A Study on the Inspiration of the Tao Te Ching on Chinese Cultural Self-Confidence

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Received: November 14, 2023 Accepted: December 15, 2023 Online Published: December 20, 2023

doi: 10.5539/ach.v15n2p64 URL: https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v15n2p64

Abstract

“The Tao Te Ching” is the core representative work of Taoist thought, which has had a profound influence on Chinese culture. In the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, Taoist thought, Confucianism, and Legalism jointly formed a great ideological trend of contention. Since Dong Zhongshu proposed the idea of “abolishing the hundred schools of thought and only respecting Confucianism” in the Han Dynasty, Confucianism has become the mainstream cultural ideology, and Taoist thought exists only as a supplementary tributary ideology. The great collision of Eastern and Western cultures brought about by the Opium War has caused widespread doubts about Chinese mainstream culture represented by Confucian culture. In the face of the fact that the West is ahead, Chinese people have fallen into unprecedented confusion about their own culture. In 2014, Chinese leaders proposed the concept of Chinese cultural self-confidence, and pointed out that the three sources of Chinese cultural self-confidence are excellent traditional Chinese culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture. This article argues that the concept proposed by the Chinese government is not comprehensive for building Chinese cultural self-confidence. Revolutionary culture and advanced socialist culture are the summary of China’s own special experience. Other countries do not have similar environments, and traditional culture is dominated by Confucianism. Confucianism cannot even be fully convinced within China. In the era of globalization, if China wants to gain some value recognition in the world to establish confidence, it must propose a doctrine with global value. I believe that the ideas and philosophies contained in the “Tao Te Ching” can effectively communicate between China and the world, help China gain worldwide recognition, and have great significance for enhancing Chinese cultural self-confidence.

Keywords: Dao De Jing, Chinese cultural confidence, world recognition

1. Research Background

China is a country with a history of five thousand years, and has produced many wise figures and ideas over the long years. Since the Han Dynasty advocated the exclusive worship of Confucianism, Confucianism has become the mainstream ideology in China. China has always been the center of East Asia before the Opium War. Since the Opium War, China’s position as the center of East Asia has gradually been lost, and the gap between China and the West has deeply hurt China’s self-confidence. Nowadays, we have entered the era of science and technology, which stems from the Western research on nature, which is an unavoidable fact. China has made many achievements in science and technology, but it must be admitted that the main reason for these achievements is the role of science and technology, rather than the great changes in Chinese culture itself. In the face of these achievements, some Chinese people believe that they once again prove the value of Chinese culture in the era, and think that it is Chinese culture that brings these achievements and self-confidence. If China falls into economic difficulties in the future, does it mean that there is a problem with its own culture, and then it is not confident? This contradictory mentality precisely illustrates that the foundation of Chinese cultural self-confidence is vague. Therefore, this article tries to clarify that the culture that supports Chinese self-confidence should meet the “three reflections”. 1) It can reflect the origin of Chinese culture. 2) It can reflect the broad recognition of the Chinese nation. 3) It can reflect the new direction of human development. A culture can only have vitality through continuous exchanges with other cultures. In order to gain confidence in the world, this culture must first be able to gain the resonance of all mankind. This article believes that the philosophy and
thought contained in the Tao Te Ching reflect the new direction of human development, which is the contribution of Chinese classical culture to humanity, and is of great significance to enhance Chinese cultural self-confidence.

2. Research on Chinese Cultural Self-Confidence

In 2014, Chinese leaders proposed Chinese cultural self-confidence, which they believed to be the full affirmation of a country, a nation, and a political party’s own cultural values, as well as a firm belief in the vitality of their own culture. Since the official proposal of this concept, many scholars have conducted research from their own perspectives.

2.1 Research on the Concept of Cultural Self-Confidence

Spruce defines cultural self-confidence as: “the full affirmation of a country, a nation, and a political party’s own value, and the firm belief in its own cultural vitality” (Spruce, 2010). Spruce links cultural self-confidence with its own value and cultural vitality, highlighting the importance of self-identity. Huijuan not only affirms cultural value, but also proposes to practice this cultural value. She points out: “Cultural self-confidence is the full affirmation and active practice of cultural value by a nation, a country, and a political party” (Huijuan, 2021). Hao believes that “cultural self-confidence is the confidence in their own civilization form, civilization path, civilization vitality, and the unique position and contribution of Chinese civilization to world civilization” (Hao, 2017). In his definition, cultural self-confidence is a kind of affirmation of its own cultural characteristics and the richness of world civilization.

2.2 Research on the Attitude Towards Chinese Cultural Confidence

From the materials reviewed in this article, scholars generally believe that building Chinese cultural confidence should maintain a humble and tolerant attitude. Lintao believes that the treatment of heterogeneous culture should be an objective attitude towards self, a positive attitude to learn from others, neither self-complacency nor blind worship. On the premise of adhering to the subjectivity of national culture, it should actively absorb the essence of heterogeneous culture, conduct cultural cognition, comparison and reflection in the exchange, collision and conflict of cultures, and gradually master the initiative of cultural exchanges (Lintao, 2016). Bosheng pointed out that different cultures should give each other a sense of trust when communicating, and be confident in absorbing the beneficial factors of various cultures for their own use, without fear of being “devoured” by the other party during this cultural exchange (Bosheng, 2012). Zhenji believes that there are two tendencies in China’s treatment of national culture in modern times: cultural inferiority and cultural arrogance. China should build cultural self-confidence by bravely accepting its past self, while actively embracing the outside world, expanding exchanges, learning from others’ strengths to offset its own weaknesses, and constantly improving itself (Zhenji, 2011).

2.3 Research on the Sources of Chinese Cultural Confidence

Zhao Fuke pointed out that the Chinese leaders’ exposition on Chinese cultural self-confidence comprehensively grasps the connotation of Chinese culture and clearly summarizes the sources of Chinese cultural self-confidence, which points out the development direction for us to build cultural self-confidence (Fuke & Daozhuang, 2016). Chengwu and Yue (2023), Shaoan and Zongyou (2023) and Fuke’s research conclusions are similar. Sun Chengwu believes that even in peaceful times, revolutionary culture cannot be forgotten. Shaoxiong pointed out that the advanced socialist culture guarantees that the direction of social development is always under the guidance of Marxism. Jianjun believes that the sources of Chinese cultural self-confidence include China’s history, the development achievements of contemporary China, the correct cultural development path, and the rise of Chinese academic. He particularly pointed out that in the era of globalization, Chinese academic has great significance in enhancing cultural self-confidence (Jianjun, 2016).

2.4 The Controversy of Chinese Culture Going Global

The globalization of Chinese culture has not been smooth. For example, the Confucius Institute, from the perspective of China, is an important window for China to strengthen external exchanges, but not everyone has the same view. Some scholars believe that the Confucius Institute is an extension of Chinese government agencies to export authoritarian ideas. Ford Christopher A. believes that Confucianism is supported by the Chinese government to rationalize one-party dictatorship, and the propaganda of the Confucius Institute increases the external recognition of China’s one-party dictatorship. He believes that Confucianism will undermine cultural diversity (Ford, 2015). Hartig pointed out that the Confucius Institute is an important tool for China’s diplomacy, and the government uses the Confucius Institute to convey China’s strategic intentions to foreign people, but this propaganda depicts the “right China” rather than the “real China” (Hartig, 2015). Salvatore Babones believes that Western universities should cut off their ties with China, and that the Confucius
Institute in China has affected the academic freedom of Western universities. He believes that cooperation between the West and China has not brought freedom and democracy to China, but rather has passed on the legitimacy of totalitarianism through the Confucius Institute (Babones, 2020). Of course, some scholars believe that some institutions and researchers have exaggerated the negative effects of the Confucius Institute, and should pay more attention to the positive role of the Confucius Institute in cultural exchanges. The Confucius Institute has helped China establish a cultural brand, and with the help of this cultural platform, it can help the outside world understand Chinese culture faster and better, reducing misunderstandings between the two sides (Usmanova et al., 2019). Some scholars also conducted comparative studies between the Confucius Institute and other similar institutes, such as Ming and Niancheng. They believe that the Confucius Institute is more powerful than the Goethe Institute when entering the local education system, which has some impact on the normal educational order of the local area. In addition, the teaching focus of the Confucius Institute is too focused on propaganda of China, and there is a lack of resonance with local culture (Ming & Niancheng, 2023).

According to the research findings of the above scholars, the establishment of Chinese cultural self-confidence in the era of globalization is not imagined to be established in a closed environment. Nowadays, both China and foreign countries mainly regard Confucian culture as the mainstream culture of China, and believe that Confucian culture represents the traditional culture of China. China is also using Confucian culture to create its own Chinese Dream to inspire the self-confidence of the Chinese people. However, as we mentioned in the above article, the Confucius Institute has been questioned in foreign exchanges. Confucianism is not fully convincing in China, and if only using Confucianism as the representative culture of China to communicate with the world, it simplifies the problem.

3. The Turning Point of Chinese Cultural Self-Confidence

The turning point of Chinese cultural self-confidence was the Opium War. Before the Opium War, China had always been the political, economic, cultural, and communication center of East Asia, and the tributary system of East Asia was formed around China. China’s central position in East Asia gave Chinese culture unparalleled influence in the region. China divided the regions that learned and used Chinese culture into three levels, and those far away from China and not influenced by Chinese culture were called barbarian lands.

The Opium War completely changed China’s central position in East Asia. As the Western powers intensified their aggression against China, the tributary system centered on China in East Asia continued to disintegrate. China’s repeated failures in foreign wars comprehensively shaken its political, economic, and cultural leadership in East Asia, and external pressure also caused internal criticism and competition in East Asia. The Sino-Japanese War of 1894 pushed this internal competition to a climax, and Japan’s victory completely rewritten the traditional order in East Asia. China not only suffered a crushing defeat in its contest with what it considered to be “barbarians”, but also lost to its former tributary states within East Asia. Since then, China has completely lost its leadership position in East Asia, not only becoming a target of the Western powers, but also being comprehensively suppressed by Japan. China’s comprehensive defeat in foreign competition shattered its cultural self-confidence for thousands of years. However, Japan, which belongs to East Asia, achieved key victories in the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, proving that the Meiji Restoration and the strategy of comprehensively learning from the West were successful. It also demonstrated from a side that China’s culture was generally lagging behind the West at that time, which was an indisputable fact. This cognition gained through positive and negative practices deeply hit China’s cultural self-confidence.

4. An Analysis of the Reasons for Insufficient Confidence in Chinese Culture

4.1 Insufficient Understanding of the Connotation of Cultural Self-Confidence

Jin Huimin believes that “a true cultural self-confidence is neither biased towards one’s own culture nor exclusive of foreign cultures, but is based on the needs of contemporary and realistic cultures, with the tolerance and ability to creatively transform and innovate both native and foreign cultures” (Huimin, 2018).

Modern China suffered from the invasion of the great powers. On the one hand, the Chinese people struggled against the West, and on the other hand, they learned from the West. In April 1922, Liang Qichao said in his “Introduction to the Evolution of China in the Past 50 Years”: “In the past five years, the Chinese people gradually realized their own shortcomings. This awakening is both the cause and the result of the progress of learning. In the first stage, we feel inadequate in the use of objects. In the second stage, we feel inadequate in the system. In the third stage, we feel inadequate in the fundamental culture...”. Mr. Liang clearly demonstrated the process of deepening self-awareness of the Chinese people after their interaction with the West.

Nowadays, with the continuous rise of China’s economic status, Chinese cultural confidence is also growing, but
a kind of cultural nationalism with the slogan of cultural confidence has also quietly emerged. Jin Huimin clearly distinguished between cultural nationalism and cultural confidence, pointing out that “we must always remind people that cultural nationalism is not true cultural confidence, not the attitude and position that China should adopt in the era of globalization to stand in the world and effectively participate in global governance. That is our post-colonial complex, although it has its historical rationality. This history is the process of China’s semi-colonialization, full of blood and tears, and thus has the impulse of xenophobia and the sensitivity of self-esteem. However, with the passage of time, today is also the time to bid farewell to it!” (Huimin, 2018). Jin Huimin reminded us that the true connotation of cultural confidence is a self-confident and inclusive tolerance, a consciousness of being all-embracing, and a sublimation of blending together. The important reason for the lack of cultural confidence among the Chinese people is that they cannot distinguish between cultural confidence and cultural nationalism, so that when communicating with foreign cultures, they unconsciously emphasize the different attributes of culture, hindering the possibility of exploring cultural commonality at a higher level.

4.2 The Country’s Status Has not Yet Returned After the Opium War

Before the Opium War, China was the center of East Asia. After the Opium War until now, although China is one of the five permanent members of the United Nations and the world’s second largest economy, the external image of modern China’s poverty and weakness has not been completely changed due to its tremendous progress. The outside world’s perception of China is still in the process of change. China has not accumulated sufficient advantages in East Asia, Japan still has significant influence in the region, and South Korea also has excellent strength, presenting a situation of tripartite confrontation. The actual national status is not enough to strengthen China’s cultural self-confidence.

4.3 The Development of Basic Scientific Theories and Original Scientific and Technological Innovation Is Insufficient

According to the research of Pan Jiaofeng and others on the world’s science and technology centers, the world’s science and technology centers have undergone a process of transfer from Italy, Britain, France, Germany to the United States (Jiaofeng, Yidong, Guanghua, & Qiuju, 2019). The establishment of five science and technology centers has all been accompanied by world-class breakthroughs in fundamental scientific theories or the birth of major original scientific and technological achievements. For example, the major breakthroughs in astronomy made by Galileo in Italy; the outstanding achievements in physics made by Newton in Britain, the steam engine brought by Watt; the significant influence of Lavoisier in the field of chemistry in France; the generator made by Siemens in Germany, the internal combustion engine made by Carl Benz, etc. The United States led the trend of world science and technology development in the 20th century, with outstanding achievements in electronic computers, aerospace, atomic energy, etc. American science and technology still maintains a leading position in the world.

Through review, we found that countries that can be called the world’s scientific and technological center in history all had significant epoch-making contributions to basic scientific theories or major original scientific and technological achievements at that time. However, China’s world-class contributions in these two aspects from modern times to modern times are lacking. The conclusion that science and technology play a key supporting role in national development has become a consensus worldwide, and the fact that China’s contributions in these two aspects are weak has strengthened the lack of cultural confidence in China.

4.4 Confucianism Is Difficult to Provide Inspiration for the Development of Natural Science and Philosophy

Confucianism is the core of traditional Chinese culture. Confucianism mainly studies how to establish harmonious interpersonal relationships, with little mention of nature and the relationship between man and nature. After the imperial examination system, the mission of Chinese scholars was to study Confucianism and enter the government as officials. As a result, fewer and fewer people in China were thinking about natural science and philosophy, which seriously limited the progress of science and philosophy.

Science and philosophy require thinkers to first have a spirit of doubt, coupled with a will to explore and firm action, in order to achieve results. The original intention of Confucianism is to restore Zhou Li, and the essence of Li is the standardization of human behavior. Whether this standard is reasonable does not need to be discussed and doubted by learners. After being confirmed and promoted by the government, this standard gradually became a compulsory behavioral requirement from a doctrine. Doubts are considered to be a kind of deviant thought, which is subject to the dual pressure of society and government. Because Confucianism is difficult to provide enlightenment for the development of natural science and philosophy, and Chinese traditional culture is mainly supported by Confucianism. If we insist on Confucianism, we may not be able to catch up with the world development trend. If we remove Confucianism from the core position of mainstream culture, it may have an
impact on Chinese social cognition. The scope and results of this impact are difficult to predict, so we cannot easily shake the status of Confucianism. This contradiction makes the reconstruction of Chinese cultural confidence a foggy work.

5. The Cultural Characteristics That Support Chinese Cultural Self-Confidence in the New Era

The author believes that the characteristics of the culture that supports Chinese cultural self-confidence in the new era should include 1) Being able to reflect the origins of Chinese culture, 2) Being able to reflect the broad recognition of the Chinese nation, and 3) Being able to reflect the new direction of human development.

Firstly, it can reflect the origin of Chinese culture. Chinese cultural confidence needs to be expressed in a Chinese way. China is the only country in the world whose civilization has never been broken. Its long history and culture have created a comprehensive cultural atmosphere and shaped the Chinese people’s "proud" cultural psychology. If a new era culture cannot be linked to Chinese culture, it breaks the Chinese people's psychological presupposition of the continuity of Chinese culture. If this new culture is not transformed into a way for Chinese people to understand through integration with Chinese culture, it will be difficult to spread and develop in China. Therefore, the cultural source of Chinese cultural confidence in the new era must be able to reflect the origin of Chinese culture.

Secondly, it can reflect the broad recognition of the Chinese nation. Whether it is traditional Chinese culture, modern Chinese culture, or future culture, only a culture that has gained broad recognition from the Chinese nation can play a role in uniting the strength of the Chinese nation, leading the direction of the Chinese nation, and creating the future of the Chinese nation.

Thirdly, it can reflect the new direction of human development. We have entered the era of globalization, and countries and regions in the world are no longer isolated. The entire human society faces a large number of public issues, and the whole world is breathing together and relying on each other for their destiny. Not all cultures created by humans in the world can reflect a "common voice" of humanity, so the Chinese culture that is going global will surely be tested by all human beings. Only the Chinese culture that can reflect the common development vision of humanity, can stimulate human unity and harmony, and gain universal recognition from all human beings can surpass the limitations of one country and one nation, and become the common gospel of all mankind.

6. The Tao Te Ching and Chinese Cultural Self-Confidence in the New Era

The author believes that the ideas contained in the Dao De Jing are in line with the cultural characteristics that underpin Chinese cultural confidence in the new era.

6.1 The Tao Te Ching Embodies the Origin of Chinese Culture

The Tao Te Ching, written by the philosopher Laozi during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, is the core work of Taoist thought and a required classic for Taoist practitioners. The Tao Te Ching has had a profound impact on Chinese politics, military, culture, etc., and is one of the most important sources of Chinese philosophy. The pre-Qin philosophers and later Chinese culture, ideology, etc. were not influenced by Laozi. Taoist thought played a crucial role in the early development of the Han and Tang dynasties, and was the foundation of the prosperity of the Han and Tang dynasties. Laozi's dialectical thought has become the theoretical cornerstone of traditional Chinese medicine, and is deeply rooted in the behavior of every Chinese person. The famous scholar Joseph Needham said: "Many of the most attractive elements in the Chinese character are derived from Taoist thought. If China did not have Taoist thought, it would be like a tree with some deep roots that have rotted away" (Hanguang, 1994). Therefore, it embodies the profound origins of Chinese culture.

6.2 The Dao De Jing Embodies the Broad Recognition of the Chinese Nation

The idea of "unity of man and nature" and "the way follows nature" conveyed in the Tao Te Ching has shaped the Chinese people's worldview of harmony between man and nature. Through the concept of "man follows earth, earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Tao, and the Tao follows nature," a complete system of unity of man and nature is outlined.

Laozi also passed on his simple dialectical thinking to the Chinese nation, giving the Chinese people a way to understand things and improving the level of understanding of the Chinese nation. The idea of "getting the essence from the outside world" repeatedly emphasized in the "Tao Te Ching" has a significant influence on the formation of the Chinese nation’s pragmatic concept. The contents of the book such as “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and the greater the goal, the more difficult it is to achieve” have become
well-known proverbs. It is no exaggeration to say that the wisdom, objectivity, pragmatism, modesty, and inclusiveness displayed by the Chinese nation are inseparable from the “Tao Te Ching”. Every Chinese child has benefited from the “Tao Te Ching” to some extent during their growth process. It is a valuable source of wisdom for the Chinese nation and has been widely recognized by the Chinese nation.

6.3 The Tao Te Ching Embodies the New Direction of Human Development

The Renaissance broke through the shackles of “God” on human thought, and the liberation of the spirit stimulated people’s interest and courage to explore nature, which promoted the birth of the scientific revolution. Since then, science has gradually become a new “God” in people’s minds, but the role of this “God” is to serve as a tool to satisfy the unrestrained desires of human beings. The progress of science has brought about a leapfrog development in productivity, greatly improving the ability of human beings to utilize nature. After the Industrial Revolution, human desires continued to expand, and human’s seizure and destruction of nature reached unprecedented heights. In the 21st century, global climate anomalies occurred frequently, and global ecological disasters intensified.

In the West, the relationship between humans and nature has undergone a process of primitive integration to gradual separation. Li Shiyan clearly summarized this process. She pointed out, “The ancient Greek philosophy was concerned with the composition of the world and the movement of matter. It had ecological ideas when it was created, affirming the organic integrity and inherent vitality of nature. However, the atomic theory, which represents the peak of ancient Greek thought, contains anti-ecological ideas. The highly respected ancient Greek rationality is an obstacle to the emergence of ecological ideas. Its emphasis on abstract thinking cuts off the organic connection between humans and nature, and fails to see the ecological relationship between humans and nature. It leads philosophy to decline and religion. Religious philosophy deviates from nature and human beings, replacing the inherent creativity of nature with the sole creativity of God. God stifles human nature and cuts off the ecological relationship between humans and nature. After the scientific revolution of the Renaissance, philosophy turned to the main body of human beings, returning to the ecological environment of human beings with human emotions, reason, will, freedom, and dignity. The natural world was trampled under the feet of human beings. With the development and strength of science, in the concept of controlling nature, the mechanical view of nature deconstructed the natural ecology and ended the ecological ideas” (Li Shiyan, 2010).

The frequent global natural disasters today suggest that we should rethink the relationship between man and nature. If we insist on our own way, we will definitely encounter the situation as Engels said in Dialectics of Nature: “We should not be overly intoxicated with our human victory over nature. For every such victory, nature retaliates against us. Each victory initially achieves the desired results, but later and later, completely different and unexpected effects occur, often eliminating the initial results. The residents of Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and other places destroyed forests in order to obtain arable land, but they never dreamed that these places would become barren today because they deprived these places of forests, thus losing the accumulation center and storage of water” (Marx & Engels, 1995). The destruction of the ecology will eventually cause the human society to lose the driving force for development. At present, a new trend of constructing the harmonious development between man and nature has formed in the Western world, especially in Europe. The new direction of human development may be the harmonious unity between man and nature, mutual achievements between people, and the integration of science and humanities. This coincides with the ideas contained in the Tao Te Ching.

The Tao Te Ching is a great work in traditional Chinese culture that focuses on nature and views human society from a natural perspective. Its focus on nature has attracted the attention of many Westerners, especially a group of Westerners represented by Needham, who not only fully affirmed the outstanding achievements of Taoist thought in the enlightenment of natural science, but also bluntly stated that the future development of human society would inevitably benefit from Taoist thought. In 1957, at the meeting of the Asian Research Association held in Canada, Needham made a speech entitled “History and the Valuation of Humanity: China’s World View of Science and Technology”. At the end of the speech, he pointed out with great conviction: “The question is how will humanity deal with the Pandora’s box of science and technology? I would like to say again that we should act according to the Eastern viewpoint (Jixing, 1985). Japanese physicist Yukawa Hideki, American physicist Capra, humanities scholars Guying, Dingcheng, Herbert etc. have all highly affirmed the role of Taoist thought in the future development of science and society. According to UNESCO’s statistics, the Tao Te Ching is the world’s most translated cultural masterpiece in addition to the “Bible”, which shows the enthusiasm of Western society in seeking wisdom from the Tao Te Ching. Dai Jinping believes that Taoist thought can effectively compensate for the rift between scientific culture and humanistic culture (Jinping, 1998). Dong Guangbi argues in the book “New Taoism” that the modern form of Taoist thought has significance in opening
up new paths for science and a new world cultural model (Guangbi, 1991). The theories of these researchers tell us that Taoist thought contains a new direction for human development, and its advocacy of harmony between man and nature, as well as the wisdom of harmony between people, is a good solution to the "instrumentalism" of Western science. Now let's see what kind of inspiration the Tao Te Ching will bring us in the new direction of human development.

1) Enlightenment of “birth”

“Tao is the core of value.” ‘Tao produces one, one produces two, two produces three, and three produces all things.’ If Tao does not like to produce, how can it explain the creation of all things? The pursuit of life is the characteristic of Tao and also the characteristic of Tao. Laozi said, ‘Water is good for all things and does not compete, so it is close to Tao.’ Water nourishes all things and allows them to grow and prosper. Its behavior is similar to that of Tao, indicating that Tao not only produces all things, but also cares for their development and reproduction. He also said, ‘When things grow strong, they become old, which is not the way. The way has long been gone.’ What does it mean to grow old? Many scholars believe that it means to expand. They believe that as long as things expand, they will die. However, this is not the case. There are two references to ‘things growing old’ in the Tao Te Ching. The first one is ‘If you have achieved your goal, do not be arrogant, do not be arrogant, do not be arrogant, do not be arrogant, do not be arrogant, things grow old, which is not the way, the way has long been gone.’ This sentence means that once you achieve your goal, you should stop indulging in expanding the so-called ‘achievements’. This kind of ‘achievements’ has deviated from the normal development path of things and is not in line with Tao. The second one is ‘Knowing harmony is normal, knowing normality is clear, benefiting life is auspicious, and using qi to control the mind is strong. Things grow old, which is not the way, the way has long been gone.’ This sentence tells all things in the world to understand the principle of harmonious growth. The excessive pursuit of life and the excessive indulgence of desire will lead to confrontation. Therefore, things growing old means that things will die out if they deviate from their own growth law, not that they will die out if they expand. Therefore, we can summarize the progressive cognition of ‘life’ in the Tao Te Ching: from the production of all things to the coexistence of all things to the balanced coexistence of all things.

In today’s world, the tension between man and nature and the conflicts between people are rooted in the belief that humans and nature and humans are in a competitive relationship. The reason for the competition is the contradiction between the limitlessness of desire and the limitation of resources. However, the Tao Te Ching tells us that the limitlessness of desire is precisely a manifestation of people’s lack of understanding of nature and themselves. Because they do not know that the Tao requires all things to be in balance and coexistence, they are driven by desire to perish. Therefore, the Tao Te Ching is an innovation of the concept of “life” for all mankind: everyone has the right to survive and develop, and no power can deprive them of this right; the survival and development of each person is not isolated, but closely connected with other things, which means that while pursuing their own right to life, humans must take into account the needs of others and other creatures. People are not only in a competitive relationship but also in a symbiotic relationship; again, this symbiosis of all things is a balanced relationship, so when expanding their living circle, people should carefully assess the impact on others and other species.

2) The inspiration of the concept of harmony between man and nature

In the Tao Te Ching, Laozi pointed out that humans and all other things are created by nature, and that even the most powerful human abilities are part of nature and cannot replace nature, let alone create a sense of superiority to despise all things. Laozi said in the Tao Te Ching: “Man follows the way of the earth, the earth follows the way of heaven, heaven follows the way of the Tao, and the Tao follows the way of nature.” Laozi believed that human behavior should conform to the laws of nature, and that conformity to the natural way of life can bring endless life. He admitted that in reality, human nature is contrary to the nature of heaven, because “the way of heaven is to compensate for the excess and make up for the deficiency, while the way of humanity is to compensate for the deficiency and make up for the excess” (similar to the Western Matthew effect). Therefore, in the last sentence of the Tao Te Ching, Laozi said: “The way of heaven is to benefit without harm, and the way of humanity is to do without strife.” This is Laozi’s exhortation to humans, and he hopes that humans can understand the way of heaven and reshape their thoughts and behaviors according to the natural way of life.

The concept of harmony between man and nature has important implications for sustainable human development. Human beings are part of nature, which helps us recognize our place. In the Tao Te Ching, it is believed that nature is striving to promote the growth of all things, and is tirelessly working to create a vibrant Earth. Moreover, it does not take credit for itself and is not arrogant. Laozi hopes that humans can also have such a consciousness, do things that conform to nature, and closely integrate human development with the prosperity of
nature.

3) The inspiration of mutual cooperation and mutual achievement between people

The characteristics of Taoism are projected onto human society in the “Tao Te Ching”. Firstly, the “Tao Te Ching” teaches us that everyone can do things that benefit others like nature. Laozi said, “If you want something, you must give it to others.” Although everyone has selfish thoughts, if we only expect others to give us convenience first, a warm society is far away. Laozi believes that to get the warmth of others, we must first release our own warmth. Secondly, the “Tao Te Ching” teaches us to be modest. Regardless of whether we have skills or not, we should be modest towards others. Without respect for knowledgeable people, we cannot learn knowledge. Without caring for people with limited knowledge, we will lose our audience. Both sides are a unified body of mutual achievement.

The Tao Te Ching believes that the relationship between people is also a manifestation of natural law, and that man and nature are harmonious and complete, so are people. Based on the above understanding of “life”, we can infer that human development should follow this rule: everyone pursues survival and development, and this pursuit of survival and development is a coexistence of all people. This kind of survival and development is a balanced coexistence. The world today is a human community, and the relationship between people is becoming increasingly close. This theory of coexistence and balance in the Tao Te Ching provides us with a good way to think about the relationship between ourselves and others, as well as between ourselves and society. It encourages us to think more about the significance of cooperative coexistence, which is beneficial to building peaceful and friendly interpersonal relationships and has enlightening significance for the peaceful development of the world.

4) Enlightenment from the discovery of “nothing”

Laozi said in the “Tao Te Ching”: “Thirty spokes, one hub, when there is nothing, there is the use of the car. The pottery is used as a utensil, when there is nothing, there is the use of the utensil. Chiseling doors and windows to make a room, when there is nothing, there is the use of the room. Therefore, having it is beneficial, not having it is useful.” When we enter a room, we are attracted by the items inside the room, often neglecting the existence of space, that is, the existence of “nothing”. He used “nothing” to remind us that humans should pay attention to the role of invisible forces. For example, in couples, many people feel that men pay the most for a family, but ignore the coordinating and supporting role played by women. Laozi used “nothing” to tell us that both sides are important and we should express gratitude for each other’s efforts. The interpretation of “nothing” in the “Tao Te Ching” is conducive to our holistic thinking about nature, society, and individuals, inspiring us to discover hidden factors beyond the visible ones, helping us to more fully understand the world.

7. Conclusion

China attaches great importance to cultural self-confidence, and proposes that the three sources of cultural self-confidence are excellent traditional Chinese culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture. This article believes that this concept is not comprehensive. Revolutionary culture and advanced socialist culture are unique to China, while the core of traditional culture, Confucian culture, has not been sufficiently convinced within China, and there have been some opposition voices in external communication. By reviewing the process of the loss of Chinese cultural self-confidence and analyzing the reasons for the lack of Chinese cultural self-confidence, it is found that the internal reason for the lack of Chinese cultural self-confidence lies in the absence of natural elements and skepticism in traditional core culture, and the lack of understanding of the connotation of cultural self-confidence. The external reason lies in the loss of traditional status due to the closed-door policy, and the insufficient contribution to the progress of world knowledge and technology. This article believes that in the era of globalization, the construction of Chinese cultural self-confidence cannot be separated from the external environment. In order to establish cultural self-confidence globally, it is necessary to have a value theory that can gain global recognition. The ideas and philosophies contained in the “Tao Te Ching” not only reflect the characteristics of Chinese thought and culture, but also have broad discussion space with the West in terms of science, philosophy, humanities, and ecology. Its insights into the relationship between man and nature are similar to the reflection of modern Western society on industrial civilization. Some Western philosophers such as Hegel, Kant, and Needham have earlier discovered the special existence of Chinese Taoist thought in Chinese thought. In the future, more Western and Eastern insightful people need to work together to make Taoist thought better presented. The ideas contained in the “Tao Te Ching” help to break the stereotype of traditional Chinese thought in the outside world, greatly expand the foundation of East-West exchanges, and help China to shape a global value that transcends national boundaries and ethnic boundaries. It is of great significance to enhance Chinese cultural self-confidence.

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