

The Study on the Differences Between Traditional Culture of China and the United States Through Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

Culture and literature related to each other very closely. Different countries have their own cultures which consistent with a good deal of cultural anthropological literature. Each culture has its distinct value systems and orientations. Values are often revealed in the behavioural patterns, community relationships, rituals and cultural artifacts that make it possible for us to recognize and experience each culture. They are learned and internalized by members of a society for their orientations and adaptations in a social world and reflected by the literary books. This paper analysed the differences of the “core value” between American culture and Chinese one through some literature works.

Keywords: *Traditional culture, Literary books, Values, Difference.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture and literature related to each other very closely. For no matter how we define culture, literature is always a part of it. Some western scholars roughly classified culture with the capital letter C and the small letter c. The former refers to philosophy, literature, fine arts, music and religion. The latter includes housing, dressing, eating, drinking, and all inter personal behaviors.

As far as it is known, each culture has its distinct value systems and orientations. For example, many would agree that individualism, freedom, and equality of opportunity are core values in American culture. Traditional Chinese culture is widely considered to be built upon a value system crystallized in Confucianism. From Williams' analysis we may summarize six key differences between the traditional American culture and the traditional Chinese culture. Since literature is one part of the culture, we can certify them by comparing with some literary books from the two countries.

2. THE DIFFERENCES OF THE “CORE VALUE” BETWEEN AMERICAN CULTURE AND CHINESE ONE THROUGH SOME LITERATURE WORKS

Firstly, American culture emphasizes “active mastery” in the person-nature relationship, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasized “passive acceptance” of fate by seeking harmony with nature. Take Ernest Hemingway's *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* for example, it gave us a typical description on the relationship between the old fisherman and the nature. There is an old fisherman, Santiago, in Cuba who has gone eighty-four days without a catch. On the 85th day, he went to the sea by the skiff and intended to take a big fish. He was confident enough with his goal. He said “I may not be as strong as I think, but I know many tricks and I have resolution.” (Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* 15) Good luck is always waiting for the ready heart. He caught a big Marlin with 18-feet long in the end. Yet there was an unexpected war between the old man and the Marlin. “But four hours later the fish was still swimming steadily out to sea, towing the skiff, and the old man was still braced solidly with the line across his back.” (36)...

"Fish," he said softly, aloud, "I'll stay with you until I am dead." (43) But the fish kept on circling slowly and the old man was wet with sweat and tired deep into his bones. For an hour the old man had been seeing black spots before his eyes and the sweat salted his eyes and salted the cut over his eye and on his forehead. He had felt faint and dizzy and that had worried him. He said, "I could not fail myself and die on a fish like this." (77) With the strong will and unimaginable endurance and fortitude, "he made the fish fast to bow and stern and to the middle thwart." (86) However, the nightmare hadn't finished yet. The fish's body attracted sharks to be close. The old was so exhausted by the struggle with the giant fish. He wished it had been a dream now and that he had never hooked the fish and was alone in bed on the newspapers. "But man is not made for defeat," he said, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." (92) He fought again bravely with the sharks to protect his brother fish, although he lost it to sharks. "Taken as a poetic symbol, as an allegory of an ideal, Santiago the fisherman remains one of the most memorable creations of modern American literature. The very aura of Santiago is one of majesty with, although weakened by time and mortality, remains awesome: his shoulders are 'strange,' and 'still powerful although very old,' and his creased and weather-beaten neck is also 'strong,' kept erect and proud by something beneath the surface of the skin itself. Old but not senile, 'unlucky' but not defeated, gentle but not soft, proud but not boastful, resigned but not passive, and — perhaps most important — hopeful for himself without being jealous of others, Santiago the fisherman is himself a poetry of the human spirit." (Cooperman, symbol 47)

Except THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA, other literary books written in the 19th century also gave us a typical description between human beings and nature. Like Herman Melville's MOBY DICK, Mark Twain's THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FIN, and Stephen Crane's THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE, the authors intend to tell us how human being obtains their revival through severe tests in the great nature, how human beings love to live close to nature and try to conquer nature and how men were punished by nature.

Different from the American traditional culture, traditional Chinese culture focused on "Passive acceptance" of fate by seeking harmony with nature. Traditional Chinese believed that men's fate was

determined by a strange power or the God in the heaven, not themselves. Zhuangzi said,

“生死，命也，其有夜旦之常，天也。人之有所不得与，皆物之情也。”（齐豫生，夏于全 127）

"Life and death are a part of destiny. The alternation of night and day is an unceasing natural phenomenon. There are aspects that human beings have no power to interfere with, and it is the nature of all things." (Qi Yusheng, Xia Yuquan, 127)

That's because people's mind was influenced by the fatalism of Confucianism and Buddhism. Therefore, they were not convinced of their own ability, and didn't know how to dominate their fate. If they wanted to change a bit, they always worked in vain. So endurance and passive acceptance are the main traits for the traditional Chinese. Confucius said, "Heaven, when it is about to place a great responsibility on a man, always first tests his resolution, wears out his sinews and bones with toil, exposes his body to starvation, subjects so as to stimulate his mind, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies."

Take Tao Yuanming for another example, he was famous for his poems, especially the poem Tao Hua Yuan Ji which praises highly of an unreal world where everyone lived peacefully and harmoniously with nature. His passionate towards nature and peaceful mind represents the mainstream in that period of China.

Secondly, American culture tends to be concerned with external experiences and the world of things, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizing inner experiences of meaning and feeling. American author Mark Twain's THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FIN depicts an adventurous story about the Huck, whose mother is dead and whose father is the town drunk. He has been taken in by the widow Douglas and Miss Watson. The two women try to reform him, but he doesn't like the rules: no swearing or smoking, being forced to go to school, wearing clean clothes, sleeping in bed. So, he dreamed for the freedom of fishing and swearing and not worrying about school and manners. One night he cleverly escapes from his father's control and takes a canoe he'd found over to Jackson's Island. After a few days, Huck comes across another runaway on the island, Jim, Miss Watson's Negro slave. Then they start their adventurous life on Mississippi. Finally, Huck helped Jim to obtain his freedom. Mark Twain adopted many artistic methods to depict such naïve and innocent child. He was a

stranger to the cultivated world and was full of curiosity to everything. Yet he would like to know the world through his adventures. He was brave enough to be against the regular rules and typical conventions, especially the slave-owning system in America.

On the contrary, Chinese traditional culture focuses on the inner experiences of meaning and feeling. In one of Laozi's articles, he said,

“不出户，知天下；不窥牖，见天道。其出弥远，其知弥少。

是以圣人不行而知，不见而名，不为而成。”（齐豫生，夏于全：99）

Without leaving home, one can know the knowledge of the whole world; without looking out of the window, one can see the way of heaven. The farther one goes, the less one knows.

Therefore, the sage knows without traveling, recognizes without seeing, and achieves without doing. (Qi Yusheng, Xia Yuquan: 99)

Take Zhuangzi for another example, one day, Zhuangzi and Huizi were playing on the Haoshui Bridge, Zhuangzi said, “Fish was swimming freely and contently in the river, that's its delight.” Huizi said, “Since you were not the fish, how do you know its delight?” Zhuangzi said, “Because you were not me, how do you know that I don't know the fish's delight?” Huizi said, “Since I were not you, of course I don't know you; you were not fish at all, so you don't know the fish's delight. I am sure about it.” Zhuangzi said, “Let's trace back to the beginning of our conversation. When you said how I knew the fish's delight, you have known that I knew the fish's delight. So you asked me the question. (Since you know my feeling, why don't I know the fish's feeling?) I knew the fish's delight when I was on the Haoshui Bridge.

Thirdly, American culture is characterized by an open view of the world, emphasizing change and movement, whereas traditional Chinese culture was typified by a closed world view, prizing stability and harmony. John Steinbeck was the foremost novelist of the American Depression of the 1930s. His sympathy for the migrant workers and the downtrodden, so evident in his writing, was the result of firsthand knowledge of their struggles. The *GRAPES OF WRATH*, generally regarded as his masterpiece, showed the migrant of the “Okies” from the “Dust Bowls” to California, a migration that ended in broken dreams and misery but at the same time affirmed the ability of the common

people to endure and prevail. (Wu Weiren, 271) Another American writer Jack London's works *MARTIN EDEN* was a patently autobiographical novel which described a young man's changeable life to the readers. The hero of the novel is Martin Eden, a plain, rough sailor. Once he happens to save in a hand-to-hand fight with a group of hoodlums a young man named Arthur Morse. The grateful Arthur introduces Martin to his family. Martin is dazzled by the seeming culture of the Morses. He naively believes society to be the realm of spiritual beauty, pure and noble aspirations and full intellectual life. He falls in love with Arthur's sister Ruth whom he considers to be the personification of all these qualities. Inspired by love, Martin determines to make his way in the world and become Ruth's equal. He reads a lot; with inhuman perseverance he masters the rudiments of sciences and crams two years of high school into three months of studies. When he runs out of money he sets out as a common sailor in ship bound for the South Seas. While on board, Martin is inspired with a new idea to become a writer. Upon his return to Oakland, Martin lives in poverty, devoting every minute of his time to writing and studying. His only rest is his occasional visit to the Morses. His first stories are turned down by the publishers, but he keeps on sending them. Desirous of encouragement in his work, Martin shows some of his stories to Ruth, but meets with bitter disappointment. The Morses force Ruth to cancel her engagement with him. This is a fateful blow to Martin, and he stops to write. But he continues to send his old rejected stories to the printing house. Finally, Eden becomes famous and receives enormous fees for his books. He also wins back Ruth's heart. Although he commits suicide in the end, yet he changes his life with great endeavors.

However, traditional Chinese culture was typified by a closed world view, prizing stability and harmony. The core of Confucius' thinking is benevolence. As he put it, “it is to love all men.” It means one should care for, love and respect others. He also said that one should love the common people and cultivate the friendship of those of perfect virtue. He believed that “benevolence” was the basic principle of one's conduct and the highest ideal of morality. Laozi said, “When the desires of men are curbed, there will be peace in mind. When there is peace in mind, there will be peace in the world.” Laozi suggests to us that there are other ways of living that are important things in life than fame and fortune. His way is the way of peace, with others as well as oneself. He puts his theory in his

famous book THE WAY. He said man should be humble. "Recede first if you want to proceed. Give first if you want to take. Humble yourself and place yourself below others first if you want to be above them. If you want to be the leader of men, you have to put their interest before your own, so that they will support you without feeling your weight on their backs." (Tang Qinghua, Wisdom: 387) He puts more emphasis on stability and harmony with others.

Fourthly, American culture places primary faith in rationalism and is oriented toward the future, whereas traditional Chinese culture rested upon kinship ties and tradition with a past orientation. Americans put more focus on the understanding towards nature and the rational knowledge instead of perceptual knowledge. They believe that men were born to understand and conquer the world. They emphasize rationalism and logical analysis, and pursue scientific method and logical inference. What's more, they stress on the future instead of the past. Take Margaret Mitchell's novel GONE WITH THE WIND for example, she tells us a story about a girl, Scarlett, her pursuit for her true love and struggle to live during the national war. She was brave enough to express her love to her lover Ashley in John Wilkes' barbecue in Twelve Oaks before the war. At that time she was too naïve and loved what she liked. When she was refused by Ashley, she was so angry and got married with Mr. Hamilton, a young man who admired her, yet she didn't love him. When the war started, she became a widow and lived in the city of Atlanta. Life was full of difficulties and hardships. Yet Scarlett was stubborn and indestructible enough. At last, she married Rhett. On one hand, she succeeded, she got wealth and everything. On the other, she lost everything—her father, her daughter, her friend Melanie, and also her love, Rhett Butler. After Rhett left her, she was in a deep sorrow. However, she was not a coward and never minded facing realities. She went back to Tara, the house in her hometown. Because she believed that Tara was so important to her. The land was the only thing that matters; it's the only thing that lasts. It was the Tara that she loved better than herself. It's this always get her straight, the red earth of Tara. She said, "Tara! I'll go home. I'll think of some way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day!" (Crazy English, 61) She was full of hope in the future instead of weeping in the corner. Future means a hope for those in the poverty and struggle. Future means a goal in one's life. The traditional American value pinned great hopes in the future.

Even nowadays, the traditional culture has a strong influence on the modern society. Many scientific fictions and movies focused on the future world or the outer space are very popular. Like the movie, THE STAR WAR, and E.T. etc., both of them try to show us a future world full of wonders and curiosity.

Different from the American traditional culture, traditional Chinese culture rested upon kinship ties and tradition with a past orientation. As Confucius put it,

“《诗》曰：‘妻子好合，如鼓瑟琴。兄弟既翕，和乐且耽。宜尔室家，乐尔妻帑。’子曰：‘父母其顺矣乎！’”
(齐豫生，夏于全 经部，21)

The Book of Poetry says, "Harmony between husband and wife is like the joyful strum of stringed instruments. When brothers get along, the home is filled with warmth and delight. So manage your household with grace, and bring joy to your wife and children." The Master said, "What greater blessing could there be than to have parents who are happy and content?" (Qi Yusheng, Xia Yuquan, Confucian Classics, 21)

In the ancient time, a typical Chinese family has many members living together. The senior male member was usually the master and he had the absolute power in the family. In the modern society, Chinese still follow the traditional convention. Although we adopted the family policy, each family only has one child. Yet we pay more attention to the kinship ties. Adult children are not expected to be independent both economically and socially. Nowadays, we can watch many TV serials describe the lives in Qing Dynasty or Tang Dynasty. For example, DA MING GONG CI (《大明宫词》), is one which tells us the story about the first female emperor Wu Zetian and her daughter, princess Taiping. People liked to know about those ancient history stories and sometimes the senior member of the family would like to tell the family history to his offspring. Most of them know or think it important, where their great-grandfathers are buried or how they conducted themselves in life.

Fifthly, American culture emphasizes horizontal dimensions of interpersonal relationships, whereas traditional Chinese culture placed more weight on vertical interpersonal relationships. In an American family, the relationships between husband and wife and their children are equal. The children can call their parents even their grandparents' first name. American women have a higher degree of legal and moral autonomy in marriage than was formally the

case in either the United States or China. In many respects there is literal equality between wife and husband. Not only in a family, but also for the whole society, the horizontal interpersonal relationships are easily seen on TV serials or in the novels. In Scott Fitzgerald's novel *THE GREAT GATSBY*, he depicts a man who wanted to win back his sweetheart and held several parties and invited so many guests. Nick was Gatsby's neighbor, yet they didn't meet until he attended the party in Gatsby's house. "Gatsby was offhand, casual, eager to entertain his guests as extravagantly as possible. That summer Gatsby gave many parties. Nick went to all of them, enjoying each time the society of people from all walks of life who appeared to take advantage of Gatsby's bounty." (Wu Weiren 225). The American is sociable and they cherish their freedom and equal rights. So, they seem friendlier to each other.

However, the traditional Chinese culture placed more weight on vertical interpersonal relationships. At the heart of the Confucian system lays a linear hierarchy governing family structure, political structure, and the supernatural world. This hierarchy was characterized by various dominance-obedience relationships: Men dominating women, old dominating young, and the emperor dominating everyone else. Take Cao Xueqin's *A DREAM IN RED CHAMBER* for example, he depicts the emperor with many good words. The emperor was benevolent and wise. So people lived peacefully. He didn't give us a description of the emperor's tyranny and brutality. When he talked about Lin Daiyu's family, he said,

“原来这林如海之祖，也曾袭过列侯的，今到如海，业经五世，起初只袭三世，因当今隆恩盛德，额外加恩，至如海之父，又袭了一代，到了如海，便从科第出身，虽系世禄之家，却是书香之族。”（《红楼梦》第二回：10）

As it happened, Lin Ruhai's ancestors had held a hereditary title of Marquis, which had been passed down through five generations by his time. The original inheritance was for three generations only, but by the extraordinary grace of the reigning emperor, it was extended for one more generation. Consequently, Ruhai himself had to sit for the civil service examinations to advance his career. Thus, although his family was one of hereditary nobility, it was also a family of scholars. (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, Ch. 2: 10)

Then he described Jia family:

“惟有次子贾政，自幼酷喜读书，为人端方正直，祖父钟爱，原要他从科甲出身，不料代善临终遗本一上，皇上怜

念先臣，即叫长子袭了官；又问还有几个儿子，立刻引见，又将这政老爷赐了个额外主事职衔，叫他入部习学，如今现已升了员外郎。”（《红楼梦》第二回：12）

Only his second son, Jia Zheng, however, was different. He had been a studious boy, growing into a man of stern and upright character. As his grandfather's favorite, he was destined for the civil service through the prestigious examination system. However, upon the death of the Duke, a final petition was submitted to the Emperor. In recognition of his family's service, the Emperor not only permitted the eldest son to inherit the ducal title but also summoned the other sons for an audience. He bestowed upon Jia Zheng an extra commission as a Secretary in one of the Boards, where he was to begin his official training. He has since been promoted to the position of Undersecretary. (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, Ch. 2: 12)

When Jia lian and his wife talked about Yuanchun's paying a visit to her parents, Sister Feng smiled and said: “可见当今的隆恩！”（《红楼梦》第十六回：102）

"This truly shows the Emperor's magnificent favor!" (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, Ch. 16: 102)

In a family there are three fundamental human relationships. First there is the relationship between husband and wife; next come that between parents and children, and then that between brothers and sisters. Confucius said that a father should keep a proper distance from his son. Without a proper distance, it may not be easy to foster a relationship in which a father loves the child and the child cherishes a filial devotion to the father. Over-intimacy may cause the child to slight the father. Therefore, the father should preferably not share the same room with child. Filial piety is a principle that most literally governs the father-son relationship. Let's take this article for example:

“家人有严君焉，父母之谓也。父之亲子也，亲贤而下无能；母之亲子也，贤则亲之；无能则怜之。母，亲而不尊；父，亲而不亲。父母者，子之天。父兮生我，母兮鞠我，拊我畜我，长我育我，顾我腹我，欲报之德，昊天罔极。”（《家塾蒙求》22）

"In the family, parents serve as the revered guides. A father's love for his child is shown by cherishing the worthy and maintaining reserve towards the less capable. A mother's love is shown by cherishing the worthy and having compassion for the less capable. Thus, the mother is affectionate but not authoritative; the father is authoritative but not intimately affectionate.

Together, parents form the very firmament under which a child lives. They patted me, they reared me, they raised me, they educated me, they cared for me, and they looked after me. I long to repay their boundless grace, which is as immeasurable as the sky." (Family Familiarity and Request, 22)

Where male-female relationships are concerned, there is an integrated set of traditional values to express male dominance: superiority of men over women, chastity for women, and lifelong submission of a woman to her husband and her husband's family. Laozi said that in marriage, if there was a big difference in the background between the husband and wife, they may have different sets of values. This difference may pose a potential snag in their relationship." (Tang Qinghua Family talk: 73)

Sixthly, American culture values the individual personality, whereas traditional Chinese culture weighted heavily a person's duties to family, clan, and state. We can find many literal books to illustrate it. As those examples mentioned above, such as Santiago from THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA, Scarlett from GONE WITH THE WIND, and Martin Eden from MARTIN EDEN, the author put more emphasis on the description of the individual personality. All of the characters are so independent and brave enough. They devoted themselves to lead a better life in the society. Different from it, traditional Chinese culture stressed heavily a person's obligation and responsibility to family, clan or state. This article tells one's obligation to the family:

“父母在，不敢有其身，不敢私其财。父母虽殁，将为善，思贻父母令名，必果，将为不善，思贻父母羞辱，必不果。”（《家塾蒙求》 34）

"As long as one's parents live, one should not claim full sovereignty over his own person or his own possessions. After their passing, when he intends to act for the better, the thought of conferring a noble reputation upon his parents will ensure he follows through. If he is tempted to act wrongly, the thought of bringing them disgrace will make him desist." (Family Familiarity and Request, 34)

3. CONCLUSION

All in all, there are really some differences existed between American traditional culture and the traditional Chinese culture. There is no doubt that we can not only improve the culture attainments by reading literary books, but also

distinguish the differences between the two kinds of cultures. Both the people in our domestic country and those abroad had unanimously agreed on this point. Because literal works provide us the most vivid, specific, profound and comprehensive materials, so that we can get a deep and vivid understanding on the national culture.

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