

# Contrast between Collectivism and Individualism in Chinese and Western Culture

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**Abstract:** Due to different historical conditions, the social values of Chinese and western countries are very different. Starting from the definition and distinction of collectivism and individualism, this paper analyzes the reasons for the emergence of the two values from the geographical environment, economic basis and cultural philosophy of the middle and the West, discusses the performance of the two in social reality, and compares the social values of the Chinese collective standard and the Western individual standard.

**Keywords:** Contrast between Chinese and Western Culture, Collectivism, Individualism.

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## 1. The Connotation of Collectivism and Individualism

Collectivism and individualism are two different values, that is, people's reflection of social existence. People choose their desired goals by evaluating the objective things around them. In the final analysis, values reflect people's attitude towards interests, that is to say, values are the interests people are aware of -- public interests and individual interests, and then form two basic values -- collectivist values and individualistic values. These two values are fundamentally the understanding of human beings, and all the discussions on the related issues of them cannot be separated from the subject of "human beings".

Collectivism, which is well known in today's society, is an ideological theory that advocates that individuals belong to society and that individual interests should be subordinate to the interests of groups, nations and states. It is a spirit that requires all words and actions to be in line with the collective interests of the people. In July 1934, Stalin clearly put forward the concept of collectivism in a conversation with the British writer Wells: "Collectivism and socialism do not deny individual interests, but organically combine individual interests and collective interests." "There is not and should not be irreconcilable opposition between the individual and the collective, between individual interests and the collective interests. There should be no such opposition, because collectivism and socialism do not deny individual interests, but combine individual interests with collective interests. Socialism cannot put aside individual interests. Only a socialist society can give the fullest satisfaction to this individual interest. Moreover, a socialist society is the only reliable guarantee of the protection of individual interests." The concept of socialist collectivism has been used until now, but in fact, this spirit of collectivism has emerged as early as China's family-based unit as a social structure, and has become the basic characteristic of Chinese traditional culture. China has always attached importance to the family group with blood relationship as the bond, emphasizing that the "person of the group" is the center, and the significance of an individual lies in its responsibility, obligation and contribution to the family, society and other groups. Individualism, as opposed to collectivism, maintains that all values are centered on the individual, and that the individual

himself has the highest value. In the civilization of western society, individualism as a way of life and value concept has the significance of integrity and universality. Western culture emphasizes the status of an independent individual. Everyone should decide various relationships according to their own will, achieve self-realization through their own choices and efforts, and do not have to be responsible for others. It fully affirms individual rights and vigorously advocates the spirit of freedom.

## 2. The Reasons for the Emergence of Two Different Culture Spirits

### (1) Geographical environment

The natural basis for the origin of the long-established Chinese civilization has its unique style. The two words "geography" and "collective" seem to have nothing to do with each other, but they are deeply related in essence. China, the cradle of Chinese civilization, has a vast land and rivers. The Yangtze River, Yellow River, Heilongjiang River, Pearl River and other major water systems cover an area of millions of square kilometers, and the Yellow River is called our mother River. These water systems provided abundant living resources for our ancestors, so that they had fertile land and rich species, so that life could continue. The Yellow River is the most important cradle of Chinese civilization, carrying 1.6 billion tons of sediment every year, of which 1.2 billion tons flow into the sea, the remaining 400 million tons remain in the lower reaches of the Yellow River, forming an alluvial plain, coupled with warm and humid climate conditions, for the growth of plants and the development of farming civilization provides favorable natural conditions. China has always been a big agricultural country, people take farming as the foundation, and "food" occupies an important position in people's hearts. People plant, build houses and build families on the land, and land has become the material wealth that every Chinese depends on for survival. With the improvement of productive forces, private ownership and class began to appear, the primitive society began to disintegrate, and the hereditary throne system opened the door of the era of "family under the world" in our country. "Family world" means that a certain family owns the world and controls it, which means that all the land in the world belongs to a family, and others must obey and support the family in order to obtain the land.

Since then, a variety of political and economic systems in Chinese history have been formed on the basis of “family under the world”, and collectivism has gradually developed.

Western civilization is mainly represented by ancient Greek civilization. The Marine geographical environment of Greece is very different from that of China’s great river basins. The birthplace of Western civilization is narrow and mountainous, so there is not much land for people to farm. In addition, the climate is characterized by wet winter and dry and hot summer, which is not conducive to the growth of food crops. The amount of land available for cultivation in Western countries is very limited, which inevitably leads to frequent wars between clans and tribes for land. It is common for land owners to change, and people’s pursuit of personal interests will follow. The natural environment can give birth to the mode of production, culture, politics, economy, etc. Western countries lacking rich land first developed commercial trade, and a large number of coastlines provided natural conditions for them to carry out commercial exchanges. Commerce is people’s pursuit of interests, and the prosperity and development of commerce thus intensifies people’s pursuit of personal interests.

#### (2) Economic Basis

Chinese collectivism is closely related to China’s agricultural economy. Due to the development of agriculture and the establishment of the economic system, Chinese people work and live in the unit of “family” and pay taxes. China has long had the tradition of recording household registration. There was a system that clearly stipulated that every child except the eldest son must separate their family, set up their own business and register, otherwise the tax will be doubled. This was the beginning of China’s social structure with “home” and “household” as its units. The Chinese family system developed when several generations of a family lived together.

The idea of individualism in the West originates from the prosperous commodity economy. The Greeks lived in a maritime state, subsisted on trade and commerce, which required them to live together in cities, and organized their society around the city-state, and their form of social organization was based on the common good of the city, and in a city-state there was no moral reason to think that one person should be more important or superior to another. The development of commodity economy has diluted people’s concept of blood, promoted the development of city-state politics, and promoted the formation of natural rational thought based on contract, thus giving birth to the idea of individual standard.

#### (3) Cultural Philosophy

Confucianism is the core thought of Chinese traditional culture. The excellent cultural thoughts of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trust, gentleness, kindness, courtesy, frugality, and letting have formed the national character of the Chinese people, which is gentle, kind, respectful and law-abiding, and also laid the foundation for the formation of the Chinese nation’s collective ideology. Confucianism advocates “traveling within” and advocates active entry into WTO. Confucius, the founder of the Confucian School, attached great importance to etiquette, maintained the feudal hierarchy, and worked to standardize all kinds of social relations, especially the moral relations between Kings and ministers, father and son, and brothers. He believed that everyone should have a clear positioning of his role and assume corresponding responsibilities. The resulting

qualities of “seeking governance in its position”, “mother’s kindness and son’s filial piety”, and “brother’s friendship and brother’s respect” have penetrated into the blood of every Chinese. The top-down, hierarchical social hierarchy is ultimately a family system, and society is an extension of family and family. This land-based family social system constitutes a huge collective with layers of hierarchy and distinct threads. It develops in accordance with the geographical environment and economic conditions of the development of Chinese civilization, enduring and lasting for thousands of years.

The Sophists in the West began to discuss the problem of man himself very early on. By the time of Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, the focus of western philosophical research shifted from nature to man himself, and the rational spirit was established. “In Socrates’ view, man’s rational cognition should be directed first not to nature but to man himself, the so-called know thyself.” The “virtue” proposed by Socrates is different from the “benevolence” proposed by Confucius. It is more inclined to pay attention to oneself, examine and interrogate oneself, and attach importance to human soul and individual rationality. After the Renaissance, the religious Reform and the Enlightenment, individualism in the West was further developed. Humanist thinkers focus on each individual again, emphasizing individual liberation, affirming human rights and denying theocracy. The Reformation recognized the individual interpretation of the Bible and believed that everyone could communicate directly with God without going through the church, affirming the value and role of the individual. During the Enlightenment period, Hobbes in England raised the individual infinitely, and the value of the individual should not be ignored, whether in real life or religious belief. The West’s individualism is already evident.

### 3. The Embodiment of Chinese Collectivism and Western Individualism Value Orientation in the Real Society

(1) Collectivism and individualism embodied by differences in family concepts

No matter in China or Western countries, people attach importance to the structure of “family”, but the concept of family in China and Western countries is different. The family structure in today’s society is mainly reflected in two aspects: marriage and kinship. In the traditional concept of Chinese people, marriage is not only the matter of two people, but also the matter of two families, so there is a “pay attention to the marriage”. In China, a marriage of two people is essentially  $1+1 > 2$ , and both men and women in the same marriage relationship not only have to manage their own newly formed family, but also shoulder the responsibility of taking care of the other half’s parents. The traditional homologous family continues to extend branches, the family size gradually expands, and the kinship relationship extends to a broader scope, emphasizing the important status of the family as a collective, and such traditional Chinese thoughts as “shining the lintels” and “shining the ancestors” profoundly reflect this feature. In this respect, Western culture differs from Chinese culture in that the husband and wife are the core of the family. In Western society, the size of the family is small, the family structure is relatively loose, and the phenomenon of two or several generations living together is very rare. Western

traditional culture believes that God created marriage first, and then there was the family. Therefore, the marriage relationship should take precedence over parents, children and other family relationships. Therefore, the Western family has become a nuclear family structure centered on the relationship between husband and wife. In Western countries, children do not necessarily have to support their parents, and couples who establish a marriage relationship do not have the “obligation” to “carry on the family line”, which is a reflection of the Western concept of individualism.

(2) Collectivism and individualism embodied by differences in communicative language

Human beings possess social attributes, and social communication language is an indispensable and significant factor in everyone’s life. Influenced by different social cultures, people from different countries have many differences in social communication language. Different social communication language habits can also reflect the different social values of different countries. Relatives are the earliest people we know in this world, which involves kinship terms. No matter which country it is, the kinship relationship formed by blood ties is the same, but the way of addressing them varies. In Chinese, there are different and detailed divisions for relatives on the mother’s side and the father’s side. For example, the father of one’s mother is called “grandpa on mother’s side” or “maternal grandfather”; the mother of one’s mother is called “grandma on mother’s side” or “maternal grandmother”; the brothers and sisters of one’s mother are called “uncle on mother’s side” and “aunt on mother’s side”, and on this basis, they are further divided according to their age, such as “elder uncle on mother’s side”, “younger uncle on mother’s side”... “elder aunt on mother’s side”, “younger aunt on mother’s side”... In Chinese culture, the father’s father is called “grandfather” or “grandpa”, the father’s mother is called “grandmother” or “granny”, and the father’s brothers and sisters are called “uncle”, “aunt”, and so on, with further distinctions based on their ages. However, in English, there are no such detailed distinctions. Whether it’s from the father’s side or the mother’s side, the father is called “grandfather”, the mother is called “grandmother”, the brothers are called “uncle”, and the sisters are called “aunt”. This difference indicates that traditional Chinese culture emphasizes strengthening the close relationship among relatives and the value of collectivism by detailing the terms of address for relatives. In contrast, people in Western countries do not make such detailed distinctions in addressing relatives and tend to call them by their names directly, highlighting the individual’s independent existence and demonstrating a strong sense of individualism.

(3) Collectivism and individualism embodied by dietary cultural differences

Diet is the basic need of human survival. At the beginning, diet was only a behavior made by human beings for survival. However, with the development of productive forces, diet has gradually developed into a unique culture. From the perspective of eating style, the Chinese family eating habit of eating together: the dishes are placed in the center of the table, everyone is free to pick dishes, and they prefer to sit around the round table to drink. In this way, it presents a kind of unity and happiness in form, reflecting the Chinese traditional concept of collectivism. Westerners, on the other hand, serve their food one by one, using separate utensils and not touching other people’s food. This way facilitates the emotional

communication between individuals, and also shows the Westerners’ respect for individuality and self. In particular, the buffet in Western food puts individual independence and autonomy in the first place, which runs counter to the traditional Chinese cultural model of big family unity. From the perspective of the social function of diet, Chinese diet has the function of collective communication. Since ancient times, whether it is marriage, funeral, entrance examination and ancestor worship outing, all through diet or “eating” to achieve the purpose of communication. In today’s increasingly frequent economic activities, dinner party has become a unique “group building” essential project of Chinese companies, but also a necessary means to contact customers for business negotiations. For Western countries, eating is more pragmatic. People in Western countries will separate eating from communication purposes, and will not deliberately sell products or solve problems while eating, or even try to avoid negotiating or doing business at the table, which reflects the concept of individualism in Western countries.

## 4. Conclusion

Looking forward to the future, the study of collectivism and individualism will continue to deepen in the field of cross-cultural communication. On the one hand, with the acceleration of the process of globalization, the collision and integration between different cultures are becoming more frequent, which provides rich materials and broad space for further exploration of collectivism and individualism. Future studies can analyze the evolution and influence of the two in different social situations from more dimensions and more deeply. On the other hand, under the multicultural background, how to organically combine collectivism and individualism to better serve social development and promote human progress will be a topic worthy of continuous discussion.

In addition, with the continuous progress of science and technology, the forms and ways of cross-cultural communication are also constantly innovative. This provides a new opportunity for us to deeply study collectivism and individualism. For example, through the Internet, social media and other platforms, people can more easily access to ideas in different cultural backgrounds, thus providing more information and resources for research.

In short, in future research, we should continue to uphold an open and inclusive attitude, and constantly explore the connotation and value of collectivism and individualism in Chinese and Western cultures, so as to contribute to the promotion of cross-cultural communication and social development.

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