

Origin of China's Human Rights Civilization: A Summary of the International Academic Conference on the Ideas of Human Rights in Ancient Chinese Classics

DING Jin^{*} & TENG Zhenduo^{**}

Abstract: *Human rights are both a hallmark of progress in human civilization and a shared achievement of all civilizations. Throughout history, civilizations, including the Chinese civilization, have continuously explored fundamental questions about human life, value, and dignity, collectively shaping the foundation of global human rights civilization. On November 20, 2024, the International Academic Conference on the Ideas of Human Rights in Ancient Chinese Classics was held at the Yuelu Academy of Hunan University. Attendants explored the historical origin and creative transformation of China's human rights civilization from four dimensions, namely comparative studies of human rights civilizations in China and abroad, human rights concepts in Confucian classics and historical records, human rights concepts in Chinese philosophical and miscellaneous works, and human rights concepts in legal texts. The conference examined the historical connection between human rights concepts in ancient Chinese classics and the shared values of humanity, aiming to promote global human rights dialogue and mutual learning through civilizational exchanges. By bridging "ancient and modern, East and West," it illuminated the civilizational foundations and Chinese wisdom underlying global human rights governance.*

Keywords: ancient Chinese classics ♦ human rights concepts ♦ human rights civilization ♦ global civilization initiative

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee has said that, "It is the pursuit of all societies to protect the life, value, and dignity of every person and ensure their entitlement to human rights. Chinese culture has always stressed the importance of respecting and caring for others. From Confucius who declared that 'benevolence has been the

^{*} DING Jin (丁进), Professor at the Law School of Hunan University.

^{**} TENG Zhenduo (滕振铎), Doctoral candidate of Hunan University.

greatest priority of governance since ancient times,’ through Mencius who said ‘Finding talents for the country is what benevolence is all about,’ to Xunzi who believed that people were ‘most valuable’ and Mozi who called on us to ‘love others as we do ourselves regardless of social status or wealth’ — each of these great thinkers stressed the intrinsic value of the person.”¹ Human rights are a hallmark of human civilization progress and a shared achievement of humanity. Throughout the long course of history, civilizations, including Chinese civilization, have steadily thought about and explored fundamental issues such as human life, value, and dignity, collectively shaping the foundation of global human rights civilization. Interpreting human rights concepts based on the traditions of Chinese civilization holds significant importance for enriching the forms of human rights in the global civilization today. On November 20, 2024, the International Academic Conference on the Ideas of Human Rights in Ancient Chinese Classics opened at the Yuelu Academy of Hunan University. The event was jointly organized by the China Society for Human Rights Studies (CSHRS), the Publicity Department of the CPC Hunan Provincial Committee, and Hunan University, and attended by more than 200 scholars and experts from countries including China, the United States, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, Portugal, Russia, Australia, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and Japan, as well as representatives from UN organizations, domestic government departments, and social organizations.

Participants focused on Chinese classics and examined the historical origins of China’s human rights civilization, its creative transformation, and innovative development from four dimensions, namely comparative studies of the historical development of human rights civilizations in China and abroad, human rights concepts in Confucian and historical texts, human rights concepts in philosophical and literary works, and human rights concepts in legal texts. They elucidated the historical connection between human rights concepts in Chinese classics and universal values, fostering dialogue among civilizations to promote the exchange and mutual learning of global human rights civilizations and highlighting the civilizational foundations of global human rights governance and China’s contributions to this field through the integration of “ancient and modern, East and West” discourses.

I. Key Human Rights Concepts in Chinese Classics

The vast trove of Chinese classics contains numerous seminal statements related to the “people,” shaping an enduring intellectual tradition and forming an integral part of China’s outstanding traditional culture. From the overarching assertions such as “The people are the foundation of the state” and “Enrich the people and improve their livelihood,” to specific ideas and

¹ Xi Jinping, “Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights,” *Qiushi* 12 (2022).

institutional practices such as nurturing the people, bringing peace to the people, protecting the people, and caring for the people, these concepts embody a profound respect for human life and put an emphasis on human value. These key statements provide intellectual resources and historical wisdom for the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional human rights concepts. For instance, the evolution of the human rights concept from “The people are the foundation of the state” to “people-centered approach” reflects a synthesis of historical tradition with theoretical and practical innovation. From the perspective of global human rights civilization, the key human rights concepts in Chinese classics will also enrich and expand our understanding of the origins and development of human rights worldwide. As Giuseppina Merchionne, President of The Belt and Road Initiative Italy-China Center of Collaboration and Cultural Exchanges, noted during the seminar: “The origins and significance of human rights concepts in China will undoubtedly attract great interest and attention.”

A. The human rights implications of *minben*

The term *minben* (people as the foundation) originates from the *Book of History*, which states, “The people are the foundation of the state; when the foundation is stable, the state is at peace.” Here, *minben* summarizes the early governance experience of Chinese civilization, represented by Yu the Great and affirms the fundamental role of the people in the political life of a nation from both a value-based and functional perspective. The concept frequently appears in Chinese classics, such as the *Book of History*, *Book of Changes*, *Book of Songs*, *Rites of Zhou*, *Book of Rites*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. During the period of a hundred schools of thought, the *minben* philosophy underwent further development and evolution, with the emergence of three milestone texts, namely *Mencius*, *Guanzi*, and *Xunzi*.

Yang Guorong, President of the Society of History of Chinese Philosophy and Professor at East China Normal University, stated, “Human rights are not abstract; they are realized through the concept of ‘people as the foundation.’” Broadly speaking, the concept means that everything is determined by the will of the people. Beginning with the *Book of History*, traditional Chinese thought proposed that ‘Heaven sees as the people see; Heaven hears as the people hear,’ emphasizing that the interests, perspectives, and opinions of the people are decisive.” Mencius enriched the *minben* philosophy with connotations such as valuing, loving, caring for, and protecting people. Zhang Chunlin, Professor at China University of Political Science and Law, explained that Mencius’s *minben* philosophy includes several key components: the idea of “valuing the people,” which indicates respecting public opinion and prioritizing people’s needs; the idea of “loving the people,” which promotes benevolence and cherishes the labor of the people; the idea of “caring for the people,” which aligns with public sentiment and enhances their well-being; and the idea of

“protecting the people,” which values life and protects the people’s right to survival. Liang Tao, Professor at the Renmin University of China, argued that the notion “the people are most precious” in *Mencius* affirms the basic rights of the populace, while “benevolent governance” ensures and protects these rights. The concept of “heavenly rank” (virtue) reflects the equality and dignity of individuals. Xie Pengcheng, Director of the Human Rights Research Center at Shandong University, summarized that the moral primacy of the “people” in traditional Chinese historical texts fundamentally stems from an exploration of “humanity,” particularly the recognition of human independence and equality. In *Guanzi*, *minben* evolved into the broader concept of *renben* (human-oriented philosophy), while *Xunzi*, drawing on earlier pre-Qin texts, introduced the “boat-water” metaphor, stating that “The ruler is like a boat, and the people are like water. Water can carry the boat, but it can also overturn it.” This analogy highlights the relationship between rulers and the people, endowing *minben* with a more pronounced human rights implication. International experts at the event repeatedly emphasized that the *minben* philosophy, which is reiterated throughout Chinese classics, holds significant historical value for reinterpreting the origins and development of global human rights civilization.

B. Human rights implications of *renben*

As mentioned above, the contribution of *Guanzi* to the *minben* philosophy lies in developing it into the broader concept of *renben*. In its chapter “Sovereign’s Words,” the idea of *renben* is articulated as “The foundation of a sovereign or king lies in putting people first.” This marks the first appearance of the phrase *yi ren wei ben* (putting people first) in Chinese classics. Just as *min wei bang ben* (the people are the foundation of the state) can be shortened to *minben*, *yi ren wei ben* can be shortened to *renben*. The transition from *minben* to *renben* represents a significant leap in understanding.

While *Guanzi* is credited with pioneering the *renben* philosophy, a historical review reveals that the concept of *renben* in Chinese classics predates *Guanzi*. Long Daxuan, Professor at Southwest University of Political Science and Law, argues that *The Analects of Confucius* starts from the logical premise of *renben* and establishes value orientations in handling relationships between heaven and humanity, humans and objects, and among people, such as “give one’s self earnestly to the duties due to men,” “humans are more valuable than objects,” and “treating others with propriety.” In terms of personal conduct and governance, it forms the core concept of “benevolence means loving others.” In social governance, it proposes practical paths such as “making the people numerous, enriching and educating the people,” Peter Hessler, former Swiss military attaché to China and historian, compared *renben* with “governing a large state is like cooking a small fish” in *Laozi*, Jia Yi’s *On the Faults of Qin*, Emperor Zhao of Han’s policy of “giving the people time to recover and multiply,” Confucius’s “harmony is most precious,” and Mencius’s “the people

are most precious and the ruler is least important” and considered *renben* the most important concept in Chinese human rights civilization.

The concept of *renben* holds significant human rights value. Lu Guangjin, vice-president of the China Society for Human Rights Studies and professor at Jilin University, pointed out that the Chinese *renben* philosophy emphasizes the value of human life and existence, embodying an awareness of the right to life. The *Analects of Confucius* mentions *ren* (humanity) 162 times, demonstrating Confucius’s deep regard for people. Phrases such as “of all living things, humanity’s spirit shines brightest,” “Humans are the heart of heaven and earth,” “Among all things under heaven, humans are the most precious,” “The people are most precious, the state is secondary, and the ruler is least important,” and “When the granaries are full, the people follow appropriate rules of conduct, and when there is enough to eat and wear, the people know honor and shame” have all derived from the *renben* philosophy, forming more specific human rights concepts. Qiao Qingju, professor at the Philosophy Department of the Central Party School (National Academy of Governance), notes that during the political transition between the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the *Book of History* already established the *renben* spirit by affirming “heaven assists with the virtuous only,” rejecting the unified notion of divine right and monarch-centered governance. Furthermore, the Enlightenment in the West championed “humanism” to counter divine-right and monarch-centered ideologies, which, though from a different historical context than China’s Zhou dynasty, share a similar fundamental spirit. Li Xin’an, associate researcher at the Academy of Military Sciences, conducted a comprehensive study of the Chinese *renben* philosophy, identifying key elements of the *renben* human rights ideology, including “Humans are most precious,” “Harmony between the self and the collective,” “Balance of rights and responsibilities,” “equal emphasis on ritual and law,” “People’s livelihood as a priority,” and “Universal harmony under heaven.” He proposed a four-stage theory of the development of *renben* human rights philosophy, encompassing its emergence, growth, enrichment, and innovation. Li also analyzed its contributions to the development of Western human rights and the advancement of contemporary global human rights initiatives.

C. Human rights implications of *minsheng*

The concept of *minsheng* (people’s livelihood) is an important human rights idea derived from *minben*. It is the result of combining *minben* with *housheng* (enriching the people), another concept from the *Book of History*. Cai Shen’s *Collected Annotations on the Book of History* says that “To enrich life means ensuring the people have silk for clothing and meat for food, ensuring that they are free from hunger and cold, thereby enhancing their livelihood.” *The Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals* also records that “When people’s livelihood is enriched, they can be virtuous.” This

shows that *housheng* is essentially *minsheng*, with its core being the protection of people's right to subsistence.

Lu Guangjin argued that the concept of *minsheng* in Chinese classics vividly reflects the awareness of the right to subsistence in Chinese human rights civilization. The *Book of History* contains the ancestral teaching of "A ruler should manifest his virtue in good governance, and the goal of governance is to bring a good life to the people." *Mencius* emphasizes ideas of nurturing the people, bringing peace to the people, and ensuring comfort for the people through concepts like "sustaining the people's livelihood" and "providing sufficient food, warm clothing, and comfortable living conditions." *Guanzi* advocates enriching the people with statements like "When the granaries are full, the people follow appropriate rules of conduct, and when there is enough to eat and wear, the people know honor and shame." A review of human literature from the Axial Age reveals that no other civilization has as rich a concept of *minsheng* as the Chinese civilization. With the accumulation of practical experience in protecting *minsheng*, the concept of *minsheng quanli* (livelihood rights) can also be deduced from the classic statements in Chinese texts. Professor Chang Jian from Nankai University holds that in ancient China, "legitimate profit" was identified through the debate on "righteousness versus profit," and it gradually evolved into the concept of *minsheng quanli* with human rights significance. Gong Xianghe, director of the Human Rights Research Institute at Southeast University, stated in his speech that *minsheng* is not an issue unique to modern society; as early as the pre-Qin period, *minsheng* referred to the survival interests of laborers in meeting their basic needs for food and clothing. He further analyzed the human rights implications of *minsheng quanli*, arguing that it possesses human rights attributes: Subjectively, it affirms the legitimacy of people's subsistence needs, while objectively, it is legally recognized in accordance with the level of social development.

In terms of theoretical extension, the *minsheng* philosophy further gave rise to human rights concepts such as *yangmin* (nurturing the people) and *baomin* (protecting the people). Ding Jin, professor at Hunan University, discovered that *yangmin* and *baomin* were referred to as the *baoxifa* (measures for nurturing the people) in *Rites of Zhou*. The chapter "Grand Minister of Instruction" mentions "using the *baoxifa* to nurture and protect all the people," including caring for the young, supporting the elderly, assisting the impoverished, helping the poor, treating the disabled favorably, and stabilizing the wealthy. *Baoxi* means protecting the people and enabling them to thrive. The "Six Policies of Baoxi" (including caring for the young, supporting the elderly, and aiding the impoverished) embody profound human rights principles and constitute a comprehensive "livelihood project" that has profoundly influenced ancient Chinese social governance for over two millennia. Additionally, *xumin* (caring for the people) is another human rights

concept derived from *minsheng*. It involves showing compassion for the disadvantaged and assisting vulnerable groups. Jin Yuanyuan, a doctoral student at Hunan University, extracted the human rights concept of *xuruo* (caring for the disadvantaged) from the *Book of Rites*, arguing that *xuruo* embodies the human rights principles of protecting the right to life and the right to health. He added that it serves as the ideological foundation for China's poverty alleviation projects and can be developed into a uniquely Chinese human rights discourse. Liu Jiayi, a doctoral student at Southwest University of Political Science and Law, analyzed the human rights implications of the Chinese human rights philosophy of "caring for the disadvantaged, including the emotional care based on *yirenweiben* (benevolence as the foundation), a value orientation centered on *yirenweizun* (respect for humanity), and a political foundation rooted in *yiminweigui* (the people are most precious).

D. Human rights implications of *minzhu*

The term *minzhu* (people as the principal) appears frequently in Chinese classics, but its basic meaning is "governance on behalf of the people" rather than "self-governance by the people." However, ideas similar to "self-governance by the people" also emerged early in Chinese classics. The *minzhu* concept also stemmed from the *minben* philosophy and created a model of "meritocratic democracy," in which capable individuals were selected from among the people to hold political power.

Jiang Guanghui, a professor at Yuelu Academy of Hunan University, held that the "Canon of Yao" in the *Book of History*, which praises Emperor Yao for selecting the commoner Shun as his successor, demonstrates that, theoretically everyone had the opportunity to be chosen as emperor. This system is somewhat similar to the selection of new consuls by the Roman Senate, but it is the world's earliest democratic selection system and a uniquely Chinese form of democracy, predating Rome by 2,000 years. Wang Huiyao, president of the Center for China and Globalization, argued that selecting virtuous and capable individuals represents a new type of democracy distinct from Western "electoral democracy," and that it can be termed "meritocratic democracy." In contrast, compared to Western electoral democracy, "meritocratic democracy" is a "selection-based democracy" that emphasizes choosing officials based on both virtue and ability through relatively equitable selection mechanisms, thereby better serving the people's livelihood and welfare. Zhao Jianwen, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, noted that the practice of "selecting the virtuous and capable" helped China avoid the aristocratic hereditary system in state politics, and that through systems such as recommendation and imperial examinations, talented individuals were incorporated into the national governance framework, providing high-quality talent for state administration and creating a pathway to break rigid social hierarchies.

The concept of *minzhu* in Chinese classics also evolved into the idea of *minquan* (popular sovereignty). For example, *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* contains the famous proposition "The world does not belong to one person; it belongs to all the people," which carries human rights implications and signifies the awakening of the concept of *minquan*. This idea holds an important place in the history of global human rights thought. Complementing this notion of sovereignty, *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* also advocates ideas such as valuing life, respecting life, preserving nature, safeguarding life, enjoying life, prioritizing the public good, following the people's will, benefiting the people, bringing peace to the people, enriching the people, caring for the people, and protecting the people. These proposals encompass a wealth of human rights concepts, including the protection of the right to life, the right to property, and the right to happiness.

E. The human rights implications of *minyi*

Minyi (public will) is another derivative concept of *minben*, and it carries profound human rights implications. It can be expressed as the "will of the people" or "the hankering of the people" (as in "the hankering of the people is always satisfied by the heaven"). Wang Zhongjiang, Professor at Peking University, pointed out that *minyi* and *minxin* (popular feeling) are uniquely Chinese human rights discourses that reveal the deep foundations of Confucian human rights philosophy in ancient China from the perspective of the people's desires and needs. Ann A. Pang-White, professor of philosophy at the University of Scranton, argues that Confucian "theories of public will" set the purpose of political power and governance, establishing fundamental standards and criteria for the legitimacy and justification of political authority. Jiang Guanghui noted that the *Book of History* states, "the hankering of the people is always satisfied by heaven" and praised the "revolutions of Emperor Tang of Shang and Emperor Wu of Zhou that overthrew their respective preceding dynasties," indicating that the people have the right to resist tyranny. This anti-tyranny philosophy predates similar assertions in the US Declaration of Independence by more than 3,000 years. Chen Renren, Professor at Yuelu Academy of Hunan University, found in the *Commentary on the Changes* the statement, "Heaven and earth change and four seasons take place. King Tang of Shang and King Wu of Zhou changed the mandate, obeying Heaven and complying with the wishes of the people." He also highlighted the chapter "Great Speech" in the *Book of History*, which states, "Heaven sees as the people see; Heaven hears as the people hear." These ideas demonstrate the unification of Heaven's will and the people's will, a shared belief in traditional Chinese society, thereby providing a philosophical and cultural foundation for the human rights concept of *minyi*.

II. The Spiritual Pursuit of Human Rights Concepts in Chinese

Classics

The outcomes of the seminar demonstrate that “valuing harmony” is a key spiritual pursuit of traditional Chinese human rights concepts. The “Canon of Yao” in the *Book of History* describes a process of “governing the world with harmony,” beginning with “promoting amity in the clan” and culminating in “harmonizing all nations.” This process, which starts with managing family relations and extends to governing the state, revolves around the central idea of harmony. From fostering familial harmony (‘clan amity’) to achieving societal harmony (‘state concord’), the human rights concepts in Chinese classics embody a prominent spirit of harmony. Even today, the belief that “a harmonious family leads to prosperity in all endeavors” remains a shared conviction among all Chinese people.

When applied to international relations, the ultimate goal of valuing harmony is “harmonizing all nations,” as stated in the “Canon of Yao.” Similar expressions can be found in the “Great Learning” of the *Book of Rites*, which mentions “bringing peace to the world” (*Great Learning*), and in Zhang Zai’s “Four Sentences,” which speaks of “creating peace for all generations.” These ideas of “harmony and peace” reflect the pursuit of global peace in traditional Chinese culture. Peace under Heaven, creating peace, and harmonizing all nations all convey the same ideal of social harmony. Professor Wang Guiguo of Zhejiang University holds that the principle of valuing harmony embedded in China’s excellent traditional culture, along with its emphasis on shared human dignity, offers valuable historical wisdom for shaping norms of state behavior in international relations. Jiang Guanghui argued that interpersonal relationships are the most complex, and international relations are the most important. In this context, “harmonizing all nations” represents the best solution offered by traditional Chinese culture for managing international relations and stands as one of the most important human rights concepts in Chinese classics. Yang Guorong, professor of philosophy at East China Normal University, noted that the concept of “harmonizing all nations” in the *Book of History* is similar to Immanuel Kant’s idea of “perpetual peace,” and it is a philosophical resource for constructing a harmonious community with a shared future for humanity. Zheng Renzhao, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, interpreted “harmonizing all nations” in the “Canon of Yao” as a recognition of Emperor Yao’s ability to unite people from near and far and extend familial harmony to societal harmony and ultimately to the harmonious coexistence of all nations. Fang Qiang, a professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth, observed that compared to the West, China’s most influential classics and ancient philosophers openly advocated for peace, opposing violence and killing.

When applied to interpersonal relationships, “valuing harmony” encompasses concepts such as “reconciliation” and “harmony as the most valuable.” Although reconciliation appears to address conflicts between individuals, it carries profound human rights implications as another expression of the Chinese civilization’s concept of harmony. It signifies the rights to peace and security. Feng Yuecheng, a doctoral student at Fudan University, offers a modern interpretation of Zhang Zai’s “enmity must be resolved through reconciliation” in *Enlightenment Through Confucian Teachings*. Feng argued that this idea represents a uniquely Chinese human rights discourse that can be applied not only to international relations but also as a concrete strategy for “harmonizing all people.” Zuo Lantao, a doctoral student at East China University of Political Science and Law, analyzed various perspectives on the Northern Song Dynasty court’s handling of the controversial case “A Yun Attempting to Murder Her Husband,” concluding that there is a “gentle ethics” in the criminal law practices of the Chinese legal tradition, which benefits shaping harmonious social relationships. Dai Jitao, Professor at Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, held that the statement “Make harmony a top priority in the application of rite” in the *Analects* presupposes the existence of diversity and conflict among multiple entities. To achieve a harmonious society, it is necessary to pursue balance and moderation while reconciling differences, embracing inclusivity, and accommodating diversity.

In the relationship between humans and nature, “valuing harmony” is expressed through concepts such as “Man is an integral part of nature” and “achieving balanced harmony.” Dong Zhongshu of the Western Han Dynasty stated, “In terms of integration of categories, heaven and man are one.” Zhang Zai of the Northern Song Dynasty explicitly referred to this as “the unification of Heaven and humanity.” The theory of “man being an integral part of nature” is one of the foundational sources of China’s human rights philosophy. The *Book of Rites* (chapter “Doctrine of the Mean”) states, “Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven.” Cheng Hao remarked, “The benevolent regard all beings of the universe as a whole.” Wang Shouren (Wang Yangming) stated in much the same vein, “The Heaven, the Earth, all things, and humanity are originally part of the whole.” These are all interpretations of the concept “man being an integral part of nature.” Lu Guangjin argued that Chinese civilization inherently possesses the characteristic of “following the timing of Heaven.” Confucianism advocates for a balanced and harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, while Daoism emphasizes “following nature,” both highlighting the unification and harmony between humanity and the natural world. Miao Zehui, a doctoral student at Sichuan University, traced the origins and evolution of the concept of “man being an integral part of nature,” asserting that it deepens the understanding of human rights and serves as an ethical foundation for human rights protection. Mary

Evelyn Tucker, a researcher at Yale University, held that “man being an integral part of nature” transcends an anthropocentric worldview, offering a cosmology of harmonious coexistence between humanity and all living things.

III. Distinctive Features of Human Rights Concepts in Chinese Classics

The pursuit of *renyi* (benevolence and righteousness) is a prominent feature of traditional Chinese human rights philosophy. The concept of *renyi* originates from the *Book of Changes* (chapter “Explaining the Trigrams”), which states, “The way of humanity lies in benevolence and righteousness.” This shows that the essence of “humanity” is *renyi*. Hu Yuan, a Confucian scholar of the Song Dynasty, explained in his *Commentary on the Book of Changes* that “Benevolence means universal love; righteousness means acting appropriately in accordance with the Way.” Acting appropriately constitutes righteousness, and practicing righteousness constitutes benevolence. From constitutes, a series of human rights concepts such as *rendao* (the way of benevolence), *ren'ai* (benevolent love), *renzheng* (benevolent governance), *xuxing* (compassionate punishment), *shenxing* (cautious punishment), and *zhongshu* (loyalty and forgiveness) have been developed, forming an essential foundation for human rights concepts in Chinese classics. Chen Renren, a professor at Yuelu Academy of Hunan University, argues that “constitutes” is a core concept in Confucianism and contains rich human rights implications. He holds that it affirms human nature, respects and cares for individuals, recognizes intrinsic human value, and protects human subjectivity, while granting people the right to resist social injustice and pursue a happy life.

First, “constitutes” has evolved into the concept of *rendao*. Yang Guorong believed that Confucianism embodies the “principle of *rendao*,” which aligns with the aspirations of modern human rights awareness. *Rendao* is highly inclusive. Long Daxuan, a professor at Southwest University of Political Science and Law, argues that *rendao* achieves moral autonomy through *ren'ai* and *renzheng*, thereby realizing human dignity. This further integrates *rendao* with concepts such as *airen* (loving others) and *shanzheng* (good governance).

Second, *renyi* has given rise to the concept of *renzheng*, a significant assertion within the framework of China's traditional human rights philosophy. Ann A. Pang-White, professor of philosophy at the University of Scranton, argues that the essence of *ren* lies in “*ren* means loving others.” When applied to politics, this becomes *renzheng*, the core elements of which are “stable property,” representing the right to subsistence, and “stable mind,” representing the right to development. Wang Xinsheng, a professor at Changsha University of Science & Technology, believes that Mencius's human rights philosophy is primarily centered on the concepts of *renyi* and *renzheng*. Jiang Xintao, a doctoral student at Southwest University of Political Science and Law, argues

that Mencius's *renzheng* serves as both the value pursuit and guiding principle for national governance. It imposes moral constraints on the public power of rulers, with the goal of protecting the human rights of citizens; its essence lies in the political philosophy of *minben*, and its value pursuit is the moral restraint on public power. The institutional design of *renzheng* focuses primarily on livelihood issues, particularly the right to subsistence.

Third, *renyi* has been applied to the field of criminal law, giving rise to the concepts of *xuxing* (compassionate punishment) and *shenxing* (cautious punishment). Jiang Bixin, Professor at Hunan University, explored the principles of *minben* and human rights care in ancient Chinese judicial hearings, humanitarianism in cautious punishment and penal practices, and the regulation of trial procedures to protect human rights and revealed their contemporary value, and their implications of people-orientation philosophy, humanitarianism, and fairness and justice. Dai Jun, executive director of the China Society for Human Rights Studies, extracted from the *Book of History* (chapter "Announcement to Kang") a series of human rights concepts, including benevolent governance to nurture the people, prohibition of humiliation, opposition to torture, conviction based on facts, punishment proportionate to the crime, non-extension of punishment to descendants, leniency in cases of doubt, independent judgment, punishment for corruption and abuse of power, and "the ultimate goal of punishment is to eliminate punishment." Li Yunlong, a young scholar at Shandong University, concluded that China not only possesses the concept of *xuxing* but also has an institutional framework for compassionate punishment, as demonstrated by the Song Dynasty's *jiyi* (collective deliberation) system in judicial practice. Song Chao, a doctoral student at Renmin University of China, argued that the principle of "non-execution of the innocent" is repeatedly emphasized in the *Book of History* and *Book of Songs*. Therefore, this principle served as a fundamental guideline for protecting human rights in ancient society. Moreover, Mencius and Xunzi regarded "non-execution of the innocent" as a basic tenet of *ren* (benevolence), profoundly influencing the development of *ren* thought. Liu Xiaolin, a professor at Jilin University, notes that the *Tang Code with Commentary* granted prisoners rights during detention, including access to clothing, food, medical care, hygiene, and rest, as well as special leave for marriage and funerals under certain conditions. The *Regulations for Prison Officials* outlined specific rights and their protection, such as rules governing the use of shackles, locks, and other restraints during detention. The *Law on Deciding Cases* specified penalties for judicial officials who failed to provide adequate protection or engaged in misconduct. Torture was permitted only under strict conditions, such as when a case remained unresolved after thorough investigation and verification, with written records and the joint approval of departmental heads. Wang Bintong, an associate professor at

Northwest University of Political Science and Law, analyzed *Practical Guide to Prison Management*, written by Zhao Shuqiao in the late Qing Dynasty. He emphasized the book's call for special care and compassion for elderly, juvenile, female, and sick prisoners, focusing on the details of their daily lives in detention. The effort to protect and uphold prisoners' right to subsistence reflects a humanistic philosophy of compassion for prisoners.

Fourth, *renyi* (benevolence and righteousness) has brought forth the concept of *ren'ai* (benevolent love). Confucius stated, "Benevolence means loving others," and scholars often use *ren'ai* as a synonym for *airen* (loving others). Fang Qiang, professor of history at the University of Minnesota Duluth, argued that Confucian values such as filial piety, fraternal duty, caring for the young, respecting the elderly, observing rituals, and the principle of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" — as well as sayings such as "At home treat parents with reverence, outside treat elders with respect, be circumspect and honest, love all people, and frequent those who are magnanimous and virtuous" and "Respect the elders in my family as well as the elders in other families; cherish the young in my family as well as the young in other families" — reflect a progression from familial love to universal love. This embodies the spirit of "fraternity," which aligns with the concept of "brotherhood" in the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Professor Dai Jitao from the School of Law at Guangdong University of Finance and Economics holds that "benevolence means loving others" extends the love that one feels for their parents to others. Wang Xigen, director of the Human Rights Law Institute at Huazhong University of Science and Technology, argued that Mozi's doctrine of *jianxiangai* (universal love) surpasses the Western notion of "fraternity" and lays a profound historical and cultural foundation for the rights to peace and development. In terms of legal values, it achieves comprehensive coverage of value subjects through "mutual benefit." Regarding legal origins, it reveals the jurisprudential basis of human rights through the internal logic of *jianai* (universal love) and *fayi* (legal standards). Professor Lu Guangjin, vice-president of the China Society for Human Rights Studies, asserted that, according to Confucius, *ren'ai* (benevolent love) must meet two conditions: First, "do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you," and second, "A humane person helps others establish what he himself wishes to establish and achieve what he himself wishes to achieve." The principle of "being considerate" encapsulates Confucius's idea of caring for others. It can be interpreted both positively and negatively as "A humane person helps others establish what he himself wishes to establish and achieve what he himself wishes to achieve" or negatively as "do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you." Professor Ru Ning from Nankai University holds that *The Western Inscription* written by Zhang Zai in the Northern Song Dynasty introduces propositions such as

“Heaven as father, Earth as mother,” “The world as one family,” “All people as brothers and all things as companions,” and “Love must be universal.” These ideas embody notions of interpersonal equality, social fairness in caring for vulnerable groups, and the ecological ethics of equality and harmonious coexistence, reflecting transcendent and timeless intellectual value.

Fifth, *renyi* has also developed into the concept of *zhongshu* (loyalty and forgiveness). Liu Jintian, a professor at Northwest University of Political Science and Law, argues that in the *Analects* “do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you” is described as *shu* (forgiveness) “a teaching that can serve as a lasting principle for conduct in one’s whole life”: Not harming others constitutes an obligation, while not being harmed by others constitutes a right. Combined, they form a complete human rights framework. In Liu’s view, *shu* can be elevated into the “way of being considerate,” which contains the human-centered value foundation of human rights, affirms the value subject of human rights, and recognizes inherent human nature as the basis of human rights.

IV. Developmental Characteristics of the Chinese Human Rights Civilization

From the classic texts of Chinese literature, it is evident that the Chinese human rights civilization emerged early, exhibited systematic and inclusive characteristics, and significantly influenced the formation of Western human rights thought. Through creative transformation and innovative development in practice, it continues to play an increasingly important role in global human rights governance and the advancement of the world’s human rights agenda. Scholars have high expectations for the contribution of Chinese wisdom to the development of global human rights.

First, Chinese human rights civilization has had a significant impact on Western human rights concepts. In terms of origins, it emerged relatively early. Jiang Guanghui, a professor at Yuelu Academy of Hunan University, noted that ideas such as “harmonizing all nations,” “selecting the virtuous and capable,” and “the hankering of the people are always satisfied by the heaven” from the “Canon of Yao” were conceived 4,000 years ago, and were among the earliest human rights concepts in the history of human civilization. Swiss scholar Peter Hessler and Professor Chang Jian from Nankai University praise the contributions of Luo Zhongshu and Zhang Pengchun to the drafting of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Qiao Qingju further revealed the influence of traditional Chinese human rights concepts on Europe, pointing out that the Enlightenment thinkers championed “rationalism,” the prototype of which is the universality of *li* (reason, principle) in Neo-Confucianism. Montesquieu believed that law is reason, and reason originates from China. French Enlightenment philosophers interpreted Confucius’s principle of “do

not do to others what you do not want others to do to you” as the philosophical foundation of “liberty” and incorporated it into the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (the *Declaration*). Article 4 of the *Declaration*, which states, “Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence, the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law,” is essentially a reiteration of the principle of the Confucian principle.

Second, the Chinese human rights civilization is characterized by its systematic nature. Qiao Qingju, a professor at the Department of Philosophy at the Central Party School (National Academy of Governance), argues that Chinese human rights civilization encompasses such aspects as survival, development, education, welfare, and relief. Notable concepts include the concept of *minben* (people as the foundation) expressed in “The people are the foundation of the state” (*minweibangben*); *fumin* (enriching the people), the concept of ensuring livelihoods for the populace; the emphasis on education reflected in “education for all without discrimination” (*youjiaowulei*); *yangmin* (nurturing the people), the concept of caring for vulnerable groups; *anmin* (bringing peace to the people), the concept of ensuring employment and family harmony; *baomin* (protecting the people), the principle of “the middle-aged are able to put their talents and abilities to best use” (*zhuangyousuoyong*) and “men have their roles, women have their homes” (*nan youfen, n iyougui*); the *jiumin* (rescuing the people) principle of “helping those in urgent need rather than simply aiding the wealthy” (*zhouji bu jifu*); as well as concepts of religious freedom, academic freedom, and legal justice in adjudication and sentencing.

Finally, the Chinese human rights civilization possesses distinct characteristics. Many of the participating scholars believe that China’s human rights philosophy embodies the concept of “integration of family and state” and collective values. Confucian human rights philosophy is characterized by its ethical, practical, and inclusive nature. Chen Lai, a professor at Tsinghua University, argues that Confucian thought is open to modern Western human rights concepts but does not accept the prioritization of “individual rights” or “individual freedom.” Instead, it emphasizes the common good of society, social responsibility, and virtues that benefit the public welfare. Mary Evelyn Tucker, a researcher at Yale University, noted that the core idea of Confucian thought advocates that humans are the heart of Heaven and Earth, forming a trinity of Heaven, Earth, and humanity. This unique value orientation has shaped Chinese human rights civilization. In contrast, Western cultural traditions focus solely on humanity, standing in stark contrast to the harmonious interaction of Heaven, Earth, and humanity in Confucian philosophy. Throughout world history, the civilizational resources embedded in historical contexts have always demonstrated a strong capacity for

development. Participating experts and scholars unanimously affirmed the contributions of Chinese human rights civilization to global human rights governance and the advancement of the world's human rights agenda. Awan Zamir, deputy director of the Center for Chinese Studies at Pakistan's National University of Science and Technology, remarked that China places collective rights above individual rights, integrating economic development, social stability, and national sovereignty as essential components of its human rights philosophy.

This perspective is grounded in the belief that development is a fundamental human right, and without a stable and prosperous society, other rights cannot be guaranteed or realized. Unlike the Western model, which prioritizes individual civil liberties, the Chinese model underscores the importance of a contextualized understanding of human rights, respecting cultural, historical, and political diversity. China has successfully lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, driven economic growth, and played a key role in global human rights governance, demonstrating to the world that pursuing collective prosperity is a vital pathway to ensuring equal dignity for all. Ann A. Pang-White, professor of philosophy at the University of Scranton, pointed out that globally, issues such as poverty, inequality, and educational injustice remain severe, adding that Confucian human rights philosophy provides a pathway to addressing these challenges through active government intervention to achieve social fairness and justice.

Looking ahead, Christophe Peschoux, former chief of special procedures at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), emphasized in his keynote speech: "There is an urgent need to re-moralize international life; there is an urgent need for China to ignite the light of civilization to illuminate the path toward a world of justice, peace, and humanity." Qiao Qingju advocated for promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture based on the interpretation of human rights concepts in Chinese classics. He called for actively practicing universal values for humanity, implementing the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative, and focusing on human rights to contribute to building a community with a shared future for mankind.

V. Conclusion

At the Symposium on Cultural Heritage and Development, General Secretary Xi Jinping profoundly stated: "Chinese civilization is the only great, uninterrupted civilization that continues to this day in a state form. This unequivocally affirms the cultural identity and robust vitality of Chinese civilization as it has responded to challenges and broken new ground through

self-development.”² Throughout the development of Chinese civilization, the Chinese nation has consistently respected human life and emphasized the intrinsic value of individuals. The vast corpus of Chinese classics records a civilizational tradition of respecting and caring for people, containing a rich and diverse array of human rights concepts. History does not remain in the past but points toward the future through the present. As participating scholars noted: “Without rooting in history, it is impossible to grasp the future.” The human rights concepts in Chinese classics not only provide a solid historical and cultural foundation for the development of China’s human rights endeavors but also offer historical wisdom from the East for the global human rights civilization and the governance of global human rights. From a global perspective, exploring the origins and development of Chinese human rights civilization is not only a reflection on human dignity and value rooted in tradition but also a practical effort to innovate and advance China’s human rights philosophy. Furthermore, it contributes to the exchange and mutual learning among civilizations, injecting continuous vitality and momentum into the development of global human rights. In this sense, the human rights concepts in Chinese classics belong to China, yet they resonate with the world; they are rooted in history, yet they will guide the future.

(Translated by *QIAN Chuijun*)

² Xi Jinping, “Speech Delivered at the Symposium on Carrying Forward Cultural Heritage and Promoting Cultural Development,” *Qiushi* 17 (2023).