

A Culture-based Concept of Wealth in China and Its Evolution

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Abstract: Wealth, as a cultural symbol, derives from people's perceptions of wealth. The concept of wealth influences people's wealth behaviour. On the basis of elucidating the cultural connotation of wealth, the concept of wealth and the evolution trend of Chinese people in ancient times and after the reform and opening up are examined. On the basis of analysing the current problems of the Chinese concept of wealth, the cultural construction of the modern concept of wealth is proposed.

1. The Cultural Connotation of Wealth

According to Cassirer: "Man is a symbolic animal". Man uses symbols to create culture, therefore, man uses wealth symbols to create wealth culture. These wealth symbols include physical objects, precious metals, money and utility, which create the wealth culture in different periods of human history and influence people's wealth behavior. Therefore, wealth culture influences people's perception of wealth and wealth behavior, as well as forming the cultural traditions of wealth in each country. The motivation to create a cultural symbol such as wealth overcomes the natural inertia of human beings and endows them with an ability to constantly create and renew the human world.

Money, gold and silver are just the forms, carriers and representations of wealth, not the entire content of wealth. Wealth is a cultural symbol with a very high degree of relevance, which is related to power, freedom, morality and other things closely related to human beings. As a cultural symbol, it has an intermediary function. People pursue freedom through wealth, and wealth can influence the spiritual world of people, so wealth is related to the integrity of people.

The economic relationship is the primary relationship between human beings and nature, and between one person and another. The wealth relationship is the most important and most direct relationship to which this relationship is related. Wealth relations promote the intermingling of cultures, and good deeds create wealth, which should be associated with sincerity, goodness and beauty. Wealth can be a manifestation of the overall strength of a nation or an individual, or of his or her ability to be created, and it is a manifestation of commitment and trust that can be tested by time and space.

Wealth, as a cultural symbol, comes from people's concept of wealth. Wealth is inseparable from the concept of wealth. In other words, wealth is, in essence, a concept. The concept of wealth influences people's behavior. The concept of wealth is people's understanding and thinking about wealth. The knowledge and understanding of wealth constitutes people's wealth concept, and guides their wealth behavior. The concept of wealth is a kind of comprehensive thinking and cognition of wealth, and it consists of the way of acquiring wealth, the way of consuming wealth, the social personal relationship of wealth, wealth ethics, etc. The concept of wealth is characterized by human subjectivity, cognitive transmission, and the transmutation of the concept. The role of the concept of wealth contains the role of guidance, coordination, and integration. People's cognition of wealth gets richer with the continuous change of people's way of living. People of different periods, different classes and different lifestyles have different concepts of wealth. This is not only reflected in their understanding of the essence of the concept of wealth, the theoretical level of social functions and roles of wealth, but also in the different stages of the historical process. Thus, the

concept of human wealth is characterized by the diversity of historical evolution.

2. Evolution of the Concept of Wealth in China

2.1. The Concept of Wealth in Traditional Chinese Culture

The concept of wealth in traditional Chinese culture mainly revolves around the relationship between righteousness and profit concerning wealth and human nature, the relationship between national wealth and the wealth of the people in pursuit of wealth, the relationship between agriculture and business, the relationship between frugality and extravagance in wealth consumption, etc. The development of these wealth ideas together builds the traditional Chinese culture based on morality as the value of the concept of wealth.

2.1.1. The Value Basis of Wealth: The Relationship between “Righteousness” and “Profit”

Confucius especially emphasized the aspect of "righteousness" and assigned the relationship between righteousness and profit to social classes, advocating that righteousness should be valued over profit. This became the moral value basis for his concept of wealth. Confucius valued wealth and believed that the nation should be rich in justice and virtue. Mencius absolutized Confucius' preference for righteousness over profit and believed that righteousness was the main theme running through life without the need to consider the benefits of wealth.

2.1.2. The Social Ideal of Wealth: Enriching the Country and the People

Confucius' concept of wealth included the idea of enriching the country and the people. Confucius regarded the enrichment of the country and the people as an important responsibility in governing the country, and believed that the country should be governed on a certain material basis so that the people's livelihood is secure with moral education following it. Mo Zi believed that the wealth of a country and its people depended on the interrelationship between the production and consumption of wealth. Shang Yang believed that a strong state should be based on wealth, and that "a rich state is powerful". In the opinion of Shang Yang, the wealth of the people promotes the prosperity of the state, thus he paid more attention to the wealth of the state.

2.1.3. Ways of Acquiring Wealth: Valuing Agriculture Over Business

In traditional Chinese culture, "agriculture-based" is used to express the importance of agriculture in national economic production. The so-called "valuing agriculture over business" means that the acquisition of wealth mainly relies on the agricultural production field, while the distribution field of business is not valued. In the feudal era, in order to consolidate feudal power and develop feudal economy, many thinkers put forward the idea of "agriculture-based". At the root, agriculture was the source of clothing and food in feudal society and was the guarantee of national wealth and fiscal revenue. Shang Yang's constitutional reform embodied a typical example of the idea of emphasizing agriculture and suppressing business. Xunkuang believed that comparatively speaking, agriculture is more important than business and agricultural production is the source of wealth.

2.1.4. The Way Wealth is Consumed: Frugality Instead of Luxury

Being thrifty is one of the traditional virtues of the Chinese people, and is an excellent quality emphasized by traditional Chinese culture since ancient times. Frugality is a common concept of wealth consumption among the various schools of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Confucius believed that one should be thrifty and courteous in the act of consumption, preferring frugality to luxury, which illustrated the pleasure of life enlightenment brought by simple life, and placed frugality on the moral level. He believed that frugality was a virtue that concerned one's moral cultivation and that one should strengthen moral self-discipline, control one's desires, and make one's behavior conform to the moral requirements of ritual. Confucius also raised frugality to the level of the country, believing that frugality is related to the security of the country. All in all, the concept of wealth in traditional Chinese culture places more emphasis on the

relationship between wealth and human beings, on the moral feelings of human beings in the face of wealth, and on the ethical considerations of human nature.

2.2. Changes in the Concept of Wealth after the Reform and Opening up in China

The concept of wealth is not independent and self-existent and its development and change is influenced by a variety of factors. Since the reform and opening up, with the socio-economic development and the great impact of diverse cultures, people's concept of wealth has undergone great changes. The value basis of wealth, namely the reasonable balance between "righteousness" and "profit" has basically been retained. The majority of people in China today are able to measure the relationship between righteousness and profit, and place themselves in the right position in their economic behavior. The social ideal of wealth, i.e., the idea of a prosperous country and rich people, has basically been preserved intact, and has become a universal social ideal from the national level to the individual level. The way of acquiring wealth, namely the concept of acquiring wealth based on agriculture instead of business, has been basically abandoned and replaced by a more reasonable development structure of industry and commerce. The consumption mode of wealth, namely, the concept of wealth consumption that advocates thrift and dethrone extravagance, has been basically retained. Advocating thrift and opposing extravagance is a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation, and the current Chinese people have basically inherited this excellent tradition.

2.2.1. Rational and Legal Access to Wealth is Increasingly Valued

There is an old Chinese saying that a gentleman loves wealth and takes it in the right way. In other words, we need to acquire wealth on the basis of morality, which is also the basis of the traditional Chinese cultural concept of wealth. After the reform and opening up, getting rich is promoted at the national level and the state encourages some people to get rich first. Although some people in today's society have raised questions about the fairness and reasonableness of the way some people acquire wealth, most people are able to view the owners of wealth rationally. People are basically able to look rationally and healthily at the accumulation of wealth by others and to create wealth for themselves through their own efforts. In addition, the traditional concept of wealth is caused by the middle way of traditional Chinese culture and the instability of people's life caused by social chaos in the past. Today, although a considerable number of Chinese still maintain the concept of saving, it is not the mainstream concept of wealth. More and more Chinese tend to invest for higher returns on their wealth.

2.2.2. Wealth Becomes a Symbol of Personal Worth and Social Status

Wealth has different connotations in different times. In traditional Chinese culture, the acquisition of political status is a symbol of self-worth and social status, and wealth does not have a great social significance, nor does it show that the owner of wealth has a high social status. After the reform and opening up, China began to promote the concept of acquiring wealth through hard work in a legal way. The status of wealth became more and more important in people's minds. This change in the concept of wealth at the national level has greatly influenced people's perception of wealth. People gradually express their pursuit of wealth in a more direct way, taking wealth as the embodiment of self-worth and social status.

2.2.3. Intangible Assets, such as Knowledge, are Increasingly Valued

The various concepts of wealth in the history of mankind still have their respective positions in different regions and different strata of today's society, and have not been completely erased by the evolution of history. In particular, the concept with money and capital as the wealth can still be counted as the mainstream wealth concept of today's society, and is often used by people nowadays to measure the scale of wealth. However, knowledge is producing an increasingly prominent role in the economy and society and has become a central driver of economic growth. The notion of knowledge as wealth has become increasingly strong and widespread in people's minds. Knowledge has become the new carrier of wealth and will increasingly replace the material carrier of wealth as the main form of wealth. Today's concept of wealth is the concept of knowledge as wealth.

The concept of wealth in traditional Chinese culture attaches more importance to material forms of tangible wealth. After the reform and opening up, the market economy has achieved rapid development, and the market-led allocation of resources has penetrated into all levels of the society and economy. In the environment of the knowledge economy where technology progresses and the amount of information surges, if people want to occupy a superior position in the fierce competition in the market, they need to pay more attention to the accumulation of their intangible wealth. Nowadays, people's focus on accumulating intangible wealth such as their own knowledge is very common, and the awareness of lifelong learning is becoming stronger and stronger.

3. Problems in China's Current View of Wealth

Along with the positive changes in people's concept of wealth after the reform and opening up, there have also been some negative changes in people's concept of wealth, which have caused a lot of negative impacts on the economy and society. Under the guidance of extreme ideology and herd mentality, some people have changed the past view that "money is evil" into the current view that "money is omnipotent". Due to the lack of wealth concept, in the process of seeking wealth, people only see money and nothing else, regardless of its damage to the interests of the society and others, regardless of methods and means, only to accumulate personal wealth. In disregard of the moral law, speculation and fraud, counterfeiting, fraudulence, corruption and bribery are all commonplace. Morality, belief and ideal are free from people's ideology.

Besides, some Chinese are not motivated to acquire wealth by simply possessing it, but by squandering it and experiencing pleasure in the process. Although ostentatious consumption can stimulate the market to a certain extent, in Chinese society today it can mislead people's consumption concepts, lead to blindly following and comparing, and even distort people's psychological awareness. The rich do not play their social role well, which is a cultural deficiency that deserves our consideration and introspection.

4. Cultural Construction of Modern Concept of Wealth

4.1 Employ Excellent Concept of Cultural Wealth as Support

The reform and transformation of the concept of wealth in today's China, namely the construction of the concept of cultural wealth, should focus on the cultivation of the creative, transcendent and rational cultural quality of the masses in today's China. Due to traditional culture, historical background and other reasons, many Chinese people have not formed a sense of their own individuality and subjectivity, nor have they formed a rigorous and rational thinking on the internal logical structure of things, but are only used to the generalized experiential cognition and intuitive grasp of things. Therefore, to establish the concept of cultural wealth, it is necessary to comprehensively use the humanistic spirit as well as scientific and technological rationality, and pay attention to cultivate people's critical consciousness, subject consciousness, technical rationality and scientific and technological thinking, which are the indispensable basic quality as subjects of the concept of cultural wealth. Only by combining the cultivation of this quality with the cause of modern education in China can the concept of wealth in today's China be transformed into the concept of cultural wealth.

4.2 Guarantee of a Social Functioning Mechanism Based on the Rule of Law and Democratization

A robust market economy is an environment of opportunity and fair competition. Everyone can either have equal opportunities, or compete for limited opportunities on the basis of ability, following generally accepted rules. This leads to fair competition, a more efficient functioning of the socio-economic order and a faster growth of wealth. Since the reforms, although tradition still haunts people, the state of transition has also trapped them in a severe form of unregulated competition. However, the rules of the market economy are taking shape, and more and more people and enterprises are becoming rich through legitimate competition, which is the hope of our

country.

In order for the concept of cultural wealth to exist and develop in the space of social ideology, it is necessary to have an ideological guarantee mechanism. In the process of changing and transforming the concept of wealth in China today, it is important to focus on the process of rationalization, legalization and democratization of the social operating system, to curb the erosion of the concept of cultural wealth by the concept of wealth today, and to create a suitable environment and creative space for the cultivation of people's basic qualities. In fact, the rationalization, legalization and democratization of the social operation mechanism and human subjectivity, creativity and transcendence are two inseparable aspects in the development process of people's wealth concept, which are mutually beneficial and inseparable. The individual's attention to the concept of cultural wealth is conducive to the innovation of social operation mechanisms, which in turn will promote its further development, and the two are mutually reinforcing. A rational, legal, democratic, contractual and humane system of social operation should be gradually established to avoid the destruction of the concept of cultural wealth.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the wealth concepts in ancient and modern times, and a cultural interpretation of modern Chinese wealth concepts. The proposed cultural wealth concept expands our horizons in the study of wealth concept and breaks through the traditional theoretical wealth concept from the perspective of economics. Besides, it highlights the influence of cultural attributes of wealth concept on human beings from the perspective of cultural philosophy, enriches the research field of wealth concept issue, and forms a new understanding of wealth concept in a cultural sense.

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