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A Comparative Study of Confucius' "Wind-Grass" Concept and Socrates' "Gadfly Stinging Steed" Metaphor – An Exploration of the Implied Relationships Between Chinese and Western Philosophers and Common People

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Abstract:

China and ancient Greece, in the Axial Age, developed different understandings on the issue of the relationship between the philosophers and the masses. Taking the "Wind-Grass" concept and the "Gadfly Stinging Steed" metaphor as windows, it can be found that according to Confucius, the virtue of Jun-zi is to influence the general public; according to Socrates, philosophers are doomed to offend public anger and be slandered and resented by the common people. Besides, Confucius built a benign and bi-directional interactions between the philosophers and the common people; Socrates highlighted the opposition, exclusion, and sharp conflict between philosophers and civilians. This paper explores the differences behind the two cultural concepts from a comparative perspective, in terms of the subjective consciousness of the masses, the cultural status of the philosophers, and the particular manners in which interactions occur, and analyzes the possible reasons for the differences in terms of cultural and educational backgrounds, the differences between people-oriented and democratic principles, and the different pursuits of balance and extremes respectively.

Keywords: Confucius; Socrates; Wind-Grass; Gadfly Stinging Steed; philosopher

1. Introduction

In the Axial Age, there's a clear difference between China and the West in terms of the role and historical mission of the philosopher, an important manifestation of which lies in the relationship between philosophers and the general public. This paper will take the comparison between Confucius' "Wind-Grass" concept and Socrates' "Gadfly Stinging Steed" metaphor as a starting point to explore the differences in the relationship between Chinese and Western philosophers and the common people, and to analyze the possible reasons for the differences.

The concept of the Jun-zi in Chinese philosophy shares similarities with that of the philosopher in Western philosophy. Jun-zi, as depicted in the "Wind-Grass" concept, can be considered a parallel to the philosopher as both of them are tasked with a quest for truths and a contemplation of the form of eternal goodness. The ancient Greek philosophers sought to understand the beauty and goodness that transcends the realm of mundane, concrete knowledge, while the Confucian Jun-zi were expected to embody benevolence and virtue as innate qualities and to cultivate genuine wisdom as a guiding principle for self-reflection and interpersonal relationships. For philosophers, in the nature of both Chinese and Western pursuits, a recommended willingness to sacrifice one's life for the sake of truths, virtue, and benevolence can be clearly seen. Thus, based on the above, a vision that can subsume Jun-zi into the category of discussing philosophers lays the starting point for the exploration in this paper.

Confucius used the phrase "When the wind blows, the grass bends – good influences of Jun-zi on common people" (*The Analects of Confucius· Yanyuan*) to describe the role of philosophers in appeasing, guiding, and reforming the public. This embodies the relationship pattern centered on philosophers with significant exemplary role and high moral status, and reveals the harmonious nature of the "wind" and the voluntary obedience of the "grass".

For the “Wind-Grass” concept, Zhu Xi commented that if the emperor governed the country and indoctrinated the people with good intentions and kindness, the masses would also remain virtuous and placid. The wind blows, and it affects the grass, making it no longer stand upright. (Zhu Xi, *The Sishu: The Classic Texts of Confucianism in Chinese and English*) Under the influence of the blowing wind, all the grasses turn prostrate, which mirrors how Jun-zi uses the virtue to influence the people, impressing all of them.

“Wind” refers to Jun-zi and philosophers, and an ideal model composed of their traits and characters; while the “grass” is related to the general public’s personalities. In the interactive relationship between these two types of people, the philosopher is in the upper position because of the virtue; while the common people are in the lower position due to the lack of intellect and morals.

In Plato’s writings, according to Socrates’ opinions, the role of the philosopher is that of the “Midwife”, who, with art of midwifery, promotes the self-production of the masses’ ideas in the process of arguing with the “hoi polloi”; the “Torpedo Fish” (Plato, *Meno, Dialogues of Plato*, 97), which, through cross-examination, causes the masses to be bogged down, “bewitched and enchanted”; and through the paralysis of transience, torpifies them, facilitates their unceasing self-examinations and the cleansing of stereotypes.

It’s also that of the “Gadfly” (Plato, *Apology, Dialogues of Plato*, 55), which is incompatible with the city-state and carries the responsibility of pricking and “arousing and persuading” the masses: “I am the gadfly of the Athenian people, given to them by God, and they will never have another if they kill me.” (55) Socrates positioned himself and the philosophers’ role in the society as “Gadfly”, and compared Athens and the general public to a lazy, noble, and idle steed – like a gadfly stinging on the old horse of the city-state, which, though strong, is bulky and slothful, and must be stimulated by the gadfly. Moreover, as a consequence of this wake-up call and stimulus, the gadfly would be hated by the huge group, just as Socrates was awake to the possibility that he might be killed by the city-state. By building this metaphor, Socrates tried to elaborate that the philosophers, such as himself, were destined to offend the public, to be accused of the “hoi polloi”, and to face the death amidst the slander, denigration, and cynicism of the masses. It’s something that refers to slanderous vilification, which means, on the philosophical level, to cover the truth with superficiality.

It is pointed out that the gadfly, as the warner, is consciously making the city-state and its inhabitants move towards a destination the gadfly wishes. Based on this conscious directionality, Marshall puts forwards a unique idea that ΜΥΩΨ should be spur instead of gadfly. (Marshall, *Gadfly or Spur? The Meaning of ΜΥΩΨ in Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 173) In a word, in the process of discerning the true meaning and metaphor of ΜΥΩΨ, an argument is clearly demonstrated that the stimulation of the gadfly, that is, the philosopher, to the city-state and the people is not an unconscious act. The symbolism of the gadfly in the philosopher’s actions is not just a coincidence, but a deliberate and meaningful act carried out with full understanding and intention. The philosopher serves as a trigger for self-reflection and contemplation, arousing the conscience of the community, and dragging it out of its state of complacency. Additionally, it’s also noticeable in their interactions with the majority that there are opposition and exclusion.

The differences in the relationship patterns between the philosophers and the common people and the essential yet complex influences from philosophers in both modes of relationship, constructed in China and the West respectively, can be corroborated and compared from the following aspects.

2. Confucius’ Recognition of the Subjective Initiative of Common People and Socrates Seeing the Masses in the City-state as “Fools”

The “Wind-Grass” concept constructed by Confucius is not a forced dissemination pattern, but a communication method with a strong emotional tone, in which the public is regarded as the subject that can be roused and enlightened. This is fundamentally different from the “Gadfly Stinging Steed” metaphor.

According to the Magic Bullet Theory in the early 20th century, the communication contents function as a potent bullet, and the audiences are a target, awaiting and then bearing it. As a result, the audiences will undoubtedly be knocked down by the magic bullet’s attack. The flaw of this interaction is that it exaggerates the force and impact of communication and dissemination yet underestimates the subjective initiative of the audiences. Although the “Wind-Grass” concept also emphasizes the power and influence of the “wind”, that is, the Jun-zi’s virtue, it does not ignore the progressive nature of the communication process and the public’s ability to understand on their own.

(Xie Qingguo & Chen Yucheng, 63) The fact that the grass lies down, but does not break or fracture shows that although the people are constrained by the ancient Chinese ideology of respecting the emperor and the traditional social system, they still have the thinking capacity to measure the contents of the message, and own a certain degree of autonomy and plasticity.

Furthermore, in the “Wind-Grass” concept, although the virtues of the Jun-zi are described as wind and the qualities of the general public are portrayed as grass, this expression does not deny the existence of the morals and characters of the common people. This indicates that the virtue of gentlemen has shifted into the normal life and gradually evolved into the conduct with universal value. The relationship between the philosopher and the common people in the traditional Confucian sense, represented by the “Wind-Grass” concept, contains an affirmation of the value of the public’s subjective consciousness of “to know”. Although finally, the Jun-zi’s virtues occupy the main ideological field in this interactive relationship, the lying-down of the grass can still be regarded as a consensus built upon the both two sides.

However, Socrates, in constructing the “Gadfly-Steed” mode of relationship, fundamentally denied the discernment and wisdom of the masses at the very beginning of the discussion. He saw the common people as passive receivers who did not possess any apt logic of thoughts, or the moral ability to do so. In *Crito*, Socrates believed that it was unnecessary to pay attention to the opinions of the majority. “Soc.: But why, my dear Crito, should we care about the opinion of the many? Good men, and they are the only persons who are worth considering, will think of these things truly as they occurred.” (Plato, *Crito, Dialogues of Plato*, 69) Besides, the masses can neither cause disasters, nor a feat of kindness. They can neither make one wiser nor one stupider; they can only drift with the current.

Furthermore, the “foolishness” of “hoi polloi”, elaborated by Socrates, has a richer connotation than merely being “insane”. Here, “foolishness” refers not only to “stupidity”, but also to the greatest mistake of the common people – ignorance and arrogance, that is, not knowing that they don’t know. In other words, the masses do not own the wisdom of knowing their ignorance.

Socrates divided wisdom into divine wisdom, human wisdom, and certain kind of wisdom. The reason why the certain wisdom is higher than human wisdom is that it is the wisdom owned by those who know their ignorance, and it is the wisdom between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men. The reason why human wisdom is insignificant is that the so-called “knowledge” that the common people think they have has already covered up the only wisdom they may truly have. On this basis, the “knowledge” of the common people is a kind of false knowledge based on ignorance. Therefore, human wisdom, due to its character of not knowing what he does not know, is essentially the same as a kind of usurpation, and blasphemy. In this regard, Socrates’ total negation of the value of “knowledge” – human’s mechanical knowing, is more radical than Confucius’ doctrine.

3. Confucius kept the philosopher in the moral superior position of being admired; Socrates put the philosopher in the inferior position of being accused and hated by the masses

As in *The Analects of Confucius· Zilu*, if one minds and polishes his own words and deeds, it will not be difficult to administer the country; if one pays no attention to do so, then he cannot influence the people or raise them up. As in *The Analects of Confucius· Taibo*, if the ruler treats his family members generously, a culture of benevolence will arise among the common people; if the ruler remains zealous, responsible, and righteous while being with his old friends, the common people will not be indifferent to others as well. In Confucianism, the Jun-zi is a combination of traditional customs, invisible hierarchy, and spiritual qualities, and plays the role of leader in both political and cultural life.

Confucianism attaches importance to the construction of a positive image of the philosophers, which leads to the requirements of learning, thinking, and cultivating oneself. When the philosophers lead the general public with moral standards and virtues, the masses will pursue good ethics, and gradually possess admirable qualities as well. In *the Analects of Confucius· Zilu*, it is said that if the ruler is well-mannered, nobody will show a contempt; if the ruler is just, nobody will disobey him; if the ruler is trustworthy, nobody will treat him dishonestly. The influence of the philosophers on the common people is an exteriorized manifestation of virtues after the internalized, personalized requirement of “cultivating oneself” is completed.

Confucianism regards moral codes, edification, and rituals as the major elements in the construction of traditional ethics and morality, and therefore, the philosophers should take up the responsibility of introspecting, and correcting oneself first and then influencing others by benevolence and duty. Liang Qichao pointed out that Confucianism deeply believes in the effectiveness of people's exemplary influences. No matter what customs and rituals one wants other people to learn, the Jun-zi should first practice them to make a demonstration. (Liang Qichao, *The History of Pre-Qin Political Thought*) In the mode of the relationship between philosophers and the common people constructed in Confucianism, philosophers educate the members of society by first practicing the disciplines on their own.

In contrast to the Confucian doctrines, in which the philosopher completes the process of cultural transmission from a morally high position, according to Socrates' ideas, the philosopher should be in an inferior position such as being the "Gadfly", "Torpedo Fish" and "Midwife". This also invariably de-constructs the top-till-bottom educational traditions of the Sophists.

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard de-coded and explained Socrates' midwifery arts, then summarized it to the following rules: to make those who think they know know that they don't know; to make those who think they do not know know that they know. The practice of "making those who think they know know that they do not know" can be found in *Meno*. Socrates and Meno discuss about virtue. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates admitted his benightedness, while Meno thought it easy. Thanks to Socrates' repeated interrogation and persistent cross-examination, Meno finally finds difficult to justify himself and perceives his ignorance of the question:

Soc.: But if not by knowledge, the only alternative which remains is that statesmen must have guided states by right opinion, which is in politics what divination is in religion; for diviners and also prophets say many things truly, but they know not what they say.

Meno: So I believe.

Soc.: And may we not, Meno, truly call those men 'divine' who, having no understanding, yet succeed in many a grand deed and word?

Meno: Certainly. (Plato, *Meno*, *Dialogues of Plato*, 123)

Unlike the "Wind-Grass" mode of spreading culture based upon moral loftiness and nobleness, Socrates constantly interrogated people to give them continuous stimulation, so that they could be disparaged, alerted, and then know that they do not know.

4. The Benign and Bi-directional Relationship in "Wind-Grass" Concept and the Opposition and Exclusion in Interactions Between Philosophers and Commoners in "Gadfly Stinging Steed" Metaphor

The virtue of the philosophers needs to be understood by the common people in the long process of being educated and influenced. The substance of "Feng-Hua", literally the wind making the grass bend down, is a gradual enlightenment based upon moral values. In *The Book of Documents*, it is recorded that Heaven only favors those who are virtuous; the masses merely love and respect the benevolent ruler (*The Book of Documents· Cai Zhong*), which shows that in ancient China, indoctrination has been formed to integrate society and transmit culture. On the other hand, the "Wind-Grass" concept not only highlights the function of "Feng-Hua" in the process of dissemination, but also enriches its connotation in the course of historical progression, adding the function of euphemism and satire to the benign bi-directional relationship.

In the relationship between philosophers and the masses in the Western society of the Axial Age, as shown in the Socratic doctrine, both the philosopher as a gadfly interrogating and alerting the general public and the philosopher as a midwife tirelessly promoting the self-production of ideas for the masses are to provide a bottom-up impetus for the whole city-state. Therefore, an "incitement" has been completed by the "unpopular" philosopher in a lower position.

5. An Analysis of the Possible Reasons for the Differences Between the Two Kinds of Relationships Between Chinese and Western Philosophers and the Masses

There are reasons for the differences between China and the West regarding the role and historical mission of philosophers. The following can be some of the possible reasons.

5.1 The Differences Between Chinese and Western Traditional Political and Cultural Patterns

Ancient China's traditional patterns, in terms of politics and culture, featuring the integration of family and nation as well as the syncretism of administrator and instructor, have formed a mode of education and communication that is different from that of the West. At that time, the group who administered also held the rights to make decisions in both education and culture. Thus, the "Wind-Grass" concept is an epitome of Confucian thinking on the unity of political and cultural communication in ancient China.

The Analects of Confucius advocates the integration of the communication of mainstream political consciousness with that of cultural indoctrination, including the unification of communication paths and roles. (Yang Xiaoling, 164) Moreover, it attaches great importance to the value of the philosophers' practices and demonstration. After Confucius, two important developers of Confucianism, Mencius and Xunzi, also further evolved their views on the unity of political and educational communication, promoting a theory of which, with local Chinese ideological and cultural characteristics, and historical connotations.

Western societies in the Axial Age, with the tradition of secularization and democracy, develop a loose and flexible pattern of cultural transmission between the philosophers and commoners. The word "democracy" in modern Western languages, is derived from the ancient Greek word "demokratia" composed of "demos" and "kratos". "Demos" means people, region, and "kratos" means rule, administration. Therefore, "demokratia" refers to the administration of people, which reveals the long tradition and multiple connotations of ancient Greek patterns.

Under the long-term influence of democratic thoughts, ancient Greece has developed a pattern of separating politics from culture and administrators from those who instructed. As a result, the status of the subject of knowledge transmission was not given such a high moral status as it was in ancient China. In a nutshell, the relationship between philosophers and commoners is a peer-interaction, and it's precisely the equality that gives the relationship the possibility of being fraught with tension and conflicts.

5.2 The Differences Between the Chinese Principle of People as Foundation and the Western Idea of Democracy

The people-oriented principle and democratic thinking, which originated in ancient China and ancient Greece respectively, look similar but are in fact very different. Ancient Chinese people-oriented principle first emerged in the Western Zhou Dynasty. In *The Book of Documents*, it is said that people are the foundation of the country, and only when the foundation is solid and firm can the country be halcyon and stable. The most essential feature of ancient Chinese people-oriented thinking is to value the people, love the people, and believe in the people, and simultaneously, the aim of which is also to pacify the people, be they calm, so that the society can remain peaceful. In the Western Zhou Dynasty, Zhougong pointed out, the ruler should understand and sympathize with the hardships of the common people, and ensure the basic livelihood of the people by well developing agriculture. Xunzi also stated, if the people are at ease and feel comfortable with the social conditions, the emperor will be able to administer peacefully for quite a long time (*Xunzi, Kingship*), which shows that maintaining the stable society is one of the most important purposes of the ancient Chinese people-oriented principle. As a result, the authority of the emperor was consolidated by the practice of the people-oriented doctrines. This is different from the situation in ancient Greece, where the governance of the minority changed into the rule of the majority after the introduction and popularization of the democratic ideas in the city-state.

In ancient Chinese contexts, the people-oriented thought, to some extent, weakened the possibility of the commoners' advancement. The ancient Greek democratic idea advocated a shift of power to the masses. Therefore, on the one hand, it can be said that based on this difference, China has formed the "Wind-Grass" concept in which the wind blows and the grass bends down, the Jun-zi sets an example and the masses obey, while the West has formed the "Gadfly Stinging Steed" metaphor in which the philosophers try to wake up the city-state and "hoi polloi", but the masses are in opposition to them, forming an obvious conflict. On the other hand, the cultural system centered on "Wind-Grass" concept is also an expression and a means of protecting and maintaining the overall structure of people-centered doctrines. The harmonious relationship built in this theory can also be seen as a way to relieve the disputes and to help the emperor achieve the expectation of invariable peace.

5.3 The Differences in the Origin and Development of Education in China and the West

The word “education” is derived from the Latin word “educare”. The Latin “E” is for out, and “decare” is for to draw and drag, which means that education is to draw out valuable ideas from the hearts of the educated. (Chen Guisheng, 13) In Chinese, “Jiao” and “Yu”, according to Xu Shen’s *Origin of Chinese Characters*, refer to the concept based upon teaching: to make people be endowed with new knowledge, in a way of imitation of exemplary behavior; to cultivate: to tell and lead many students to what is right and good. (Xu Shen, *The Origin of Chinese Characters*) With the development of history, the connotation of “Jiao” has been constantly enriched and expanded, gradually containing the meaning of instruction, indoctrination, edification, admonition, and so on. It contains an ethical relationship between two sides, meaning that the emperor teaches his ministers, parents teach their children, and teachers instruct their students. (Wang Jing, 50) To conclude, it implies that education is a resultful influence exerted on people from the outside and from others.

Western educational philosophy focuses on inspiring people to discover and recognize knowledge that has already existed within their minds through guidance and interrogation; Chinese educational philosophy places more emphasis on the external giving and cultivation of cultural knowledge. The former is an “internal” concept, while the latter is more an “external” principle. Furthermore, this difference in the origin of the definition of education contributes to the differences in the construction of the relationship between philosophers and civilians. In the Western mode, the philosopher functions as a helper, a warner. He awakens the people “internally” through interrogation and stimulation. In the Chinese mode, the philosopher works as an instructor, a conductor. He makes the common people gain through “external” inculcation and dissemination.

In the later implementation of education, there are also fundamental differences between the “knowledge type”, the difference between knowledge and imperial art, such as the difference between objective knowledge and social knowledge of the human-centered world, and the difference between heavenly truths and argumentations. It presents a marked contrast in the way of thinking in the two regions.

Ancient China goes after knowledge to make it extend, while the West pursues knowledge in a connotative way. The West has attached importance to rationality and emphasized that the proof of a proposition must go through rigorous reasoning. On this basis, the interrogation of the philosophers represented by Socrates can be understood as a means of rejecting straightforward consensus and searching for ideal truths with publicness.

While Chinese philosophers aspired to and pursued the certain answer of specific questions, and passed this pursuit on to the masses; ancient Greek philosophers were geared to lead people to examine mis-conceptions in their thinking rather than to give fixed answers. Under this influence, in the Chinese mode, the philosophers transmitted socially consensual righteousness to the common people. In the Western mode, however, philosophers gave the common people a continuous stimulus to make them aware of the mis-conceptions in their thinking and to produce insights, without focusing on the accomplishment of clear answers.

5.4 The Differences Between the Chinese Pursuit of Convergence with the Community and the Western Principle of Individuality

Since ancient times, Chinese society has long been dedicated to the pursuit of the unity of man and nature. For example, for Confucius, he not only demonstrated an emotional attachment and reliance on Heaven (Tian) in a personal sense, but also saw it as the fundamental source of goodness and kindness on a macro level. This has gradually evolved into a collective unconscious concept and tendency of seeking common views. Western societies, on the other hand, pay special attention to the principle of independence and individuality.

Within historical Chinese perspectives, there are doctrines teaching people how to be neutral, impartial, and thus appropriate, such as for those who exhibit a tendency towards explosive anger, they are reconciled with peace of mind; for those who are too deep and complicated in their thinking, they are harmonized with calmness and gentleness; for those who are too brave and impulsive in their disposition, they are enlightened and made docile. (*Xunzi*) It is believed that Jun-zi should act in accordance with prevalent social norms and values, not to be biased, not to exceed a certain limit, otherwise he will degenerate into someone with low moral characters.

The Book of Documents has cited several virtues, saying that Jun-zi, the epitome of a noble and virtuous person, should exhibit qualities of openness and caution, tenderness and assertiveness, humility and solemnity, talent and diligence, resolution in the face of turmoil, uprightness and gracefulness, simplicity and meticulousness, rectitude and circumspection, bravery and reliability. These qualities combine to form the hallmark of a truly great and worthy individual (*The Book of Documents· Yu*), the emphasis of which is placed on finding an unbiased balance between these virtues. It requires virtuous people to seek a balance between two almost opposing behavioral characteristics. (Yang Zhongfang, 56)

Ancient Western societies advocate the search pursuing the ultimate and getting to the bottom of it; while ancient Chinese societies, on the other hand, invariably form a broad and long-lasting social consensus on pursuing common views and seeking balance, and therefore, the “Wind-Grass” concept has been formed.

6. Conclusion

Ancient China and Ancient Greece in the Axial Age, in their very different political, social, ideological, and cultural contexts, construct the “Wind-Grass” mode of “Feng-Hua” concept and the “Gadfly Stinging Steed” mode of cross-examination and stimulation respectively, reflecting the very different views of China and the West on the relationship between philosophers and common people and the influence of philosophers on the masses.

It's with tension that in the Chinese mode, the subjective initiative of the common people is recognized and emphasized, but the harmony and peace hidden in the “Wind-Grass” concept, to some extent, reflects the insufficiency of the self-capacity of the common people. In the Western mode, the subjectivity of the common people is criticized as “foolishness”, but the contradictory opposition found in the “Gadfly-Steed” metaphor precisely reflects the strong individuality of the common people. This contrast is quite thought-provoking. Philosophers and commoners, two seemingly both close and distant social roles, have left unique and indelible imprints of their times in the respective waves of Chinese and Western philosophical history.

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