

From the Axial Age to Philosophers Age: Cultural Genes for Philosophical Breakthroughs and the Continuity of Chinese Civilization

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Abstract

The theory of "Axial Age" reveals the philosophical breakthrough of human civilization, but the breakthrough path of "Age of Sons" in China is unique. This paper points out that the Hundred Schools of Thought did not negate the ancient tradition completely, but bred the "cultural gene" that deeply influenced the trend of Chinese civilization through a "continuous breakthrough". By analyzing the Confucian ethical path of "inner transcendence", the Taoist cosmology of "Tao and nature" and the logical spirit of the two schools of thought, this paper argues that these ideological genes together constitute a civilized framework emphasizing harmony, order and historical consciousness. It is this framework that provides the fundamental spiritual impetus and internal mechanism for the Chinese civilization to show strong inclusiveness, resilience and historical continuity in later generations.

Keywords

Axial Era, Hundred Schools of Thought, Cultural Gene, Continuity of Civilization, Inner Transcendence.

1. Introduction

In the pedigree of world civilization, the amazing continuity displayed by Chinese civilization is a grand historical phenomenon. Karl Jaspers's theory of "Axial Age" provides an excellent framework for understanding the synchronization of spiritual awakening among civilizations in hundreds of years BC, but it focuses on the universality of "breakthrough" and fails to fully explain the uniqueness of China path and its internal connection with civilization continuity. This paper argues that China's "times of sons" completed a unique "continuity breakthrough" in response to the deep crisis of "the collapse of etiquette and music." The core lies in the fact that the thoughts of the sons do not cut off the tradition, but create a series of stable "cultural genes" from it, such as the cosmology of "harmony between man and nature", the value path of "inner transcendence" and the priority concern for the order of the world [1]. These genes compete with each other, fuse, and finally precipitate into the basic structure of Chinese civilization, endowing it with strong cohesion and endurance. The purpose of this study is to explore the core of this philosophical breakthrough and reveal how cultural genes, as key variables, shape the unique continuous paradigm of Chinese civilization.

2. Axis Turning and Thought Awakening

The theory of "Axial Age" reveals the rational awakening and philosophical breakthrough of human civilization in hundreds of years BC, which are common in the pursuit of universal ultimate existence, the emergence of critical reflection and the awakening of human individuality. However, in this general picture, there are fundamental differences in the breakthrough paths of civilizations. Ancient Greece is characterized by a break between philosophy and myth, while Israel emphasizes the absolute dichotomy between God and the

world, both of which are characterized by "fracture" [2]. In contrast, China's "axis breakthrough" presents a unique "continuity" color. The thoughts of the philosophers did not break away from the ancient tradition completely, but creatively transformed the core concepts of "heaven", "virtue" and "ceremony", forming a path of "reviewing the old and learning the new". This mode of transcendence in continuation constitutes the philosophical starting point of the continuity of Chinese civilization.

The ideological explosion of China's Axial Age was rooted in the profound social and historical changes from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. The order established in the Western Zhou Dynasty, with the core of "the mandate of heaven is not constant, only virtue is auxiliary" and the performance of patriarchal rites and music, already contained rational seeds. By the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the "collapse of rites and music" marked the failure of the old order, which gave birth to the core issue of the times: after the traditional view of destiny was shaken, what was the basis of reasonable social order? This historical context shapes the basic problem domain of China breakthrough-strong spirit of "humanity and action", that is, believing that order can be rebuilt through human reason and practice. At the same time, the ritual and music cultural tradition of Western Zhou Dynasty was not abandoned, but became the basic resources for philosophers to create philosophy [3]. Therefore, China's ideological awakening is a kind of "continuous breakthrough" oriented to reality and devoted to the reconstruction of order in the process of responding to the disintegration of traditional order.

3. The Hundred Schools of Thought and Genetic Mutation of Thoughts

3.1. Confucian "benevolence and propriety" system and the road of inner transcendence

The creative transformation of Confucianism lies in infusing new spiritual core into traditional ritual and music culture and realizing philosophical breakthrough from external norm to internal consciousness [4]. The core of this breakthrough is to construct a value system with "benevolence" as its body and "courtesy" as its use. Confucius completed the fundamental transformation of Zhou ceremony through the discovery of "benevolence." He defined "benevolence" as the inherent foundation of ritual and music culture, and put forward "people without benevolence, how to ceremony?" People are not benevolent, what if happy? "(8) The famous proposition of Analects. This transformation made the external system norm (ceremony) obtain the internal moral basis (benevolence), forming a unique "benevolence and ceremony integration" system. On this basis, Confucianism initiated the spiritual path of "inner transcendence." Different from "external transcendence" in western culture, which relies on external gods to redeem itself, Confucianism believes that the value root of transcendence (heaven) lies in human nature, and spiritual sublimation can be realized in secular human relations through moral cultivation of "turning against oneself." This mutation of ideological gene has far-reaching influence: on the one hand, it establishes the value orientation of Chinese civilization with moral rationality as the core, and makes ethical concern become the basic characteristic of civilization; on the other hand, it shapes the practical path of "cultivating one's moral character and governing the country," closely connects individual morality with social governance, and forms a strong spirit of joining the WTO and a sense of historical mission. Mencius 'elucidation of "the theory of good nature" and the discussion of "nature and heaven" in the doctrine of the mean further deepened this inherent transcendental philosophical path and laid a deep humanistic foundation for Chinese civilization.

3.2. Taoist "natural" law and endless cosmology

Taoism responded to the crisis of the times with more fundamental philosophical thinking. Its ideological breakthrough lies in transcending the specific system arrangement, directly exploring the origin and operation law of the universe, and establishing a metaphysical system with "Tao" as its core. Laozi's core proposition "Man obeys the earth, the earth obeys the heaven, the heaven obeys the Tao, and the Tao obeys the nature"(chapter 25 of Tao Te Ching) reveals a cosmology with "nature and inaction" as the highest criterion. From this perspective, benevolence, righteousness and wisdom, which Confucianism strives to uphold, are regarded as the products of "the abolition of the Great Way." The real wisdom lies in "assisting the nature of all things but not daring to do them," that is, conforming to the natural state of things without arbitrary intervention. This kind of thought contains profound dialectical wisdom, such as "the movement of the opposite Tao" reveals the law of mutual transformation of opposites, "weak wins strong" expounds the wisdom of overcoming hardness with softness. Zhuangzi further developed this naturalistic view of the universe into the realm of "all things in one." He proposed that "heaven and earth and I coexist, and all things and I are one"(Zhuangzi·Qiwu Lun), breaking the boundary between things and me, advocating to transcend the bondage of secular values with the attitude of "free travel." This thought provides a unique transcendental dimension for Chinese civilization: it does not seek transcendence to external gods, but realizes spiritual freedom by returning to nature. The combination of Taoism and the philosophy of change in Yi Zhuan forms the special generative thinking mode of Chinese civilization, which makes China culture keep strong self-renewal ability in the face of historical changes [5].

3.3. Rational resonance and cultural reorganization of mohism and legalism

Although the ideological orientations of Mohism and Legalism are very different from those of Confucianism and Taoism, they also embody the awakening of the rational spirit in the Axial Era. They participated in the reorganization and construction of the spiritual genes of Chinese civilization in different ways. Mohism represents a distinct utilitarian rational orientation. Mozi put forward the core idea of "loving each other and benefiting each other," taking "Tianzhi" as the metaphysical basis and "three tables"(origin, origin and application) as the standard to test truth, and constructed a complete ideological system. He strongly criticized the confucian funeral for a long time, rites and music, and advocated the pragmatic principles of "frugal use" and "frugal burial." Mohist "Shang Tong" thought emphasizes unity of thought, "Shang Xian" advocates breaking the Shiqing Shilu, these have strong egalitarian color. It is particularly noteworthy that Mohism developed a rather rigorous logic system, and its scientific and rational spirit in Mojing injected precious intellectual genes into China culture. Legalists pushed political rationality to the extreme. Shang Yang advocated "rule of law," Han Feizi put forward the political theory of combining "law, art and potential," completely abandoned the role of moral education in politics, and advocated "no distinction between close and distant, no distinction between noble and humble, and a decision based on law." This ultra-rational political thinking, though controversial for its harshness, laid the theoretical foundation for the bureaucracy of the unified empire. Legalists 'thought of "king after law" embodies a concept of historical evolution, and its pragmatic orientation of "enriching the country and strengthening the army" has a profound impact on later politics.

4. Cultural Genes and Civilization Endurance

4.1. The internal mechanism of culture

The philosophical breakthrough of the Axis era completed a "source code" level rewrite of Chinese civilization. The core concepts and thinking modes put forward by hundreds of philosophers do not stay at the ideological level, but realize the "reprogramming" of civilization

through multiple paths such as institutionalization, socialization and psychological internalization. This reprogramming process is first reflected in the institutional construction level. The establishment of the Qin and Han empires established Confucianism as the official ideology through the policy choice of "eliminating hundreds of schools and respecting Confucianism alone," and at the same time, "Yang Confucianism and Yin Fa" integrated the bureaucratic system and governance technology of Legalism into the imperial management system. This institutionalized "convergence of Confucianism and Legalism" transformed ideological genes into stable political structures. Secondly, at the social level, through the imperial examination system, clan system, education system and other channels, these cultural genes were continuously copied and transmitted, shaping the common values and behavior patterns of the scholar-bureaucrat class and forming a strong social cohesion. In addition, at the psychological structure level, such as the ideal of life of "cultivating one's moral character, governing the country and leveling the world," the thinking mode of "harmony between man and nature," the attitude of "moderation," etc., gradually accumulate into the deep cultural psychology of the Chinese nation and become the internal stabilizer of civilization continuity.

4.2. Traditional "rebirth" and modern "variation"

The cultural genes of the sons of thought show amazing vitality in the long river of history. Their inheritance is not a simple replication process, but a "genetic lineage" of continuous creative transformation. The central feature of this lineage is that memes are always "reborn" under new historical conditions, maintaining their temporal relevance through constant "variations." The China of Buddhism is the best example of this process. From the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Tang and Song Dynasties, Buddhism, while maintaining its core doctrine, interacted deeply with the native Confucianism and Taoism. The combination of Taoist wisdom of "natural inaction" and Confucian theory of "mind" with Buddhist concept of Prajna emptiness finally gave birth to Zen Buddhism, which is the most characteristic Buddhist sect in China. Zen Buddhism stresses "no writing, teaching outside the biography," "that is, the heart is Buddha," its way of thinking and practice path are deeply stamped with the brand of China culture. This process is not a simple cultural substitution, but a successful cultural fusion, reflecting the inclusiveness and transformation ability of Chinese civilization. The establishment of Buddhist sects in Sui and Tang Dynasties and the absorption and transformation of Buddhist thoughts by Confucian scholars in Song and Ming Dynasties all showed the strong adaptability of cultural genes.

In response to the challenge of Buddhism and Taoism, Neo-Confucianism reinterpreted Confucian classics, systematized the concepts of "Li," "Qi," "Xin" and "Xing," and constructed a sophisticated philosophical system. Cheng and Zhu Xi's elucidation of "natural principles" and Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming's exploration of "original mind" are all creative developments of Confucianism in Pre-Qin Dynasty. This "rebirth" process not only did not deviate from the spiritual essence of primitive Confucianism, but realized the inherent transcendence of Confucianism at a new ideological height. The return of textual criticism to Sinology in Qing Dynasty and the creative interpretation of tradition by modern Neo-Confucianism are the continuation and expansion of this genetic lineage in different times.

4.3. The generative logic of the continuum of Chinese philosophy

The final formation of "Chinese continuum" stems from a kind of "middle order" pursuing dynamic balance and "civilization self-consistency" ability realizing self-maintenance contained in its cultural gene. This order is neither rigid nor disordered, but harmonious in inclusive tension. This "middle order" is first embodied in structural complementarity and balance. Confucianism provides ethical order and worldly spirit, Taoism provides transcendental dimension and critical wisdom, Legalism provides institutional framework and governance technology. This diversified and complementary structure enables Chinese

civilization to mobilize different ideological resources to cope with different historical challenges, forming a flexible "super-stable structure". It manifests itself as a strong capacity for inclusion and transformation. Chinese civilization does not simply reject or accept foreign culture, but absorbs and integrates it into its own system by "China". Finally, at its core lies a historical consciousness. Deep historical tradition makes "learning from history" a basic way of thinking. The past, present and future are understood as a continuous organic whole. This strong historical consciousness itself is an important guarantee of continuity.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper reveals the deep mechanism of the continuity of Chinese civilization by investigating the philosophical breakthrough from Axial Age to Zhuzi Age. It is found that China's "axis breakthrough" presents a unique "continuity" feature. In the historical context of the collapse of etiquette and music, hundreds of philosophers creatively transformed tradition and bred core cultural genes such as "inner transcendence." These genes complement each other, creating a civilization that is both stable and inclusive. Since Qin and Han Dynasties, through multiple paths such as system construction and social infiltration, the "Chinese continuum" with self-renewal ability has finally been formed. This unique model not only shapes the historical track of Chinese civilization, but also provides important enlightenment for understanding the diversity of human civilization, and has profound value for the exchange and mutual learning of civilizations today.

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