

Spiritually Cultural Differences between China and the West Manifested by Material Cultures—Human-Oriented Philosophy versus Harmonious Coexistence of Man and Nature

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Abstract

Western and Chinese cultures have great distinctions. Culture is generally divided into material, institutional and spiritual cultures, and they are usually correlated. By analyzing two differences in material culture, including the differences in architecture and painting in China and the West, diverse modes of thinking in Western and Chinese cultures can be figured out. Westerners hold a philosophy that humans and the beauty of humans should be valued while Chinese people believe that the harmonious coexistence of man and nature should be given priority. Through this discussion, we can have a better understanding of Western and Chinese cultures and distinguish them.

Keywords

Cultural Differences, Human, Nature, Art, Architecture

1. Introduction

Culture is a significant factor in the inheritance and development of a nation as well as the image of a nation. Traditional culture is the soul and identity of a nation, which is also the fruit and carrier of human wisdom and thought. We can see history and human wisdom through culture. Generally, culture can be divided into three parts: material culture, institutional culture, and spiritual culture. Material culture involves material products created to meet the needs of human life and survival and the culture they represent. Institutional culture refers to the system of norms which human beings create and set for their survival, and social development needs. Spiritual culture includes values, modes of think-

ing, moral sentiments, aesthetics, religions, etc.

Chinese and Western traditional cultures are rich in content and distinctive in characteristics, but there are obvious differences between them. The Ancient Greek culture provides the foundation for the Western culture, which was centered on ancient Greece and radiated to the entire European continent and now North America. Later, Western culture has been affected by many major ideas of various ages like humanism, modernism, etc. Chinese traditional culture has a history of thousands of years and has preserved the main ideas and carried them forward. Chinese culture is distinct from Western culture.

Sometimes, the material, institutional and spiritual cultures mentioned above might be correlated. As these three parts might be correlated, when we discuss some material differences between Chinese culture and Western culture, they might come from deep differences in the spiritual culture or the institutional culture. The spiritual culture is usually intangible if we forcefully separate these three cultures. Institutional culture is a comparatively complex and sensitive issue to discuss. Generally, the material culture is a tangible one, which can largely reflect the spiritual culture. Sometimes, the material culture can even reflect the institutional culture, but this will not be discussed in this analysis. Given that, this paper will mainly discuss cultural differences between China and the West with concrete examples of differences between Chinese and Western material cultures which can be traced back to the differences in spiritual cultures. In this paper, architecture, and painting are chosen as the typical cases to manifest different philosophies in the West and China.

2. Cultural Differences Displayed in Architecture

Architecture is a kind of material product created to meet the needs of human life, belonging to material culture. Shapes, structures and patterns, and many other aspects of architecture are influenced by spiritual or institutional culture. In turn, much spiritual culture such as religious belief, thought, as well as institutional culture is revealed through architecture. Western architecture is constantly changing. However, Chinese architecture has maintained its core and has not changed much in the past thousands of years of history. The cores of Western and Chinese architecture are diverse, given that the former focuses more on humanity itself while the latter focuses more on the harmony between man and nature. In this part, the ancient Greek styles of columns and the traditional Chinese scenery-borrowing method of architectural design are taken as typical examples of reflections of humanity in Western architecture and harmony between humans and nature in Chinese architecture respectively.

2.1. Western Architecture

Ancient Greek architecture can be a typical case of Western architecture. Ancient Greece is the cradle of Western culture, the ancient Greek architecture is also the pioneer of Western architecture. Some shapes of its buildings, structure, combi-

nation of specific art forms, and some principles of the art of buildings, have deeply influenced the Western architectural history of more than two thousand years (Yang, 2004). Ancient Greek architecture is a long-enduring classic. It has some typical characteristics, like the use of columns and mythical elements. As for the material, the columns of temples were mainly made from marble. Many other public buildings, walls, and upper parts of buildings were also made from it.

Distinctive columns are one of the characteristics of ancient Greek architecture. Ancient Greek columns are divided into three parts: base, body, and head, equivalent to people's feet, body, and head. They are all constructed in accordance with the human body shape. In ancient Greece, the three famous types of columns are Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian Orders. For example, as for the Doric Order, the ratio of the column height to the column diameter is 6:1. It is equal to the ratio of men's feet to men's height. This kind of column with 20 grooves, looks powerful and symbolizes male beauty. In this case, the Doric Order is also called the man's column. Doric Orders were used in the famous Acropolis Parthenon in Athens. Another paradigm is the Greek Ionic Order, which is characterized by its slim and beautiful style, with 24 grooves and a pair of downward swirls at its head. The ratio of its height to diameter is around 9:1, which is the same as the ratio of women's height to length of feet. The Ionic Order is also known as a female column. The Ionic Order, because of its elegant and noble characteristics, widely appeared in many ancient Greek buildings, such as the Temple of Athena Nike. The Corinthian Order is similar to the Ionic Order except in the form of its capital. The acanthus leaves which enclose the circular slender body of the capital make the Corinthian Order unique (See **Figure 1**).

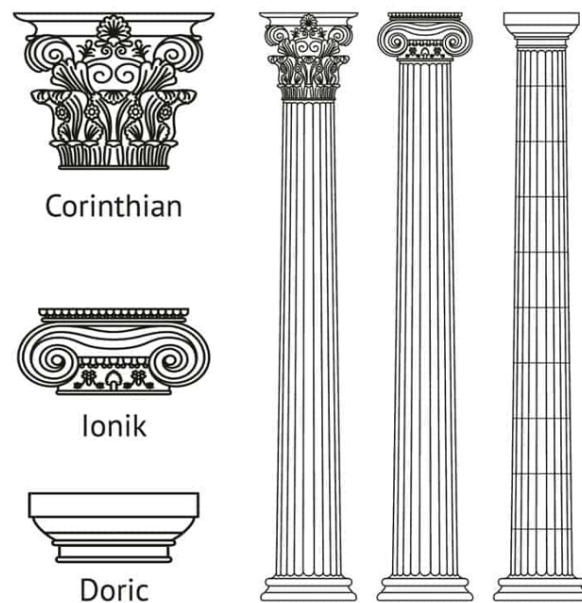


Figure 1. Three types of Greek columns (The Three Orders of Greek Architecture, 2020).

This order was much favored by the later Romans who combined the volutes of the Ionic with the acanthus leaves of the Corinthian orders and created a composite order. Besides, Caryatid Order is another famous kind of column in Greece. In ancient Greece, there was also a kind of supporting pillar which takes the form of a standing female figure. This kind of pillar is called Caryatid. The ancient Greek columns all have a common characteristic, which is people-oriented. These columns reflect the posture, appearance, behavior, and beauty of humans. The art of the ancient Greek era and the characteristics of the column show the noble status of human beings as the spirit of the universe, and these Greek columns, also known as the architectural model in contemporary European history, are the embodiment of ancient Greek architectural aesthetics. The Ancient Greeks believed in the beauty of the human body, and they believed that the human body was in perfect proportion and worthy of being made into works of art and applied to architecture.

Ancient Roman architecture also plays a dominant role in the development of Western architecture. Ancient Roman architecture is distinct from ancient Greek architecture in terms of the architecture supporting system. The well-known supporting system in ancient Greece was columns while vaults in ancient Rome still make an impact so far. Vaults always make the architecture massive and splendid. Colosseum and Pantheon are two representative buildings with vaults and arches as ancient Roman architecture. Even though, in terms of the style of architecture, the architectural style of ancient Rome inherited the ancient Greek architecture. The outer facade of the Colosseum in Ancient Rome is copied with the columns of ancient Greek architecture. The bottom layer is constructed with Doric Orders, the second layer is constructed with Ionic columns, and the third layer is constructed with Corinthian Orders. This kind of reflection of human beauty in ancient Greek architecture is vividly reflected in the Colosseum in ancient Rome.

The Palace of Versailles is the most famous royal chateau in France. It is a typical example of Western architecture. Even though it involves many changes in architecture, like its interior Baroque and Rococo decoration, it still presents some ancient Greek characteristics. Construction of the Royal Chapel in the Palace of Versailles was completed in 1710. Its imposing colonnade on the first floor was inspired by antiquity ([The Royal Chapel, 2016](#)). To be specific, these columns are inspired by the Greek columns, which are the reflection of the beauty of the human body.

2.2. Chinese Architecture

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the current designations.

Unlike stressing humanity in Western architecture, Chinese traditional culture emphasizes the coordination and unity of man and nature. Since ancient times, China has had a tradition of advocating for and loving nature. Whether it is Confucianism or Taoism, mainstream Chinese thoughts have always closely linked man with all things in nature. The environmental concept of “unity of nature and man” in traditional Chinese architecture is to transform nature and create a harmonious form on the premise of respecting nature. The environment not only refers to the building itself but also includes the space inside and outside the building and the surrounding natural environment. Architecture should become an organic part of this macro environment, integrate into it, and adapt to it. The harmonious coexistence of architecture and the natural environment is a main feature of traditional Chinese architecture (Cai, 2003).

Scenery borrowing is one of the common means of landscape construction in Chinese classical garden architecture. Scenery borrowing attaches importance to the fine integration and harmonious coexistence of man and nature. It brings limitless scenery to us in the limited space and immerses us in the beautiful and rich scenery. There are four main categories of “scenery borrowing”. Distant borrowing focuses on large-scale landscapes such as mountains and lakes while adjacent borrowing involves neighboring buildings and landscape features. Upward borrowing encompasses sky and clouds. In addition, downward borrowing draws on ponds, rocks, sand, gravel, fish, even reflection, etc. (Ji, 2009) Summer Palace is a classical garden architecture in China, with typical features of traditional Chinese architecture. It was listed as World Heritage in 1998. UNESCO reported that the Summer Palace was a masterpiece of Chinese landscape garden design. In Summer Palace, there are many designs with borrowed scenery. Kunming Lake is one of the typical examples involving distant borrowing. The surface of Kunming Lake precisely mirrors the scenery of Xishan Mountain peaks and Yuquan Mountain. Apart from a few small bridges, the west causeway on Kunming Lake shows no tall or huge buildings. In this case, the beautiful shape of Yuquan Mountain and the graceful posture of Yufeng Pagoda outside the garden can be taken as a part of the garden scenery without shelter. Willows along the west causeway on Kunming Lake cover the unsightly wall which separates the garden from the outside. The borrowed scenery outside the garden and the scenery inside the garden is integrated as a unity, which fits perfectly with each other. The integration of architecture and nature is just like an excellent picture.

Changing nature while conforming to nature is also in line with the traditional Chinese view of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. In terms of adapting to the law of nature, the layout of the ancient buildings in the Forbidden City also reflects this idea. On the one hand, the overall layout of Forbidden City conforms to the principle of being backed by mountains and facing water. The back mountain in Forbidden City here refers to a man-made mountain to the north of the Forbidden City, which was named Wansui (English Definition:

Long Live) Mountain in the Ming Dynasty and Jingshan Mountain in the Qing Dynasty. The water here refers to the artificial river to the south of the Forbidden City, including the Jinshui River outside Tiananmen Square and the Jinshui River inside the Square in front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony. In the area where Beijing is located, the wind blows much from the south in summer and the wind blows much from the north in winter. The layout of “being backed by the mountain and facing the water” is conducive to the wind from the south bringing water vapor from the Jinshui River into each palace in summer, which can lower the temperature of the Forbidden City. Besides, blocking the wind from the north helps keep the Forbidden City from getting too cold in winter. Therefore, this kind of layout form conforms to and exploits the law of nature. In this case, nature and humans can live in harmony.

3. Cultural Differences Displayed in Paintings

Traditional Chinese painting is one of the most representative arts in China. Traditional Chinese painters always use an inky color to paint. The subjects of Traditional Chinese painting are mainly divided into figures, landscapes, and flower-and-birds. In terms of content and artistic creation, it reflects ancient people’s cognition of nature, society, and related politics, philosophy, religion, morality, literature, and art. Western painting has a long history and a wide variety. Especially, Western painting has rich and bright colors, which can fully express the texture of objects, making the depicted objects appear realistic, credible, and expressive. Traditional Chinese painting is diverse from Western painting not only in forms and content but also in cultural backgrounds.

3.1. Western Paintings

In Europe, figure painting is the main type of painting. Landscape painting is in a subordinate position and even cannot be listed as the dominant in Western painting. Western painting gives priority to colorful paintings, paying attention to the principle of proportion, lights, and colors. In Western painting, colors are rich, sense are vivid. To accurately depict objective things, Western painters not only pay attention to the light and shade of colors but also pay attention to saturation, contrast, intensity, and other factors. Most Western paintings give priority to perspective and analysis of details to pursue real beauty. In this case, the figure can be depicted in detail and vividly.

The nude is a kind of work of art consisting of a naked human figure. Western painters believe that the human body is the most beautiful art in nature and the most perfect aesthetic object in the world. There is no other line or outline comparable to the human body’s vivid and soft lines, nor any other form comparable to the body’s symmetry, harmony, and sense of rhythm.

Oil painting is the main way of painting in the history of Western painting. For thousands of years, no matter through the performance of structure, proportion, movement, or skin colors of the human body, countless oil paintings

use different ways to express the praise of the human body, to show the external charm of the human body and the inner spiritual temperament of the characters.

Spring, painted by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, is the best depiction of a female body in Western European art history. In Spring, a naked girl is carrying a water pot to bathe, standing on a bluish-gray rock. The soft curve of her body shows to the world. The upturned arms, the slightly slanted waist, and the half-curved legs constitute the whole curve of the girl's body, which contrasted sharply with the linear running water and accentuated the beauty and grace of her figure. Compared with other skin colors, the girl's face is slightly red and pink. In addition, the girl's shy eyes and closed lips appropriately represent the girl's inner characteristics, like elegance, quietness, purity, and shyness (Ma, 2013). All the details in this painting express humans' physical and spiritual beauty. This painting also reveals that the West values and pays more attention to human beings which is a mode of thinking and aesthetics different from those in Chinese culture.

3.2. Traditional Chinese Paintings

Traditional Chinese painting is mainly divided into figures, flowers and birds, and landscapes, Chinese painting is divided into these categories by subject matter. It is to express a kind of concept and thought with art. The traditional Chinese painting is divided into three branches, namely, it summarizes the three aspects of the universe and life: figure painting is the expression of human society and the relationship between people; landscape painting shows the relationship between man and nature, integrating man and nature; the flower and bird painting is the expression of all kinds of life in nature (Deng, 2016). The reason that traditional Chinese painting is divided into characters, flowers and birds, and landscapes is the philosophical thinking of art sublimation: the combination of the three forms, which means the whole universe complements each other, which is the essence of art. As for the characteristics, traditional Chinese painting focuses on similarity in spirit instead of forms, attaches less importance to reality and the use of various colors, and advocates the use of blankness for subjective imagination. Ma Lin, a painter in the Southern Song Dynasty, once painted a picture of "Listening to the Wind Blowing the Pine": In the picture, an old man is sitting under a pine tree. There is a stream on the mountain, and the wind blows through the pine slightly. The old man is listening to the sound of the wind blowing the pine trees and running water. This picture reveals the relationship between man and art as well as the unity between man and nature in landscape painting. Chinese people are full of attachment to landscapes and have an emotion toward nature, which will not vanish. The four representative painters of landscape painting in the Yuan Dynasty were Huang Gongwang, Wang Meng, Ni Zan, and Wu Zhen. The landscape painting of Ni Zan does not even need to be embellished by characters or figures, because the landscape in the picture is already the incarnation of Ni Zan. The painting is silent and bleak, which is the projection of the painter's mind or subjective consciousness toward

the landscape. What he paints seems to only be the landscape but expresses his feelings indeed. The landscape paintings of the four great painters of the Yuan dynasty are just like lyric poems. They construct the environments with human emotion, and all the scenery embodies their emotions. The scenes and feelings blend, and man and nature eventually become integrated (Wang, 2012).

4. Discussion

The origin of human-oriented thought or humanism can be traced back to ancient Greece. Protagoras's saying "Man is the measure of all things" not only places "man" above god and all natural things but also elevates ordinary individuals and personal feelings to the highest position as the standard to measure, test, and judge all things. In the Renaissance, humanism, which was opposite to religious theocracy, began to emerge. However, Renaissance Humanism roots in classical antiquity and has profoundly influenced Western society, including art and architecture. Although artists have not completely divorced their works of art from the themes of religions, they have begun to inject secular reality into their works, especially by depicting and shaping the beauty of human bodies. They have perfectly combined the passion of humanism with the scientific methods of expression. Western architecture also embodies such ideology. All the material things in the Western including works of art (especially paintings mentioned in this paper) and architecture reflect Western thought that human beings should be valued more, and we should recognize and see the inner or outer beauty of human beings. This people-oriented mode of thinking is still worth spreading to some extent.

Unity of nature and man is a Chinese philosophy, which is expounded by many schools of thought including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In traditional Chinese thinking, nature and man coexist, and all living things and man are one. The ecological wisdom of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, the architectural structure conforming to the law of nature, and the aesthetics of harmonious development between man and nature contained in ancient architecture still provide useful references for people in modern times. And the importance traditional Chinese painting attaches to nature should also be carried forward in modern society as the rapid development of industrial science and technology tends to make people ignore the protection of nature. People should realize that only harmonious coexistence between man and nature can achieve sustainable development.

5. Conclusion

Through a brief comparison between China and the West by analyzing architectural and painting differences in them, we can see a distinction between Chinese and Western spiritual culture, especially the attitude toward human beings and nature. Chinese people concern more on the balance and unity of man and nature. Chinese people attach importance to harmonious coexistence between

man and nature while Westerners focus on humans. They value human beings more instead of nature or the balance of man and nature. We should absorb the merits of both Western and Chinese cultures, like recognizing the beauty of humans while also balancing humans and nature. This analysis is brief and limited because more aspects can be discussed and analyzed for people to get a deeper understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. For future research, more differences in the spiritual culture can be discussed with the help of more intuitive material cultures. Besides, the institutional culture can also be a good discussion point if analyzed well. Nevertheless, it can be inferred from this paper that only by distinguishing Chinese and Western cultures can we have a better understanding of Chinese and Western cultures.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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