

# On the Identification and Inheritance of the Concept of Human Rights in Traditional Chinese Culture

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**Abstract:** *Human dignity, the logical starting point of human rights, determines that human rights are universal. However, people's different understandings, expressions, and practices of human rights under diverse historical and cultural conditions constitute the particularity of human rights. The theory of the universality and particularity of human rights serves as a theoretical instrument for identifying and analyzing the concept of human rights in traditional culture. From the perspective of the universality of human rights, it is certain that the concept of human rights exists in traditional Chinese culture. From the perspective of the particularity of human rights, the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture possesses both historical progressiveness and historical limitations. Its historical progressiveness is reflected in aspects such as the state's responsibility, concern over people's livelihoods, and the pursuit of harmony, while its historical limitations are manifested in areas such as the state-centric stance, obligation-based orientation, and hierarchical concepts. Studying the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture, scientifically understanding its progressiveness, limitations, and the tension between them, and consciously promoting its innovative transformation and critical inheritance are of great significance for constructing China's independent knowledge system of human rights, shaping the contemporary Chinese outlook on human rights, and even advancing the development of the cause of human rights with Chinese characteristics.*

**Keywords:** concept of human rights ♦ traditional Chinese culture ♦ historical progressiveness ♦ innovative transformation

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Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee pointed out, "Human rights are concrete, rooted in history, and based on current realities. We cannot mouth empty words on human rights regardless of the social and political conditions and the historical and cultural traditions of a country."<sup>1</sup> This viewpoint provides theoretical guidance for an in-depth study of the concept of human rights in traditional culture. Traditional Chinese culture contains abundant concepts of human rights, yet they are not direct expressions of modern concepts of human rights. Among them, there are elements that align with and contribute to the development of modern concepts of human rights, as well as those that contradict

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<sup>1</sup> Xi Jinping, "Steadfastly Following the Chinese Path to Promote Further Progress in Human Rights," *Qiushi* 12 (2022): 9.

them.<sup>2</sup> We should delve deeply into these human rights thoughts, integrate the essence of fine traditional culture with modern governance based on the conditions in the new era and open up new horizons in human rights, thereby making contributions to China and even the entire human civilization.<sup>3</sup> The integration of traditional culture and modern governance requires systematic innovative transformation and critical inheritance, a process that drives the development and preservation of traditional culture and actively responds to the needs of contemporary society. This paper leverages the theory of the universality and particularity of human rights to identify and analyze the historical progressiveness and limitations of the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture. It employs two methods, namely, innovative transformation and critical inheritance, to preliminarily explore how to develop the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture, attempting to establish a new research paradigm and provide cultural resources, discourse materials, and theoretical insights for the development of the Chinese contemporary theory of human rights.

## **I. Identification and Analysis of the Concept of Human Rights in Traditional Chinese Culture**

As a common human value with human dignity as its logical starting point, human rights possess both universality and significant particularity. The former reflects the universal recognition of individual dignity and value, while the latter is closely linked to the historical development and traditional culture of a nation or state. They present diverse connotations and expressions under different conditions. The theory of the universality and particularity of human rights provides a scalpel for us to identify and analyze the concept of human rights and its characteristics in traditional Chinese culture. The universality and particularity of human rights discussed in modern human rights theory are primarily a comparative analysis based on the contemporary status of global human rights development. It both acknowledges the differences in the levels of human rights development and advocates for the necessity of human rights values. Although the theory of the universality and particularity of human rights emphasizes the synchronic characteristics and horizontal comparisons of human rights, it also implies methods and standards for diachronic characteristics and vertical comparisons.

### **A. The logical starting point of human rights: human dignity**

Human dignity has consistently served as the core concept and theoretical cornerstone of human rights theories throughout their development. As a universal value foundation, principle, or standard, human dignity addresses the basis for the universality of human rights. Also, it provides a methodology and instrument for studying the concept of human rights and their practices in different social and cultural contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> Chen Hongyi, "Chinese Cultural Traditions and Modern Concepts of Human Rights," *Law Science* 5 (1999): 9.

<sup>3</sup> Tu Yunxin, "Comparing Rights and Obligations in Human Rights Cultures: An Analysis Based on Western, Traditional Chinese, and Marxist Paradigms," *Journal of Human Rights Law* 2 (2022): 76.

Human dignity represents an affirmation of an individual's intrinsic value. In moral and legal systems, dignity demands that each person, as a subject with unique value, be given basic respect and protection. In international human rights law, human dignity is regarded as an inherent characteristic of being human as well as the origin and logical prerequisite for human rights.<sup>4</sup> The preamble to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* emphasizes, "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Both the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* affirm in their preambles that "these rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person." The 1993 *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* opens by declaring that "all human rights derive from the dignity and worth inherent in the human person," which is widely regarded as an exemplary model for addressing the controversy over the universality and relativity of human rights, laying the foundation for universal human rights.<sup>5</sup> "Human dignity" is not confined to legal discourse; its intellectual roots can be traced back to various philosophical and religious traditions. Many cultures regard humans as "the crown of creation," acknowledging their uniqueness and intrinsic value. Ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and the Stoics proposed the concept of the "rational being," emphasizing that humans possess reason distinct from other creatures and should therefore be given higher reverence. Christianity posits that human dignity stems from human being a creation of God, which also forms a foundation of Western human rights thought. Kant emphasized that human dignity transcends all other values and has no equivalent substitute.<sup>6</sup> Jack Donnelly pointed out, "The concept of human dignity expresses a particular understanding of the inner (moral) worth and the social (political) standing of the human person."<sup>7</sup>

Human dignity is the logical starting point of human rights. First, it is the ultimate value of human rights. Human rights, as a means, aim to realize and protect human dignity as its ends.<sup>8</sup> Kant proposed that humans are "ends in themselves" and should not be treated merely as means to achieve the ends of others. This is exactly where human dignity lies, elevating it above all other non-human entities that may be used.<sup>9</sup> This illustrates the teleological dimension of human dignity as a core value, indicating that the realization of human rights aims to comprehensively protect and

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<sup>4</sup> Zhao Jianwen, "Dignity: The Convergence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Traditional Chinese Culture," *Human Rights* 5 (2018): 36.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Wanhong and Xiao Siyu, "Human Dignity: A Human Rights Consensus Transcending Universalism and Relativism — Commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action," *Journal of Xiangtan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 3 (2024): 67-69.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated by Miao Litian (Shanghai: Shanghai People Press, 2002), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, translated by Wang Puqu, et al. (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2001), 72.

<sup>8</sup> Yoshinori Sanada, "Human Dignity and Human Rights", translated by Bao Rongzhen, *Global Law Review* 2 (1993): 79.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, translated by Li Kezheng and Wang Fuling (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2022), 260.

develop individual dignity. People “need” human rights to live with dignity. “Human rights are specific social practices aimed at realizing a particular conception of the essence of human dignity.”<sup>10</sup> Second, human dignity possesses a universality that transcends culture and history, constituting a value concept with universal significance and the philosophical foundation for the universality of human rights. As a shared human concept that transcends culture and time, the human rights thought does not leave any blank spots in the culture of any ethnic group.<sup>11</sup> We can distill similar cores of human dignity from different cultures. *The Koran* contains teachings on “respecting others,” Confucianism advocates “benevolence,” Christianity promotes “loving others as oneself,” and the ancient Indian epic poem *Mahabharata* includes customs for protecting vulnerable groups. All of them reflect a universal concern for human dignity. As American human rights scholar Lauren stated, “Early human rights ideas did not emerge solely in the West or in connection with specific forms of liberal democratic governance; rather, they arose in the cultures of many places, where thinkers expressed these ideas in diverse ways.”<sup>12</sup>

The emphasis on human dignity in the preamble to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (hereinafter referred to as the “*Declaration*”) also fully confirms its core status. Chinese representative Zhang Pengchun made significant contributions in this regard. During the drafting process of the *Declaration*, Zhang Pengchun emphasized the need for a preamble to establish a philosophical foundation and highlight the concept of “elevating human dignity and emphasizing respect for individuals.” He believed that human rights principles should apply universally, regardless of an individual’s status. This reflects the ideas of universality and equality in human rights and constitutes the fundamental principles and basis of the *Declaration*.<sup>13</sup> Zhang Pengchun, drawing on traditional Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism, paid attention to the diversity of world cultures, emphasized the concept of dignity, and reinforced the universality of human rights.<sup>14</sup> His advocacy was deeply influenced by the concept of respect for individuals in traditional Chinese culture, which believes that human rights originate from human dignity. Ultimately, Zhang Pengchun incorporated the Confucian concept of “benevolence or humanity” (*ren*) into the *Declaration* as a common essential attribute of humanity to the philosophical foundation for human rights. This enabled the *Declaration* to encompass the concept of human rights beyond the Western tradition, enhancing its universality and playing a crucial role in setting global human rights standards.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, human dignity, as the logical starting point of human rights, serves

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<sup>10</sup> Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Ye Xinyuan, “The Distinctive Characteristics of the Expression Systems of Traditional Chinese and Western Human Rights Thoughts,” *Fujian Tribune (The Humanities & Social Sciences Monthly)* 3 (2006): 62.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Sun Pinghua, *Zhang Pengchun: An Important Architect of the World Human Rights System* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2017): 227-228.

<sup>14</sup> Sun Pinghua, “On the Concept of Human Dignity in Zhang Pengchun’s Human Rights Thought,” *Fudan International Studies Review* 1 (2022): 336.

<sup>15</sup> Sun Pinghua, *Zhang Pengchun: An Important Architect of the World Human Rights System*, 241.

as a bridge that connects the concept and practices of human rights across different eras, cultural backgrounds, and institutional traditions. It is also the greatest common denominator in the human rights outlook. It is exactly because of the universal recognition of human dignity that human rights have acquired a minimum degree of universality. Meanwhile, due to the diversification of theoretical and practical approaches to upholding human dignity, the particularity of human rights has room for development. Human dignity is the logical starting point of human rights theory and the core spirit of human rights that transcends history and culture.

### **B. Identification of the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture**

The ancient Chinese moral and ethical system, along with its practices, contained the embryonic ideas of human rights such as respect for life and concern for people's livelihoods, reflecting the universality of human rights. "The universality of human rights is grounded in human dignity and value, as well as in the common interests and morality of humanity."<sup>16</sup> According to modern human rights theory, the universality of human rights refers to the fundamental rights and freedoms universally enjoyed by all humans, regardless of historical periods, social conditions, cultural types, religious beliefs, ethnic groups, or national systems. It represents a value that should be universally upheld. Although traditional Chinese culture lacked both the concept of "human rights" and a modern awareness of "universality," it encompasses various narrative forms that respect human dignity, serving as interpretations of the universality of human rights in traditional Chinese culture.

Confucianism holds a dominant position in traditional Chinese culture. Its understanding and interpretation of human dignity, which emphasize respect for people and value their personality and worth, are manifested in ethics and morality. Also, they profoundly influence the establishment of social order and interpersonal relationships. Pre-Qin Confucians believed that dignity was inherent in every individual, regardless of wealth, social status, or nobility. First, benevolence or humanity (*ren*) is one of the core concepts in Confucianism. Confucius proposed "the benevolent love others" (*ren zhe ai ren*), emphasizing mutual respect and kindness toward others, with over 100 discourses to *ren* in *The Analects*. This represents a moral responsibility and an affirmation of an individual's intrinsic value and dignity. Mencius proposed that "all men have a heart which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others",<sup>17</sup> arguing that human nature is inherently good and possesses intrinsic value worthy of respect. Thus, humans inherently possess "dignity" that predates any external dignity that may later be conferred by the state or society.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, "human preciousness" is also an important expression of traditional views on dignity. *The Classic of Filial Piety* states, "Of all (creatures with their different) natures

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<sup>16</sup> The State Council Information Office, "Development and Progress of China's Human Rights Undertakings over the 40 Years of Reform and Opening-up," published on the website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, accessed December 6, 2024, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/12/content\\_5347961.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/12/content_5347961.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Mencius: *Gongsun Chou I*

<sup>18</sup> Heiner Roetz: *The "Dignity within Oneself": Chinese Tradition and Human Rights*, in *Virtue and Rights: Confucianism and Human Rights from a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Liang Tao (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2016): 197.

produced by Heaven and Earth, man is the noblest,”<sup>19</sup> Mencius asserted that “every man has in himself that which is honourable”<sup>20</sup> and “all men may be Yaos and Shuns”,<sup>21</sup> reflecting a high recognition of human value. “To put an innocent person to death is contrary to benevolence”<sup>22</sup> demonstrates respect for life. In *The Analects*, “The will of even a common man cannot be taken from him”<sup>23</sup> and “they would not lower their purpose, nor allow themselves to be disgraced in their persons”<sup>24</sup> reflect the importance attached to personal dignity. Second, Confucian “ritual propriety” (*li*) represents a concrete practice of respect for people. By regulating individual behavior through *li*, one shows respect for others and upholds one’s own dignity. Therefore, the ancient ritual system actually embodies people’s recognition and protection of each other’s dignity and value. Achieving *ren* through *li* is a fundamental approach for Confucians to uphold human dignity.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Confucian “righteousness” (*yi*) is also related to human dignity. “Water and fire possess vital energy (*qi*) but are without life. Grass and trees possess life but are without awareness. Birds and beasts possess awareness but are without a sense of morality and justice (*yi*). Humans possess *qi*, life, and awareness, and in addition possess a sense of morality and justice. Hence, they are the noblest beings in the world.”<sup>26</sup> Xunzi believed that humans are precious because of their righteousness and thus worthy of respect.

Apart from Confucianism, the thoughts of various schools of philosophy also contain different understandings of human dignity, reflecting the multidimensionality and practicality of human dignity and value. Mohism, with “universal love” and “non-aggression” as its core, represents a universal recognition of human dignity. “Universal love” advocates for respecting and caring for all people without discrimination, breaking through ethical limitations based on kinship and demonstrating equal concern for individual dignity. “Non-aggression” opposes war and aggression, reflecting respect for the value of life. Taoism, from a perspective of natural philosophy, advocates for human dignity and value, emphasizing that “the law of the Tao is its being what it is” and arguing that all things have their own Tao, and individual lives are part of the cosmic nature, thus possessing unique intrinsic value and dignity. Laozi expressed dignity through the concepts of “respect” and “preciousness,” stating “that is why all things honour Tao and prize its influence. Tao is honoured, its influence prized, because it never orders, but is always so of itself.”<sup>27</sup> Thoughts such as “between heaven and earth, there is nothing more noble than mankind”<sup>28</sup> and “to be humane is to be a man”<sup>29</sup> also reflect a high reverence for human life and value. Legalism, on the other hand, ensures social fairness and order through institutions and the rule of law, reflecting the value of dignity. Han Feizi

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<sup>19</sup> *The Classic of Filial Piety: The Rule of the Sage King*

<sup>20</sup> *Mencius: Gaozi I*

<sup>21</sup> *Mencius: Gaozi II*

<sup>22</sup> *Mencius: Jin Xin II*

<sup>23</sup> *The Analects: Zi Han*

<sup>24</sup> *The Analects: Wei Zi*

<sup>25</sup> Zhao Jianwen, “Dignity: The Convergence of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Traditional Chinese Culture,” *Human Rights* 5 (2018): 40-41.

<sup>26</sup> *Xunzi: The Rule of the King*

<sup>27</sup> *Dao De Jing, Chapter 51*

<sup>28</sup> *Sun Bin: The Art of Warfare: The Sixth Chapter on Monthly Battles*

<sup>29</sup> *The Book of Rites: Zhongyong, Chapter 31*

advocated for “punishment without hierarchy”,<sup>30</sup> meaning equality before the law. This principle of the rule of law, to a certain extent, protected the dignity of ordinary people.

### **C. The particularity of the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture**

Human rights stem from human dignity and are profoundly shaped by specific cultural and social conditions. Despite the undeniable universality of their value, the concepts and practices of human rights exhibit distinct characteristics across different cultures. The universality of human rights does not imply uniformity in values; in the context of globally diverse civilizations, traditional pluralism and variation manifest in varied understandings and practices of human rights.<sup>31</sup> These “varied understandings and practices” reflect the particularity of human rights. Consequently, although traditional Chinese culture valued human dignity, it did not develop a modern conception of human rights. Such concepts of human rights possess both historical progressiveness and limitations, each reflecting the particularity of human rights.

The particularity of human rights generally refers to the variations in how different countries or regions understand, express, and implement human rights, due to differences in history, culture, religion, values, and resources.<sup>32</sup> It does not negate universality but rather contextualizes universal principles within specific historical and cultural settings, adapting them selectively according to the actual conditions on which a state or region depends for its existence and development. Hence, human rights also possess a historical character. As social needs differ across historical periods, so do the demands, expressions, and practices of human rights.<sup>33</sup> China in ancient times differed greatly from that of the modern era in economic, political, and cultural conditions. Within a framework dominated by order and familial-state ethics, human dignity, equality, and freedom were often constrained by external forces such as family, society, and rulers. Thus, the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture possessed a historical particularity distinct from other ancient cultures and even more so from modern concepts of human rights.

In traditional Chinese culture, human dignity was often manifested as a relational value embedded within ethical order and social responsibilities, rather than as individual dignity. For instance, the Confucian concept of “benevolence” emphasized mutual respect and love, framing human dignity within ethical duties rather than the modern notion of individual inviolability. Although Mohist “universal love” advocated for inclusive care, it was still grounded in ethical practice and lacked a conception of rights. This ethically oriented view of dignity, often based on familial roles and social relations, emphasized moral duties toward others and society rather than rights entitled to individuals. In practice, it relied mainly on scholars’ moral assertions and ethical systems, lacking legal and institutional safeguards. In contrast,

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<sup>30</sup>*The Book of Lord Shang: Rewards and Punishments*

<sup>31</sup>Hans Köchler, “Human Rights and Peaceful Coexistence Among States: Universality-Diversity-Dialogue,” *Human Rights* 3 (2021): 21.

<sup>32</sup>Xu Xianming, “An Analysis of the Universality of Human Rights and Human Rights Culture,” *Law Review* 6 (1999): 18.

<sup>33</sup>Li Haixing, “On the Particularity of Universal Human Rights,” *Academic Forum* 1 (2006): 77.

human dignity in modern society is centered on the individual, highlighting its universality and inalienability, and is protected by laws and institutions. This transcends traditional ethical frameworks and philosophical categories, establishing dignity as a core value of individual rights, which is guaranteed by international human rights law, constitutional law, and related legal and policy instruments. This understanding and practice transform dignity from a traditional ethical value into an independent and universal system of rights.

In ancient China, equality was manifested as a value constrained within limited ethical, moral, and social behavioral norms. Although Confucianism advocated “education without discrimination,” affirming equality in educational opportunities, this equality was confined to education and did not extend to politics and society. This was because ancient China emphasized “social status” and “hierarchy,” advocating distinct roles and a clear order of superiority and inferiority, with “ritual propriety” (*li*) serving to maintain identity obligations and social harmony, while individual rights were often subordinated to the framework of collective interests. In contrast, the modern concept of equality is built upon the rule of law, encompassing multiple domains such as politics, economy, and education. It is explicitly safeguarded by laws and policies, granting everyone equal basic rights within the legal framework, regardless of gender, race, religion, or social status. This legal and institutional development has laid the foundation for democratic politics and human rights protection in modern society.

Freedom, as a vital component of modern human rights, was primarily expressed as moral self-discipline or spiritual transcendence in traditional culture, as the historical conditions of hierarchical systems and obligation-centered norms severely restricted its universal expression. The cornerstone of Confucian thought on freedom is moral self-discipline,<sup>34</sup> emphasizing that individuals should achieve self-realization within the framework of “ritual propriety” (*li*), with individual behavior subordinated to social order and familial responsibilities. Personal freedom was more of an inner freedom and moral self-restraint. Taoism advocates “non-action” (*wu wei*) and “free wandering at ease” (*xiaoyao*), asserting that individual freedom lies in transcending worldly utilitarianism and pursuing harmony with nature, with an emphasis on spiritual liberation. In contrast, the concept of freedom in modern human rights has undergone a qualitative transformation. It is no longer confined to ethical frameworks and spiritual freedom in philosophy but evolving into an inalienable basic right for individuals, which is institutionalized in political, economic, and legal practices. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* explicitly states that “all human beings are born free,” emphasizing that individuals enjoy multidimensional rights, including freedom of speech, religion, political participation, property, and movement. This difference reflects the profound evolution of the concept of freedom under varying historical and cultural conditions.

Despite the apparent limitations in the concepts of human dignity, equality, and freedom in traditional culture, they indeed contain concerns for human value in moral

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<sup>34</sup> Zhao Jianwen, “Confucian Thought on Freedom: The Convergence of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Traditional Chinese Culture,” *Human Rights* 1 (2020): 54.

philosophy and ethical education, which, to some extent, demonstrate the historical foundations and cultural context of the contemporary Chinese outlook on human rights. From ancient ethical and philosophical principles to modern legal and rights-based practices, the concept of human rights exhibits distinct particularity and temporality. The emphasis on equality and freedom in modern society deepens the universal value of “human dignity” and expands the connotations of human rights. The differences between tradition and modernity are not merely conceptual but represent fundamental disparities in cultural and institutional forms. “Human rights are not innate but historically produced.”<sup>35</sup> The historical and cultural environment constitutes the soil for the development of human rights. Ancient China lacked the conditions for the emergence of modern concepts of human rights, reflecting the impact of cultural and temporal differences on the development of human rights. As Hegel observed, “Every age has such peculiar circumstances, such individual conditions that it must be and is to be understood by itself.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, within the framework of the universality and particularity theory of human rights, it is essential to examine the concept of human rights in traditional culture from the perspective of cultural continuity, taking into account historical, cultural, and institutional contexts.

## **II. The Historical Progressiveness of the Concept of Human Rights in Traditional Chinese Culture and Their Innovative Transformation**

Although the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture did not form a discourse of rights in the modern sense, they possessed specific social functions and ethical efficacies in their historical contexts. One of the keys to evaluating their contemporary value lies in whether they exhibit historical progressiveness and can be integrated into the modern human rights system through innovative transformation. Historical progressiveness refers to the positive significance of a culture or ideology in promoting social development under specific historical conditions. It embodies the intrinsic value of the concept of human rights in traditional culture and forms the basis for their contemporary expression and innovative transformation. As General Secretary Xi Jinping stated, “Innovative transformation means that, in line with the characteristics and requirements of our times, we should reform the connotations that still hold reference value today as well as outdated forms of expression, endow them with new contemporary connotations and modern forms of expression, thus revitalizing their vitality.”<sup>37</sup> This provides direction for identifying and analyzing the historical progressiveness of the concept of human rights in traditional culture.

### **A. Methods for identifying historical progressiveness**

First, assessment criteria should be established “in line with the characteristics and requirements of the times.” The characteristics of the times refer to a concentrated reflection of the level of social development, core demands, and major issues at a

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<sup>35</sup> Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1972), 146.

<sup>36</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated by Wang Zaoshi (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1963), 44.

<sup>37</sup> Xi Jinping, *On the Party’s Publicity and Ideological Work* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2020), 57.

specific historical stage. “We should evaluate and interpret old traditions based on new reference systems, enabling traditions to unfold as living entities.”<sup>38</sup> It is essential to combine the contemporary spirit of human rights with the realities of the rule of law and establish criteria for identification with practical relevance from both historical and contemporary perspectives. At the theoretical level, clarifying the characteristics of the times facilitates the connection between traditional and modern concepts of human rights and the construction of a framework for theoretical dialogue. At the practical level, it provides directional guidance for the innovative transformation of traditional culture. Without a clear reference to the times, transformation risks becoming blind, leading to a disconnect between traditional culture and modern needs and even causing misunderstandings or conflicts. Issues such as the emphasis on dignity, equality, and freedom in modern concepts of human rights, the focus of the contemporary Chinese outlook on human rights on the people’s subjectivity and the rights to subsistence and development, the core socialist values, and Xi Jinping thought on the rule of law can all serve as a reference for identification. Meanwhile, neglecting the characteristics of the times may lead to a deviation from the spirit of modern human rights. Some traditional ideas, while possessing ethical values such as Confucian “filial piety,” may see their applicability significantly reduced if not combined with concepts of gender equality and individual freedom. Furthermore, clarifying “the characteristics and requirements of the times” holds methodological significance. In the dialogue between tradition and modernity, traditions constitute the “other,” while contemporary contexts represent the “self.” Only by establishing a modern value system and human rights demands can we distinguish between the “self” and the “other.” In this way, we can respect the historical logic of traditions while avoiding excessive reliance on them, which leads to confusion. Through value discernment and logical coherence, we can achieve rational selection and effective transformation.

Second, it is crucial to identify human rights resources with modern significance, namely, “the connotations that still hold reference value today.” The progressiveness or reference value of traditional concepts of human rights is manifested in their adaptability and contribution amidst the changes of the times. The establishment of a contemporary human rights discourse system should neither simply replicate the original forms of any historical ideology nor isolate fragments, but should extract resources that align with the contemporary spirit and institutional needs in the overall historical context. The core criteria are whether they can respond to the needs in contemporary society and align with the core values of modern concepts of human rights, namely, dignity, equality, and freedom. Any content that contributes to advancing universal concepts of human rights, addressing current pressing issues, and offering unique contributions to the global human rights discourse system holds reference value. During the identification process, attention should be paid to the complexity of historical contexts, overcoming one-sided or generalized treatments of traditional ideas, and ensuring the compatibility of historical and cultural resources with modern needs.

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<sup>38</sup> Zhang Shiyong, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002), 325.

## **1. Taking historical contexts into full account**

The concept of human rights in traditional culture is deeply embedded in specific historical contexts, and detachment from these contexts may lead to misinterpretation. Research must be grounded in authentic historical materials and interpreted within the corresponding historical settings. “No research method can afford to ignore the characteristics of the research object.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, research should proceed from the unique discursive expressions and modes of thinking in traditional Chinese culture, combined with the social systems and power structures of the times, to understand their legitimacy and rationality and avoid abstract or absolute treatments. Zhu Suli’s “Contextualism” emphasizes: “It is important to focus on the constraints formed within a specific society based on human biological endowments and the development level of productive forces, to examine how legal systems and rules serve as a relatively economical and standardized response to conventional social problems.”<sup>40</sup> Taking Confucian “benevolent governance” as an example, it originated during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, which were characterized by feudal lords vying for supremacy and social turmoil, to restore social order. Ignoring this historical background and interpreting “benevolent governance” solely from a modern perspective may obscure its progressive role in promoting social governance and the development of human rights awareness at the time.

## **2. Overcoming one-sided or overgeneralized interpretations**

Many concepts of human rights in traditional culture exhibit ambiguity in their forms of expression, and their historical progressiveness cannot be judged solely based on superficial text or isolated historical events. For instance, Mencius’ statement, “the people are the most important, the state comes next, and the ruler is the least important,”<sup>41</sup> is often regarded as an embodiment of human rights awareness, emphasizing the status of the people within the state. However, interpreting it one-sidedly as a complete or contemporary democracy may result in overlooking the fact that this idea remains rooted within the framework of monarchy. It aims to provide governance references for the monarch rather than advocating for present-day popular sovereignty. Similarly, while the “governance through non-action” in Taoism reflects a critique of excessive power intervention, equating it with anarchism or libertarianism may lead to misconstruing its original intent of emphasizing natural laws and social adaptability. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of the concept of human rights in traditional culture should be conducted from multiple dimensions, including textual connotations, ideological contexts, and institutional practices, to explore their logic and purposes, clarify their applicable scopes and contextual limitations, and avoid oversimplifying the diversity and complexity of traditional culture with modern notions.

## **3. Ensuring the compatibility of historical and cultural resources with modern needs**

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<sup>39</sup>Wang Ning, “The Inheritance of Ancient Linguistic Heritage and Independent Innovation in Linguistics,” *Linguistic Sciences* 2 (2006): 56.

<sup>40</sup>Zhu Suli, “Contextualism: An Approach and Method for the Study of Legal Systems,” *Peking University Law Journal* 1 (2000): 20.

<sup>41</sup>*Mencius: Jin Xin II*

Some ideological resources in traditional culture, while historically significant, may have low compatibility with modern needs. Therefore, they should be selectively screened in light of contemporary realities, prioritizing the extraction of content that possesses both historical value and practical efficacy. For example, the Confucian concept of “benevolence” aligns with modern concepts of equality, justice, and harmony in its value orientation and can be reconstructed within a modern context. However, ideas such as “upholding heavenly principles and suppressing human desires,” which suppress individual rights and freedoms, should be identified and transformed with critical approaches. The key to assessing compatibility lies in combining the development goals and practical issues of modern society to screen for content with universal applicability and practical significance. In the meantime, international contexts should also be considered, highlighting the contributions of traditional culture to universal human values. For instance, the inclusive concept of “harmony in diversity” can provide theoretical support for international cooperation and global governance.

## **B. Main Manifestations of Historical Progressiveness**

The historical progressiveness of the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture is primarily reflected in three aspects: state responsibility, concern for people’s livelihoods, and the pursuit of harmony. These core values have promoted social stability and development during specific historical periods, while providing important ideological resources and practical insights for modern concepts of human rights.

### **1. The concept of state responsibility**

The concept of state responsibility emphasizes the duties of rulers and the state as governing entities, with a key focus on safeguarding order, maintaining stability, and promoting development, all grounded in the legitimacy and sustainability of power. Confucian “benevolent governance” stresses achieving people’s well-being through moral cultivation and compassionate administration, fostering social harmony via “rule by virtue.” Legalist thought advocates “rule by law,” maintaining state order and authority by legal norms. Both the moral and institutional dimensions reflect a strong emphasis on the responsibilities of rulers.

The historical progressiveness of the state responsibility concept is mainly embodied in its interpretation of power legitimacy and its regulation of rulers’ duties. First, this concept closely links the existence of state power with social responsibility, asserting that power is not unconditionally granted but justified by fulfilling social obligations. For instance, the *Book of Documents* states, “Heaven sees as the people see; Heaven hears as the people hear,”<sup>42</sup> explicitly attributing the legitimacy of state power to accountability toward the people. Second, this concept has promoted the institutionalization and structuration of social governance, highlighting the importance of rules for power exercise and functional boundaries. For example, Legalists proposed “The law does not favor the rich and powerful; the marking-line does not bend,”<sup>43</sup> emphasizing equal application of the law and establishing a

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<sup>42</sup> *The Book of Documents: Tai Shi Zhong*

<sup>43</sup> *Han Feizi: You Du*

normative foundation for power operations. During the Qin and Han dynasties, the promotion of the prefecture-county system strengthened centralized control over local regions, laying an institutional framework for state governance. Meanwhile, civil servant selection mechanisms like the “recommendation system” prioritized moral integrity and competence, ensuring effective duty performance. Last, this concept has promoted ethical governance models. The Confucian concept of “aligning virtue with Heaven” stresses that rulers should establish authority through moral cultivation, making ethical principles a critical standard for state governance. This approach has, to some extent, mitigated the exploitation of society by authoritarian power, infused power operations with humanistic qualities, facilitated civilized relations between power and the people, and enhanced rulers’ sense of responsibility by balancing people’s well-being and national stability in both moral and practical terms.

In contemporary society, the state responsibility concept holds significant reference value in areas such as social governance, rule of law, and international cooperation. First, it underscores that state power must fulfill social responsibilities, inspiring modern governments to prioritize the legitimacy and fairness of power operations. By adopting social governance models based on equity, transparency, and accountability, the fundamental rights of citizens can be effectively protected. Second, this concept has exerted a profound influence on the modern rule of law, particularly in standardizing power and legitimizing governance. On one hand, the idea of “governing by law” aligns closely with the modern concept of “rule by law,” emphasizing the authority and fairness of legal systems and providing theoretical support for building a law-based nation. On the other hand, it highlights the moral dimension of governance, arguing that state governance relies not only on laws and institutions but also on integrating moral and cultural values, offering a crucial foundation for building a “people-centered” social governance model. Last, in international relations and global governance, the spirit of “protecting the nation and ensuring people’s safety” embedded in the state responsibility concept infuses traditional wisdom into shaping the image of a responsible global power. Especially when addressing transnational challenges like environmental issues and public health crises, it emphasizes proactive international accountability to drive global cooperation and sustainable development.

## **2. The concept of prioritizing people’s livelihoods**

The concept of prioritizing people’s livelihoods is a core value deeply ingrained in ideas such as “benevolence” and “people-centeredness,” emphasizing that rulers should focus on the basic survival and well-being of the people. Confucianism advocates “the benevolent man loves others” and puts forward the notion of “rejoicing in the people’s joys and grieving over their sorrows,”<sup>44</sup> highlighting that rulers should understand the people’s situations and improve their livelihoods. Mencius proposed that “He who secures the people’s well-being and reigns as king cannot be resisted,”<sup>45</sup> pointing out that safeguarding people’s livelihoods is the political responsibility of rulers, with governance legitimacy predicated on meeting the people’s basic needs.

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<sup>44</sup> Mencius: Liang Hui Wang II

<sup>45</sup> Mencius: Liang Hui Wang I

This concept encompasses livelihood security, resource allocation, and social equity, permeating the ideological frameworks and political practices of rulers throughout Chinese history.

The historical progressiveness of the concept of prioritizing people's livelihoods is primarily manifested in its guidance of people-centered value orientations and its proactive role in fostering social governance models. It focuses on ensuring the people's survival and development, driving rulers to shift from a purely power-centric approach to a governance model centered on people's well-being, thereby promoting human-centered and socialized state governance. This concept has also fostered pragmatism and institutional development in public policies. In specific practices, systems such as the equal-field system and light taxation and corvée reduced the people's burdens, secured their basic livelihoods, and enhanced governance efficacy. These policies helped alleviate social conflicts and enhance social stability. Also, they achieved institutional innovation in state governance through the regulation of resource allocation. The concept of prioritizing people's livelihoods has also extended to the state's care and protection of vulnerable social groups. For example, the "voluntary granary" system in the Tang Dynasty relied on state grain reserves to provide aid to the people during famines, while the state-run charity institution "Yangji Yuan" in the Song Dynasty specifically cared for marginalized groups such as the elderly, widows, orphans, and the weak. These measures reflect the state's responsibility and commitment to safeguarding people's livelihoods, promoting social equity and justice. They provided an institutional foundation for the long-term stability of the state at that time and offered historical experience for the evolution of modern human rights thought.

In contemporary society, the concept of prioritizing people's livelihoods remains highly relevant and provides important insights, especially in the establishment of social security systems and the protection of fundamental rights. First, this concept aligns closely with contemporary Chinese outlook on human rights, with views such as "a happy life for the people is the greatest human right" and "the rights to subsistence and development are the primary and fundamental human rights" fully reflecting a value orientation centered on people's well-being. Since the reform and opening-up, China has gradually established a people-centered development philosophy, focusing on securing citizens' basic living conditions and development opportunities, which represents a modern practice of the concept of prioritizing people's livelihoods. Currently, China remains committed to development as the key to addressing social problems and comprehensively protects people's fundamental rights to subsistence and development by implementing institutional initiatives such as targeted poverty alleviation, social security, universal healthcare, and compulsory education. This represents a systematic practice of "prioritizing people's livelihoods." General Secretary Xi Jinping's proposition that "a happy life for the people is the greatest human right" inherits the core idea of people-centeredness from traditional concepts of livelihood. It provides a practical response to contemporary concepts of human rights and stands as an important theoretical achievement in China's human rights cause.

Second, the concept of prioritizing people's livelihoods holds significant value for improving the modern rights protection systems. In particular, it provides practical grounds for the equitable distribution of social resources and the equalization of public services. This concept emphasizes the fair allocation of resources and the improvement of public services, which aligns with the goals of modern governments in pursuing common prosperity and narrowing urban-rural disparities, and embodies a people-centered governance philosophy. Moreover, the concept of prioritizing people's livelihoods can also offer cultural support for China's participation in international human rights affairs. For instance, by emphasizing the importance of the rights to development and subsistence, China has injected new meaning into the theory of socio-economic rights within the global human rights discourse system, demonstrating its positive contributions to global livelihood issues.

### **3. Pursuing the concept of harmony**

As a core value of traditional Chinese culture, "harmony" emphasizes both the pursuit of unity amid differences through complementarity and coordination, such as the harmonious blending of the eight musical tones and the balanced combination of the five flavors, and the maintenance of equilibrium among diverse elements, forming a resilient and enduring "elegant order."<sup>46</sup> The concept of harmony embodies profound connotations at two levels: "unity in diversity" and "harmony in differences." It serves as an ethical foundation for social governance. Also, it profoundly demonstrates its historical progressiveness.

Unity in diversity is an important manifestation of the concept of harmony, which emphasizes the achievement of stabilization, balance, and harmonization of relationships through inclusivity and guidance. At the level of social governance, harmony is reflected in individual moral cultivation and family cohesion. Also, it extends to harmony within ethnic groups and among nations. "As a model for handling relationships among individuals, between humans and society, among ethnic groups, and between humans and nature, the pursuit of 'harmony' has become a universal ideal in Chinese cultural thought, shaping the modes of thinking, value orientations, and aesthetic pursuits in Chinese civilization."<sup>47</sup> Confucius advocated "governance with ritual and music," achieving social division of labor, role coordination, and ultimately national and societal stability and prosperity through ritual systems. The concept of harmony also underscores the relationship between humans and nature, with "harmony between humans and heaven" serving as a lofty embodiment of their harmonious coexistence. As a central tenet of Confucianism, it asserts that humans are not adversaries of nature but rather interdependent with all natural beings, reflecting an ancient understanding of ecological balance and sustainable development.

Harmony in differences constitutes another core dimension of the concept of harmony, advocating for harmony amidst diversity and unity among differences, embodying an inclusive value outlook. This philosophy rejects uniform "sameness"

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<sup>46</sup> Yan Qinghui and Cheng Zhimin, "On the Cultural Genes of Chinese Human Rights Thought," *Guizhou Social Sciences* 8 (2021): 56

<sup>47</sup> Chen Lai, *Core Values of Chinese Civilization: The Evolution of Sinology and Traditional Values* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2015), 71

and affirms diverse “differences,” emphasizing the interdependence and dynamic equilibrium among differences with the goal of achieving “universal harmony.”<sup>48</sup> In ancient Chinese social practice, “harmony in differences” demonstrated broad applicability across multiple domains, including social hierarchy, culture and religion, and ethnic relations. Socially, ancient China featured a rigid hierarchy from emperors and nobles to commoners, yet all strata coexisted in harmony based on cultural mechanisms like ritual systems. Culturally and religiously, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism achieved common development in different periods of time, illustrating the coordination of cultural diversity and inclusivity. In ethnic relations, diverse ethnic groups coexisted peacefully within a framework of mutual tolerance, each preserving their own traditional cultures. Thus, the concept of “harmony in differences” contributed to sustaining the overall order of ancient society, and also respected and accommodated individual and group differences, fostering a uniquely Chinese cultural paradigm.

In contemporary society, the concept of harmony holds profound cultural significance in advancing and practicing human rights, especially in pluralistic social governance and social equity protection. First, how to manage relationships across cultures, ethnic groups, and religions amid growing pluralism has become a critical issue in human rights protection. The concept of harmony provides an important philosophical basis by emphasizing respect for differences, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding, and advocating for the integration and coexistence of diverse cultures based on equality and mutual respect. Second, as social transformations intensify, issues like wealth disparities and urban-rural divides pose challenges to national human rights protection. The concept of harmony, with its emphasis on balance and inclusion, offers theoretical guidance for resolving these social conflicts by improving resource allocation and optimizing social policies to protect the fundamental rights of each citizen and promote social equity and justice. Last, from the perspective of modern human rights development, the concept of harmony holds equally important value domestically and internationally. Domestically, it helps balance collective and individual rights, respecting individual freedom and rights while accommodating collective rights and overall social progress. Internationally, it emphasizes respect for cultural diversity and differences, fostering dialogue and cooperation among nations on equal and inclusive terms, thereby contributing Oriental wisdom to the building of a more just, inclusive, and sustainable global human rights governance system.

### **C. Approaches to innovative transformation**

The historically progressive concept of human rights embedded in traditional culture can achieve in-depth alignment with contemporary human rights systems only through innovative transformation, namely, their adaptation and reconstruction within the right demands and legal frameworks of modern society. The key lies in integrating the selected progressive elements into the modern human rights value system, endowing traditional concepts with new vitality in contemporary contexts and expressions. Innovative transformation places an emphasis on the organic integration

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<sup>48</sup> Yan Qinghui and Cheng Zhimin, “On the Cultural Genes of Chinese Human Rights Thought,” 56.

of the human rights essence in traditional culture with modern value systems and human rights philosophies. This process serves as both a historical exploration of the human rights values in fine traditional Chinese culture and a vital pathway for its modernization. By facilitating dialogue between traditional culture and modern human rights, innovative transformation ensures continuity and historical inheritance of values from ancient times to the present, thereby enhancing the adaptability and international expressiveness of China's traditional concepts of human rights. Its ultimate goal is to enable valuable concepts of human rights in traditional culture to serve the establishment of a contemporary Chinese human rights outlook and a human rights discourse system with Chinese characteristics, while actively responding to the demands for cultural diversity and universal human rights in globalization.

Innovative transformation must thoroughly implement the principle of the “Two Combinations.” At the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the CPC, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that “we must continue to adapt the basic tenets of Marxism to China's specific realities and its fine traditional culture.”<sup>49</sup> This important discourse constitutes a component of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. Also, it provides theoretical basis and practical directions for the innovative transformation of the concept of human rights in traditional culture. On one hand, adapting the basic tenets of Marxism to China's specific realities requires that, in the pursuit of human rights development, China should adhere to Marxism's basic theories regarding the all-around emancipation of humanity and social progress. Also, it should ground its efforts in China's current development stage and specific national conditions. It should take into full account the variations in the levels of economic development, the unique features of social governance structures, and the profound impacts of cultural traditions, in order to explore an approach for human rights protection tailored to China's distinctive characteristics. On the other hand, adapting the basic tenets of Marxism to China's fine traditional culture emphasizes aligning traditional concepts of human rights with Marxist theories, leveraging Marxist scientific theories and methods to modernize and reconstruct the concept of human rights in traditional culture. For instance, combining the people-oriented philosophy with Marxist theories on the people's subject status has given rise to the contemporary expression of “putting the people at the center.” This integration exemplifies the Sinicization of Marxism and serves as a vital pathway for modernizing traditional culture, thereby achieving mutual empowerment between Marxist theory and traditional Chinese culture.

Innovative transformation can be achieved through theoretical reconstruction, which combines the historical progressiveness of traditional concepts of human rights with modern needs, endows progressive content with new connotations that align with the characteristics of the times, and revitalizes it in contemporary society through

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<sup>49</sup> Commentator of Xinhua News Agency, “Vigorously Promoting the Great Founding Spirit of the Party — Studying and Implementing President Xi Jinping's Important Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China,” website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-07/04/content-5622281.htm>.

modern forms of expression. First, it is essential to identify the convergence points between traditional concepts of human rights and modern human rights values. For instance, the emphasis on state responsibility underscores governance legitimacy, the focus on people's livelihoods highlights individual well-being, and the pursuit of harmony advocates for pluralistic coexistence. Second, by re-examining traditional concepts through the lens of modern human rights theories centered on dignity, equality, and freedom, we can adapt them to contemporary needs through innovative expressions. Innovation in expression is not merely about updating linguistic forms but also involves reconstructing ideological content. Taking the concept of "people's livelihoods" as an example, its traditional connotation lies in ensuring the basic survival needs and well-being of the populace. In modern contexts, this can be expanded to encompass fundamental human rights categories such as "the right to subsistence and development," which cover basic living guarantees and ensure people's enjoyment of rights across economic, cultural, and social dimensions, thereby facilitating their all-around development. Last, innovative transformation requires leveraging academic research, philosophical inquiry, and interdisciplinary integration to systematize and organize traditional concepts of human rights, ensuring that their expressions respond to the practical needs for human rights protection in contemporary society and resonate widely among rights holders. For instance, the right to equal education represents an innovative transformation of the principle of "education without discrimination." General Secretary Xi Jinping's proposal of "A Community of Life for Man and Nature"<sup>50</sup> serves as a modern interpretation of the concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity."

Institutional innovation also serves as a vital avenue for achieving innovative transformation. The essence of institutional innovation lies in building a bridge between traditional culture and modern society, fostering an in-depth integration of concepts and practices. Traditional concepts of human rights predominantly exist in the forms of ethical norms or political propositions, lacking systematic support from the legal framework. Through legislation and policy design, their connotations can be translated into operational and enforceable institutional arrangements. For instance, the concept of "focusing on people's livelihoods," when transformed in a modern context, translates into the establishment of a social security system. This encompasses income distribution mechanisms, employment-first policies, a comprehensive social security system, healthcare and medical care systems, and population development support systems, all aimed at addressing and resolving various imbalances and inadequacies in people's well-being. The *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization*, adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 20<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee, explicitly calls for improving the institutional framework for safeguarding and improving people's livelihoods.<sup>51</sup> This

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<sup>50</sup> Xi Jinping, "Jointly Building a Community of Life for Man and Nature," *People's Daily*, April 23, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization", website of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, accessed December 13, 2024, [https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202407/content\\_6963770.htm](https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202407/content_6963770.htm).

spirit of reform precisely exemplifies the institutionalization of traditional concepts related to people's livelihoods. By transforming moral and ethical principles into inclusive policies through institutional arrangements, it elevates the level of rule-of-law governance and strengthens the pathways for realizing citizens' rights. Meanwhile, it is imperative to improve mechanisms for power supervision, rights protection, and accountability implementation, establishing a multi-tiered enforcement system to advance the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities, ensuring that traditional concepts are truly integrated into modern human rights systems.

In the process of innovative transformation, the following three aspects are pivotal for ensuring the in-depth integration of traditional culture and modern concepts of human rights. First, it is crucial to avoid over-simplifying or symbolizing traditional concepts, which could undermine their ideological connotations and cultural depth. This requires a thorough exploration of their core values during the transformation, presenting their complexity through diverse forms of expression to ensure that the rich connotations of traditional culture are preserved in modern contexts. Second, striking a balance between tradition and modernity is essential. It involves preventing the excessive modernization of traditional concepts from diluting their essence, while also ensuring that their transformation aligns with the needs of contemporary society. Effective integration of tradition and modernity should be achieved on the basis of maintaining the logical framework of traditional culture. Last, the transformed content should be practically feasible. Through rigorous theoretical analysis and repeated practical verification, the transformed ideas should be truly implemented in modern society and cater to the specific needs of human rights protection. In conclusion, the relationship between traditional culture and human rights development constitutes a dynamic, bidirectional process of interaction. Innovative transformation enriches and evolves China's concepts of human rights, and also uncovers and interprets the excellent ideas in traditional culture, which highlights its value connotations. This interaction and integration offer significant support for fostering a human rights outlook with Chinese characteristics, demonstrating the potential for mutual inspiration and common development between traditional culture and modern concepts of human rights.

### **III. Historical Limitations and Critical Inheritance of the Concept of Human Rights in Traditional Chinese Culture**

Although the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture demonstrates a certain degree of historical progressiveness, they are also significantly constrained by specific social structures and political orders, exhibiting historical limitations that cannot be overlooked. Historical limitations refer to the constraints imposed on a culture or ideology by its economic foundation, social system, or cultural notions under specific historical conditions, resulting in a failure to fully embody the core values of dignity, equality, and freedom inherent in the concept of human rights, and reflecting the internal contradictions in a particular socio-cultural context. Analyzing

these limitations is conducive to accurately grasping the historical origins of the concept of human rights in traditional culture and provides a theoretical basis for their renewal and transformation in the modern context. “In China’s long feudal society, a splendid ancient culture was created. To sort out the developmental process of ancient culture, discard its feudal dross, and absorb its democratic essence is a necessary condition for developing a new national culture and enhancing national self-confidence. However, we must not indiscriminately absorb everything without criticism. It is essential to distinguish between all the decadent aspects of the ancient feudal ruling class and the excellent ancient culture of the people, which to some extent possesses democratic and revolutionary elements.”<sup>52</sup> This idea of critical inheritance offers significant insights for deeply understanding and reconstructing the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture.

#### **A. Methods for identifying historical limitations**

Classic texts such as Chinese classic works are the richest and most explicit carriers of the concept of human rights in traditional culture, yet they also contain the dregs of feudal culture. To identify the historical limitations of the concept of human rights in traditional Chinese culture, it is essential to make a critical interpretation and value distillation of classic texts in Chinese culture. The foundation of the methodology lies in integrating a modern perspective with historical context. Researchers need to clarify the historical background of these traditional texts, acknowledge that their concepts of human rights are products of specific social structures and historical conditions, and define the value orientations and limitations of these concepts. For instance, the people-centered philosophy is grounded in the stance of rulers and the state, reflecting the ideology of “benevolent governance.” However, it does not equate to democracy in the modern sense, as its fundamental purpose is to uphold feudal autocracy. This aspect should be subject to critical analysis from a modern perspective. This perspective emphasizes understanding traditional concepts on the basis of today’s socialist constitution, socialist democratic politics, and democratic society, while critically evaluating the contemporary stances of the discussants.<sup>53</sup>

The second approach to identifying historical limitations is to analyze practices related to human rights in ancient societies and explore the human rights experiences and lessons they may contain. By tracing back the history of human rights, it can be found that many civilizations had functional equivalents of human rights, but they were not defined as “human rights.” Instead, they were manifested as “factual human rights” in their respective social customs, moral norms, and legal systems.<sup>54</sup> Human rights have dual dimensions of theory and practice, encompassing both theoretical human rights and factual human rights, with the former corresponding to the realm of ideas and the latter to the world of living experience.<sup>55</sup> The distinction between the

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<sup>52</sup> Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 3 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1991), 1083.

<sup>53</sup> Wang Xinsheng, “Promoting the Innovative Transformation of Traditional Legal Culture through Constitutional Scrutiny,” *Procuratorial Daily*, June 15, 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Yasushi Ohnuma, *Human Rights, the State, and Civilization*, translated by Wang Zhian (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2014), 158.

<sup>55</sup> Qi Yanping, “Harmonious Human Rights: Mutual Reinforcement of the Chinese Spirit and Human Rights Culture,” *The Jurist* 2 (2007): 30-33.

two lies in the presence of a rights-based mindset and the purpose of protecting human rights. The existence of human rights practices does not necessarily imply that of human rights theories or concepts, as human rights facts can exist without the purpose of protecting rights and without being expressed in the form of concept of human rights. However, it cannot be denied that certain historical facts acknowledged and protected rights or, to some extent, produced effects of protecting the rights and interests of the people. Although these facts often reflect limitations centered on the interests of the ruling class, they remain valuable subjects for research. Therefore, research on the concept of human rights in traditional culture should not be confined to textual analysis or the mere presence of the term “human rights,” as many concepts are actually embedded in specific policies or practices. For example, the principle of “cautious punishment” and policies of light taxes and corvée exemplify factual human rights.

To identify limitations, it is also essential to scrutinize the relationship between traditional concepts of human rights and the feudal system, especially the severe constraints imposed by China’s ancient hierarchical social structure and autocratic monarchical political regime on the concept of human rights. Ancient concepts of human rights typically mirrored the fundamental values of feudal patriarchal society, such as loyalty, filial piety, and the supremacy of imperial authority – ideas that inherently restricted individual freedoms and rights. Therefore, analyzing how these social systems shaped and influenced the concept of human rights is of critical importance. Meanwhile, discerning the conflicts and disparities between traditional and modern concepts of human rights represents another vital step in identifying limitations, with its methodology grounded in comparative analysis between history and reality. Modern human rights emphasize the universality of rights and legal protection mechanisms, whereas the concept of human rights in traditional culture is largely rooted in non-institutional frameworks such as moral governance, hierarchy, and ritual systems. This reveals that while traditional thought embodies humanistic concerns, it lacks the subjectivity, institutionalization, and universality demanded by a modern rights discourse system. Its ideological resources require reconstruction from a modern perspective to achieve contemporary relevance.

## **B. Main manifestations of historical limitations**

The historical limitations of concepts of human rights in traditional Chinese culture are primarily reflected in three aspects: the state’s stance, an obligation-centered approach, and hierarchical notions. These limitations, to a certain extent, have constrained the expression and development of individual rights while shaping the governance logic and cultural characteristics of traditional society.

### **1. The state’s stance**

The concepts or practices of human rights in ancient Chinese society often stemmed from the will of rulers, manifested as the state’s “protection” of the people. This protection did not originate from the people’s demands for rights but rather from the rulers’ responsibilities. The people reasonably expected rulers to fulfill their responsibilities and benefit from them, yet they did not possess the right to make claims against rulers. The dominant ideas were natural law and justice, such as a sense

of justice and integrity, rather than equal, inalienable rights or human rights.<sup>56</sup> This indicates that there is no necessary or corresponding relationship between the obligations of rulers and the demands of the people. As “obligations themselves do not imply that those for whom the ruler has an obligation to act necessarily possess rights, let alone confirm the existence of such rights.”<sup>57</sup>

The state’s stance is also evident in the fact that ancient concepts of human rights or practices typically served to consolidate imperial power and maintain social order, rather than to protect human rights. Ancient Chinese society never prioritized the demands and rights of individuals vis-à-vis the state.<sup>58</sup> Even though concepts such as “governing with virtue” and “people-oriented governance” were widely celebrated in later generations, their core remained political exhortations and moral requirements rather than guarantees of the people’s basic human rights. Nearly all inherited Chinese classics presented theories and viewpoints from the state’s perspective, with few theoretical systems constructed entirely from the people’s or individuals’ standpoints. The culture of official admonitions in ancient times is a typical example, which expressed humanistic concerns and political wisdom by advising rulers on “the way of officialdom” to ensure the long-term and stable feudal rule.<sup>59</sup> Although these concepts, to some extent, safeguarded the people’s interests in practice, they were essentially means or tools of political rule rather than advocates for the people’s rights. For instance, in *The Book of Documents - Tai Shi*, phrases like “Heaven shows compassion to the people; what the people desire, Heaven will surely grant”<sup>60</sup> and “Only Heaven bestows blessings on the people; only the ruler upholds Heaven’s will”<sup>61</sup> emphasize the rulers’ need to heed the people’s demands, but their true purpose lies in maintaining the regime and governing the country.

The state’s stance imbued the concept of human rights of the time with a strong political hue, making them more of a political discourse than a human rights discourse in the modern sense. Many seemingly metaphysical moral propositions, such as “upholding fundamental principles and integrity” and “loyalty to the ruler and love for the people,” actually reflected governance characteristics centered on “rule by man.”<sup>62</sup> This “bestowal” model, based on the rulers’ stance, rendered the state’s protection of the people’s rights fragile and unstable. Under the traditional belief in the divine right of kings, the monarch was regarded as the supreme representative of power and morality. Although “benevolent governance” and “the royal way” were extolled as ideals for governance, and rulers did engage in practices that guaranteed the people’s livelihoods, such guarantees did not equate to the people’s “rights” but were more of a passive, condescending form of giving. While there were exemplars of “benevolent governance” in history, records of tyranny also abound. For example, during the reign

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<sup>56</sup> Jack Donnelly, “On the Relative Universality of Human Rights,” translated by Guo Xiaoming, *Human Rights* 4 (2018): 124.

<sup>57</sup> Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> Chen Lai, “Confucian Ethics and the Value of ‘Human Rights,’” *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 5 (1998): 61.

<sup>59</sup> Gong Rufu, “A Brief Discussion on the Political Wisdom of Ancient Chinese Official Admonitions,” *Journal of Renmin University of China* 1 (2006): 150-151.

<sup>60</sup> *The Book of Documents - Tai Shi I*

<sup>61</sup> *The Book of Documents - Tai Shi I*

<sup>62</sup> Gong Rufu, “A Brief Discussion on the Political Wisdom of Ancient Chinese Official Admonitions,” 153.

of Emperors Wen and Jing in the Han Dynasty, the people's livelihoods were relatively secure, but with the rise of "harsh officialdom," such security gradually disintegrated. Therefore, when rulers lacked the will or ability to implement "benevolent governance," the people's rights were highly vulnerable to infringement. This dependent form of protection limited the possibility for individuals to assert their rights against the state, making state responsibilities heavily reliant on the rulers' moral constraints and personal will, lacking institutionalized implementation paths. It also reflects the limitation of ancient human rights in terms of the absence of institutionalized safeguards.

## **2. Obligation-centered orientation**

Obligation-centered orientation refers to the emphasis on fulfilling duties as its core, rather than protecting individual rights in ancient Chinese society. In ancient times, family relationships were regarded as the foundation of state relations, with patriarchal ethics extended into politics as principles of governance. The monarch was viewed as the "father of the world," and the state was metaphorically described as a "big family." The extension from family to state became the fertile soil for cultivating hierarchical doctrines such as serving the sovereign as one serves the father and transforming filial piety into loyalty. "Paternal kindness and filial piety within the family were elevated into benevolent rule by the sovereign and loyal service by ministers, forming a unified structure of state and family where loyalty and filial piety were integrated, with filial piety as the foundation and loyalty as the priority."<sup>63</sup> This family-state isomorphic model, rooted in moral culture, prioritized collective interests while rejecting individualism and utilitarianism, embodying the characteristics of an obligation-centered orientation and severely hindering the development of individual rights.

First, neglect of individuality and rights subjectivity. Ancient China focused on the collective rather than the individual, and on centralized power rather than its limitation.<sup>64</sup> Ethics-centeredness confined personal identity to specific ethical relationships rather than an independent "citizen" status. An individual's status depended on their ethical roles within the family and state, forming a hierarchical and clearly defined social structure. This structure emphasized collective values and individual obedience and responsibility, suppressing the consciousness of individual rights and the development of personality, resulting in rights being viewed as secondary to state or family interests. For example, in ancient times, the rights to survival and property were contingent upon the stability of the family or state, rather than directly reflecting individual needs and freedoms. In contrast, it is stated in Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," establishing the fundamental principles of individual independence and equality of personality. It emphasizes that human rights are centered on the individual as the bearer, serving as the starting point for the modern human rights value system. It is further stipulated in Article 6 that "everyone

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<sup>63</sup> Zhang Zhongqiu, "A New Exploration of Traditional Chinese Conceptions of the State: Implications for Contemporary Chinese Politics and Law," *Law Science* 5 (2014): 38.

<sup>64</sup> Song Zhiming, *A General Introduction to Traditional Chinese Philosophy (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2013), 23.

has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law,” establishing the basic qualification of the individual as a rights subject, which is the institutional prerequisite for rights realization. Evidently, traditional Chinese society had a weak awareness of rights and failed to establish an individual-centered framework for rights subjectivity. Individuals were more often understood as duty bearers within ethical relationships, highlighting the stark contrast with modern concepts of universal human rights.

Second, ethics-dominated rights and the primacy of obligations over rights. The concept of human rights embedded in the ethical and moral system was more about social responsibility and moral duties than inalienable individual rights. In the family, individual behavior was guided by the overall interests of the clan; in the state, individual obligations were subordinate to the needs of national stability and order. The realization of rights was implicit in the fulfillment of obligations. Moreover, obligations were not based on the principle of reciprocity between rights and duties but rather on a state of rights deficiency.<sup>65</sup> The lack of a rights perspective meant that “in specific social practices, the criteria for action or inaction were moral standards derived from the inner realm of the mind, rather than conscious rights-based demands arising from the need to satisfy certain practical needs.”<sup>66</sup> This model internalized ethical requirements centered on “filial piety and loyalty,” resulting in “individual desires and aspirations being entrusted to social elites and dignitaries for design and disposition.”<sup>67</sup> As a result, individuals’ rights to autonomous choice were restricted.

Third, the conflation of family and state blurs the boundaries between public and private spheres. The isomorphic model of family and state leads to the blurring of boundaries between family ethics and state governance, which is prone to causing “confusion and even amalgamation between governmental and civil affairs, the public and the private, the monarch-subject relationship and the father-son relationship, loyalty and filial piety, territorial and blood ties, fictive and natural kinship, national laws and family rituals, as well as governing the state and managing the family.” This obliterates the inherent differences between family and state, which constitute the prerequisites for demarcating public and private spheres and setting boundaries for rights and obligations.<sup>68</sup> In traditional China, the patriarchal clan system and family rituals were employed to transform the family into a tool for state governance, with paternal authority within the family being utilized to reinforce state authority and the responsibilities of family members being politicized. This logic of “turning the private into the public” undermines the privacy and autonomy of the family and even results in public power encroaching upon individuals. Meanwhile, family ethics are widely applied in the public sphere, leading to the privatization and ethicization of public affairs. For instance, officials model their governance on the family, emphasizing human sentiment and the combined use of favor and coercion, which undermines the

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<sup>65</sup> Chen Jiaming, “Dignity and Rights: An Inquiry Based on the Perspective of Chinese Society,” *Marxism & Reality* 2 (2011): 7.

<sup>66</sup> Li Haixing, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Rights* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2012), 223.

<sup>67</sup> Lu Hanlong, “On the Intellectual Environment for Theoretical Construction in Chinese Sociology,” *Social Sciences* 5 (1991): 70.

<sup>68</sup> Zhang Zhongqiu, “A New Exploration of Traditional Chinese Conceptions of the State,” 41.

independence of the principles of the rule of law and rationality in the public sphere and tends to restrict the development of the rule of law in public affairs.

### **3. Hierarchical concepts**

Ancient China placed great emphasis on social hierarchy, ethical order, and gender distinctions, presenting a stark contrast to modern concepts of human rights, which underscores individual equality. For the interpretation of “equality,” Confucianism distinguishes between two questions: “what humans are” and “how humans ought to behave.” Although individuals are morally “equal” in nature, this is not the case in practice. The “ritual propriety” that distinguishes between senior and junior, close and distant relations serves as a concrete manifestation of “inequality” in behavioral norms.<sup>69</sup> The tradition of ethical orientation enabled Confucian thought, centered around the “Five Cardinal Relationships” to dominate Chinese civilization and construct a hierarchical society centered on the family. The establishment of ethical norms was both a result and a cause of social inequality. This inequality is manifested in family relations, state governance, and the division of gender roles, forming the hierarchical system in ancient society. At the family level, patriarchal supremacy is a deeply entrenched ethical norm. The father is the supreme authority in the family, whose will must be obeyed unconditionally by his children. This patriarchal system is institutionalized through social customs and ritual systems, leading to a severe imbalance of rights among family members. Hierarchical relationships also exist between elder and younger siblings, with “fraternal affection and filial respect” emphasized in *The Book of Rites*, highlighting the ethical order between brothers. This inequality is typically manifested in the distribution of rights and resources, such as the eldest son’s priority in inheriting property and family status, while the interests of other children are marginalized. In politics, the relationship between monarch and subject reflects the profound influence of hierarchical concepts. The phrase “Monarch as monarch, subject as subject” underscores the monarch’s supreme status and absolute authority, legitimized through the “divine right of kings.” Subjects must demonstrate absolute loyalty and obedience to the monarch, who, however, does not bear corresponding responsibilities. This one-way power structure renders the monarch-subject relationship highly asymmetric, further exacerbating social hierarchy and inequality. Additionally, gender-based inequality between men and women is another significant manifestation of hierarchical concepts in ancient Chinese society. The traditional notion of “male superiority and female inferiority” is deeply ingrained, with ethical norms such as the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” relegating women to a subordinate position in both family and society, severely restricting their rights. On one hand, women are viewed as appendages to male authority within the family, with their behavior and moral standards typically dominated by men, as epitomized by the principle of “the husband as the wife’s moral guide and authority.” On the other hand, the rigidification of gender roles excludes women from public affairs, resulting in their long-term marginalization in society and ineffective protection of their rights.

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<sup>69</sup> Li Qiuqi, “The ‘Universality’ Argument of Confucianism and Human Rights,” *Journal of Southwest University Social Science Edition* 4 (2018): 37.

### C. Approaches to critical inheritance

The critical inheritance of concepts of human rights in traditional culture necessitates discarding their historical limitations while retaining their rational essence. Although certain ancient ideas exhibit historical constraints as a whole, they may still contain elements worthy of absorption and inheritance, such as concepts of livelihood security, benevolence, and respect for the people in the state's stance. The identification and inheritance of these resources must be grounded in modern human rights value systems to assess their practical applicability and theoretical significance. One should avoid categorizing the concept of human rights in traditional culture as simply "bad" or "good," as many traditional cultural resources lack clear boundaries between the two; instead, they represent unified entities blending strengths and weaknesses, benefits and drawbacks. Therefore, building upon the "dichotomy of traditional essence and dross,"<sup>70</sup> it is essential to adopt a holistic perspective, systematically analyze their internal logic and functions, achieve theoretical elevation through discernment, and regenerate value through integration.

Critical inheritance requires researchers to examine the particularity of ancient concepts of human rights with a universal perspective of modern human rights, dissecting incompatible elements while extracting values that transcend temporal boundaries. This approach avoids both a complete rejection of ancient thought and its mechanical application to modern society. The key lies in scientifically identifying points of alignment and conflict between ancient and modern concepts of human rights, clarifying their practical value and applicable boundaries. "Cultural forms are historical and transient products, yet the humanistic spirit embedded within may transcend eras."<sup>71</sup> Thus, it is necessary to break through the "shells" of traditional concepts of human rights and explore the reasonable logic with temporal-spatial characteristics inherent in it.

The general principle of critical inheritance is abstract inheritance.<sup>72</sup> Often termed the "method of abstract inheritance," this approach was first proposed by Feng Youlan: "It is important to analyze the key propositions in a philosophical system to distinguish their concrete and abstract meanings. If a value is worth inheriting, its abstract meaning can be inherited, while its concrete meaning cannot."<sup>73</sup> This viewpoint emphasizes the separation of timeless humanistic spirit in ancient philosophical and ethical concepts from their specific forms. Critical inheritance of concepts of human rights in traditional culture should retain universally significant core values while discarding specific forms incompatible with modern concepts of human rights.

Ancient concepts of human rights maintained stability and rationality in hierarchical societies through specific cultural logics and ethical self-consistency. The governance and coordination wisdom embedded in these historical limitations

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<sup>70</sup> Li Yejie and Wu Weihua, "On the Critical Inheritance of Culture from the Perspective of Cultural Systematicity," *Shandong Social Sciences* 2 (2000): 87.

<sup>71</sup> Sun Chuanhong, "Rethinking the Principle of 'Critical Inheritance'," *Journal of China Youth University for Political Sciences* 1 (1992): 51.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>73</sup> Wu Chuanqi, "Feng Youlan's Method of Abstract Inheritance and His Philosophical Perspectives," *Philosophical Research* 2 (1958): 85.

constitutes an indispensable resource for critical inheritance. Although ancient China emphasized hierarchical order, its ethical logic achieved familial harmony, stable state governance, and gender harmony through relative “rationality.” Through specific historical-cultural mechanisms, this hierarchical and differentiated structure demonstrated internal coordination and relative stability in ancient society. Take the concept of state-family isomorphism as an example: while it suppressed individual subjectivity and failed to establish modern inalienable rights systems, it fostered public identification with family and state, unifying self-worth with the rise and fall of family and nation, thereby providing critical support for family harmony and national stability. This holds significant implications for contemporary legal construction. Some scholars, from a state governance perspective, affirm the emphasis on family function and status in the state-family isomorphism model, arguing for its cross-temporal relevance in protecting family rights and, by extension, individual rights.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, traditional coordination wisdom is evident in *yin-yang* philosophy, which posits that all things arise from the unity of opposites. Male and female represent *yang* and *yin*, respectively, embodying complementarity between them. This idea explained the division of gender roles in ancient society – men managing external affairs and women internal ones – to maintain family and social harmony. Such complementarity somewhat alleviated tensions from gender inequality, granting women a form of “respect” in their familial roles. In critical inheritance, we must analyze the rigidifying effects of *yin-yang* concepts on gender roles and extract their wisdom of balance and harmony, reflecting on them based on modern concepts of gender equality to inspire gender rights dialogue in contemporary society.

The perspectives for critical inheritance should be diverse, with multi-layered dimensions and varied processes.<sup>75</sup> The concept of human rights in ancient society were part of a dynamic, evolving process rather than a static, unchanging system. Therefore, analysis should be made from a systematic and continuous perspective. Specifically, this can involve longitudinal comparisons to study the evolution of a concept across different historical periods and its varying effects. For instance, the concept of “benevolence” (*ren*) in traditional culture has undergone interpretations and practices across different eras, reflecting its diversity and flexibility amid historical changes. Alternatively, analysis can be based on different schools of thought to examine typical concepts of human rights in each school, such as Confucian views on morality and order, Legalist perspectives on power and law, Taoist outlook on freedom and nature, and Mohist notions of universal love and equality. Another approach is to contrast the specific manifestations and implementations of concepts of human rights across different historical contexts in light of changing times, revealing their differences and interactions in practice. Only through multi-dimensional and multi-layered analysis can we fully comprehend and inherit the rational value of concepts of human rights in traditional culture and uncover their historical wisdom.

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<sup>74</sup> Chen Yishu, “Ethics and Law: The Methodological ‘State-Family Isomorphism’ and Its Integrative Function,” *Legal Method* 3 (2021): 171-182.

<sup>75</sup> Li Yejie and Wu Weihua, “On the Critical Inheritance of Culture from the Perspective of Cultural Systematicity,” 87.

## Conclusion

General Secretary Xi Jinping stated, “The fine traditional Chinese culture represents the wisdom and essence of Chinese civilization. It is the root and soul of the Chinese nation.”<sup>76</sup> This discourse provides theoretical guidance for our in-depth exploration of human rights resources in traditional culture. The concept of human rights embedded in traditional culture reflects the universal values of human rights while being constrained by their historical limitations. Employing the theoretical framework of the universality and particularity of human rights as an analytical tool enables us to more accurately understand and evaluate the concept of human rights in traditional culture, as well as their progressiveness and limitations. We should incorporate traditional concepts of human rights into modern human rights theory and practice through critical inheritance and innovative transformation guided by the principle of “the Two Combinations” (Combining Marxism with China’s realities and with its fine traditional culture). In doing so, we can enrich the human rights knowledge system with Chinese characteristics and lay a solid cultural foundation for China’s human rights development path. Also, we can contribute unique cultural wisdom and a Chinese perspective to global human rights governance. Looking ahead, we should further deepen the dialogue and integration between traditional culture and modern human rights, enabling the fine traditional Chinese culture to radiate new vitality in today’s global human rights sphere.

(Translated by *LI Chunyan*)

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<sup>76</sup> Xi Jinping, “Deepening Research on Chinese Civilization’s History to Strengthen Historical Awareness and Cultural Confidence,” *Qiushi* 14 (2022): 7.