

Review and Reflection on Individualism

Haiyun Zhao *

College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, China

* Email Address: zhumeng1020220912@163.com

Abstract: Individualism is the core value of the western world, which is rooted in the western culture and philosophy and possesses a long history. Individualism guides people's thought and life, reflecting the spiritual outlook of the people in the western world. The values of individualism and the Eastern world are rooted in different historical and cultural traditions, and there are differences in their value connotations. This paper reviews the concept of individualism from the perspective of its origin, development process, rationality and limitations, so as to enhance the understanding of the individualism. And then the paper goes on to the discussion of the measures in dealing with the impact of western individualism by the promotion of community values in the new era and the construction and development of socialist core value system. It is hoped that this paper may provide reflections on the interactions between the collectivism and individualism.

Keywords: Individualism; Rationality and Limitations; Community Values; Socialist Core Values.

1. Introduction

Individualistic values have been deeply rooted in the Western culture, and even today, they still occupy a dominant position in the Western society. Individualism is not simply equated with egoism, but a complete set of ideological value system. The fact that some domestic researchers criticize individualism as egoism is biased. With the increasing interactions between China and the Western cultures, it is significant to understand the values of individualism and its limitations, and to correctly deal with the interactions between individualism and the value system of our country so as to form a benign social order.

2. The Origin and Development of Individualism and Collectivism

The fundamental characteristics of individualism in the West is to affirm the value of the individual as an independent entity in the universe. In the western world, individualism can be traced back to the ancient Greece. The reflection of the school of sophism on the status and role of the individual is an important origin of western individualism. Protagora's philosophical proposition that man is the yardstick of all things regarded mankind as the general principle and fundamental standard to measure the things around. Socrates went deeper into the rationality and essence of individual consciousness from the perspective of ethics and proposed the famous philosophical proposition of knowing yourself, and established the self-consciousness in philosophical sense. The origins of western culture represented by ancient Greek philosophy and Christian culture formed the concept of individualism on the basis of the dichotomy of mind and object. According to this concept, man is a unified whole composed of the body and the soul. For the interpretation of the body, from the early individualism in the West to the Christianity, they attach much importance to the kinship it reflects. It was believed that the body itself is made up of some rough materials and the desire that embodies its function is considered to belong to the soul of human beings. Only when the physical body is combined with the soul can it gain vitality and become a real entity. The human soul was

considered to be composed of reason, emotion, desire and so on. The Christianity believes that the root of human sin lies not only in the body, but also in the soul. The moral standards that it explicitly requires people to obey are all derived from the God. Christian doctrine requires everyone to properly deal with the relationship between themselves and God, but not with others. In the Renaissance, humanistic philosophers repeatedly emphasized human personality, dignity and happiness, which showed the initial emergence of individualism. The European Enlightenment Campaign regarded reason as the essence of human beings and the fundamental difference between human beings and animals. German classical philosophy elevates the status of man to an unprecedented height, and Kant's man is an end rather than a means is its most representative one.

Due to the characteristics of society in the ancient times, people in China believed that each individual's characteristics are primarily defined by his or her social relations. In traditional China, the relations corresponding to this kind of definition include: monarch and minister, father and son, husband and wife, brother and friend. The definition of individual can only be reflected in collective relations. Therefore, Chinese people do not tend to think that behind some specific interpersonal relationships, there is an abstract personality, that is, the God with perfect personality believed in in the western religious tradition. The emergence of this phenomenon is likely to be related to the absence of the so-called concept of individual soul in Chinese culture. With the existence of the concept of individual soul, it is likely to produce a clear boundary of "self" from the general concept of collectivism.

3. Rationality and Limitations of Individualism

The historical progressiveness of individualism is mainly reflected in following aspects. Firstly, individualism opposes the rule of feudal religion and theology, thereby promoting the emergence of modern democracy in Western society; Secondly, it respects the rights and interests of individuals and promotes the development of modern economy in Western society to some extent; Thirdly, it facilitates the construction

of democratic rule of law and social progress in Western society in modern times. To affirm the historical progressiveness of individualism is not the same as to say that individualism does not have its limitations.

The affirmation of the historical progressiveness of individualism is not the same as saying that individualism is as universally salvific as socialism[1]. It has an apparent limitation, that is, it emphasizes that the individual is the ultimate goal of pursuing anything, and the state or society only serves as a means to achieve the individual's personal ends, which is likely to make people contradict with others for personal interests, and eventually do harm to the sustainable development of society. Marx and Engels analyzed and criticized such limitation of individualism.

In the era of capitalist commodity economy and market economy, economic identities take the pursuit of their own interests as the fundamental motive of their economic behaviors in most cases. Marx deemed this relationship as each one serving the others for the purpose of serving himself and using the others as a means to his personal ends, and Engels regarded it as subordinating the subject to the predicate and the whole to the part, thus putting the cart before the horse. Due to the above-mentioned limitation of individualism, some Western political thinkers and ethicists have opposed the extreme individualism of the past and have begun to discuss the relationship between the individuals and society, thus forming a new individualism or modified individualism, that is the "limited individualism [3]".

4. Reflection on Individualism

The connotations of individualism are not fixed but dynamically developed, and its content is not unitary but diverse. Individualism can be divided into four levels, which are (1) the individual's sense of self due to the difference between himself and the outside world; (2) the individual's sense of self-interest due to the need for survival; (3) the individual's sense of altruism due to the need for development; (4) the individual's sense of democracy due to political needs. Individualism is the system of value ideology and consciousness established on the basis of the principle of the relationship between oneself and others, oneself and nature, and oneself and society based on the individual's need for survival and development, starting from the separation of man and self [7].

In the capitalist market economy, individualism highlights the emancipation of individual desires and the centrality of the individual in relationships, resulting in an individualistic ideology that emphasizes individual interests. Under the guidance of reason, people who believe in individualism strive to achieve their own interests, thus doing whatever it takes for the sake of personal gain, which may potentially harm society and others and move toward egoism in terms of value orientation. In the Western world, individualism emphasizes self-interest in economics, which logically leads to potentially extreme economic individualism; In politics, it emphasizes freedom, which leads to the opposition to the restrictions imposed by the state and society on individuals, believing that the restrictions may lead to anarchism; In terms of ownership, it advocates private ownership and the sanctity of personal property, which leads to privatization and the increasingly uneven distribution of social wealth. In spite of these extreme possibilities of individualism. Individualism in the Western world still maintains some elements of rationality; however, the attention and responsibility given to the others

outside of the individual is still largely for the purpose of self-interest, and is a tendentious value judgment and value choice made in the actual practice process to protect personal interests.

5. Reflections on Individualism in the Context of the New Era

The community in the era of globalization is a community with shared interests formed on the basis of globalized economic development. Economic globalization has led to a high degree of convergence of interests among countries, making each member of the world become a link on the chain of common interests. The premise of the existence of such a community is to share benefits and confront risks together. The participants of the community in the era of globalization should realize that individuals and the community form a relatively complete chain, and if any one of the links goes wrong, the interests of each member of the community will be at stake; therefore, the recognition of the importance of the community of common destiny is conducive to demonstrate the reality and feasibility of the construction of community values.

5.1. Community Concept and Individualism

The market economy has influenced people's social behaviors. The fragmentation of the Western societies has become more and more prominent with the development of the market economy, which has led to the further impact of individualistic concepts on the existing collectivist values. The community values, namely the collectivism practiced in China in the new era is a value consensus built on economic globalization that leads the general direction of globalization. "The Belt and Road Initiative", "the Community of Shared Interests" and "the Community of Common destiny" etc..are value consensus proposed by China based on community values [4]. To be more specific, the community in the new era should be a community shared by all the peoples with truly universal value connotations.

Therefore, to build a globalized community of destiny, we need to go beyond the individualistic values, adjust our traditional values centered on family and blood relations, and build a new type of collectivist values so as to lay a solid foundation for our country to stand firm in the wave of globalization and reach true value consensus with different countries and cultures.

In the 20th century, the interests condition of the international community can be described as a zero-sum game, where competing interests often led to conflict and even war was inevitable. The "Thucydides' trap" mindset has been haunting the Western capitalist countries, and this kind of Cold War mindset has been brought into the 21st century. The participants of globalization cause are not confined to the capitalist countries. The vast number of developing countries and less-developed countries are also indispensable participants of this trend. Whether different countries are actively or passively involved in globalization, the globalization itself has become an irrevocable trend. The current situation around the world has prompted some people in the capitalist countries to reflect on their inherent Thucydides way of thinking.

The concept of community is originated from ancient Greek philosophy. The ancient Greek city-state community was a kind of community which stresses the concept of holism.

Aristotle has once pointed out that a city-state is precisely a group of a number of citizens and a number of citizens gathered together in a political community becomes a city-state [2]. A citizen, not only in private but also in public affairs, is considered an independent and autonomous person who enjoys the rights of a citizen while assuming the corresponding duties. This was the basic principle of the ancient Greek community concept and the values once held by the city-state community. Individualist values emerged in human history along with the waves of the capitalist industrial revolution, the Renaissance and the movements of the Reformation. Individualism is a new value of rights that has influenced and changed the values of community concept, and historically, individualism has indeed played a progressive role in the emancipation of humanity.

What we are concerned about at present is the existence of a community that the full potentials of individuals can be fully unleashed and the rights and interests of the individuals are universally well-protected. At present, in a society where individualist values are increasingly influencing or even squeezing collectivist values, it is of far-reaching significance to construct the community values of the new era, that is, the community of human destiny. The promotion of community values should primarily avoid ideological confrontation with individualistic values and advocate value consensus. The values of different individuals within the community may diverge due to their different interests, resulting in a conflict of values; while the group values reflected in the community concept regulates these different interests, thereby ultimately converging them to strive for the common good and promoting the evolution of the community [8].

Community values have a significant unifying effect on parties concerned within the community. Firstly, each member of the community shares the common interests when thinking about the long-term and fundamental pursuits; Secondly, community values provide shared value evaluation standards for all members of the community, so that different individuals can always take the overall interests into consideration when taking actions, thus forming a moral constraint mechanism that can, to some extent, avoid the occurrence of blind pursuit of individual interests at the expense of the interests of others. In addition, community values enable the value-realization activities of each member to be mutually agreed upon certain issues, so that the community can develop harmoniously.

The construction of a community of human destiny in the process of globalization requires a new consensus on value orientation, i.e., community values. Man is a communal being. The essence of mankind is not the abstraction of single persons, but the sum of all social relations [5]". In his *Outline on Feuerbach*, Marx points out the social properties of man, arguing that human society has existed in community when it comes into existence for the first time, and that community contains the procedural provisions of the orientation of what makes man as they are, regulating their behaviors and thoughts [4]. The universality of the community exists in its particularities, and the universality of the community is also the generality and comprehensiveness of the community. People are born and raised in the community, and the existence in the community is equal. Each member's pursuit for a better life, the full realization of personal values and the achievement of harmonious coexistence should be based on the concept that we all live in a common community.

In the era of globalization, individuals in a community are

consciously or unconsciously exploring the culture and values they believe should be upheld. In the world, there are numerous values, and the conflict of different values is a problem that we have to confront in the course of globalization, and there is still a long way to go before we can realize the building of a community of shared destiny for humanities. If politicians of all countries can truly consider the long-term interests of mankind in the process of globalization and overcome short-sightedness of pursuing individual values, a community of common destiny that is conducive to the common prosperity of human society can be finally realized.

5.2. Individualism and Socialist Core Values

Individualism, with an obvious ethical orientation, has posed considerable impact on the values of Chinese society, the cultivation and promotion of socialist core values by Chinese people as well as the realization of national rejuvenation. It is crucial to properly deal with the influence of individualism and its contradiction with the socialist values in the Chinese context.

A culture that takes the socialist core value system as its ideological kernel and value orientation, and integrates ideological concepts, ideals and beliefs, social customs, spirituality, and behavioral norms, is the new cultural view of contemporary Chinese society [6]. Against the background of realizing the Chinese Dream, the society should vigorously cultivate and promote socialist core values, lead and govern individualism with socialist core values, and confront the potential challenges posed by individualism.

Individualism was introduced in China in the early 20th century. Unlike the Western world, the dominant value in Chinese society is not individualism, but a concept centered on holism that is contrary to the value of individualism and is based on the significance of others, namely the collective whole and the nation. For more than half a century after the New Culture Movement in 1919, the concept of individualism has been generally criticized and rejected in Chinese society, although it was favored to a certain extent in the short term. The reform and opening up, especially the establishment and implementation of the socialist market economy, has invigorated the individual subjectivity of the people, and the masses have begun to attach importance to the pursuit of personal interests, self-fulfillment and expression of their personal wills. The values of the whole society have changed significantly. Individualism can be summarized as a kind of contradictory unity, i.e.: on the one hand, it has received considerable criticism and accusation for its characteristic of being self-centered, and on the other hand, it has also gained tacit approval and acceptance for its promoting effects of encouraging entrepreneurship and people's ever increasing needs for the material abundance. This fact tells us that, despite the dominance of collectivist values, individualism has become increasingly popular in the context of reform and opening up and socialist market economy. Individualism has become a force to be reckoned with in Chinese society, and in the face of this fact, it is necessary for us to consider how to recognize and understand the conflict and strife over individualism and collectivist values and how to insist on cultivating and promoting the core socialist values in the process of realizing the Chinese Dream.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese society has established a socialist system as well as a value system based on the principle of collectivism that has

always been opposed to individualism. In a socialist society, the cultivation and promotion of socialist core values should be integrated into the unswerving pursuit of Chinese Dream, that is, in the process of realizing the Chinese Dream, it is necessary to explore and promote core values that are compatible with the cause of national rejuvenation and take a clear-cut stand against individualism. Analyzing the differences between socialist core values and individualism is a prerequisite for redressing individualism and advocating and cultivating socialist core values. Firstly, the socialist core values establish the social order based on the concept of holism, which is in opposition to individualism which regards the individuals as the starting point of the routine affairs. Secondly, socialist core values advocate the pursuit of individual interests through the realization of the interests of the whole, which is opposite to the individualism, which insists on the priority of individual interests. Moreover, socialist core values must continue to adhere to a collectivist stance which takes the long-term interests of society as its fundamental purpose instead of the short-term gains at present.

In Chinese context, in order to achieve the goal of national rejuvenation, measures should be taken in terms of the value orientation.

Firstly, it is significant to consolidate the education of socialist core values. Schools and family education are the primary means to inculcate people with proper value orientation, thereby forming a sound personality. The education of the significance of following the socialist core values, the rationality as well as the shortcomings of the individualistic values are conducive to equip members of the society to differentiate between what is upright and wrong and avoid the blind negation or aversion of any value orientation.

Secondly, it is significant to highlight the “exclusionary” nature of socialist core values and alert the erosion of the exclusionary nature of individualism [7]. The value orientation is primarily born out of the specific historical and cultural context and demonstrates the urgent needs and philosophies of the specific culture. The realization of the sustainable development and the great cause of national rejuvenation in China require the joint participation of all parties concerned, which means all members in society should share the common value primarily born out of its own culture which characterizes the personality of the Chinese people. The socialist core values, which comprise the national, societal and personal levels of philosophies, satisfy the needs of this joint campaign, and is conducive to regulate the actual practice from the micro to the macro levels. Values are applicable within a certain period of time, a certain scope, or a certain social system, rather than a universal value that applies to all periods and all social systems, which is an important attribute characterizes the individualistic values. The improper intervention of individualism in Chinese context may increase the possibility of the irrational elements of the individualistic values endangering the well-being of the people and the long-term goals of the nation.

Thirdly, the central status of socialist core values should be emphasized with individualism playing a subordinate role. The “central” here refers to the fact that socialist core values are the main part of social values and that socialist core values can achieve the function of integrating various values and jointly promoting the harmonious and well-regulated development of the society. The accurate grasp the meaning of being central and the correct response to the desired subordinate characteristic of the individualism are conducive

to provide a value benchmark for judging the relationship between individualism and collectivism in the process of realizing the Chinese Dream.

Finally, the collective orientation of socialist core values should be highlighted, and the rational elements in the individualist orientation of individualism be adapted in the Chinese context. Socialist core values adhere to collectivism and the role of society for the individual, emphasizing the close connections between individuals and the whole society while stressing the importance of the individuals. The importance that socialist core values attach to individuals and their interests shows that they play an integrative role in a community, embrace the reasonable and rational contents of individualism, and realize effective unification of the individuals orientation of individualism with the collective orientation.

6. Conclusion

The establishment and development of Western individualism has been a long process. Individualism influences the way of thinking in the western world and becomes the core value of the Western culture. As the world enters the era of globalization, cultural exchanges between China and the West are becoming more and more frequent. Understanding individualistic values is conducive to a more objective and comprehensive analysis of their nature. While individualism has its rational elements, its limitations are still prominent. In addition, based on China’s national realities and development philosophies, this paper analyzes the strategies that China can adopt to deal with the western concept of individualism from two perspectives, which are the promotion of a consensus on community values in the new era and the construction of a socialist core value system in the context of realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation so as to realize the construction of Chinese value concepts in the new era. In times of value pluralism, the advocacy and cultivation of core values are always closely associated with the development goals of the society. In the face of the impact and influence of individualism, Chinese society should consistently adhere to the collectivism and the socialist core values while integrating the rational elements with the socialist core values and opposing the extreme aspect of individualism.

References

- [1] Arieli, Yehoshua. Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology[M]. Harvard University Press, 1964.
- [2] Aristotle. The Politics of Aristotle[M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1965.
- [3] Geng Bujian, A Dili. A Dialectical Reflection on the Western Individualism[J]. Truth Seeking, 2006, (S3):122-123.
- [4] Jiang Yong. The Probability and Actuality of the Community Value[J]. Theory Journal, 2018, (04):119-125.
- [5] Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels. Collected Works of Marx and Engels (Vol 1) [M]. Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2012.
- [6] Sun Lanying, Chen Jianan. Analyzing the Refinement Made by the Socialist Core Values on Traditional Chinese and Western Values[J]. The Party Building and Ideological Education in Schools, 2013,(20):17-21.
- [7] Wang Changzhu. Individualism and Socialist Core Values from the Perspective of Realizing the Chinese Dream[J]. Lingnan Journal, 2017, (04):40-46.

- [8] Wen Ru, Lu Yanqin. Exploring the Value Orientation of the Community Concept[J]. Teaching Reference of Middle School Politics, 2020, (37):62-64.