritance of cultural legacy developed through generations of human wisdom in the process of human civilization, and the relativity time orientation in Taoism offers us the possibility of pursuing freedom beyond various restrictions. Furthermore, the subjective, flexible, and relative approaches of the traditional Chinese culture time orientation can provide meaningful revelations to the western world, which has accentuated the objective, absolute, and future-focus time orientation

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