A Cultural Interpretation of the Holistic Success and Individual Obedience of China's Fight against COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract. Possibly the main reason why China can completely control the COVID-19 pandemic is that it can use state power to implement holistic and systemic deployment, integrate all resources, and form an efficient and refined grassroots management system. The sense of responsibility of the Chinese people has been a very important factor. The obedience of individuals in China does not come from the authority imposed by any external agent. It stems from its Confucian traditions and the positive pursuit of common ways of self-recognition and self-realization. These traditional values are very different from the Western individualistic construction of modernity. China's cultural orientation may not be replicated by other countries, but its way of shaping the people's sense of social responsibility and the holistic way of handling crises should be worthy of study and reference.
Keywords: COVID-19, Individualism, Collectivism, Confucianism, Values.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the world, unleashing a huge destructive force that has affected all countries and all aspects of human life. How to deal with COVID-19 and protect national health has become the greatest test for national governance systems. Moreover, the crisis of COVID-19 is also a test of human values. Its distinctly shows the challenges that human society faces today. And although there are still conflicts among nations, some of the emerging common problems might be solved at a global level if the whole mankind became a community of shared interests.

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, differences and imbalances in political and governance systems, economic capabilities as well as other areas have led to different choices in the fight against the pandemic. What's more, different cultural traditions and values have also yielded

different ways of tackling the problems and even interpreting the results of the actions undertaken.

China was the first country to suffer from the virus, but after making great sacrifices, we can say that the country has won a victory against the pandemic. The main reason for its success lies in the high degree of national uniformity and concerted efforts. A prominent factor is the high level of cooperation between people and government, which largely stems from traditional collectivist upbringing, based on Confucianism. This collectivism does not depend on an external imposing authority, but on everyone's responsibility in achieving common harmony.

CHINA'S SUCCESS AGAINST COVID-19 CRISIS

Although the origin of novel Coronavirus is yet to be determined, it was first discovered in Wuhan. On 30 December 2019, 27 cases were confirmed in the city. Just over two weeks later, on 21 January 2020, Wuhan was in lockdown. On January 31, 10000 cases were confirmed all over China. On February 12, the number of cases in a single day was over 15,000. A month later, on March 18, there were only 34 new cases, all imported from overseas. After that, there has only been sporadic imported cases, all quickly eradicated.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the slow response of local governments in China was much criticized. However, the speed and efficiency of the response increased rapidly after the state machinery was fully launched. In the weeks following the early spread of the virus, the government implemented quarantine measures and strict travel restrictions, affecting hundreds of millions of citizens. We know that in countries all over the world, cities have instituted quarantine measures. The question is, what makes China so different?

In October 2019, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security hosted a pandemic tabletop exercise called Event 201 with various partners, the World Economic Forum and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, 2019). The conclusion was that the spread of the pandemic would be inevitable and the ultimate loss extremely large. In this tabletop exercise, the measures taken by China were not even considered.

Most Chinese people believe that the key has been the rapid implementation of temporary restraint mobility in a highly mobile modern society, maintaining the most basic social operations and restarting normal function once the pandemic was contained. During the national quarantine, which lasted several weeks, there were no mass protests or riots, and the whole society was able to endure all kinds of inconveniences; some unimaginable in other countries.

Korean scholar Byung-Chul Han concluded that: "Asian countries like Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan are already culturally conditioned (Confucianism) as authoritarian. People are more obedient and submissive (folg- und gehorsamer) than in Europe." (2020 n.p) Though it is not accurate to describe the Confucianism as a form of authoritarianism, it is true that the people in these areas are more obedient and cooperative.

CHINA'S HOLISTIC MEASURES AND PEOPLE'S COOPERATION

It is generally believed abroad that, technically, the main reason why China has been able to completely control the pandemic is that it can use state power to implement holistic and systemic deployment, integrate all resources, and form an efficient and refined grassroots management system.

As a typically centralized large body, the Chinese government is responsible for everything in society. Governments at all levels –cities, regions, etc.—are accountable to the central government which ultimately leads the overall governance of the country. After the first outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese government adopted a holistic governance approach, which included coordination, integration and responsibility. This management pattern crossed all organizational boundaries and largely fixed the fragmentation problems of local pandemic control.

The Chinese central government provided an overall guideline for the effective integration of various institutional governance resources, and the National Health Commission, as a specialized department, took the lead in specific professionalized management. This centralized management model ensured precise policy implementation and effective multi-party coordination. For example, in the early stage of the spread of the pandemic, China organized over 346 medical teams and 42,600 medical

personnel from all over the country to assist key pandemic areas, and started a province-to-city assistance project to support cities in Hubei and in other provinces and regions. (Zhao et al, 2020)

However, to make all these work effectively, the cooperation of the people has been an essential factor. A research on China's control measures showed that all of the 342 cities surveyed had implemented measures to close schools and isolate suspected and confirmed patients. 220 cities banned public gatherings and closed entertainment venues. 136 of them shut down the public transportation system. (Tian *et al,* 2020) During the quarantine, almost all residents cooperated with the measures enforced by local governments. Grassroots community workers, property personnel, security guards and volunteers participated in related work to meet the basic needs of society. Thus, the long-term quarantine was successfully completed at a relatively low social cost, and the spread of the virus controlled in a relatively short time.

In the whole process, the Chinese people showed a strong sense of order and self-restraint. They also actively participated in compulsory epidemic prevention. Zhao Guoxiang's research shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of Chinese subjects (89.36%) were willing to do voluntary work. Even more people (96.79%) were willing to make their own contributions to maintaining the stability of social order. Only 1.25% of the participants showed low willingness to cooperate with the government in pandemic prevention measures. Assistant Director-General of the World Health Organization's Polio and Emergencies Cluster, Bruce Aylward said in an interview:

> I was so impressed by the people of China, … There was a sense of societal responsibility and sense of duty to play your part, and it was a striking and very, very special thing about China, and something that really touched me. (cited in Han & Meng, 2020 n.p.)

In the COVID-19 crisis, volunteers from all over China actively supported Hubei province, and more than one billion people strictly complied with the quarantine regulation, thus ensuring well-organized pandemic eradication and future prevention measures. There are two typical examples that highlight the Chinese people's sense of responsibility and cohesion in the crisis.

The first one has to do with face-masks. During the pandemic, people's cooperation was first manifested in their conscious self-isolation at home

and the strict use of face-masks. In China almost all people wore face-masks in public areas regardless of whether they are in the affected areas or not. In many Western countries, the use of masks is a deeply divisive issue. Of course, initially there was the problem of mask supply.

Wearing masks can cause people breathing discomfort and people do not like it. Moreover, based on the emphasis of individual freedom, some people in Western countries might regard government recommendation of the use of masks as a mandatory requirement, an imposition and a threat to their private persona, and an infringement of individual freedom, instead of seeing it as aimed at protecting their health. The many public protests in the West over this issue show that individuals believe that they should have the right to choose. From a cultural and psychological point of view, this right of free choice, while important in itself, might cover up anxieties over the pandemic and a distrust for their own governments, manifest in this unleashed opposition to mandatory masks as well as to home quarantine and other pandemic prevention measures.

In addition, modern western civil society is based on the public sphere, whose rules are freedom, equality, individuality and so on. If someone cover up their mouth and nose, it indicates a signal of isolation and prevention in expression, and Westerners feel that it is impossible to communicate openly on an equal basis. Thus, face covering might be interpreted as a violation of the public sphere. Thus, the above reasons have become a huge obstacle in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis, particularly in some countries like the U.S., turning simple epidemic prevention into a political conflict.

In China, by contrast, there is no resistance to masks. For Chinese people, wearing masks is not just about protection. It is also about protecting others. Chinese people have a common understanding: if everyone wears a mask, the virus will stop spreading. In this philosophy, everyone is part of the whole picture, and everyone wears a mask to protect each other. The Chinese people value self-restraint greatly, so that masks are not a sign of disease or a restriction of freedom; a sign of responsibility and cooperation. This consensus enabled the government to obtain, without much effort, the full cooperation of the public to stop the spread of the virus.

In China's fight against the pandemic, there were naturally different voices. The most famous one is the controversy caused by the words of

the famous writer Fang Fang, a characteristic case showing the cultural orientation of Chinese people. Fang Fang is based in Wuhan and, during the pandemic, she posted a large number of diary entries on Weibo, China's twitter-like social media platform. These were later published in the United States, Germany and other countries. Her *Wuhan Diary* recorded what ordinary citizens heard, saw, and felt when the pandemic struck. She focused on the deficiencies of the pandemic prevention measures, the impact on ordinary people, and the psychological trauma, recorded from hearsay. At first, her diaries gained great praise, and many people who had been hurt by the pandemic found some sympathy and comfort in them. As the pandemic developed, her diaries attracted large-scale criticism. The reason is that although people think that voices like hers are reasonable and even necessary, she had not come up with any constructive opinion, or inspired any positive motivation to fight. Some people believed that she ignored or even obliterated people's efforts to prevent the virus by using unconfirmed news to over-amplify personal fears and sorrows in the crisis, criticizing and satirizing the pandemic prevention measures. Although many of the situations she criticized repeatedly appeared all over the world, her argument blamed the Chinese government system for it. Her negative criticism gradually become repugnant; a one-sided view and lack of objectivity that had a negative influence in the fight against the pandemic and became unfavorable to the overall situation. Gradually, *Wuhan Diary* was criticized by more and more people. Criticism came from health workers at the front lines, intellectually active young people, and even ordinary people who had initially criticized the government for its slow response. The *Diary* was in contradiction to the overall interests in the face of a crisis.

In Chinese culture, it has become a customary to sacrifice part of individual freedom and override individual interests for the overall benefit. It is this consciousness what has enabled China to unite and form a strong fighting force against the virus. With the overall interests realized, the individual ones are also achieved.

A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHINESE 'COLLECTIVISM'

China's response to the pandemic, as part of its centralized governance system has been questioned by many voices in the West. There are two

main perspectives. One is that China's governance model is a form of centralized control with a relatively stable social structure but a low efficiency. The other is that the government's coercive capacity may have been effective in dealing with the crisis, but that it undermines the freedom and privacy of the citizens. Evidence of this appears in particular in the U.S., where Bloomberg published on 25 August 2020 and article entitled "Wuhan Beat the Virus. Now It's Moving on by Shutting out the World" by Sharon Chen, Claire Che and Sarah Chen. Naturally, with this understanding, even if China has effectively responded to COVID-19, Western countries continue to see China's response as non-replicable and, what is more, unacceptable.

Although we could try to ignore any political and ideological bias, there are still cultural gaps between China and the West that concern core values. This paper does not wish to discuss any political implications underlying the different understandings, which in the case of the U.S. might be quite obvious. The paper just seeks to explain that, as in other countries, Chinese values are not only the result of particular ideological movements, but formed over thousands of years of history of China. They have solid cultural foundations, forming a self-consistent system; a system that has been tested by various crises. Based on such values, the country has forged a set of political and economic governance theories as well as specific operating methods, suitable and effective for various aspects of life in China.

Collectivism is an important aspect in China's way of life, and a very relevant one during the fight against the pandemic. On various occasions, China's official media stressed that this fight relied on concerted strength coming from all sides of society and concentrated efforts to accomplish great things. This collective approach is sometimes seen by Western eyes as equated to authoritarianism, since it seems to suppress individual freedom. The discussion is also related to the problem of modernity, which as Chuan-jin Jian notes is based on a western concept, that is, a mode of life and ideology established since the Enlightenment bringing about a particular social and historical development (Jian, 2016). A very important aspect of this ideology of Western modernity is rationality. Under thinkers such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, or Heidegger, rationality has shaped Western conception of subjectivity as well as human socio-cultural structures. Since then, rationality is fundamentally seen as a kind

of individualism: *cogito ergo sun*. It is centred on the individual, his or her rights, equality and freedom. Individual liberty is the highest principle of Western modernity.

Before the Enlightenment, the major problem was the dualistic opposition between God and man. Descartes' anthropocentric mind-matter view did not eliminate the duality, since after human reason and thought (*cogito*) occupied the central position, the rest of the external world became 'Other'. The individual subject was formulated in opposition to all Others, potentially objects of cognition and even domination. This irreconcilable contradiction between the subject and the external world was not solved in modernity, nor in postmodernity. The subject is only able to gain freedom by resisting the constraints to individual liberty coming from the external world.

Since individual freedom as the supreme status and cannot be easily compromised even in life threatening situations, the COVID-19 pandemic may not necessarily sustain a higher level of urgency and priority over personal liberty.

Individualism is not important in China. China's core values are based on Confucianism, and Confucius's theory is mainly ethics rather than ontology. Confucius emphasized learning, but his learning did not entail the total cognition of the external world. Instead, it was directed to the attainment of 'knowing destiny' through the cultivation of the internal world. Culture and truth come from human personal cultivation. Confucianism emphasizes human subjectivity as collective rather than individual effort. The ideal person in Confucianism is a person who meets the standard of "Ren(仁/benevolence)" under the rule of "Li(礼/rites)". That is to say, people who are integrated into a perfect ethical system. This is formulated in *The Doctrine of the Mean*:

> This Equilibrium is the great root from which grow all the human actings in the world, and this Harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue. Let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish.(Zhu, 18)

It is also said in *The Analects of Confucius* that "The superior man seeks harmony but not uniformity; the mean man seeks uniformity, but not harmony." (Zhu, 147) The concept of harmony is based on mutual respect between subjects.

There is no external central authority in traditional Chinese society. The entire conception of society is an harmonic and cohesive ethical structure. In such a society, human subjectivity holds a higher status than in Western pre-Enlightenment society, forming a kind of 'quasi-intersubjectivity'. Compared with Jürgen Habermas' notion of intersubjectivity, human status is lower because the focus lies more on the equilibrium of the totality. In this integrated whole, people are required to give up their individuality, eliminate conflictive differences and create this social harmony under certain norms or 'rites'. Although Confucius stressed that harmony did not mean 'uniformity', this idea is subordinated to the emphasis on the entire community. Thus, this individual obedience to the community in Chinese culture appears as diametrically opposed to the worship of individual freedom of the Western world and Enlightenment reason.

At the level of family relations, the individual complies to this family harmony. This does not mean that individual interests are denied. In psychological terms, Confucianism seeks to reduce the 'ego', but not to eliminate the 'self'. In this way, Confucian ethics are internalized at an individual and collective level, becoming metaphysical. Individual and social relations come always together. However, the foundation for this pursuit does not lie on ethics or a sense of justice, but on the belief in the organic connection of all living things. Therefore, individual obedience to the community does not come from any authority imposed by external will. In this sense, it is fundamentally different from the Western collectivism, which is regarded as the suppression of individual will under authoritative will.

Under the influence of Confucian values, China can run any holistic measures smoothly. In addition to the various management mechanisms of government, the majority of citizens will always cooperate actively and voluntarily. In this sense, to the Chinese people, their participation in the fight against the COVID-19 virus is not only a social need, but also an individual responsibility and an obligation. It is even a positive pursuit of value, a way of self-recognition and self-realization.

This cultural orientation has led to the success of pandemic prevention. Although in the early stage of the pandemic, the negligence of Wuhan municipal government might have led to the quick spread of the virus, causing angry accusations from the entire society, after the implementation of quarantine measures, the Chinese society still cooperated fully while

expressing their anger at the same time. The reason is that, in Chinese society there is a natural consensus that social governance, including in this case the fight against the virus, should involve a good integration of the all parties involved. Such an integration is not only at government level, or between different functional departments, but also an organic unification of public sectors, private sectors, and individuals. In the face of the pandemic, governments, nations and other individuals are not powers to be confronted, or rivals that need to compete in the process of survival, but members of a community that support each other and upon which everyone can rely.

CONCLUSION

Due to the differences in history, tradition and cultural values, especially in ideologies, there are conflicts in the global society in terms of survival beliefs, modes of activities, basic social values and life ideals that cannot be eliminated in a short period of time. These different ideas, systems, values and ways of behaving determine people's different attitudes towards nature, society and humanity. During the COVID-19 crisis, the international community has struggled to adopt similar measures in the fight with the pandemic. Global emergency has made clear that this is not a time to compete with each other, but a time to transcend political and cultural barriers, assume responsibilities and support each other. In order to clear any suspicions about China, this paper has tried to offer an explanation for China's spirit of unity and concerted efforts in the fight against the pandemic. The paper has tried to make clear that such communal efforts do not simply originate from an authoritarian political system, but more from an active pursuit of traditional cultural values embedded in the social tissue. This pursuit is very different from the Western construction of modernity and postmodernity, based on individual freedom. However, China's communal approach has proven very effective in the fight against the pandemic. While some countries have praised the measures taken in China, others have criticized them. Media products are, of course, largely sustained by governments so that the different takes might have political bias. This paper has not been willing to enter into this debate, focusing only on the specific cultural orientation that has mobilized the entire Chinese population in the fight against the

COVID-19 pandemic. This cultural orientation may not be replicated by other countries. However, it is my belief that the Confucian way of shaping the people's sense of social responsibility and the holistic way of handling crises should be worthy of study and reference.

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Bioprofile

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