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**Bai Xiaolong**  
International College, Silla  
University, Busan, South  
Korea

**Guo Wenqiang**  
International College, Silla  
University, Busan, South  
Korea

## A study on the enlightenment of Taoist thinking in relieving differences between China and the United States

**Bai Xiaolong and Guo Wenqiang**

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### Abstract

The different ways of thinking between China and the United States affect their national behavior and are an important reason for the differences between the two countries. Relatively speaking, Americans tend to prefer analytical and logical thinking, while Chinese people are better at holistic and dialectical thinking. Both countries believe that they have grasped the fundamental laws of the movement and change of things, representing the "correct" direction of the world's progress, so the differences are difficult to resolve. Taoist thinking is usually considered a representative ideology of dialectical thinking in China, but in reality, Taoist thinking can combine independent self and holistic thinking. Reasonable use of Taoist thinking can inspire both China and the United States to examine their own thinking shortcomings, promote understanding of each other's positions, and play a role in easing differences between China and the United States.

**Keywords:** Taoist thinking, independent self, holistic thinking, differences between China and the United States

### Introduction

China and the United States are world powers, and the stable development of their relations is of great significance for maintaining world peace. Since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States in 1979, significant achievements have been made in China US relations over the past forty years, but there are also many differences. Scholars have conducted research from different perspectives on the reasons for the differences between China and the United States.

#### 1. Cold War mentality leads to differences between China and the United States

Zeng Peiyan (2021) <sup>[17]</sup> pointed out that it is normal for China US relations to have differences, and the key is not to view such differences with Cold War thinking and ideological biases. Some political forces in the United States often adopt a Cold War approach to the differences between China and the United States, which invisibly increases the difficulty of communication between the two sides.

Wu Zhicheng and Xu Xiaofang (2023) <sup>[15]</sup> believe that Cold War thinking is a way of thinking in dealing with national relations during the Cold War era, manifested as inciting ideological opposition, regional political games, blocking the market, and promoting cultural prejudice; In the current era, the United States is under pressure from China in the international political landscape, but the United States has not chosen to resolve differences through communication and exchange, but has created a Cold War situation of opposing competition, which has exacerbated the differences between China and the United States.

Niu Weigan and Chen Kang (2023) <sup>[8]</sup> proposed in their research that the US technology containment strategy towards China is a continuation of the US Cold War mentality and a result of the US Cold War "victory" experience. The economic and technological gap between China and the United States continues to narrow, accelerating the US's containment and blockade of China's technology, and this situation will continue in the future.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Bai Xiaolong**  
International College, Silla  
University, Busan, South  
Korea

## 2. Economic competition leads to differences between China and the United States

Chen Yu (2021) <sup>[2]</sup> analyzed the evolution process of the United States' economic strategy towards China from 1979 to 2020, dividing this process into four stages: strategic coordination, non enemy, non friend, stakeholder, and strategic competition. Since 2008, the economic gap between China and the United States has rapidly narrowed, and since Trump, the United States has comprehensively upgraded its strategy to contain the Chinese economy. The two sides have engaged in fierce competition at multiple levels, seriously affecting normal economic exchanges between China and the United States.

Zhao Bo (2024) <sup>[20]</sup> pointed out that the three reshaping of Biden's economics are reshaping the United States, reshaping allies, and restructuring institutions. Its focus is on China, aiming to curb China's economic development by reshaping the American economic system.

Wang Zhifang and Zhang Dan (2023) <sup>[14]</sup> analyzed the different economic strategies of China and the United States in the Asian region from the perspective of the global value chain, pointing out that there are significant differences between the United States' "offshore balance" strategy in Asia and China's Asian economic integration strategy. The Asian value chain lacks guidance from major powers, and China should take the initiative to assume this responsibility. However, this will reduce the economic influence of the United States in Asia, so the differences between the two sides will further intensify.

## 3. Different understandings of human rights lead to differences between China and the United States

The concept of human rights in the United States comes from the theory of natural law, which holds that human rights are universal and can even interfere in the internal affairs of other countries to protect them. The concept of human rights in China comes from Marxism and traditional Chinese culture. While China respects human rights, it does not believe that interference in the internal affairs of other countries can be arbitrary for the sake of human rights.

## 4. Different ways of thinking lead to differences between China and the United States

Pan Zhongqi (2017) <sup>[9]</sup> pointed out that the interaction between China and the United States is not only a game of two ways of behavior, but also a competition between two ways of thinking. Chinese people are better at dialectical and relational thinking, while Americans are better at logical and categorical thinking. The different ways of thinking result in significant differences in national behavior between the two sides, which has become a deep-seated cause of friction between China and the United States. American scholar Kerbel, J (2009) <sup>[3]</sup> also has a similar view that Chinese thinking tends to be more inclined towards comprehensive thinking, while American thinking tends towards analytical thinking. He further pointed out that China's comprehensive thinking may be more suitable for today's complex and interconnected world, and the United States also has better opportunities to develop its own comprehensive thinking. Lin Yizhai (2019) <sup>[5]</sup> drew on the analysis of self construction in social psychology and cultural psychology, and compared the types and activation mechanisms of national identity under different conditions of self construction. He believes that China constructs and

understands its own relationship with its surroundings based on the "relationship self", while the West, led by the United States, understands its own relationship with its surroundings through the "independent self". The difference in self-awareness between the two countries is an important reason for the ongoing divergence between China and the United States.

From the analysis in the previous text, we can see that the emergence of differences between China and the United States is not caused by unilateral reasons. Scholars have analyzed the differences between China and the United States from multiple aspects. Relatively speaking, there are relatively few research results analyzing the differences from a thinking perspective. In the author's opinion, analyzing the different ways of thinking between China and the United States is of great significance for understanding the different interests and concerns between China and the United States, and resolving the differences between the two sides.

The thinking styles of China and the United States are typical representatives of East Asian and Western thinking styles, respectively. Chinese and Western scholars have long noticed the differences in thinking patterns between China and the West. Ji Xianlin (1991) <sup>[22]</sup> believes that the Eastern way of thinking is comprehensive, while the Western way of thinking is analytical. Western analytical thinking can help us understand the various parts and laws of motion of things, but it is not conducive to us understanding the whole picture of things from a holistic perspective because it lacks attention to the relationships between different parts. On the other hand, Eastern thinking is a holistic approach to understanding things, which can effectively compensate for the shortcomings of Western thinking. Nisbett, R.E., Peng, K., Choi, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2001) <sup>[7]</sup> argue that the way East Asians think is holistic, focusing on the whole picture of things and establishing causal relationships between parts and the whole, relying on "dialectical" reasoning; The thinking style of Westerners is analytical, focusing on the essence of things and dividing them into categories, using rules and logic to understand the way things operate. Lian Shuneng (2002) <sup>[4]</sup> compared the thinking styles of China and the West from ten aspects: ethical and cognitive, holistic and analytical, intentional and objective, intuitive and logical, imagery and empirical, fuzzy and precise, seeking the same and opposite, feedback and foresight, introversion and extroversion, inductive and deductive. She believed that the reason why China and the West's thinking styles are different is closely related to geographical environment and political culture. China chose the thinking direction of political ethics, while the West chose the thinking direction of scientific cognition.

We can see from the research of the above scholars that they generally believe that China's way of thinking is holistic and dialectical, while the Western way of thinking represented by the United States is analytical and logical. Chinese thinking pays more attention to overall improvement, while American thinking pays more attention to individual protection.

## The root cause of the differences between China and the United States

The fundamental difference between China and the United States lies in the fundamental opposition between the Confucian concept of unity and the core value of

safeguarding individual rights in the United States. The essence of Confucian thinking in politics is a patriarchal system that requires family members to obey their father's will. After the Han Dynasty deposed the Hundred Schools of Thought for their exclusive worship of Confucianism, Confucianism became the official orthodox ideology. The reformed Confucianism achieved the combination of family and state, that is, the monarch is the "father" of the whole world, and all subjects in this country must obey the orders of the "monarch's father". Ordinary people must obey the monarch's leadership like they obey their own biological father, and resisting the monarch is like resisting their own father, which is a heinous and immoral thing. Although Confucianism hopes that the monarch is a ruler who loves the people like a son, this is only moral, and there is no real balance mechanism for the monarch's power. The monarch's mistakes will not be truly punished. For example, when Emperor Wu of Han reflected on his own mistakes, he only needed to issue a "Self Punishment Edict". In this situation, unification requires absolute obedience from some to the whole, and China's concept of the whole is essentially based on compulsory control through military force.

The American mindset strongly upholds individual rights, and there is an equal relationship between individuals and the whole. The relationship between individuals and the whole is regulated by entering into contracts. This is fundamentally contradictory to the unified thinking of Confucianism in China. Although Confucianism emphasizes that the ruler should have the appearance of a monarch, the father should have the appearance of a father, and the son should have the appearance of a son, that is, everyone should do their part. However, as mentioned earlier, this is a requirement of moral character, and there is no mechanism or force to restrict or punish behavior that deviates from the requirements. This approach ultimately leads to the violent violation of individual rights.

Therefore, the author believes that the difference between China and the United States is not a superficial contradiction between holistic and analytical thinking, but a significant difference in the perception of holistic and partial relationships under different ways of thinking, as well as a huge difference in the potential protection of individual rights between the two implicit ways of thinking. The overall thinking style of China shows a sense of superiority over parts, and sacrificing parts as a whole is considered appropriate. However, there is no requirement in the American way of thinking that parts must be sacrificed for the whole, nor is there a sense of superiority over parts as a whole.

The second major reason for the divergence between China and the United States is the competition between Confucian unified thinking and American classification thinking. The United States divides countries into democratic and non democratic countries based on whether or not they use democratic systems. It believes that democratic countries have similar systems and ways of resolving conflicts. If the world becomes a democratic country, it is possible to permanently eliminate conflicts and disputes. The idea of seeking consensus is consistent with the Confucian "Great Unity" thinking, and the essence of Confucian "Great Unity" thinking is to eliminate inconsistent ideas and behaviors, ultimately achieving complete unity of thinking and behavior. Due to the inconsistent starting points of these two

types of thinking, but the pursuit of consensus in the results, both sides will inevitably have differences.

## **The Core Thinking in Taoist Thought**

### **Dialectical thinking**

In Laozi's "Tao Te Ching", there is a spark of dialectical thinking, ranging from "the coexistence of existence and non existence, difficult to imagine, long and short in shape, and high and low in inclination" to "the reliance of misfortune and happiness, and the ambush of misfortune and misfortune" and so on. Both Chinese and Western scholars have seen the shaping effect of Taoist dialectics on the thinking and behavior of Chinese people. Zou Fuhuan and Tang Shu (2006) <sup>[21]</sup> believe that the dialectical thinking of Taoism has important enlightening significance for solving today's social contradictions. Chen Guying (2000) <sup>[1]</sup> believes that Laozi's naturalism and dialectics are important components of Chinese thought by analyzing the relationship between the Book of Changes and Taoist thought. Yang Xiaohua (2017) <sup>[16]</sup> pointed out that the dialectical thinking of Taoism has a significant impact on the overall and relational thinking of the Chinese people, shaping their behavior. Peng, K., Spencer Rodgers, J., & Nian, Z. (2006) <sup>[10]</sup> argue that Western thinking emphasizes individual independence, while China's way of thinking emphasizes the whole. These two types of thinking present a conflicting side, and dialectical thinking can build a bridge of communication between China and the West.

### **System thinking**

In Taoist thinking, humans, the earth, the heavens, the Tao, or nature form a complete system that requires "humans to follow the earth, the earth to follow the heavens, the heavens to follow the Tao, and the Tao to follow the nature.". In Taoist thinking, there is not only a complete system of nature, heaven, earth, and human beings, but also a set of systematic operating rules, which is the balance and coexistence of all things.

### **The combination of independent self and holistic thinking**

The independent self in Taoist thinking is an astonishing discovery. Wang Zhendong (2021) <sup>[13]</sup> explored the influence of Confucianism and Taoism on self construction systems and ways of thinking through experiments; This experiment adopts the manipulation method of educational intervention, using the original texts of classics carrying Confucian and Taoist values as the text material for cultural intervention, combined with experimental tasks of classroom teaching and post class reflection, to examine the differences in self-construction and thinking styles of participants who received different ideological and value interventions before and after the experiment. After an eight week mental intervention on sixth grade students in a certain area of Shandong, China, the group participating in the experiment experienced significant changes in self construction and thinking patterns: (1) Changes in self construction: the self construction of Confucian group participants developed towards interdependence, while the self construction of Taoist group participants developed towards independence; (2) The changes in thinking patterns have led to the development of holistic thinking among participants in the Confucianism and Taoism groups.

This experiment indicates that scholars believe that the interdependence self bias of Chinese and even East Asian people is mainly influenced by Confucianism. Although there is a significant difference between the independent self advocated by Taoism and the Western independent self advocated by cultural scholars today. The former emphasizes a spirit of transcendence and independence, while the latter constructs a contractual social structure based on emphasizing individual rights. However, in terms of individual personality alone, the two have certain similarities in their views on individuality and independence (Tu Yangjun, Guo Yongyu, 2014) <sup>[11]</sup>.

It should be noted that this experiment demonstrates the unique connection between independent self and holistic thinking in Taoist culture, which breaks the inherent notion in cultural psychology that interdependent self is associated with holistic thinking, while independent self is associated with analytical thinking. This is a huge unexpected gain from this experiment.

Although both Taoism and Confucianism contain holistic thinking, in the author's opinion, the holistic thinking of Taoism is completely different from that of Confucianism. Firstly, the "whole" in the two types of thinking refers to different objects. The Confucian whole refers to the family, the country constructed in a "family" way, and the larger world. The whole of Taoism refers to the Dao or a naturally formed system. Secondly, the overall operating rules are different. In Confucian thinking, the overall operating rules are the laws of "family", while in Taoist thinking, the overall operating rules are the natural operating rules. The relationship between the whole and the parts is different again. In Confucian thinking, the parts must obey the whole, and the whole is higher than the parts. Not only is the whole unequal to the parts, but also the parts unequal to each other. Simply put, the closer to the center and the closer to the whole, the more power and resource dominance can be obtained, reflecting the suppression of the whole over the parts. In Taoist thinking, there is no physical "whole". The whole is composed of various parts, and there is a parallel relationship between parts and the whole, as well as between parts and parts, without any inequality in status.

In addition, there are significant differences between Taoism and Confucianism in terms of behavioral purposes and starting points. The purpose of the Tao is for the prosperity and development of all things. It provides resources for the development of all things and does not seek anything in return. In the Tao Te Ching, the expression of the Tao is "all things rely on it to be born without hesitation, and achievements are not achieved. Clothing nourishes all things without being the main one, and all things return without being the main one.". So the Dao has never considered himself superior to all things as the master of all things, and his behavior is based on his true heart, without using rewards as the driving force for action. In Confucianism, it is believed that an individual's body, hair, and skin are owned by their parents, and the purpose of raising children by parents is to prevent aging. Similarly, the whole world belongs to the king, and the king raises the people to support the king. In Confucianism, parents are above their children, kings are above the people, parents raise their children, and kings raise their people with the purpose of obtaining rewards, using rewards as the driving force for behavior.

## **The Enlightenment of Taoist Thinking on Relieving Differences between China and the United States**

### **1. Resonance of independent self**

The independent self emphasis of the United States is the protection of individual rights, while the independent self emphasis of Taoism is a detached and free spirited spirit. The two seemingly vastly different ways of thinking actually resonate to a certain extent. The independent self of the United States is closely related to Christian doctrine. In Christian doctrine, people's spiritual world belongs to God, and everyone is equal before God. The equality of the spiritual world promotes people's exploration of equality in the secular world. The ideas of "freedom and equality", "innate human rights", "sovereignty in the people" affirmed in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of Human Rights can be seen as important achievements of this exploration. The independent self of Taoism originates from the starting point of Taoist thinking. Taoism believes that the starting point of the world is the Dao, which is a collection of matter and laws, similar to the singularity in physics. After the birth of the Tao, all things operate in an orderly manner according to the rules of the Tao. In the system of the Tao, people, like other objects, must follow the laws of the Tao. In the face of the Tao, not only are people equal to each other, but people and objects are also equal. Therefore, there is no secular authority in Taoist thinking. The standard for evaluating people is whether they act according to the laws of the Tao. People who can act according to the laws of the Tao are called "saints". The independent self of Taoism and the independent self of America share similarities. They both believe that there is a higher rule outside the human world that determines the operation of the world. In the eyes of Americans, it is God and in the eyes of Taoism, it is the Tao. Everyone is equal before God or the Tao, and everyone can communicate with God or the Tao to obtain enlightenment. In terms of the division between China and the United States, the traditional Confucian thinking in China lacks recognition of independent self, and may not be understood by the United States in its interactions with the United States due to excessive emphasis on collective or holistic values. Especially under collective or holistic values, the issue of unequal rights or interests between parts is often overlooked, which is also an important reason why the United States doubts China's collective or holistic values. In Taoist thinking, there is an independent and equal relationship between the whole and the parts, as well as between each part, which is similar to the idea in Western contract theory that the parties to a contract are independent and equal. The essence of protecting individual rights in the United States is not to promote the opposition between individuals and collectives, but to explore better institutional mechanisms to protect individual interests. China should strive to understand the thinking logic behind the protection of individual rights in the United States, and strengthen research on independent self in Taoist thinking, laying a ideological foundation for communication between both parties.

### **2. A community with a shared future for mankind under holistic thinking**

Taoist thinking unifies humans and all things in the natural



system, and humans and all things have an equal relationship. In American thinking, although it is also believed that humans and all things come from nature, it is believed that humans are above all things and that conquering nature is an important pursuit of humans. Understanding the overall thinking of Taoism helps the United States understand China's position on global issues. China's way of thinking on global issues is Taoist thinking, advocating that there is only one Earth for humanity, and that the Earth is the home for human survival. Maintaining the ecological balance of the Earth is the responsibility of everyone. Human beings should respect nature, learn from it, and build a harmonious relationship with it, rather than an antagonistic relationship. The current global climate change and frequent extreme weather events are reminding humans to learn to live in harmony with nature. Taoist thinking holds that in the relationship between people, it is not a competitive relationship but a mutually reinforcing relationship, as stated in the Tao Te Ching, "A good person is not the teacher of a good person, and a bad person is the asset of a good person. He does not value his teacher, does not love his asset, and although he is wise, he is confused." The meaning is that those who are good at doing something are the teachers of those who are not good at it, and those who are not good at doing something are the resources of those who are good at it. If these two types of people cannot see each other's value for themselves, they are foolish. In the international system, it means that developed countries and developing countries are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Developed countries are the learning objects of developing countries, while developing countries are important sources of resources and commodity markets for developed countries. China and the United States are both the largest developing countries and the most advanced developed countries. The United States has many aspects that China can learn from, and China also has areas that the United States can learn from. These two countries share huge common interests and have a broad foundation for cooperation. Taoist thinking helps both countries reverse their narrow perception of the two countries as competitors and instead work together towards higher levels of value.

### 3. A balanced and symbiotic international system

In the Tao Te Ching, it is said that "the Tao gives birth to one, gives birth to two, two, three, and all things", and "all things rely on it to be born without hesitation, and achievements without achievement", which means that the Tao gives birth to all things, and provides endless power for the development of all things. The Tao does not provide clear regulations on the way in which all things develop, but it explains the situations that violate the Tao. The situation of violating the Tao is called "when things are strong, they grow old". In my opinion, this "when things are strong, they grow old" does not mean that all things grow old, but rather that if they violate their own development laws and exceed their own boundaries, they will lead to extinction. In the Tao Te Ching, it is said that "the way of heaven damages excess to make up for deficiency", which means that the way of nature will supply the poor with excessive wealth, maintaining a state of natural balance. The natural order in Taoist thinking presents a state of balance and symbiosis among all things, which refers to the growth of various organisms in nature according to their own laws, and the entire natural system presents a state of balance. The

balanced symbiotic thinking of Taoism is clearly reflected in ecology, where the ability of different plants to balance symbiosis is closely related to their own diffusion limitations.

Usually, if a species produces smaller seeds, it tends to have a higher reproductive rate as compensation (Moles *et al.*, 2004) [6]. Most small seeds can spread further in the community, while larger seeds face greater diffusion limitations during regeneration compared to smaller seeds. For example, in Turnbull *et al* In the study of balanced neutral communities (2008), it was found that there are species coexisting in the community that can produce many small seeds and a few large seeds. The results showed that species that can produce most small seeds often compete to exclude species that produce a few large seeds. This is because the small seeds of the species diffuse more evenly in the community, and the limited large seeds often cannot spread to the empty spots. However, in the balance model between endurance and reproductive rate, we can also see that large seeds have stronger endurance, higher survival rates, and will also have an advantage in competition among different communities, which also explains the harmonious coexistence of species of different seed sizes in plant communities.

If Taoist thinking is used to shape the international system, then the operating rules of this system are balanced coexistence. According to the Taoist concept of balanced coexistence, both large and small countries in the international system should have their own rights but are also subject to corresponding restrictions, just like the restrictions on the spread of plant seeds. Both large and small countries can achieve symbiosis and development in this system. But in fact, taking the permanent members of the United Nations as an example, these five countries all have strong comprehensive national strength. No country is ranked in the bottom ten of the global economy, and no country comes from Africa and Latin America. Therefore, it is debatable whether this international system can truly represent the common interests of all humanity. China and the United States have broad cooperation space in building a more fair, open, and diverse international system. If China and the United States can transcend narrow national interests and view the interests and values of all humanity from a broader human perspective, it will bring good news to all humanity.

### Conclusion

China and the United States are two crucial countries in the world, and their differences are influenced by various factors such as Cold War thinking, economic competition, human rights, and ways of thinking. Chinese people are good at holistic and dialectical thinking in their way of thinking, while Americans are good at analytical and logical thinking. The holistic thinking in China is deeply influenced by Confucianism, and there is an unequal relationship between the whole and the parts, which is significantly different from the contractual social relationships in the United States. Contractual social relationships are based on the protection of individual interests, while Chinese holistic thinking requires individual interests to be subordinate to the overall interests. Taoist thinking uniquely combines independent self with holistic thinking, which changes the inherent cognition of combining independent self with logical thinking and interdependent self with holistic

thinking. And we have found commonalities between the independent self in Taoist thinking and the American independent self, which provides strong support for both China and the United States to understand each other. Taoist thinking has made special contributions in building a community with a shared future for mankind and establishing a balanced and symbiotic international system. It not only has significant implications for traditional China with Confucianism as its core, but also for Western thinking represented by the United States. Taoist thinking combines independent self and holistic thinking, reflecting not only the characteristics of Western thinking independence but also the characteristics of Eastern thinking holism.

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