

HARMONY IN DIVERSITY

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Abstract: “和”, which means harmony or being concordant, is one of the key point of the Chinese culture. However, it hasn't been well distinguished with a similar aspect, “同”, which means sameness, uniformity. One of the purpose of this article is to clearly tell the difference between “和” and “同”, the other one is to clarify that the Chinese culture admires the diversity and pursues the harmony at the same time.

A number of people got confused about the Chinese culture because of some sentences like those below:

One World, One Dream. (“同一个世界，同一个梦想” the theme of the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing)

One World, One Family. (“天下一家” the theme of the 17th Chinese Bridge Competition)

Some Chinese people have already realized that these themes were not good enough because it might bring misunderstandings to the Chinese culture and incur some guess and prejudice. On the other hand, other Chinese don't believe it at all and regard this idea as a really ridiculous joke. However, when more and more Chinese people start to misunderstand our own culture, it's time to reveal the truth.

The truth is, by the time of Confucius youth age, our ancestors had already had discussions and very convictive conclusion on it. Yan Ying, a famous politician in ancient China, strongly claimed that “和” (harmony) is different from “同” (uniformity, sameness). He gave his lord three examples of distinguishing these two concepts.

The first one is the metaphor of food. Yan Ying said, “和” was like a dish which had to be cooked with more than one materials. In his example according to the ancient recipe, if one person wanted to cook fish, besides the fish he needed water, fire, and a lot of ingredients like salt, vinegar, minced meat, herbs and so on. Then he needed the chef to



control the fire, to mix the ingredients, to season the fish, to weaken the bad taste while strengthen the good taste. Only this kind of delicious food can satisfy people and make them feel the love and peace. The dish was produced by the ingredients and materials supplement each other. This is the harmony of different taste.

The second one is the metaphor of the music. As we all know, in the official occasion or the ceremony, people prefer the symphony to the solo, because the symphony sounds grander and more inclusive. It was also true in ancient China. People prefer the music with multi-instruments, variety of melody and rich emotions. We had at least eight groups of ancient instruments: 金木土石, 丝竹匏革(metal, wood, soil, stone, string, bamboo, pumpkin or cucurbit and leather. Besides, the bone could also be processed to be instrument.) And it would also be different if people played piano or forte, long or short, fast or slow, happily or sadly, high pitch or low. With so many different things, the concordant existed, otherwise it would be only noise. This is the harmony of different sound.



The last metaphor was about the lord and his ministers. Yan Ying said that if the minister had no disagreement with the lord, the lord would never know his mistakes. If the lord came up with some policy that generally good but with something could be improved, the minister should improve it, so that the policy could be more efficient. If the lord came up with an evil idea but still with something smart in it, the minister should stop the lord while find the good part and keep it. If the minister was always obeying the lord's words, then he must be a “小人”(snob) instead of a “君子”(gentlemen with noble character) . With the disagreements, it would be possible for people to correct each other. People get along with each other with their own personality. This is the harmony of different people in the society.



Here comes the question. Since it is so good to keep the diversity in harmony, why the idea of “同” started to breed and confuse the original idea of “和”? Because it is extremely difficult to keep “不同” and “同” on the two sides of the balance. In Confucius' idea, gentlemen should keep things in balance, which means neither to weight too much on the left nor on the right. But the reality was, the governors were not sure if they and the ordinary people could

keep in harmony if they let the people go too far or let them know too much knowledge. In the lords' mind, to have people be the same means the people would be easier to be ruled. So they lead people to live in the similar style and think in the similar way.

The other reason is, some philosophers such as Lao Tzu, believed that too much diversity may drive people wild and even break the harmony, so people should more or less control their desire. He said: Too many colors might make us blind, too many sounds might make it difficult to be distinguished, too many tastes might be addictive to people. If people enjoy something a lot, they will have less interests in doing other things, if something becomes really precious to people, the people would attempt to get it by hook or by crook without any scruple. Actually his words was for the balance instead of against the diversity, however someone did misunderstand his words for their own benefits, which seemed to weight more on the “同” side.

One of the other reasons may be the wish of pursuing the essence of things, which an army of ancient philosophers and linguistics from all over the world devoted themselves to. They had to achieve through concluding the universal law of things, which tends to focus on the generality and similarity. Not only did this happen in China, but also in the west. For example Socrates devoted his whole life to find the common knowledge and Thales tried to submit the original element of the physical world.

Nowadays, it is almost impossible to live without the multicultural communication, in which people really need a bridge between each other, just like the ancient philosophers needed the similarity to be the bridge between the physical world and the essence of the things. The bridge we need is the things in common, through which we can understand each other easily. In another word, “同” is just the method instead of the purpose. What is the purpose and how to achieve? The answer from this article is, “和而不同”, to live and communicate in harmony while showing respect to the diversity.

Reference

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