

A Research on the Reconstruction of Traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” (Justice and Interest) Conception

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Abstract: The relationship between moral ethics and economic interests is the core of economic ethics. Although the traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” conception and the western economic ethics are both connected with certain morality, their economic characteristics have notable distinctions because of the respective different political, economic and cultural background. In the light of Chinese and western cultural origin, the paper analyzes the influence of the western economic ethics on the traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” conception. The paper proposes how to treat the relationship between the traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” conception and the western ethics under the condition of Chinese market economy.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” conception; Western economic ethics; Comparative study; Influence; Reconstruction

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1. Introduction

The basic interest, which has the most universal significance of human society, is economic interests. And the acquisition and distribution of economic interests involve moral issues, which have come into being naturally as man lives in the social collective. Human economic activities concern ethical issue, and ethical life also have an economic issue. The relationship between economic interests and morality is at the very core of economic ethics. From a moral point of view, economic ethics, as the theoretical pattern of the ethical spirit during economic activities, researches the relationship between social economy and human development, and the science of the moral concepts, which is derived directly from people's economic conducts. Both in China and the Western, the thinking of economic ethics goes back to ancient times, and has a profound influence on each economic life.

2. A Comparative Study Between Chinese and Western Economic Ethics

2.1 The Traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” Conception

“Yi-Li” conception is the core of Chinese traditional economic ethics. Usually, So-called “Yi”, representing “Justice”, means ethical duties, which guide people's conducts; So-called “Li”, representing “Interest”, means all kinds of interests, especially economic interests. Traditionally, Chinese were considered as the people who always value justice above interests. This view had its rationality according to our traditional culture.

Generally speaking, the traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” conception originated from pre-Qin dynasty period. As in A Mandarin Language, it was written “justice produces interests”. Also as in “Decade Zuo Truth” recorded Yanzi's words: “Justice is the base of interests.” In these words, the concept of “Justice above Interests” has already been revealed. Then, this concept was inherited by Confucian School, and was developed into a major economic thinking. Confucius admitted the truth that everyone has the idea to seek

interests, but he opposed to people who “engage solely in self interested action”, or it “will arouse continual discontent.” He advocated that “in the face of profit, man should think of Justice”, and use “Justice” to restrict the action of interests-seeking. In Confucius’ opinion, a real gentleman should “give the first place to justice”, and obeyed to the principle of “Justice above Interests”. Mencius carried on Confucius’ viewpoint of “Justice above Interests”, thought that benevolence and justice are the most important things, and objected to the struggle for self-interests.

Afterwards, the concept of “Justice above Interests” proposed by the ancient Saints has always held an important position in Chinese economic ethics, and guided people’s thought and actions.

2.2 The Western Economic Ethics

In the West, the link between economics and ethics can be traced back to ancient Greece. As early as the third century BC, Aristotle’s ethics has already touched upon the content of economic ethics. In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle connected the pursuit of economic subject with the aims of people’s actions. Although superficially economics only cares for the pursuit of wealth, at a deeper level, economic research is still related to the seeking of other goals except wealth, “because it is very evident that wealth is not the ‘good’ we are pursuing. It is only useful thing for the purpose for other things.” (Aristotle 8)

In the 18th century, the theories proposed by Adam Smith laid the theoretical foundation for the western industrial revolution and great development of capital productive mode. In his famous economic works *Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith explained that people could get to richness only through competition with freedom, and that the pursuit of maximizer of private interests could stimulate social public interests. It is possible to achieve the unity of intuitive egoism and human moral sentiments—economy and ethics were embodied and unified completely in Adam Smith’s theory.

2.3 Differences

Although the traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” conception and the western economic ethics are both connected with certain morality, their economic characteristics have notable distinctions because of the respective different political, economic and cultural background.

Economically, china took inland farming as its main economic pattern for a long time. This kind of economic structure formed the national values of collectivism or group orientation. As the famous saying goes “be the first to be concerned with state affairs and the last to enjoy oneself”, Chinese advocated that everything must attach importance to social and national interests and self-interests should be ignored as occasion demands. To a certain extent, conventionally, “Interests” was always in opposition of “Justice”. Therefore, under the influence of collective orientation, Chinese always consider “Justice above Interests”, even “sacrifice profit to justice” as one of the most respectable national characters.

On the contrary, private interests play an important role of in the western economic ethics. It is closely related to the western political, economic and cultural setting. Politically, each western country had its own independent state power; economically, Roman law protected private property; culturally, Renaissance advocated humanism focusing on the concept of individual freedom and dignity. This political, economic and cultural background molded the spirit of freedom and individualism. People believed that the pursuit of self-interests could accelerate the development of public good even the progress of the whole society is based on the concentration of private poverty.

3. Cultural Analysis of the Differences

Chinese collective orientation gives rise to people’s interdependence and cooperation. People in the collective circumstance pay more attention to their interior group, and in exchange for that they believe they are absolute loyalty to the group. Referring to the relationship between individual and collective, people are required to be satisfied with the existing state of affairs in order to maintain the stability of in-group relationship. People regard themselves as one part of the whole collective, and value loyalty between in-group’s members. Thus, traditionally, job-hopping, considered as a kind of treason, was despised by Chinese. As every coin has two sides, collective orientation also has its duplicity. In the active respect, Chinese are honest, careful and cooperative. They always put “Justice” above everything else, and attribute their success to the other’s help or the whole collective. In addition, collectivism formed the national characteristic of seeking of stability. People try to adjust themselves to the around environment. So, it promotes social stability and harmony. However, in the passive respect, collective orientation makes people lack of initiative and competitive consciousness. People are used to depend on others, and eat from the same big-mess together. Overvaluing “Justice” also makes people easily confound public affairs with private ones, and limited their self-development.

In comparison to Chinese culture, the western people adore exceedingly individualism. People’s personal goals take priority over their allegiance to groups like the family or the employer. The loyalty of individualists to a given group is very weak. The pursuit

of self-improvement makes people change their membership frequently as it suits them. Because of the characteristic of seeking of change, the western people are continuously bold to blaze new trails and establish new life atmosphere. Interests-seeking during change and competition also brings huge material wealth and spiritual vigor into the western society. However, while creating material wealth and stimulating the development of productivity, individual competition also appears many drawbacks. The cruelty and disorder of competition leads to loneliness and alienation in human relation.

4. Reconstruction of “Yi-Li” Conception under the Conditions of Chinese Socialist Market Economy

Current china is placed a transitive period from planned economy to market economy. The practice of the transitive economy challenges the traditional economic ethics. The traditional Chinese “Yi-Li” conception, which was held in high esteem by the whole society, has already not adapted to the demands of economic development. With the development of Chinese socialist market economy and the acceleration of globalization, there is a trend that people’s individual consciousness will be gradually strengthened and give much more influence on the social life.

In this special transitive period of economy, the development of market economy could not resolve the contradiction of “Justice” and “Interests” automatically. So the construction of economic ethics become a necessary mean of restraining people’s behaviors, promoting people’s spiritual state, and improving firms’ economic conducts. Economic ethics in china should have its own perspectives and norms designed to promote the harmonious development of Chinese market economy and society.

Firstly, the western economic ethics should be combined with Chinese traditional economic criteria. If people do not take note of Chinese characteristics of economic ethics, and simply borrow principles of economic ethics from the West, they will wind up suppressing the vigor of the economy in China. During the development of Chinese market economy, it is better to hold traditional economic value, especially the concept of “Yi” that limit the claims of individual interest and the profit motive. Therefore, it is necessary that people could not completely deny the money orientation or self-interest but instead view them in the right way. Secondly, interest motive should reflect Chinese characteristics of social morality. Chinese people traditionally are not utilitarian. Although Chinese believe that “our life or death is determined by fate and is rich or noble by nature”, they equally believe that knowledge and morality can only be obtained through their efforts. Therefore, what will motivate them to struggle for utility will not be simple utility but a deeper motivation rooted in professional or moral reasons. If the profit motive is affirmed by this spiritual or moral motivation, the profit motive will cease to be a mere motive of utility and will look beyond one’s own personal utility. Then, this complicated structure of motives is an important part of not only the economic ethics but also the social morality.

In a short, people must get rid of the long-standing mistaken ideas of the binary opposition of “Justice” and “Interests”, and foster the economic ethical value of “Interests with Justice”.

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