

The Human Rights Awareness of Chinese Civilization in the

“Axial Age”

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Abstract: *During the “Axial Age,” Chinese civilization experienced a distinctive human rights awareness characterized by its endogeneity, autonomy, and originality. This awareness, based primarily on humanism, populism, and naturalism, emphasized respect for human beings, highlighting the importance of caring for, respecting, and protecting people, and focusing on “benefiting the people,” “nurturing the people,” “enriching the people,” and “prospering the people.” It reflected an awareness of human rights such as the rights to life, personality, subsistence, development, and environment. This human rights awareness, oriented towards values such as “achieving benevolence,” “valuing goodness,” “revering righteousness,” “cherishing harmony,” and “seeking the public good,” established a cognitive logic that unifies human nature, virtue, and rationality. It featured a human rights spirit that is not dominated by divine authority, based on moral and ethical philosophy, and oriented towards “positive” rights. This awareness delved into the value of being human and the meaning of human existence, demonstrating creativity and innovation, and marking a significant breakthrough in the history of human rights civilization. The ideological wisdom, spiritual strength, and practical pathways contained in this human rights awareness not only laid the foundation for the human rights thought of classical Chinese civilization but are also indispensable for contemporary China’s commitment to the “two combinations”. It holds important practical significance for advancing Chinese modernization and creating a modern human rights civilization for the Chinese nation.*

Keywords: Axial Age ♦ Chinese civilization ♦ human rights awareness ♦ human rights civilization ♦ “two combinations”

I. Introduction

In his book *The Origin and Goal of History*, German philosopher Karl Jaspers proposed the renowned “Axial Age” theory. Jaspers believed that “It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deep cut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being.”¹

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¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Translated by Li Xuetao (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2018), 8.

According to Jaspers, during this historical period, China saw the emergence of numerous thinkers and schools of philosophy such as Confucius, Laozi, Mozi, and Zhuangzi; India produced the *Upanishads* and Buddha; Iran and Palestine developed philosophies of good and evil along with prophets; and Greece witnessed the appearance of historians, thinkers, and scientists like Homer, Heraclitus, Plato, Thucydides, and Archimedes. Jaspers pointed out that “the most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period.”² In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and during this era, the whole of humanity took a forward leap towards universality,³ enabling a leap in the overall realization of ‘human existence’.⁴ Therefore, for short we may style this the ‘Axial Age’.⁵ History shows that the “Axial Age” marked a significant breakthrough in human civilization, laying the spiritual foundation for human civilization and exerting an immeasurable impact on subsequent generations.

As one pole of human civilization, Chinese civilization occupied a significant place in the world during the “Axial Age.” In terms of timeline, the Eastern Zhou Dynasty in ancient China (770-256 B.C.) largely coincided with Jaspers’ “Axial Age.” Historically, the “Axial Age” witnessed a period of cultural vibrancy and a flourishing of Chinese civilization. On October 15, 2014, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee in his speech at the Symposium on Literary and Art Work, mentioned that Jaspers’ observation about the “Axial Age” was “profound and insightful.”⁶ He stated, “Throughout history, China’s position and influence in the world has never relied on military might or outward expansion, but rather on the compelling power and appeal of its culture.”⁷ He also emphasized, “Very early on, our ancestors realized that ‘if distant peoples are not won over, then cultivate culture and virtue to attract them’. When examining the endowments, distinctive features, and spirit of the Chinese nation, one important aspect to consider is our belief in persuading people with virtue and educating people with culture.”⁸

“Human rights represent the progress of human civilization.”⁹ Without respect for and protection of human rights, there would be no modern human civilization. Compared to the over one million years of human history, the several thousand years history of human civilization, though brief, is rich in humanistic connotations and intellectual wisdom. One of the most significant aspects is humanity’s continuous and newfound conscious awareness of the value of being human and the significance of human existence. The “Axial Age” was a period of significant breakthrough in human civilization and also one of the concentrated periods in history for the emergence of human rights thought. During this era, major civilizations almost universally generated, to varying degrees, human rights thought related to respecting human life

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ Xi Jinping, *On Publicity and Ideological Work of the Communist Party of China* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2020), 94.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Xi Jinping’s congratulatory letter to the 2021 South-South Human Rights Forum”, *People’s Daily*, December 9, 2021, first edition.

and realizing human value, marking the “first human rights awareness” in human history.

For a long time, influenced by “Western-centric” views and constrained by traditional beliefs, people have had varying degrees of bias in their understanding of human rights. One of the most prominent issues is the belief that human rights thought or the concept of rights originated in Western countries and is a product of Western culture, having little connection with traditional Chinese culture, and even denying the existence of human rights-related thought in traditional Chinese culture. But as General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out, “It is the pursuit of all societies to protect the life, value, and dignity of every person and ensure their entitlement to human rights.” He also emphasized, “Chinese culture has always stressed the importance of respecting and caring for others.”¹⁰ Facts demonstrate that during the “Axial Age,” Chinese civilization experienced a human rights awareness characterized by its distinct endogeneity, autonomy, and originality, containing a wealth of human rights elements, even a “treasure trove” of human rights, which deserve cherishing, exploring, and utilizing.

Did the Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” harbor ideas of human rights? Or, extending the inquiry further, did traditional Chinese culture — an exemplar of excellence — embody such ideas? This is a fundamental question that must be clarified when exploring the human rights awareness in Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age.” To answer this question, three key aspects regarding the understanding of human rights must be addressed:

First, the relationship between ideas of human rights and the concept of human rights should be clarified. In terms of scope, they share similarities yet remain distinct. Ideas of human rights give rise to the concept, but the concept does not fully equate to the ideas. Chronologically, ideas of human rights emerged earlier than the formal proposal of the concept. The existence of ideas of human rights does not necessarily imply the presence of the concept, yet the concept must be underpinned by such ideas. As one study notes, “The idea of rights is an important contemporary idea that derives from an ancient tradition, a tradition that antedated the idea of rights, was received and incorporated, and gave birth to rights.”¹¹ History clearly shows that while the modern concept of human rights emerged during the Western Enlightenment and bourgeois revolutions, ideas of human rights had already taken shape over two millennia earlier, which were manifested differently across different civilizations. To draft the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and reflect the universality of human rights, UNESCO sought philosophical perspectives on human rights from numerous influential experts worldwide in June 1947. “Some of the non-Western respondents suggested that although the language of rights was modern and European, the sources of human rights were also to be found within their own traditions.”¹² Among them, Chinese scholar Luo Zhongshu contended that the absence of a formal

¹⁰ Xi Jinping, “Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights,” *Qiushi* 12 (2022).

¹¹ Louis Henkin, *The Age of Rights*, translated by Xin Chunying, et al. (Beijing: Knowledge Press, 1997), 244.

¹² Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, translated by Liu Yisheng (Beijing: China University of Political Science and Law Press, 2016), 72.

declaration of rights in China did not mean its people had never advocated for or lacked fundamental human rights. Luo emphasized, “The idea of human rights had developed early in China. The right of the people to overthrow a tyrannical ruler had been established early on... The great Confucian thinker Mencius had stressed that government should serve the will of the people.”¹³

Second, the historical nature of human rights must be recognized. Human rights are products of specific historical conditions. The emergence of ideas, the formulation of concepts, the evolution of discourse, and the establishment of institutions concerning human rights all bear distinct historical imprints. For instance, Western natural law thought in ancient Greece and Rome laid the groundwork for natural rights theory and the idea of “inalienable human rights,” culminating in modern theories of individual rights through a prolonged historical process. Based on an understanding of human rights civilization, the author posits that its development has spanned four major eras, marked by “four waves of human rights awareness”: The nascent era of human rights and the first human rights awareness, the revolutionary era and the second human rights awareness, the era of universalization and the third human rights awareness, and the globalized era and the fourth human rights awareness.¹⁴ Each subsequent wave elevated human rights civilization to new heights. The historical nature of human rights underscores that all ideas of human rights have evolved through long-term accumulation in history.

Third, the unity of particularity and universality in human rights must be understood. Definitions of human rights vary widely, a norm in cross-cultural human rights research that the author does not intend to adjudicate here. However, it is crucial to emphasize that defining human rights cannot rely solely on one cultural standard. Instead, human rights represent a synthesis of particularity and universality, emerging from the mutual learning and integration of diverse cultures. In their origins, human rights are often “a social construction in local culture,”¹⁵ products of specific cultural development. Yet in their evolution, human rights result from cultural exchange and inclusivity across regions, nations, and ethnicities, which fosters universal principles. The UDHR exemplifies this dynamic. On December 9, 1948, Lebanese delegate Charles Malik emphasized to the UN General Assembly that the UDHR was a “a composite synthesis” of all the main traditions of rights, drawing upon “the wisdom of Asians and Latin Americans.” “There had never been a synthesis of this kind in all history.”¹⁶ By embodying cultural diversity, the UDHR gained global acceptance and enduring vitality.

Building on these reflections, this paper undertakes a foundational study of the ideas, values, and spirit of human rights embedded in Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age.” It argues that over 2,300 years ago, Chinese civilization creatively established an autonomous knowledge system of human rights, marking a significant

¹³ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴ Lu Guangjin, “The Historical Position and Value Orientation of Human Rights Civilization,” *Human Rights* 1 (2024).

¹⁵ Benjamin Gregg, *Human Rights as Social Construction*, translated by Li Xianfei (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2020), 142.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 166.

wave of human rights awareness with lasting influence.

II. Human Rights Consciousness in Chinese Civilization during the “Axial Age”

Civilization emerges and evolves through transformations in human modes of production and livelihood, while human rights thought arises from reflections on human survival and development, reflecting humanity’s aspirations for a happy life and a prosperous future. Progress in human civilization inevitably drives the advancement of human rights thought, which in turn enriches the connotations of civilization itself. Chinese civilization during the Axial Age, rooted in agrarian traditions, exhibited distinct characteristics across economic, political, social, and cultural spheres compared to other civilizational forms, particularly city-state or mercantile civilizations.

“Rights derive from accepted principles or accepted purposes — social purposes such as peace and justice, individual purposes such as human dignity and happiness — to which they are necessary.”¹⁷ Furthermore, “every civilization had its own standards of truth, virtue, and propriety.”¹⁸ Although Chinese civilization during the Axial Age did not explicitly articulate concepts like “human rights” or “rights,” it developed profound insights into the value of being human and the significance of human existence. Grounded in humanism, populism, and naturalism, this civilization fostered a human rights cognition that emphasizes respect for human beings, highlights the importance of caring for, respecting, and protecting people, and focuses on “benefiting the people,” “nurturing the people,” “enriching the people,” and “prospering the people.” It reflected an awareness of human rights such as the rights to life, safety, personality, subsistence, development, and environment.

A. Rooted in humanism, a human rights ideology that values and respects individuals emerged, along with an awareness of human rights such as the right to life and personality

Humanism is the cornerstone of human rights thought. During the “Axial Age,” major Chinese schools of philosophy essentially developed their doctrines centered around the concept of “humanism,” emphasizing humanity’s central position and core role among all things in the universe. As early as in *The Book of Documents • The Great Declaration* (Part I), there is the statement, “Man is the soul of all things.” According to research statistics, the term “human” appears 162 times in the Confucian classic^{19, 20} *The Analects*, highlighting Confucianism’s emphasis on humanity. Confucianism stresses that “man is the heart of Heaven and Earth, and the visible embodiment of the five phases (*wu xing*). He is born to enjoy the flavors, distinguish the notes, and be clothed in colors.” (*The Book of Rites - The Evolution of Rites*), and

¹⁷ Louis Henkin, *The Age of Rights*, 2.

¹⁸ Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity: Equality and Cultural Difference in World History*, translated by Xu Shuangru (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2022), 4.

¹⁹ Chai Rong, “The ‘Human Rights’ Factors in Traditional Chinese Legal Culture,” *Social Science Research* 1 (2008).

²⁰ Ibid.

explicitly states that “of all (creatures with their different) natures produced by Heaven and Earth, man is the most noble.” (*The Classic of Filial Piety - Holy Governance*). Xunzi believed that “Fire and water possess *qi* but not life. Grass and trees possess life but not awareness. Birds and beasts possess awareness but not a sense of righteousness. Man possesses *qi*, life, awareness, and adds to them a sense of righteousness. Therefore, he is the most noble being under Heaven” (*Xunzi - Regulations of the King*). Daoism also values humans, advocating that “heaven gives birth to all things, but among them, humans are the most precious” (Liezi - Heaven’s Gifts). These insights into the importance of human existence share similarities with the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras’ assertion that “of all things the measure is Man,” both highlight human subjectivity.

The emergence of a mindset that values human life and prioritizes it is considered a crucial condition for the development of human rights thought. *The Book of Changes - Appended Judgments* states that “the great virtue of Heaven and Earth is bestowing life,” which inherently emphasizes the value of human life. In *The Analects - Book X. Heang Tang*, it is recorded that once Confucius’ stable caught fire. Upon returning home from court, he only asked, “Was anyone hurt”? without inquiring about the horses, demonstrating his concern for human life. Mencius also placed great importance on human life. In *Mencius - Li Lou Part I*, there is a dialogue that goes: “Chunyu Kun said, ‘Is it the rule that males and females shall not allow their hands to touch in giving or receiving anything’? Mencius replied, ‘It is the rule’. Kun asked, ‘If a man’s sister-in-law be drowning, shall he rescue her with his hand’? Mencius said, ‘He who would not so rescue a drowning woman is a wolf. For males and females not to allow their hands to touch in giving and receiving is the general rule; when a sister-in-law is drowning, to rescue her with the hand is a peculiar exigency’.” The central idea of this dialogue is to emphasize that although “propriety” is very important, when it conflicts with human life, human life must take precedence. Focusing solely on propriety between men and women without rescuing a person would make one no different from a beast.

Humanism opposes war and killing. Laozi believed that “now arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures. Therefore, he who has the Tao does not abide by them...In the use of arms, it is desirable to have calmness and quietness, and not to be in a hurry to conquer. To conquer is not good. To regard conquest as good is to delight in the slaughter of men; and he who delights in the slaughter of men cannot get his will in the kingdom.” (*Laozi - Chapter Thirty-One*). Therefore, Laozi proposed that “he who would assist a lord of men in harmony with the Tao will not assert his mastery in the kingdom by force of arms.” (*Laozi - Chapter Thirty-One*). Confucius also opposed killing, advocating that “If good men were to govern a country for a hundred years, they would be able to transform the violently bad and dispense with capital punishments.” (*The Analects - Zilu*). Even when it came to “killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled” (*The Analects - Yan Yuan*), Confucius was still opposed. Mencius condemned rulers who killed without reason, harshly criticizing actions such as “in wars to gain territory, the dead fill the plains; in wars to capture cities, the dead fill the

cities.” (*Mencius - Li Lou Part I*), and stating that “this is what is meant by showing the land how to devour human flesh. Death is not enough for such a crime.” (*Mencius - Li Lou Part I*). The Mohist school (founded by Mozi, an important school in the Axial Age advocating ‘universal love’ and ‘non-aggression’) also advocated “non-aggression” and opposed “unjust wars.”

Humanism values human dignity. The concept of rights originates from respect for individuals, and human dignity is the core of fundamental human rights. Article 1 of the UDHR emphasizes that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”²¹ The preamble of the *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, further states that “all human rights derive from the dignity and worth inherent in the human person.”²² This underscores the significant position of dignity in the hierarchy of human rights. The human rights thought of Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” clearly demonstrated a value for human dignity and respect for personality. Confucianism placed great importance on personality, even elevating it above life itself, believing that “the scholar may be approached, but not forced to do what is wrong; he may be familiar with you, but cannot be constrained; he may be killed, but cannot be insulted.” (*The Book of Rites - The Conduct of the Scholar*).

The key to valuing human dignity and respecting personality lies in whether individuals can treat each other equally. In Confucius’ view, equal treatment among individuals requires two principles: the first is “do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself” (*The Analects - Wei Ling Gong*). The second is “a man of virtue, while establishing himself and pursuing success, also works to help others establish themselves and succeed” (*The Analects - Yong Ye*). Both principles emphasize “putting oneself in others’ shoes” (*The Analects - Wei Ling Gong*), treating others with empathy. “Do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself” embodies a certain “negative” human rights awareness, emphasizing that one should not impose on others what one does not wish for oneself, or that one should not impose on others what one does not want others to impose on oneself. This helps to establish a relationship of mutual respect between individuals. On the other hand, the principle “a man of virtue, while establishing himself and pursuing success, also works to help others establish themselves and succeed” reflects a certain “positive” human rights awareness, emphasizing that while pursuing one’s own aspirations, one should also strive to help others realize theirs. Only when everyone can “help others establish themselves” and “help others succeed” can a positive interaction be fostered among individuals, leading to social harmony and stability.

B. Based on populism, a human rights perspective that emphasizes the importance of “the people” and concern for their livelihood emerged, along with an awareness of human rights such as the rights to subsistence and development

Populism is a concrete and practical manifestation of humanism. During the “Axial Age”, “the people” constituted the main body of “humanity” in China and were positioned in the lower strata of society, thus most in need of respect, care,

²¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Human Rights: A Compilation of International Instruments, Volume 1 (First Part): Universal Instruments, United Nations publication, 2002, page 2.

²² Ibid., 43.

compassion, and assistance. As early as in *The Book of Documents*, there were teachings such as “The people are the foundation of the state; when the foundation is solid, the state is peaceful.” (*The Book of Documents: The Song of the Five Sons*) and “Heaven shows compassion to the people; what the people desire, Heaven will surely grant” (*The Book of Documents: The Great Declaration I*). If Confucius esteemed humans, then Mencius paid respect for the common people. Mencius proposed that “The people are of supreme importance; the altar of the grain god comes next; the ruler is of least importance.” (*Mencius: Jinxin II*), and also put forward valuable ideas such as “To protect the people and reign as king — no one can stop him” (*Mencius: King Hui of Liang II*) and “Now, if the king can share his joy with the people, he can achieve kingship” (*Mencius: King Hui of Liang II*). In Mencius’ view, only by implementing “benevolent governance” and “the royal way” of caring for the people, could rulers have legitimacy and ensure the stability of their rule. Conversely, if rulers were unjust and failed to heed the will of the people, their rule would be difficult to sustain. As the saying goes, “If the ruler has great faults, they [the ministers] should remonstrate with him. If, after they have done so repeatedly, he does not listen to them, they should depose him” (*Mencius: Wan Zhang II*). Mencius’ examination of the connection between “populism” and the legitimacy of rulers was remarkable under the historical conditions of the time, and it represented the thought closest to the democratic spirit among the major civilizations during the “Axial Age.”

Based on populism, thinkers in China during the “Axial Age” mostly advocated “benefiting the people,” “nurturing the people,” “enriching the people,” and “prospering the people.” They emphasized not competing with the people for benefits and even yielding benefits to them, believing that “The intercalary month is appointed to regulate the seasons; the seasons, to determine the proper times for agricultural and other operations; these operations, to secure the prosperity of the people. On this depends the true method of governing the people.” (*Zuo Zhuan: The 6th Year of Duke Wen’s Reign*).

To value people’s livelihoods, rulers must “nurture the people.” *The Book of Documents: The Counsel of Yu the Great* contains the ancestral teaching that “Virtue consists in good government; good government consists in nourishing the people.” Confucius advocated “He who can widely bestow benefits on the people and relieve the multitude — who can do that”? (*The Analects: Yan Yuan*), and praised Zichan for possessing “four aspects of the noble way,” one of which was “In nourishing the people, he was generous” (*The Analects: Gongye Chang*). Mencius proposed “to nourish men with goodness” (*Mencius: Li Lou II*), believing that when those in power could enable the people to “have no regrets in nurturing the living and burying the dead,” it marked the beginning of “the royal way.” If those in power only sought their own enjoyment without regard for the people’s well-being, it would be no different from “leading beasts to devour men (a metaphor for rulers’ tyranny that harms the people)” (*Mencius: King Hui of Liang I*). Xunzi listed “excelling in nourishing the people” (*Xunzi: The Way of the Ruler*) as the foremost principle of the way of the ruler, advocating that governance should “devoting efforts to nourishing the people” (*Xunzi: Enriching the State*). Xunzi believed that the ruler’s responsibility lay in

“governing all transformations, utilizing all things, nourishing all the people” (*Xunzi: Enriching the State*), and emphasized that “What heaven covers and earth bears — nothing fails to display its beauty or yield its utility. This serves to honor the virtuous above and nourish the commoners below, bringing them peace and contentment” (*Xunzi: The Royal Regulations*).

To value people’s livelihood, one must also “benefit the people.” Mencius emphasized treating the socially vulnerable with an equal mindset, proposing that “honor the aged in our own families and extend that honor to the aged in other families; show affection to the young in our own families and extend that affection to the young in other families” (*Mencius: King Hui of Liang I*). Xunzi proposed “taking in the widows and orphans and supporting the poor” (*Xunzi: The Royal Regulations*). And for the five types of persons with disabilities — the deaf, mute, lame, those with broken limbs, and the exceptionally short — the ruler should “take them in and support them, train them according to their abilities and put them to work, assign them official positions and provide them with food and clothing, so that none of them are left out” (*ibid.*), reflecting a focus on protecting the vulnerable. Mozi proposed “mutual benefit,” believing that “all people, regardless of age or social status, are subjects of Heaven” (*Mozi: The Standards*), advocating that “those who are strong should hasten to help others; those who are wealthy should strive to share with others; those who are wise should encourage to teach others. If this is done, then the hungry will get food, the cold will get clothing, and the disorderly will be brought to order.” (*Mozi: On Exalting Worthies II*)

To value people’s livelihoods even more, one must “enrich the people.” *The Book of Songs · Major Odes of the Kingdom · The People’s Toil* contains the ideal of valuing people’s livelihood, expressing an anticipation for the people to lead a relatively prosperous life: “The people are weary with toil; Let us inquire about their wellbeing. Bestow favor on this central land, and so bring peace to the four quarters.” Guan Zhong proposed important ideas such as “The way to govern a state is, first of all, to enrich the people” and “When the granaries are full, the people will know propriety; when their clothes and food are sufficient, they will know honor and shame” (*Guanzi · Shepherding the People*). In *The Analects*, there is a record that goes as follows: “The Master went to Wei, and Ran Qiu drove his carriage. The Master said, ‘How numerous are the people’! Ran Qiu said, ‘Since there are so many, what further should be done’? The Master said, ‘Enrich them’. Ran Qiu said, ‘Since they are enriched, what further should be done’? The Master said, ‘Instruct them’.” (*The Analects: Zilu*) In Confucius’ view, for the common people, the first priority was to “enrich them,” and after prosperity came education and propriety. Mencius also believed that “having eaten their fill, being warmly clothed, and living in ease,” and then “receiving instruction,” “this is the way of man” (*Mencius: Teng Wengong I*). Although the above remarks by Confucius and Mencius emphasized the importance of “education,” they also indicated a hope for rulers to achieve the enrichment of the people through “benevolent governance.” Laozi also cared about people’s livelihoods, proposing to “let them have food sweet to their taste, clothing beautiful to their sight, homes comfortable to live in, and customs delightful to their hearts” (*Laozi: Chapter*

80 of the Lower Part), expressing a yearning for a peaceful and happy life.

Developing production is the basic condition for safeguarding people's livelihoods and enhancing their wellbeing. To this end, Mencius proposed the theory of "constant livelihood" and "constant will." He believed that "The way of the people is such that those who have a constant livelihood have a constant will; those who have not a constant livelihood have not a constant will. If they have not a constant will, they will do anything, however vicious or extravagant" (*Mencius: Teng Wen Gong I*). To enable the people to have "constant livelihood" and foster a "constant will" for developing production based on it, Mencius proposed the famous theory of "regulating the people's livelihood." In his view, the first issue to be addressed in "regulating the people's livelihood" was determining the boundaries of fields. He believed that "Benevolent government must begin with the proper demarcation of boundaries. If the boundaries are not properly demarcated, the well-field system will not be evenly distributed, and salaries and emoluments will not be fair. Therefore, tyrannical rulers and corrupt officials will neglect the proper demarcation of boundaries. Once the boundaries are properly demarcated, the distribution of fields and the determination of salaries can be done sitting down" (*Mencius: Teng Wen Gong I*). Mencius further proposed that through "regulating the people's livelihoods" one could achieve the following: "In a five-mu homestead, plant mulberry trees, and a man of fifty can wear silk. Keep chickens, pigs, dogs, and pigs, and do not miss the proper seasons for breeding them, and a man of seventy can eat meat. In a hundred-mu field, do not interfere with the proper seasons for farming, and a family of eight can have enough to eat without being hungry" (*Mencius: King Hui of Liang I*). In this way, "It must enable them to have enough to support their parents above and their wives and children below, to be well-fed throughout the year in good times, and to escape death in bad times" (*ibid.*). It is evident that Mencius' theory of "regulating the people's livelihoods" embodied a good wish to spare the people from want and demonstrated a rudimentary awareness of protecting property rights, the right to subsistence, and the right to development. Xunzi also proposed to "Measure the land to establish the state, calculate the benefits to support the people, assess the human strength to assign tasks. Make sure that the people are capable of handling their tasks, that the tasks yield benefits, and that the benefits are sufficient to sustain the people, so that they all have food, clothing, and various necessities, and their income and expenditure balance each other" (*Xunzi: On Enriching the State*).

To value people's livelihoods, one must also alleviate the people's burdens and enable them to live and work in peace and contentment. Confucius proposed to "mitigate punishments and lighten taxes" (*The Analects: Yao's Sayings*), opposing the excessive collection of taxes from the people and advocating that tax collection should be moderate and nurturing the people should "benefit others without incurring expense (to oneself)" (*The Analects: Yao's Sayings*). Mencius proposed that rulers should "levy taxes on the people in a regulated manner" to reduce their burdens. The *Mencius* states: "If the agricultural seasons are not interfered with, more grain will be available than can be eaten. If fine nets are not used in large ponds, there will be more fish and turtles than can be consumed. If axes and bills enter the hills and forests only

at the proper time, there will be more timber than can be used. When there is an abundance of grain and fish, and an endless supply of timber, the people will have nothing to regret at birth or death” (*Mencius: King Hui of Liang I*). Meanwhile, one must also practice frugality and moderate consumption. To this end, Confucius proposed to “Be reverent in the performance of your duties and be trustworthy in what you say. Be economical in expenditure and cherish your people. Employ them only at the proper seasons” (*The Analects: Learning and Teaching*). Xunzi believed that “The way to make the state wealthy is to practice economy, enrich the people, and store up the surplus. Practice economy in accordance with ritual principles, and enrich the people through good government. By enriching the people, there will be a surplus. When the people are enriched, they become wealthy. When the people are wealthy, the fields become fertile and productive. When the fields are productive, the yield will be a hundredfold” (*Xunzi: On Enriching the State*).

C. Based on naturalism, a human rights perspective that emphasizes the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature has emerged, along with an awareness of human rights such as environmental rights and sustainable development

Although environmental rights are a modern human right, humanity’s understanding and contemplation of the environment dates back much further. How to perceive nature and comprehend the relationship between humans and nature was a crucial question pondered by Chinese thinkers during the “Axial Age.” The ancient Chinese agricultural society was characterized by “acting in accordance with the timing of nature.” Most Chinese thinkers of the “Axial Age” believed that Heaven and Earth operated according to their own laws, and humans should take nature as their guide, treating all natural beings with kindness and affection, and achieving harmony and coexistence with nature.

Regarding the relationship between humans and nature, Confucianism advocates “benevolence towards people and love for things,” emphasizing the mutual influence and harmonious unity between humans and nature. Confucianism holds that Heaven, Earth, and humans are an integral whole, with humans a part of nature. It encourages extending benevolence from oneself to others and then to all things in the universe. Mencius integrated human “benevolence” with the Way of Heaven, stating, “A noble person loves things but does not extend benevolence to them; he extends benevolence to people but does not treat them with close affection. He extends close affection to his kin and benevolence to the people, and then extends his love to all things” (*Mencius: Jin Xin I*). Based on the recognition that humans are the “heart of Heaven and Earth,” Confucianism advocates that humans should assume the responsibility of “assisting in the transformation and nurturing of all things” (*I Ching: Xi Ci Zhuan*). “Assisting in the transformation and nurturing of all things” means integrating human existence into the universe as a whole, enabling all natural beings to change and develop in accordance with the Way of Heaven and natural laws through positive human actions, ultimately achieving a harmonious relationship of “attaining the ultimate harmony” between humans and nature. Morally speaking, “attaining the ultimate harmony” means that human “benevolence” should correspond to Heaven’s

“life-generating virtue,” realizing a “greater self” that “takes heaven, earth, and all things as one” (as stated by Cheng Hao during the Northern Song Dynasty), which is the responsibility that the “heart of Heaven and Earth” should undertake.

Taoism goes even further, considering nature as the mother of humans and all things, which implies that human existence is contingent upon the existence of nature. Therefore, Taoism proposes “the Way follows nature,” advocating that humans should live in harmony with nature. Taoism believes that “Heaven and Earth are the parents of all things” (*Zhuangzi: On the Perfection of Life*), and “Heaven and Earth were born together with me, and all things are one with me” (*Zhuangzi: On the Equality of Things*). Thus, Taoism advocates “respecting the Way and valuing virtue.” In the Taoist view, “The Way gives birth to them, Virtue rears them, Things take shape for them, Circumstances complete them. Therefore, all things without exception honour the Way and value Virtue. The honour given to the Way and the value placed on Virtue are not the result of any command, but are always spontaneous.” (*Tao Te Ching: Chapter 51*). “Respecting the Way” acknowledges the value of the “Way” in the process of generating all things, requiring people to respect the natural process of evolution and not to violate natural laws. “Valuing virtue” means respecting and cherishing the natural instincts of humans and all things, respecting life, and upholding the laws governing the operation of all things. “Respecting the Way and valuing virtue” emphasizes that humans should take nature as their foundation and live in harmony with nature under the governance of the Way. In Taoist view, chaos between Heaven and Earth is caused by humans’ reckless actions, so one should “act without action,” allowing the *yin* and *yang* of Heaven and Earth to function in the natural process of evolution.

In terms of specific practices, Chinese thinkers during the “Axial Age” particularly cherished natural resources, valued all forms of life, and advocated moderate exploitation and “regulating exploitation according to seasons.” “The Master fished with a line but not with a net, shot birds but not those perching” (*The Analects: Shu Er*), reflects Confucius’ attitude of treating other lives with benevolence. *Lushi Chunqiu* (*The Annals of Lü Buwei*) records, “If you drain the pond to fish, you may catch fish, but next year there will be none. If you set the marsh on fire to hunt animals, how can you fail to catch them? Yet there will be no wildlife left the following year.” (*Lushi Chunqiu: Filial Piety*), underscoring the importance of maintaining ecological balance. Guan Zhong believed that “Though mountains and forests are vast and vegetation lush, their exploitation must be regulated by season... Though rivers and seas are wide, ponds and marshes abundant, and fish and turtles numerous, nets and traps must adhere to proper standards.” (*Guanzi: Eight Observations*), demonstrating an attitude of sustainable utilization of natural resources. Confucianism even linked “regulating exploitation according to seasons” with “filial piety,” believing that “to cut down a tree or kill an animal out of season is not filial” (*The Book of Rites: On Sacrificial Rites*). Xun Kuang (known as Xunzi) also believed that “The regulations of a true king... prohibit the exploitation of mountains, forests, and wetlands at certain times, yet impose no taxes thereon” (*Xunzi: The Royal Regulations*).

III. Cognitive Approach to Human Rights Values in Chinese Civilization during the “Axial Age”

As an ideological concept, human rights must possess a certain cognitive value orientation, which serves as a criterion for measuring the value of being human and the significance of human existence. “The concept of rights is related to theories of ‘the good’, ‘the right,’ and ‘justice,’ as well as the concept of a ‘good society’.”²³ Further research reveals that during the “Axial Age,” the human rights awareness in Chinese civilization was primarily oriented towards values such as “attaining benevolence,” “upholding goodness,” “revering righteousness,” “valuing harmony,” and “aspiring to the public good,” and a cognitive logic that unified human nature, virtue, and rationality was established.

The first value is “attaining benevolence,” which, from the semantic understanding of human rights, means being a compassionate person.

“Benevolence” (*ren*) is at the core of Confucian thought. “Confucius valued benevolence above all” (*Lüshi Chunqiu*), believing that “there are but two paths: The way of humaneness (*ren*) and the way of its absence.” (*Mencius, Li Lou I*). Confucius emphasized the fundamental role of “benevolence,” even posing the question, “What can a man do with ritual if he lacks humaneness (*ren*)? What can he do with music if he lacks humaneness?” (*The Analects, Ba Yi*). In the Confucian classic, *The Book of Rites: The Doctrine of the Mean*, it is even explained that “Humaneness (*ren*) is what makes a human truly human,” directly stating that the reason for being human is “benevolence” and implying that without “benevolence,” one cannot be considered human. This sufficiently illustrates that in Confucius’ thought, the entire content of “benevolence” revolves around the issue of humanity. From the Confucian perspective, human cultivation and growth, interpersonal relationships, the relationship between humans and nature, as well as the purpose and ideals of life, should all be guided by “benevolence.” Thus, “benevolence” becomes an inherent essential requirement and characteristic of humans, sharing many similarities with the concept of respecting and protecting human rights in modern civilization.

Without love for others, one cannot “attain benevolence,” nor can one truly respect others. From the Confucian viewpoint, to “attain benevolence,” one must first “love others,” achieving mutual love and respect among people. In *The Analects, Yan Yuan*, when Fan Chi asked Confucius about “benevolence,” Confucius replied, “A benevolent person loves others.” Mencius further elaborated, “He who is benevolent loves others; he who is courteous respects others. Those who love others are constantly loved by them; those who respect others are constantly respected by them” (*Mencius, Li Lou II*). Confucian “love for others” is a form of universal love, as expressed in the sayings “He should overflow in love to all” (*The Analects, Xue Er*) and “Within the four seas, all men are brothers” (*The Analects, Yan Yuan*), indicating that love should be extended to all, regardless of blood ties, closeness, or distance, and that everyone is worthy of love. Compared to Confucius and Mencius, Mozi

²³ Louis Henkin, *The Age of Rights*, 1.

expressed even more profound thoughts on love. His concept of “universal love” represents a more widespread and equal form of brotherly love and great compassion. In his view, the phenomena of “the strong will oppress the weak, the rich will insult the poor, the noble will disdain the humble, and the cunning will deceive the simple” (*Mozi, Universal Love II*) arise because people do not love one another. Based on this, Mozi proposed that “universal love will bring peace and order to the world, while mutual animosity can only throw the world into disorder” (*Mozi, Universal Love I*). He emphasized that “this is why we must urge people to love one another” (*Ibid.*). The Confucian and Mohist thoughts on “benevolence” and “love” share many similarities with Western concepts such as “love your neighbor as yourself” and “brotherly love,” reflecting the common values of humanity. It is exactly for this reason that some Western scholars believe that “the Confucian concept of ‘ren’ was very comprehensive and had a potential universalist thrust.”²⁴

Confucian “attaining benevolence” thought demonstrates love, even universal love, towards the common people, while demanding that rulers practice “benevolent governance” based on love, taking the people’s hearts as their own and caring for their hardships. “Benevolent governance” is a form of moral governance that emphasizes “human-centeredness” and “people-centeredness,” highlighting love for the people, advocating for “the rule of the king” while opposing “hegemony” and detesting “tyranny.” When Duke Ai asked Confucius about governance, Confucius said, “When the ruler is present, his policies are carried out; when he is absent, they collapse” (*The Book of Rites: The Doctrine of the Mean*). Starting from the moral principles of “benevolent governance,” Confucius stated that “tyrannical government is fiercer than a tiger” (*The Book of Rites, Tan Gong II*), and believed that in “governance” one should “respect the five excellences,” namely, “the noble person benefits others without exhausting himself; tasks others without provoking resentment; desires what is righteous without being greedy; remains composed without arrogance; and commands respect without severity” (*The Analects, Yao Yue*). Meanwhile, one should also “avoid the four vices,” namely, “to punish without instruction is cruelty; to demand immediate results without warning is tyranny; to issue orders lightly but enforce them harshly is malice; and to be stingy in rewarding others is petty bureaucracy” (*Ibid.*). It is evident that Confucius’ “benevolent governance” requires rulers to fulfill their responsibilities of loving and caring for the people. Mencius’ thoughts on “benevolent governance” are even more specific and thorough than Confucius’. Mencius emphasized that “if a ruler delights in benevolence, he will be invincible in the world” (*Mencius, Li Lou I*), and conversely, “without benevolent governance, one cannot secure the tranquil order of the kingdom” (*Ibid.*). In Mencius’ view, if rulers can practice “benevolent governance,” “Be sparing in punishment and light in taxation; plow deep and hoe thoroughly. Let the strong, in their leisure time, cultivate filial piety, brotherly respect, loyalty, and sincerity. At home, they serve their fathers and elder brothers; abroad, they serve their superiors. Then, even with sharpened sticks, they can defeat the armor and weapons of Qin and Chu” (*Ibid.*). Then, even in a “great kingdom,” “the people’s joy in such a ruler would be like being

²⁴ Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity: Equality and Cultural Difference in World History*, 69.

released from an upside-down suspension” (Ibid.).

The second principle is “advocating goodness,” which, from the semantic understanding of human rights, means being a person beneficial to others.

“Goodness” is an important proposition in Chinese philosophy during the “Axial Age” and a significant value in traditional Chinese culture. In traditional Chinese culture, the basic connotations of “goodness” are beauty and virtue, specifically referring to one’s words, deeds, and moral character conforming to ethical standards, with “evil” being its antonym. Doing good deeds, acts that benefit others, and things that are advantageous to society are inherent aspects of “goodness.” “Goodness” is a concrete manifestation of the Confucian concept of “benevolence” in real life, and achieving “goodness” fulfills the basic requirement for “benevolence.” “Goodness” implies treating others kindly, including caring for, loving, and respecting them.

In Chinese classics from the “Axial Age,” there are numerous thoughts on “goodness.” “Goodness” places great emphasis on a person’s character and virtue, on whether one can treat others with a friendly attitude in social life, take pleasure in helping others, and facilitate others’ achievements. Only through virtuous behavior based on “goodness” can good interpersonal relationships be formed, and harmonious families and a harmonious society be established. In *Chapter 8 of the Upper Part of Dao De Jing*, Laozi proposed the view of “the highest good is like water,” believing that “Water benefits all things without contention and dwells in places that others disdain. Thus, it is close to the Dao. In dwelling, it chooses the lowly ground; in mind, it is deep; in giving, it is kind; in speech, it is truthful; in governance, it is orderly; in action, it is timely; and in movement, it follows the right moment.” Thus, using “the highest good is like water” as a metaphor for the essence and omnipresence of the “Tao” of “goodness” fully illustrates the importance of “goodness” to a society. Mencius developed Laozi’s viewpoint by directly combining “the highest good is like water” with the virtue of human nature, believing that “Human nature is inherently good, just as water naturally flows downward. There is no one who is not good, just as there is no water that does not flow downward” (*Mencius: Gaozi I*).

Given the importance of “goodness,” Mencius and Xunzi respectively proposed the claims of “goodness” and “evil” in human nature. Mencius put forward the view that “there is no greater virtue for a noble person than to encourage others to follow the good” (*Mencius: Gongsun Chou I*), emphasizing that “goodness” is the most important virtue for a noble person. Mencius believed that humans are born with a sense of pity and compassion for others, which is a manifestation of the “goodness” in human nature. As he said, “All people have a heart that cannot bear to see others suffer. The ancient kings had such a heart, and thus they practiced compassionate governance” (*Mencius: Gongsun Chou I*). Mencius also believed that humans are born with the “four sprouts,” namely, “the feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence; the feeling of shame and disdain is the sprout of righteousness; the feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety; and the feeling of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom” (*Mencius: Gongsun Chou I*). In Mencius’ view, “for humans to possess these Four Sprouts is like having four limbs” (Ibid.). The “four sprouts” are the beginning and the duty of “goodness.” In terms of the importance of “goodness”

for what makes a person human, Mencius' thoughts on "goodness" already embody an altruistic human rights spirit. Unlike Mencius, Xunzi advocated that human nature is "evil." Xunzi believed that "Human nature, from birth, is inclined toward self-interest. If this inclination is followed, contention arises and deference disappears; humans are born with aversions, and if these are followed, cruelty arises and loyalty disappears; humans are born with desires for the ears and eyes, for pleasant sounds and colors, and if these are followed, licentiousness arises and ritual propriety disappears. Thus, following human nature and indulging human desires will inevitably lead to contention, transgress social roles, and result in violence. Therefore, there must be instruction by teachers and the transformation of laws, as well as the guidance of ritual and righteousness, before deference arises, social norms are upheld, and order is achieved" (*Xunzi: On Human Nature Being Evil*). Based on the above analysis, Xunzi concluded that "it is clear that human nature is evil; its goodness is artificial" (ibid.). From Xunzi's analysis of the path to the emergence of "evil," it is not difficult to find that he believed that the "evil" in human nature is due to the innate "tendency to seek personal gain," "hatred and dislike," and "desires for the ears and eyes," which lead to "contention." What Xunzi pursued was to suppress evil with the aim of promoting goodness. In Xunzi's view, the fundamental way to suppress evil is through "the transformation through instruction by teachers and laws, and the guidance of ritual and righteousness," enabling society to embark on the path of proper governance by adhering to rituals and laws. This also shows that whether it is Mencius' view of "goodness" in human nature or Xunzi's view of "evil" in human nature, their value goals are consistent, both involving in-depth thinking and design for becoming a "good" person.

The thought of "advocating goodness" in Chinese civilization during the "Axial Age" is the unity of "individual goodness" and "common goodness." "Individual goodness" lies in continuous self-cultivation and self-improvement to become an upright and noble person, as the saying goes, "As Heaven's movement is ever vigorous, so must the noble person strive ceaselessly to strengthen himself. As Earth's condition is receptive devotion, so must the noble person carry the outer world with broad virtue" (*The Book of Changes*). The "common good" lies in the principle that "the noble person helps others to achieve their goodness" (*The Analects: Yan Yuan*), bearing responsibility for others and society, being able to create conditions for the "goodness" of every member of the community, and achieving social harmony. Having a beautiful vision of life represents a higher level of human goodness. The ideal realm of "common goodness" is to achieve "great harmony under heaven." From the context of human rights, both "individual goodness" and "common goodness" are indispensable for everyone to enjoy human rights.

The third principle is "upholding integrity and justice," which, from a human rights perspective, means being a person who upholds justice.

The character "正" (*zhèng*) carries multiple meanings in Chinese culture, including integrity, righteousness, correctness, fairness, and justice. Its profound connotations embody the moral values and life philosophies of China's fine traditional culture. "正" is a fundamental requirement for an individual's character

and behavior, and also serves as a value yardstick for assessing families, clans, and society. It represents the basic moral standard for conducting oneself and handling affairs; only when one is upright can they act fairly and treat others justly, thereby fostering altruism and establishing sound social norms and order.

To correct others, one must first correct oneself. The quality of “正” demands that one be an upright and just person in life, conducting oneself with integrity, acting righteously, upholding justice, and benefiting society. It also requires consistency between one’s words and deeds, fulfilling promises without hypocrisy or deception, thereby gaining trust from others. In a sense, being upright oneself means respecting others, as the saying goes, “extend one’s own feelings to others.” When answering Ji Kangzi’s inquiry about governance, Confucius said, “Government means rectitude. If you, sir, lead with rectitude, who would dare to be not rectitude”? (*The Analects: Yan Yuan*), clearly indicating that those in power must be upright themselves to influence others positively. In Laozi’s thought, “Dao” is the origin of all things and the sum of natural laws, while “正” embodies “Dao.” Therefore, Laozi advocated “the righteous path” and emphasized “governing the country with righteousness,” believing that “I do nothing, and the people transform themselves of their own accord. I love tranquility, and the people straighten themselves of their own accord. I do no business, and the people grow rich of their own accord. I have no desires, and the people return to the natural and the unadorned of their own accord” (*Dao De Jing: Chapter 57*). This represents a thought of loving, respecting, and protecting the people by following the natural righteous path, demonstrating a simple human rights spirit.

In traditional Chinese culture, “正” is closely linked with “义” (yì, righteousness). “正” means “upholding oneself,” while “义” means “achieving benevolence.” Together, they form the compound word “正义” (zhèngyì, justice), constituting a concept of justice. This concept of justice adheres to principles of fairness, impartiality, equality, and non-discrimination, urging people to do things beneficial to others and society. “Justice” represents both social morality and a human rights spirit. Confucianism emphasizes “义” over “利” (lì, profit). When life conflicts with “义,” one should “sacrifice life for righteousness.” Confucius made the moral value judgment that “the noble-minded understand what is righteous; the small-minded care only about profit” (*The Analects: Li Ren*), and stated that “wealth and honors obtained through unjust means are like fleeting clouds to me” (*The Analects: Shu Er*). Mencius vowed, “Life is what I desire; so is righteousness. If it is not possible to have both, then I will choose righteousness rather than life” (*Mencius: Gaozi I*). He particularly emphasized the righteous spirit and integrity of Confucians, believing that “wealth cannot seduce him, poverty cannot move him, power cannot subdue him — this is what is called a True Person” (*Mencius: Teng Wen Gong II*). Xunzi also believed that “When righteousness prevails over profit, it is a well-ordered age; when profit overcomes righteousness, it is a chaotic age. Therefore, one should regulate profit by righteousness.” It should be noted that Confucianism’s emphasis on “义” should not be simply interpreted as denying the value of life or the importance of rights. Instead, it emphasizes upholding moral justice with a moral spirit, filling society with upward momentum, and thereby realizing the “goodness” of human nature. In a sense,

advocating “义” aims to uphold “正,” which aligns with the pursuit of the common interests of the majority in moral human rights philosophy.

The highest realm of “正” is the pursuit of life philosophy proposed in *The Great Learning: The Doctrine of the Mean*: “Investigate things to attain knowledge; attain knowledge to sincere intentions; sincere intentions to rectify the heart; rectify the heart to cultivate the self; cultivate the self to regulate the family; regulate the family to govern the state; govern the state to bring peace to the world.” This life philosophy permeates the spirit of “正” and is filled with an upward moral force. The ultimate goal of “bringing peace to the world” emphasized here implies universal peace and equality and encompasses spirits of balance, rationality, order, fairness, and harmony, representing an ideal social state of universal equality. This life philosophy evolved into Zhang Zai’s “Four Statements from Hengqu” during the Northern Song Dynasty: “Establish a heart for Heaven and Earth; establish a destiny for the people; carry on the teachings of the past saints; create peace for all generations” (*Hengqu’s Discourses*). The life philosophy advocated by China’s fine traditional culture, centered on “upholding integrity and justice,” represents a worldview and approach to social governance that takes responsibility for the world, unifying personal rectitude with the governance of family, country, and the world, and is filled with a human rights spirit of actively taking on the responsibility for the world.

The fourth principle is “valuing harmony,” which, from a human rights perspective, means being individuals who do not harm one another.

“Harmony” is a key term in Chinese civilization. In traditional Chinese culture, the character “和” (*hé*) encompasses multiple meanings such as peace, harmony, coordination, stability, inclusiveness, and integration, embodying a rich human rights spirit. Combining “和” (harmony) with “平” (peace) forms the compound word “和平” (*héping*, peace), which stands in contrast to “战争” (*zhànzhēng*, war). Harmony serves as the prerequisite and foundation for the existence of all human rights, as expressed in the *Declaration on the Right of Peoples to Peace*, approved by the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution 39/11 on November 12, 1984: “Convinced that life without war serves as the primary international prerequisite for the material well-being, development and progress of countries, and for the full implementation of the rights and fundamental human freedoms proclaimed by the United Nations.”²⁴

Confucianism advocates “benevolent governance” and “the Way of the king,” emphasizing ethical norms and social order and placing “harmony” at the forefront of handling human affairs. Confucianism examines all matters from the perspective of harmony, making it a criterion for life and society, and a yardstick for measuring the relationships between heaven, earth, and humanity. Based on the wartime reality and social chaos of their time, thinkers like Confucius explicitly stated, “Of the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable” (*The Analects: Xue Er*). The purpose of “valuing harmony” is to balance one’s own interests with those of others, achieving a harmonious and mutually beneficial order. Confucius also proposed, “Music is the harmony of heaven and earth; ceremonies are the order of Heaven and

²⁴ Chai Rong, “The ‘Human Rights’ Factors in Traditional Chinese Legal Culture,” 430.

Earth. Through harmony all things are transformed; through order all things are distinguished” (*The Book of Rites: Yue Lun*).

In the thought of “valuing harmony,” Confucianism places a great emphasis on cultivating a harmonious spirit and pursuing a harmonious state, which represents a significant difference between ancient Chinese and Western human rights thoughts. From the perspective of pursuing harmony, Confucianism views Heaven, Earth, and humanity as a unified, ordered, and interacting whole, emphasizing the harmonious relationship among them. While emphasizing overall harmony, Confucianism also recognizes individual differences. Confucius stated, “The gentleman agrees with others without being an echo; the small man echoes without being in agreement (*The Analects: Zi Lu*), emphasizing that a noble person should have their own virtues and individuality while being inclusive and forgiving of those with differing opinions. *Discourses of the States on Zheng* states, “Harmony indeed generates things; sameness does not continue,” suggesting that only by maintaining differences and diversity can people learn from each other and achieve common development.

Based on the principles of “following the natural way” and “governing by non-interference,” Taoism considers harmony as the fundamental criterion for the existence and development of all things. Laozi proposed, “The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two” (*Dao De Jing: II Chapter 42*), and emphasized, “To know harmony is to be in accord with the constant. To know the constant is to be enlightened” (*Dao De Jing: II Chapter 55*). In Taoist thought, a harmonious atmosphere is the guarantee of harmony in nature, among people, and in society. This concept of harmony is interconnected with the Confucian idea of “valuing harmony,” both expressing a law-based and anti-war perspective.

Combining the two characters “和” (harmony) and “合” (integration), we get the compound word “和合” (*Hehe*). *Mozi: Shang Tong Zhong* states, “Within the state, fathers and sons, older and younger brothers become enemies and develop feelings of hatred. They all have minds set on division and separation and are unable to reach harmony and unity.” “合” means unity, cooperation, and integration. The combination of “和” and “合” to form “和合” represents a sublimation of values in Chinese culture. From a human rights perspective, “和合” means strengthening unity and cooperation with a spirit of “valuing harmony,” achieving non-aggression, non-harm, mutual support, and mutual assistance, and fostering harmonious relationships among individuals, between individuals and society, between humans and nature, and among nations.

The fifth principle is “striving for the common good,” which, from the perspective of human rights semantics, means being an individual who enjoys equality and is free from discrimination.

What does “common good” mean? According to *Shuowen Jiezi (Analytical Dictionary of Characters)*, “gong (公)” means “equal distribution.” It represents fairness and justice, ensuring that everyone has a sense of security, receives what they deserve, contributes meaningfully, and enjoys shared benefits. The concept of “common good” views the relationship between individuals and society from the

fundamental interests of all members of society, thereby establishing social order and optimizing social governance. Rooted in the agrarian civilization and the social structure it fostered, Chinese sages during the “Axial Age” possessed a global vision and lofty aspirations. They often contemplated how to manage and balance the relationships among individuals, families, society, and the world with a benevolent heart, ultimately forming a human rights value orientation centered on “common good” and the pursuit of equality for all.

“The world belongs to everyone” represents the highest realm of the “common good.” The *Six Secret Teachings* (Liu Tao), a book completed before the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), provides a relatively complete exposition on this concept: “The world is not the possession of a single individual. It is the possession of everyone in the world. He who shares the benefits of the world with everyone will gain the world. He who monopolizes the benefits of the world will lose the world. Heaven has its seasons; Earth has its wealth. If you can share them with men, this is *jen* (humanity, benevolence). Where *jen* is, the world will turn to. Wherein you release men from death, resolve their difficulties, save them from calamity, and succor them in emergencies — this is *te* (virtue). Where *te* is, the world will turn to. Wherein you share sorrow and joy, likes and dislikes with men — this is *yi* (righteousness). Where *yi* is, the world will go to. All men hate death and cherish life. They love *te* and seek profit. To be able to produce profit is the Tao (the Way). Where the Tao is, the world will turn to.” (*The Six Secret Teachings: The Counselor of Culture*). This passage regards “benevolence,” “virtue,” “righteousness,” and “the Way” as the spiritual essence of “the world belongs to everyone,” establishing a value logic of “striving for the common good” that prioritizes the common interests of all people under heaven as the highest value orientation, and reflecting the human rights spirit of equality for all.

In the view of Confucianism, achieving the “common good” requires implementing “benevolent governance,” considering the wellbeing of all and the world at large, realizing public ownership of social resources and meritocratic governance, and ultimately achieving the ideal of ‘Great Unity’ (a world where all peoples live in harmony). This beautiful vision of the ideal is described as follows: “When the Grand Course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talent, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Men had their proper work, and women had their homes. They hated to see the wealth of natural resources unused and undeveloped [but] not necessarily for their own profit. They hated not to use their own strength [but] not necessarily for their own benefit. In this way, selfish schemings were repressed and found no development. Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open and were not shut. This was the period of what we call the Grand

Unity (*Da Tong*).” (*The Book of Rites: The Evolution of Rites*).

Confucianism advocates “the world belongs to all” which, when measured by modern human rights theory, represents a more collectivist perspective on human rights. Through Confucian interpretation, the concepts of “the world belongs to all” and “universal harmony” as ideals of “community” became the highest social ideals of Confucianism and served as long-term development goals pursued by traditional Chinese society, which has exerted a profound influence on subsequent generations. Because China during the “Axial Age” emphasized the value of “common good,” the value of “individualism” did not develop as fully. This represents the most significant difference in the human rights value orientation between ancient China and the West, represented by Greek civilization: The former placed greater emphasis on collective rights, while the latter prioritized individual rights.

Through the semantic analysis of human rights embedded in the concepts of “attaining benevolence,” “upholding goodness,” “revering righteousness,” “valuing harmony,” and “striving for the common good,” it becomes evident that Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” established its own human rights value system. This system adheres to a cognitive logic based on humanity, virtue, and reason, meeting the essential requirements for realizing the value of being human and the significance of human existence.

IV. The Human Rights Spiritual Traits of Chinese Civilization in the “Axial Age”

“Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby.”²⁵ The human rights awareness of Chinese civilization in the “Axial Age” was a product of human production, life, and thinking activities under specific historical conditions. Based on agrarian civilization, Chinese civilization in the “Axial Age” shared both similarities and differences with other forms of human civilization, particularly in comparison to Greek civilization founded on city-state or commercial civilization and subsequent Roman civilization. It possesses its own unique human rights spiritual traits.

First, human Rights independent of theocratic dominance.

The relationship between gods and humans is an ancient topic, and the relationship between theocracy and human rights is extremely complicated. Some studies suggest that “The human story of God is our own story.”²⁶ In the early stages of human civilization, “gods” held significant importance for humanity. In regions such as Greece, the Middle East, and India during the “Axial Age,” the relationship between gods and humans was an unavoidable major real-world issue. People living in these areas at the time were, to varying degrees, subject to theocratic dominance. Moreover, the dual nature of theocracy was evident during this period: On one hand, deities were interpreted as “saviors” of humanity, embodying “love” and shouldering

²⁵ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2015), 16.

²⁶ John Bowker, *God: A Brief History — The Human Search for Eternal Truth*, translated by Gao Shining, et al. (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2007), 21.

the mission of rescuing humanity from suffering and guiding them towards peace and happiness. On the other hand, deities were also seen as the talismans of royal authority, with the concept of “divine right of kings” serving as the legal basis for rulers to exercise power.

Unlike other forms of human civilization, China during the “Axial Age” did not develop monotheistic thought or religious politics. In contrast to civilizations steeped in religion, Chinese civilization was not dominated by “gods” but rather immersed in secular life. The concept of “Heaven” existed in Chinese culture during the “Axial Age” and even earlier, along with traditions of revering, worshiping, responding to, and seeking guidance from Heaven, and even attributing many moral and mystical qualities to Heaven in the hope that it would bless the wellbeing of all people. However, this “Heaven” was markedly different from the “God” in religion. Ultimately, “Heaven” represents a natural phenomenon, whereas “God” is a theological concept; the traditional Chinese “Heaven” is not equivalent to the religious “God.” Additionally, although ancestor worship existed in traditional Chinese society, ancestors were not considered “gods” in the religious sense, and the two were fundamentally different in nature. Some studies have compared the thoughts of Confucius and Paul the Apostle, who lived in roughly the same era, arguing that “Confucius’ thought is ethical, while Paul the Apostle’s is theological. Confucius’ answer is to become a person of benevolence, respect, trust, and compassion. In Paul the Apostle’s theology, the fundamental problem of the world is sin, a broken relationship with the creator God.”²⁷ Further research suggests that “Confucius derived his philosophical and ethical insights through observation and reflection on traditions, cultures, and the surrounding environment, as well as through contemplation of methods for cultivating human nature and virtue. Paul the Apostle, on the other hand, gained his unique perspective on the world and salvation through his ‘encounter’ with God.”²⁸ Therefore, Confucius and Paul the Apostle had fundamentally different intellectual roots; “Confucius’ thought is more ‘worldly’, while Paul the Apostle’s comes from the transcendent”; “Confucius is the ‘master’ of his ethics, while Paul the Apostle is the conveyor of theology.”²⁹ Although Taoism, centered on Taoist thought, later emerged, and Buddhism, which originated abroad and developed in China, also took root, strictly speaking, Taoism and Buddhism differ significantly from Judaism and subsequent Christianity.

Religion is generally considered to be composed of a set of beliefs and organizational forms, featuring a creator and dogma, a complete set of beliefs in heaven, hell, sin, salvation, and ethical principles, as well as a series of rituals that touch and influence people’s spirits. “If that is what we mean by a ‘religion’, then none of the three great philosophies of China, nor all three together, constitutes a separate, autonomous ‘religious’ realm.”³⁰ Confucianism provides some ethical and social rituals but lacks a god or dogma about the spiritual world; Taoism has rituals

²⁷ Yang Keqin, *Confucius and Paul* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009), 29.

²⁸ Ibid., 32-33.

²⁹ Ibid., 33.

³⁰ Alan Macfarlane, *China, Japan, Europe and the Anglo-sphere: A Comparative Analysis*, translated by Xun Xiaoya (Beijing: China Science and Technology Press, 2022), 23.

but does not propose ethics or a God; Buddhism has rituals, ethics, and dogma but no creator.³¹ As early as 1942, Liang Shuming analyzed and compared the differences between Chinese and Western humanistic philosophies in his article “The Incompatibility of Reason and Religion.” He pointed out that “magnificent religious organizations and philosophies, as well as imaginative mythological literature born of religion, such as those in Egypt and India, could not have originated in China. China’s primitive religion was largely the worship of deities related to human affairs and witchcraft. This led China to embrace the concept of ‘humanity’ in the modern world very early on.”³² He particularly emphasized that “the Chinese nation was the first to settle on Earth. The ancient Chinese people’s thoughts and visions never exceeded real-world life to dream of a future heavenly kingdom.”³³

In contrast, religion played a very different role in other civilizations during the “Axial Age.” Primitive religions existed in the civilizations of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers or ancient Egypt, India, or Greece. “Religion played so important a part in the life of the ancient Egyptians that it left its impress upon practically everything: Their government, their literature, their art, their architecture, and their business affairs.”³⁴ In particular, Judaism and subsequent Christianity and Islam not only formed religious etiquette, rituals, or social ethics and responsibilities but, more importantly, penetrated every aspect of people’s lives, exerting an influence unparalleled in Chinese society. As some researchers have noted, “In Europe, religion enveloped everything: The great cathedrals and the countless smaller churches, the secondary schools and the universities, literature, music, politics, war, and the very concepts of language and philosophy (including science).”³⁵ This represents the greatest difference between Chinese and Western civilizations. Because traditional Chinese culture lacked the “creator” found in Judaism, Christianity, and other religions, when some representatives attempted to include language related to the “creator” in the drafting of the UDHR after World War II, Peng-chun Chang, the Chinese representative and then Vice-Chairman of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, explicitly opposed it. Peng-chun Chang argued that “His country included a very substantial proportion of the human race, and its people possessed traditions and conceptions different from those of Christian Western.”³⁶ Zhang reminded the drafters that “The Declaration was intended for all mankind, and should be conceived in a universal spirit.”³⁷ Thanks to the persistence and efforts of Peng-chun Chang and others, the final text of the UDHR did not include the term “creator,” thus acquiring universal significance.

Due to the absence of theocratic dominance, Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” developed a markedly different understanding of human rights compared

³¹ Ibid., 24.

³² Liang Shuming, *How We Can Save the Past: Liang Shuming on Chinese Culture* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House, 2013), 56-57.

³³ Ibid., 57.

³⁴ Philip Lee Ralph, et al., *World Civilizations (Volume I)*, translated by Zhao Feng, et al. (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1998), 90.

³⁵ Alan Macfarlane, *China, Japan, Europe and the Anglo-sphere: A Comparative Analysis*, 67.

³⁶ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

to other civilizations. Most importantly, without an external “god” beyond nature and above humanity, and without a “savior,” the human rights thinking of Chinese civilization was never dominated by “Gods” from its inception. Instead, it approached life with a positive and “worldly” spirit, focusing more on how to realize the value of being human and the significance of human existence in reality, and emphasizing the creation of a better life through human effort and struggle.

Second, human rights are grounded in moral and ethical philosophy.

The human rights awareness of Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” was distinctly characterized by moral and ethical philosophy. Rooted in agrarian civilization, this philosophical framework reflected the self-sufficient household-based agricultural economy in ideological terms, differing markedly from human rights philosophies based on natural law or theology in city-state or commercial civilizations. Moral and ethical philosophy emphasizes creating a life or building relationships — among individuals, between individuals and society, and between humans and nature — through moral and ethical principles, seeking harmony among individuals, communities, society, and nature. It highlights the intrinsic value of being human and the significance of human existence, stressing kindness, friendship, mutual assistance among people, as well as harmony, peace, and solidarity between individuals and society, while advocating compromise and non-confrontation. This philosophy prioritizes both moral value construction, pursuing ideals such as “benevolence,” “virtue,” “righteousness,” “harmony,” and “public-mindedness,” and ethical norm construction, guided by principles such as propriety, respect, filial piety, and fraternal duty, as encapsulated in the Confucian maxim: “When the man of noble mind unfailingly conducts himself with self-respect, and is courteous and well-behaved with others, then all within the four seas are his brother” (*The Analects: Yan Yuan*). Cognitively, it emphasizes cultivating humanity, virtue, and rationality, fostering holistic development from the individual to the collective, from the family to the broader community, with social ideals like “the world belongs to the public” and “universal harmony.”

Moral and ethical philosophy shares both similarities and differences with ancient Greek natural law philosophy. Their greatest commonality lies in a shared emphasis on valuing, respecting, and loving humanity. China’s assertion that “humans are the most intelligent among all beings” and ancient Greece’s declaration that “man is the measure of all things” both position humanity as the central focus for understanding the world. Similarly, China’s principle of “do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you” and ancient Greece’s exhortations to “know thyself” and “exercise moderation” both underscore respect for others and equality in human relations. Research has clearly shown that ancient Greek concepts of human rights derived from natural law thought, whose core tenets include nature, reason, justice, freedom, and equality. The central proposition of natural law is to live in harmony with nature, which constitutes natural justice, while human laws aligned with natural justice represent legal justice. Undoubtedly, ideas proposed by Chinese thinkers during the “Axial Age,” such as “the Dao models itself on nature” and “harmony between humans and heaven” also reflect a rational spirit of acting in

accordance with natural laws. However, in its ultimate orientation toward human rights values, China was guided not towards natural justice but moral justice.

Regarding the fundamental characteristics of traditional Chinese society, the renowned American Sinologist John King Fairbank offered penetrating analysis. He argued that while generalizing about such a vast, ancient, and diverse society risks misrepresentation, foreign observers should note key features: “First, the basic unit of Chinese society is the family rather than the individual, the government, or the church. For every individual, the family provides the primary economic support, security, education, social interaction, and entertainment.”³⁸ Fairbank emphasized that “China’s ethical system does not point to God or the state, but centers on the family.”³⁹ He further explained that “In China, social norms derive from the personal virtues of loyalty, faithfulness, and goodness inherent in the family system. Law is an indispensable tool for governance; but personal morality is the foundation of society. Far from descending into anarchy due to a weak legal consciousness, Chinese society has been tightly knit together by Confucian thought. One might say that this great ethical system has played an even greater role than law or religion in the West.”⁴⁰ Fairbank highlighted the fundamental divergence between traditional Chinese and Western civilizations, underscoring the centrality of “ethical systems” and “personal morality” in Chinese society.

The book *World Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture* written by Edward McNall Burns and others also provides unique insights into traditional Chinese society. The book argues that “Chinese philosophy reached its brilliant peak in the period from the sixth to the third century B.C.”⁴¹ Comparing ancient Greek, Indian, and Chinese thought, it notes: “While the Greek philosophers were pondering the nature of the physical world and Indian thinkers were speculating about the relation of soul and matter, the sages of China were seeking the foundations of human life and the principles of good government. Chinese thinkers had little interest in metaphysics or natural science. They sought the first principles of the physical world not for the sake of absolute truth, but in order to illuminate the problems of human existence. They endeavored to set forth principles for the stabilization of society and the pacification of the human heart.”⁴¹ Clearly, the “Chinese sages” pursued a moral and ethical philosophy aimed at “explaining human existence.”

Some scholars advocate interpreting this moral and ethical philosophy from a multicultural perspective. They argued that human rights exhibit distinct features in different historical and cultural contexts, and that this cultural diversity constitutes “rich resources” for developing universal human rights. Specifically, they pointed out: “If one rejects the idea that there is a single, thick morality for all humans — whether based on reason or human nature — then it is natural to think that culture and history have a great deal to do with one’s moral outlook.”⁴² Moreover, “any particular

³⁸ John King Fairbank, *China: Tradition and Transformation*, translated by Zhang Pei (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 2002), 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁴¹ Philip Lee Ralph, et al., *World Civilizations (Volume I)*, 196-197.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴² Stephen C. Angle, *Human Rights in Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry*, translated by Huang Jinrong

morality can be seen as the dynamic product of a tradition of moral discourse that is itself shaped by specific social and natural circumstances.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, studying China’s rights discourse history offers two benefits: First, “We will discover that there are rich resources within China’s rights discourse for contemporary thinkers to draw on”; second, “it can help us appreciate the wisdom of seeing moral traditions as dependent on, and rooted in, their particular historical circumstances.”⁴⁵

By emphasizing moral and ethical dimensions in human rights philosophy, the human rights thinking of Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” demonstrated greater concern for the survival and development of individuals in reality, rather than abstract metaphysical attention to the realization of individual rights. Some researchers contrast this with liberal moral frameworks, noting that “Confucianism presents another radically different moral picture.”⁴⁶ The Confucian “moral picture” is a moral principle based on virtue, believing that “What it values is not the claim of rights or self-assertion, but the virtues of care and benevolence. The demand that Confucian morality makes upon us is not so much to exist as an independent, autonomous being as to become an exemplary person (*junzi* 君子). Unlike liberalism, in which the right is prior to the good, Confucianism holds that being a good person takes priority over being a claimant of rights.”⁴³ Researchers further emphasize that “Confucian morality is an aspirational morality. What it commends to us is a character we ought to achieve, a personality we ought to perfect, and a community we ought to strive to build.”⁴⁸

Third, human rights are oriented towards “positive” rights.

Confucianism emphasizes taking the world as one’s own responsibility, advocates applying knowledge to practical use, and insists on placing the individual within society. Through the life path of “self-cultivation, family harmony, state governance, and world peace,” it seeks to achieve the unity of the individual and society, restrain one’s selfish desires, cultivate oneself in personal growth, and realize personal value by contributing to society. Therefore, Confucianism embodies a spirit of “active engagement in the world.” Confucianism is a doctrine for governing society, primarily aiming to provide reasonable policy recommendations for rulers in governing the country and maintaining stability. The dual nature of these policy recommendations is evident, as they assist rulers in maintaining their rule and seek happiness for the people, aiming to build a harmonious and orderly society. Specifically, Confucianism requires rulers to implement “benevolent governance” and “the way of the king,” ensuring that the people lead a happy life. It envisions the building of a “Great Harmony Society,” where “people do not just show love for their own kin and children but extend it to all. The elderly are cared for, the able-bodied have employment, the young are nurtured, and the widowed, orphaned, childless, disabled, and sick are all provided for,” thereby creating an ideal social state.

and Huang Bin (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2012), 22.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Stephen C. Angle, *Human Rights in Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry*, 22-23.

⁴⁶ Lee Seung-Hwan, “Liberal Rights and Confucian Virtues,” in *Virtues and Rights: On Confucianism and Human Rights from Cross-cultural Perspectives*, edited by Qu Tao (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2016), 258.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The “positive” rights thinking in Confucianism clearly exhibits characteristics of collectivist purpose. It aims to encourage rulers to take the initiative, ensuring that all members of society enjoy favorable conditions for survival and development within a harmonious and stable order, thereby safeguarding people’s well-being and long-term social stability. This “positive” human rights thinking with collectivist purpose places greater emphasis on building a “Great Harmony Society” that protects the rights of all members based on moral ethics, which significantly differs from the “negative” human rights thinking characterized by individualism, represented by that of ancient Greece, which focuses more on building a society that protects individual rights based on natural law. As some research has pointed out, “In the Confucian ethical system, a person is socially situated — one is not an isolated being but a being-in-relation. From the Confucian point of view, the Western self as an autonomous, free-choosing, and abstract concept is far removed from our actual experience. In this socially contextualized way, one’s identity is achieved not through separation from others but by playing appropriate roles in the interwoven social relationships.”⁴⁹

How should we understand the Confucian human rights thinking oriented towards “positive” rights? We can draw inspiration from existing research. When asked whether “human rights and the pre-existing resources for democratic ideas can be found in classical Confucianism,” American scholar Henry Rosemont Jr. stated, “Clearly, my answer is both yes and no. It is no if we define human rights as civil and political rights predicated on the concept of persons as autonomous individuals. It is yes if we believe the basic rights of human beings derive from a full human community, each of whose members takes the well-being of every other member, both individually and collectively, as her or his responsibility.”⁴⁴ Rosemont stated that “Confucius insisted that even the lowliest peasant was included in his concern,” advocating that “the first duty of government is to see to it that the people have sufficient food, or the government is disgraced; next, to help them become prosperous; and only after they are prosperous, to provide them with education.”⁴⁵ He further questions, “Are these not also the stuff of which the democratic ideal of public self-government is made”?⁴⁶ Clearly, Rosemont recognizes the rationality of Confucian “positive” human rights thinking from the perspective of “communal partnership.”

South Korean scholar Lee Seung-Hwan emphasizes in his research the Confucian “communal” human rights thinking that focuses on “virtue.” Lee argues that “in the Confucian ethical framework, what is considered most important is not procedural justice or individual rights but becoming a benevolent person. The society that Confucianism seeks to construct is not a collection of egoists but a collection of moral individuals who are in harmonious relationships with other members of the community. Therefore, Confucianism emphasizes the priority of virtue over rights,

⁴⁹ Lee Seung-Hwan, “Liberal Rights and Confucian Virtues,” in *Virtues and Rights: On Confucianism and Human Rights from Cross-cultural Perspectives*, 132-133.

⁴⁴ Henry Rosemont Jr., “Whose Democracy? Which Rights? A Confucian Critique of Modern Western Liberalism,” in *Confucianism and Liberalism*, translated by Shang Geling (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001), 240.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

substantive justice over procedural justice, and the common good over rational egoism. In short, Confucianism focuses not on autonomous morality throughout one's life but on a morality of harmonious coexistence, not on individualism but on an organic holism."⁴⁷ Regarding the theoretical and practical significance of the Confucian approach to human rights, some research suggests that Confucianism "roots rights in authentic interpersonal relationships, where our lives are intertwined, and the moral communities (starting from the family) on which our practical selves depend are also interconnected. This is important because it is more realistic than thought experiments like the 'state of nature' or the 'veil of ignorance', which either erroneously assume that people are separate (or even opposed) or mistakenly believe that they can at least forget their upbringing or interpersonal dependencies through thought."⁵⁴

From the above, we can see that the human rights awareness of Chinese civilization during the "Axial Age" possesses its own spiritual traits. If the human rights awareness represented by Greek civilization, built on the philosophy of natural law, has abstract and metaphysical (transcending concrete reality) characteristics and primarily pursues individual liberalism as its value, then the human rights awareness represented by Chinese civilization, based on the moral and ethical philosophy, has concrete and realistic characteristics and primarily pursues collective egalitarianism as its value. This fully illustrates that although classical Chinese and Western human rights philosophies, built on different economic and social structures, and historical and cultural backgrounds, all contain the ideological connotations of valuing, respecting, and loving people, they have been significantly different since their inception. From a grand historical perspective, it is precisely because of these differences in human rights philosophies between China and the West that humanity has gained a richer and more diverse understanding of the meaning of being human and the value of human existence. Based on such reflections, some research suggests that "human rights should not merely aim for uniformity that eliminates differences; they should more importantly promote the elevation and development of humanity. Human rights should support the moral development of humanity and society rather than harm society. All virtues that contribute to the all-round development of humanity and human society should be included into the scope of human rights." "In this sense, the virtue thoughts in the Chinese humanistic tradition and the human rights concepts in the Western rational tradition can work together for the establishment of a sustainable and ecological social order in the new century"⁴⁸.

V. Conclusion

The human rights awareness, cognitive understanding of human rights values, and the distinctive spiritual traits of human rights demonstrated in Chinese civilization

⁴⁷ Lee Seung-Hwan, "Liberal Rights and Confucian Virtues," in *Virtues and Rights: On Confucianism and Human Rights from Cross-cultural Perspectives*, 255.

⁵⁴ Shen Meihua, "A Confucian Approach to Human Rights," in *Virtues and Rights: On Confucianism and Human Rights from Cross-cultural Perspectives*, edited by Qu Tao (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2016), 156.

⁴⁸ Cheng Chung-Ying, "Transforming Confucian Virtues into Rights: A Study of Human Practical Abilities and Potentials in Confucian Ethics," in *Virtues and Rights: On Confucianism and Human Rights from Cross-cultural Perspectives*, edited by Qu Tao (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2016), 163.

during the “Axial Age” are characterized by pronounced endogeneity, autonomy, and originality. They represent a significant moment of human rights awareness in the history of Chinese civilization, creating landmark achievements in human rights civilization in human history. This human rights awareness emerged as a result of indigenous cultural innovation and development under specific historical conditions, reflecting the Chinese nation’s unwavering pursuit of the value of being human and the significance of human existence, embodying profound humanistic sentiments and intellectual wisdom.

The human rights awareness in Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” has exerted a profound impact on the development of global human rights civilization. Following the advent of the Age of Exploration, the process of “Eastward Spread of Western Learning” inevitably led to the “Westward Spread of Eastern Learning.” Chinese classics containing human rights thought from the “Axial Age” were continuously translated and introduced to the West, serving as intellectual nourishment for the Enlightenment and the bourgeois revolution in the West. On October 2, 1948, as the UDHR was nearing completion and adoption, Peng-chun Chang, speaking at the 91st meeting of the Third Committee of the Third Session of the United Nations General Assembly, stated, “In the 18th century, when progressive ideas on human rights were first proposed in Europe, translations of Chinese philosophical works were already known to thinkers such as François-Marie Arouet, Francois Quesnay, and Denis Diderot, which inspired their humanistic resistance against feudal concepts.”⁴⁹ Peng-chun Chang also emphasized that “even when modern Europe first explored the issue of human rights, Chinese thought had already fused with European thoughts and sentiments on human rights.”⁵⁰ It was precisely this “fusion of thoughts and sentiments on human rights” that enabled the birth of the UDHR, which embodies the principle of universality of human rights. Subsequently, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, formulated based on the UDHR, constructed a more comprehensive international human rights charter system grounded in two distinct perspectives on human rights. This represents a successful experience and a true reflection of the international community’s inclusive approach to embracing the diversity of human civilizations.

When discussing China’s path of human rights development, General Secretary Xi Jinping stated, “In advancing the human rights cause, we have combined the Marxist outlook on human rights with China’s specific realities and the best of traditional Chinese culture, reviewed our Party’s successful experience of leading the people in respecting and protecting human rights, and learned from the outstanding achievements of other civilizations. This has allowed us to forge a path that is in keeping with the times and the conditions of China.”⁵¹ The human rights thoughts generated from the human rights awareness in Chinese civilization during the “Axial

⁴⁹ Chang Jian, *Collected Works of Peng-chun Chang: Human Rights Volume* (Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2023), 288.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵¹ Xi Jinping, “Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights,” *Qiushi* 12 (2022).

Age” constitute an important part of the fine traditional Chinese culture and are also a key aspect of the “two combinations.” They hold significant practical implications for establishing a contemporary Chinese perspective on human rights and staying committed to China’s path of human rights development. In contemporary China, we center on the people and respect their principal status. We emphasize that the rights to subsistence and development are the primary and fundamental human rights and that a happy life for the people is the greatest human right. Focusing on the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, we coordinate and promote the all-round development of various human rights, and advance the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. All these endeavors carry forward the spirit of human rights awareness in Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age.” In a sense, this is also a practical manifestation of the continuity of Chinese civilization.

Human rights are historical and evolving. The human rights awareness in Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age” represents the initial self-awareness of human rights in the history of global human rights civilization and naturally possesses insurmountable historical limitations. We should view these limitations objectively and rationally and must not deny the human rights value of Chinese civilization because of them. Regarding this issue, the key lies in examining what human rights thinking existed in Chinese civilization during the “Axial Age,” what human rights thoughts it proposed, what human rights spirit it embodied, and what significance it holds for contemporary human rights development, rather than overly emphasizing what was not discovered or what was lacking. Of course, exaggeration is also not a historical materialist attitude.

“A thousand years have passed.” Contemporary China stands at a new historical starting point. In the new era, China is comprehensively deepening reforms, continuously expanding opening-up, advancing Chinese modernization, and creating a new form of human civilization. Human rights are an inherent part of civilization, and human rights civilization is an important component of Chinese civilization. Rooted in the Chinese land and staying committed to the “two combinations,” we should summarize the successful experiences of China’s human rights practices, draw on the outstanding achievements of human civilization, and create a modern human rights civilization of the Chinese nation, which is a major mission entrusted to the new era by history.

(Translated by *LI Chunyan*)