A Study on Holism in Chinese Traditional Culture

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Abstract. Holism is derived from Chinese ancient patriarchal system and has a close relationship with China's unique geographical environment and production mode. Holism is an opposite of individualism, emphasizing the national standard, family-based thinking. While individualism emphasizes freedom, personality, liberation and rights. On one hand, holism includes the idea of patriotism and advocates harmony and unity. On the other hand, holism pursues utilitarian, power and tyranny and suppresses the personality. Therefore, holism has its positive factors, but also has its negative factors. This article makes a brief discussion on the connotation of holism, the reasons of its formation and its development and influence in history.

The Connotation of Holism

The word holism first appeared in South African politician JC Simuzi’s book *Holism and Evolution* which was published in 1926. After Hayek, Popper and other people’s use, holism was widely disseminated and entered the field of social sciences. For its general meaning, holism was relative to the principle of individualism or Individualistic value. Holism emphasized the national standard and the family-based thinking, whose most prominent manifestation was patriotism. Holism emphasized individual's responsibility to the state and society. In the relationship between people, it advocated eliminating the differences and opposites between people and establishing harmonious interpersonal relationship. Individualism was self-centered and emphasized freedom, personality, liberation and rights.

Although there was no clear word holism in the ancient Chinese society, the ancient society’s whole values were deeply implied by the idea of holism. Scholar Liu Xiaohong pointed out in the article *On Holism* that holism was a basic tendency of Chinese traditional culture and an important principle of traditional value system in Chinese traditional value system and its transformation in modern times. Scholar Chen Jianping pointed out in the article *On Traditional Chinese Holism* that holism was a very important moral principle in ancient Chinese society, especially the feudal society. From the above arguments, we could see that holism not only existed for a long time but also played a very important role in ancient Chinese society.

The Cause of the Formation of Holism

The economic basis determined superstructure. A country’s superstratum and values were related with its underlying economic structure, production mode and distribution methods.

Scholar Yang Shengli and Li Bo pointed out in the article *Holism and Individualism-the comparison of Chinese and Western cultural values* that Chinese holism was group-based, which originated from the patriarchal system of ancient Chinese society. From his paper we could see that Chinese traditional holism originated from the patriarchal system of ancient Chinese society. China was an ancient agricultural country. The development of agriculture and the maturity of the irrigation technology made us transit to class society when our clan system had not yet fully collapsed. Self-sufficient natural economic model dominated a long time, therefore, the system of blood patriarchy which based on this economy had deeply influenced people's ideas.

Western patriarchal commune was disintegrated as early as the Middle Ages, but in China, the
family commune existed throughout the slave society and feudal society and became the basic form of society. And the impact didn’t disappear until liberation in the countryside. These kinds of family were joint family, common possession of land and parents in charge of politics and economic power. In this cohabitation system, the family members didn’t have economic independence and personal freedom. Their life must rely on the family’s common property. The fate of the family was the same with the individual’s, so that individual had to become family-based. Family-oriented family cared more about family than individual with particular emphasis on the ethical relationship between family members and paid more attention to personal responsibilities and obligations in the family. Family and patriarchal relations were existed a long time in Chinese history, which led to the same structure of the clan and country. Family became the country's mother and prototype, the father was the emperor in the family; country was the expansion and amplification of the family, the emperor was the father in the country. Therefore, the family not only became values’ starting point and foothold, but also became the ideal model of the social relations. The so-called "family today and gone tomorrow", “All under heaven are of one family" just reflected the special value ideal of Chinese culture.

Holism Developed in the Debate on Group and Individual

Because of the same structure of the clan and country, people would take the country and family’s benefits into consideration when they pondered a problem, which also showed in the ancient sages’ answer of the debate on group and individual. Feng Qi insisted that there were three centers of philosophical arguments, which were the debates on nature and man, group and individual and ration and desire. And among these, the debate on group and individual was the debate about entirety and entity. The idea of group belonged to the category of holism.

Confucianism was the first school to consciously think about the relationship between group and individual, which first manifested in their attention of group. Confucius regarded group as an important feature of the distinction between man and animal. Confucius suggested that people were living in a certain ethical relations, thus "birds and animals can not be in the same group". Individual could not live without the group. In the view of Confucius, group and individual were two different aspects. We should deal with the relationship of group and individual according to the way of harmony in diversity and mixing with others but do not be a partisan. Group should be based on individual love and individual should regard the group’s identity and care as the aim. The latter not only referred to the life value "deny self and return to propriety", but also included epistemology aspect, namely, "no surmise, no affirm, no stubborn, no wiseacre".

After Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi developed the debate on group and individual from different ways. In the understanding of group, Mencius mainly regarded it as an ethical structure, Xunzi achieved a deeper understanding level from the perspective of history. Xunzi said that the strength of man was less than cattle and the speed of man was slower than horses, but why people could use the cattle and horses? Because people could group, but cattle and horses couldn’t. Why could people group? Because people had ranks. Why people had ranks? Because people had righteousness. In his opinion, group first was a social organization form which could conquer nature and made people survive, therefore we should be birthright to group. In the understanding of self or individual, Mencius developed the idea of Confucian benevolence depending on oneself, and gave considerable attention to the individual's moral will and personality independence. Xunzi emphasized more about the individual's obey to the group, which was the specific function in the rank order. Therefore, for Confucian group and individual harmony goal, Mencius emphasized the realization of the self-inner virtue and the improvement of the realm of personality. Xunzi's thought contained the tendency to realize the force through external coercion.

Mohism was also known as significant as Confucianism. Mohism’s value orientation was obvious group principle. From the standpoint of universal love, Mohism emphasized that individual’s interests should absolutely yield to the group’s interests. And they thought that the individual's will should be transferred unconditionally into the group’s will. Mohism’s holism was close to its utilitarianism. In contrast to it, the Legalists had drawn up the political proposition of
rule of law from the recognition of the evil of human nature. Legalists highlighted the individual's obligation to the group and the group’s control of the individual from the aspect of legal relationship. The difference was that the Mohists stressed that the group was to achieve the public’s interests, whose goal was for the people and not the emperor. The Legalists’ holism was a kind of nationalism, whose purpose was to achieve the emperor’s interests, which was an idea service barely for the autocratic monarch.

Confucius suggested harmony but emphasized group more than individual in the relationship between group and individual, which were guided to the holism trend and a refined theoretical system. This holism was later reflected, shocked and criticized by Metaphysics, Buddhism and Heresy. But they couldn’t shake its roots. And holism reached the peak in the Song and Ming dynasties. Neo-Confucianism required people to "survive and extinguish", "extinguish" asked people to “no me”, "survive" asked people to be unselfish and comply with the group’s interests. This idea of self-denial of human nature was later criticized. The holism idea of despotism, centralized rights, patriotism, sense of responsibility and so on were benefit to feudal rule and national unity, so they were vigorously advocated by the emperor.

The Dual Character of Traditional Chinese Holism

Although the holism contained some positive factors like harmonious unity, loyalty and patriotism, promoted the unity of the Chinese nation and affected the character of the Chinese nation for thousands of years. However, this holistic tendency in the traditional culture of the Chinese nation also included negative factors like authoritarianism, re-righteousness and so on. And the idea of justice outweighing benefit and survive and extinguish were seriously constrained of human nature and hindered the social development. It seemed that holism must have a choice in the present era in order to meet the trend of development nowadays.

The Positive Factors in Holism

The holism emphasized harmony, unity, loyalty and patriotism and affected the ancient society for thousands of years. Although this holism was later reflected, shocked and criticized by Metaphysics, Buddhism and Heresy, it also had its deep roots and lived in the mainstream position. Ancient Chinese intellectuals and scholar class had always been loyal to the patriotic mission and had deep patriotic feelings. The Book of Songs had put forward the moral requirements of attending office morning and night. Confucian classic book of Rites Ceremony had put forward the ideal of the whole world as one community which was called “Datong” and had a profound impact on later generation.

After the Qin and Han dynasties most of the Confucianists inherited the tradition. The Western Han Dynasty politician Jia Yi put forward the idea of for the nation, the family can die and for the group, the individual can die. Northern Song Dynasty politician Fan Zhongyan suggested that we should be concerned about the country and the people before anything else. Zhang Zai put forward ideal pursuit of striving for heaven and earth, for the living, for the survival of the living, for the past and for the rest of the world. The later intellectuals regarded this state as the highest pursuit.

In Zhang Zai’s theory of everything on earth were of the same body, the moral consciousness of the individual was greatly improved and his behavior also had higher value. Personal life and death, poverty and wealth, expensive and cheap were negligible in front of the vast universe. Life was belong to the universe. People alive should serve to the heaven and earth. People should strive for heaven and earth, for the living, for the survival of the living, for the past and for the rest of the world. Although the life was limited, the ideal was infinite. The holism just inspired people to serve people worldwide as their duty, save the nation in danger, undertake the due obligations, abide by morality throughout their life and put their life to death.

Qing Dynasty thinker Gu Yanwu won the essence of this idea and put forward the thought of rise and fall of a nation rests with every one of its citizens, showing a noble patriotism for the nation, for the country and for the whole world. The Chinese nation had experienced numerous serious internal and external problems in its five thousand years’ civilized history, but national unity and national
reunification had always been the mainstream direction of Chinese historical development. The Chinese nation had gained new vitality once and again and stood proudly in the world, which was rare in the rest of the world. Why China could develop continuously in the history? The holism and patriotism had played an irreplaceable role. Chinese noble moral spirit including patriotism and benevolence had an important impact on nation-state unity. The holism regarded patriotism as the main body and at the same time pursued harmony between people, which was deeply rooted in Chinese culture.

The Negative Factors in Holism

In the class society, due to the existence and development of private ownership, it was impossible to form a common interest or overall interest on behalf of all members of society. The public interests which were advocated by Confucianism had a large degree of illusory. Traditional holism had serious historical limitations. It equated the selfishness of the ruling class with the whole interests of the nation and the state, and confused the individual's obligations for the nation and the state or for the emperor. This illusory public interests thought became the basic idea to maintain the rule of the exploiting class in the ancient Chinese society. The holism regarded justice outweighing benefit in the moral value theory, and it developed as the thought of survive and extinguish, which one-sided emphasized the group interests, limited people’s pursuit of legitimate interests and suppressed people's personality and freedom. Under the autocratic system, the greatest virtue of the subjects were obedience.

As Chen Duxiu said that monarch was the outline for his subjects, then the subjects didn’t have independent personality; father was the outline for his sons, then the sons didn’t have independent personality; husband was the outline for his wives, then the wives didn’t have independent personality. All men and women in the world were subjects, sons and wives, but no one had independent personality, which was because of the three outlines mentioned above. The devoid of human personality seriously destructed people's initiative and creativity. The policy of stressing the policies of the agriculture and ignoring the commerce, paying attention to politics and ethics and despising nature and technologies were the expression of this value. That was why the ancient Chinese commodity economy, science and technology developed so slow.

Holism in Today’s Choice

In the attitude towards holism, Feng Qi gave a reasonable view, he believed that the principle of individuality and patriotism was unified, the group and individual were unified. He argued that we should not deny personality and we should let the personality develop freely. We were supposed to have a sense of historical responsibility and maintain the nation's fine tradition. This reasonable and correct attitude was also recognized by later scholars.

Scholar Li Wenjun advised in the article Traditional China's Holism and its Modern that holism was for the monarchical interests in the traditional system and not for the nation and state. The group interests just stand for the nation’s and state’s interests. But he also affirmed the positive content which were included in holism.

Scholar Chen Meijin pointed out in the article On Holism that the content of holism was related to the relationship between man and man, the relationship between man and nature, the relationship between scientific social consciousness and social life. From the point of view of postmodernism, he argued that under the concept of contemporary holism, the various relevant content subjects were related. And thus we should reconstruct the values of holism.

Scholar Yang Shengli, Li Bo believed that in modern society, we should insist on carrying forward national culture, which was also called holism. And at the same time we should fully absorb the advantages of Western individualism and create new culture, which could adapt to the epoch’s requirements. Scholar Chen Jianping insisted that we should adhere to socialism, inherit and carry forward the rational content of holism, abandon its negative factors and enhance the national centripetal force and cohesion in the base of collectivism in modern society. This way was called draw the best and remove the worst, which was supported by the most scholars.
References


