



## Study on Inspiring Soft Power of Chinese Traditional Ethics

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### Abstract

“Humanism”, “Using promotion and life improvement”, “Self-discipline”, “LiGong LiDe and LiYan” and other traditional ethics of Chinese traditional culture, are highly valuable for improving the moral construction of present China. But in terms of characters and limits of development of traditional ethics, there also be some drawbacks. Based on this, to renew traditional ethics, we must correctly grasp the inherent wisdom in our tradition, and aim at modern moral problems to realize the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional ethics.

**Key words:** Chinese traditional ethics; Creative transformation; Innovative development

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### INTRODUCTION

To answer the question of the modern significance of traditional ethics, we must make clear that, firstly, what are traditional ethics; why should we renew Chinese traditional ethics; which kind of ethics are contained

in Chinese traditional culture; why is it possible and necessary for the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional ethics, and its scientific connotation. On the basis of clarifying these problems, we could solve the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional ethics.

### 1. WHAT ARE ETHICS

Since ancient times, every society in the history will form a series of conventional standards of judgment about right or wrong, good or bad, true or false, and these standards become the guideline for people’s thinking and behavior. Ethics refer to ethical and moral concepts that rule and play dominant role in a society which guide people to practice, and also the basic ethical norms that a society follows for a long time. Which having the relative stability, historical inheritance, nationality, commonality, etc.. Among these features, relative stability refers that ethics belongs to the category of the superstructure, which is the intrinsic value concept that built on the basis of social existence and generally to guide people to correctly understand the law and principles of social moral life, with relative stability in economic and social change. Historical inheritance refers that once generated ethics develop and combined with the present ethics and got developed, and makes further processing for traditional ethics, which exists independently following the laws of its own. Relative stability and historical inheritance tight together and interacts with each other. Nationality refers that ethics of a nation is formed on the social and historical conditions in this nation, with different features from other nations, and the ethics of different nationalities is different. Commonality refers that in the same society, ethics of different class and stratum has the similarity or identity; in the same age, due to the similar or same economic condition, life style and cultural psychology, it also exists some kind of similar or identical

characteristics among different social ethics. Nationality and commonality are closely linked and complementary each other.

Chinese traditional ethics, having the nature of the Chinese nation, are different from other nations, which embodies wisdom, reason, creativity and self-discipline full stop The Chinese nation formed constantly in the process of its historical development. It has the unique value and function in adapting to the special natural environment and social environment. Chinese traditional ethics condense the unyielding pursuit and enduring wealth of spirit, inheritance of the cultural psychology and condensing into the moral integrity of the Chinese nation, which is the profound basis for the development of new ethics and the important support of the construction of spiritual civilization of the Chinese nation.

There is no doubt that the change of the economic structure causes the change of interest structure, leading to social diversified value orientation, which has a huge impact on people's values; and, the entering of postmodernism and the digestion of modern cultural spirit leads to moral anomie in the development of human nature. The popularity of scientism and reductionism encourages the moral relativism; with the deviation of utilitarianism, the idea of selfish has become a monopoly value of modern culture; the missing of nihilism makes life dull and anxious, causing huge loss to the human spirit and culture. These trends show that we can not blindly eulogize modernization and unconditionally accept its value, at the same time we should review it and criticize it (Hong, 2001, p.33). By the using special conventional wisdom, and carrying forward the function of rectifying abuses of the tradition of the modernization, we could achieve in criticizing modern by tradition.

The renewing of traditional ethics is of great advantage in breaking through the dilemma of modernity. Also, the great historical process necessarily has a profound impact on the existence and development of tradition, and puts forward new requirements for traditional thought and traditional concept. As for Chinese traditional culture as a whole which formed, developed and ripened in the age of farming culture, it has been unable to adapt to the development of the times, and impossibly undertakes the mission of the construction as the main body in the era of industrial civilization, and even in the society of post-industrial and post-modern. Blindly raising the status of traditional ethics, is inconsistent with the spirit of the time of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This means that constructing new ethics with distinct characteristic of era, should scientifically transform traditional ethics according to the request of the time. The mode of "Westernization" and "Chinese-style Westernization" fails, whose crux lies in separating the connection between tradition and modern, nationality and contemporaneity. As a result, the foothold of modernization of traditional ethics cannot

be anything but the social movement and great practice of social modernization in contemporary China, so as to criticize tradition by modern.

## 2. THE POSSIBILITY OF THE CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION AND INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE TRADITIONAL ETHICS

Taking example of the claim of Group of Synthetic Innovation (Zhang, 1988) on the synthetic innovation of the traditional culture, traditional ethics can be viewed in two aspects about the possibility and necessity of the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional ethics. On one hand, Chinese traditional ethics are not rigid, but rather an inclusive and active system, and while maintaining its basic characteristics, its content and form changed with the transformation of society and history. The reasons why it mutates lie in: Firstly, in the process of development, Chinese traditional ethics collisions, exchanges and integrates with other cultures, which changes certain attributes of its own; secondly, ideologicalization, it has become the tool of sustaining the rule and instrument of intensifying the power, which changes nature of its own; thirdly, secularization turns into daily ethics of people, from pure to miscellaneous, from ideal to reality, which changes characters of its own.

On the other hand, Chinese traditional ethics have active factors. The first is that ethics are the systematic summary of social ethics, which is a system with resolvability and reconfigurability. Ethics are neither the monolithic block cannot be resolved, nor the mixture of unrelated ingredients, but a system composed of many complex elements which have the general structure and function. The metabolism of an ethical system, or the fundamental approach of transformation is the resolution of the old system structure and the reconstruction of the new system structure. The second is separability and compatibility among the elements of ethics. Some elements that an ethical system contains can be changed and accommodate to other ethical systems. Ji Liang in his efforts to save Chinese traditional ethics, puts forward moral resources, power and judgment is the nature of human, that is to say, people can use their moral judgment to test if ethics are appropriate. Different groups pay attention to different aspects, some emphasizing "Self-cultivating", and some "State-ordering". In the groups of "State-ordering", some of Practical Utility have highlighted the importance of system and law to society (Schwartz, 1959, p.50, 58). In a word, the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional ethics does not represent the overall reconstruction and regeneration, but analyze the truthful particles it contained, to foster and promote the emergence

of Charisma that is truly great, rather than false and vulgar.

In addition, in the ethical level, Chinese traditional culture has achieved a very high level, but as for characters and limits of development of traditional ethics, there are still serious defects, which mainly manifests in the following aspects: Firstly, the formation and development of Chinese traditional ethics is based on natural economy, which means that it inevitably leads to the value orientation of valuing loyalty over money, which is completely divorced from the mental demands of pursuing profit maximization of modern Market Economy; secondly, Chinese traditional ethics laying emphasis on interior, stresses restraint and harmony, which is incompatible with dispersive and pioneering consciousness of contemporary social development, pioneering consciousness is out of step; Moreover, as “value rationality”, Chinese traditional ethics, pay attention to subjective consciousness and inner spirit, which deviates from “instrumental rationality” of modern economic society; finally, Chinese traditional ethics look up to morality and down on law, valuing virtue, advocating emotional ethics, which is also a conflict with rule of law in modern society.

Xi (2014) pointed out that

Inherit and carry forward the traditional virtues, which are cultivated and formed in the long-term practice of Chinese people, insist in Marxist morality, persist in socialist morality, on the basis of discarding the dross and selecting the essential and eliminating the false and retaining the true, sticking to making the past serve the present and bringing forth the new through the old, and endeavor to realize the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional virtues, guide people to yearn for and pursue the life of maintaining morality, respecting morality and defending morality, let every one of 1.3 billion people become the main body of spreading Chinese virtue and Chinese culture.

“The creative transformation and innovative development” guided by Marxism, investigates, analyzes, criticizes and inherits traditional ethical heritage, investigating, analyzing, selecting and absorbing western ethical accomplishment, and this is the new development of the theory of synthetic innovation in the contemporary, taking proactive attitude to the changes of ethics.

### **3. HOW TO PROMOTE THE CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION AND INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE TRADITIONAL ETHICS**

Creative transformation “is to transform the symbol and value systems of Chinese cultural tradition, and turn those modified symbol and value systems into benefiting transition and simultaneously keep the identity of culture in the course of transformation” (Lin, 2011, pp.363-371).

The creative transformation of Chinese traditional ethics includes two levels of meaning: First is a kind of creative transformation about moral thoughts of different schools of Chinese traditional culture, including quintessential ethical thoughts such as Confucianists, Mohist, Taoists, Legalists etc, and those since dynasties of Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing. Second is some other kind of creative transformation which under the guidance of Marxism, synthesizing excellent contents of Chinese traditional ethics and achievements of western ethics, and observes and studies the switched scientific accomplishments. Based on that, we should carefully identify and draw ethical factors in it, then make a distinction of those “living” and “lifeless” elements, and take in those insufficient ethical parts in our own nation, so as to enrich those living aspects ourselves. This is a process, of which new things are produced by transforming dynamic and healthy qualities in traditional ethics and integrating smoothly into westward value; in this process, the tradition gets to be converted. Lin (2011) takes typical example of the development of humanistic “Benevolence” in the modern civil society in his work, making a concrete analysis of practice of the creative transformation. He points out that by rethinking the concept of Benevolence in the Confucian humanism, then Benevolence and “Etiquette” can be divided into different parts and Benevolence, and we should emphasize more in the direction of individual moral autonomy. On the premise of urgently constructing external systems of democracy and law, there will be an incorporation between the new meaning of Benevolence and the liberal humanism in Western. Only by this, individual freedom and value could be rooted in the consciousness of Chinese intellectuals.

The creative transformation of Chinese traditional ethics is to alter the thought of valuing subjective moral consciousness with calling for paying equal attention of those consciousness with some external constraints such as rules and disciplines; transform the thought of valuing group and ignoring individual to the harmony and unity of advocating collectivism and esteeming individual freedom and value; convert the idea of valuing the ideal and ignoring the utility to emphasizing both of the links. Besides, the spirit of the age should be enriched, which is the most glorious reveal of the national spirit. Taking the relationship of righteousness and profit for example, in the socialist market economy, making profit is nothing to be denounced, and it’s actually the foundation power which can be used to promote economic and social development, but the extreme tend of seeking profit can also lead to selfishness, mercenary and some other wicked behaviors, and destroy the normal operation of the economic and social order. Therefore, Righteousness should be used to guide and standardize the tendency of seeking profit, that is to say, to advocate and promote the concept and behavior of “Righteousness to drive profit”,

“Righteousness to gain profit”, “Righteousness turned to profit”, swift the ancient relationship of righteousness and profit into a new socialist pattern, and lead people not to be easily negative to pursuing in interests, but advocate chasing interests rationally, in order to ensure the healthy and orderly development of modern economic society.

The innovative development, is to put factors which are earnestly picked out from different ethical systems at all times and places into a modern one to insist in Marxism as a guide, and adhere to the socialist principles, and carry forward the national spirit, and transform it from the creative spirit and make innovation on the basis of the transformation. Based on the needs of construction of socialist modernization, we can put those compatible factors which from different nationalities and eras into a new style of ethical system. The new system aims at inheriting and superior to the national ethics. In a word, the core of the innovative development of traditional ethics is a synthesis of Marxist theories and excellent ethical tradition of Chinese culture, thus to construct a new type of ethics and realize the so called “Moral Reconstruction”, namely to implement the reconstruction of Chinese culture. Moral Reconstruction, is the most important basic problems of human beings in the future, also the same problem posed to Chinese culture. In generally speaking, Moral Reconstruction neither follows the ancient, nor lives for tomorrow, and nor superficially compromise of taking a middle in the face of choices (Yin, 1988, p.570), but “the innovative development”. As the word, “Great Harmony”, which derives from Li Ji-Li Yun, originally is the beautification of primitive society, and a respectant of the ideal society, and contains some ideological contents of revivalism, but after the interpretation by Kang Youwei, Sun Zhongshan, Li Dazhao, Mao Zedong and so on, it turns out to be the ideal society in the future, and became the goal of revolutionary struggle. For another example, some important concepts like Paradise, Tao, Pneuma, Nature, Fate, Benevolence, Righteousness and some others have all gotten specific demarcation and obviously modern feature, after being analyzed and explained by modern philosophers and historiographers. And then another analysis of the proposition by Feng Qi about “Unity of Nature and Human” and “Separation of Nature and Human”, really got to the point that modern people should create relying on the tradition, and in turn, the tradition also catch rejuvenation because of the innovation of modern people.

To Chinese traditional ethics, the innovative development is a new kind of interpretation which contains contemporary significance. It comes from the practice of modern people, contacting with the historical world to explore it, the essence of which is establishing a connection between the past and the present and making people to care for modern problems consciously. The innovative development is the reexamine of Chinese traditional ethics in the perspective of age, which means

an active choice by principal part, and the selectivity determined that the relationship between the innovative development and Chinese traditional ethics is not something simply copied and reappeared, but a process of “Horizon Fusion”, which means an integration of time horizon of interpreters and historical horizon of Chinese traditional ethics. The key lies in it is the establishment of the reasonable horizon itself, neither the western horizon nor the traditional one, but the contemporary vision, the realistic needs of Chinese social development, which contains “the need of all-round development of human beings under the situation of new technical revolution, cultivating cultural spirit and value rationality that adapts to the socialist market economy, accurately recognizing and dealing with the contradiction hidden in the spiritual life of Chinese people, and meeting the need of strengthening the construction of cultural ethics (Tang & Cao, 2008, p.66). The innovative development which transcends the mode of westernization and Confucianization, proposing critical inheritance, excavating ethical resources advantage to construction of modern civilization, and claiming not only to stand on the native culture, but also to integrate into the cultural system of the world. That means to avoid the national nihilism under the westernization and the cultural conservatism of the confucian theories, with objective, scientific and dialectical attitude towards Chinese traditional ethics. For instance, in the market economy, competition is a double-edged sword, it is not only the driving force to realize the efficient allocation of market resources and market development but also the essential part to promote market qualities and the whole social production optimization, however, it also can cause the loss of social resources, economic disorder, mental crisis and alienation of human and other negative influences. For its negative effects, from a certain point, they produced because of the lack of coordination and cooperation between competitors. While, ethics are the fundamental guarantee to maintenance group and give play to its power, also on behalf of fundamental interests of the masses. To carry out and implement the new view on righteousness and profit in the contemporary social life environment which is produced by the transition of Chinese traditional ethics, we should make “Harmony” as the security and give benefits to the competition. Take the thought of “Harmony” to the market competitive mechanism, and stress that when conflicts happens between individual and others and even society, we should take an honor and modest attitude, with the principle of the supremacy of public interests to deal with all kinds of relationships of human beings.

All in all, the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional ethics have the following characteristics. Firstly, the creative transformation and innovative development is an orientation, which provides Chinese ethics with a

development direction of the progress. Secondly, the creative transformation and innovative development are a very complicated idea, which emphasizes that the new ethics must be innovative, to create new things being less in the past. Thirdly, for this kind of innovation, we should not only understand the essence and context of western ethics, but also Chinese traditional ethics profoundly. In the process of interaction, it forms dialectical continuity with tradition in which traditional transformation is formed and in the transformation something new takes shape, in dialectical cohesion with tradition. That is to say, the traditional ethics are considered as the important resources and dependence in contemporary socialism with Chinese characteristics, and try to realize the direct inheritance and continuity between ethics and traditional virtues, and make ethical soft power to trigger positive energy.

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