The Rebuilding of the Value System in Social Transformation
— The Base-line Ethics and the Morality Cultivation

SHI Rui-jie
Tianjin Normal University

Abstract The pre- eminent question in social transformation is the conflict of pluralistic values and the key to balance and harmonize the pluralistic values is to rebuild a monistic value system. When we refer to the rebuilding of the value system, it means to establish a monistic value of fairness and justice, and, based on its foundation, to promote the harmonious development of pluralistic values, which is the underpinnings and preconditions for the smooth and successful transformation of the society. The value of fairness and justice is not one folded or abstract, but one with the content of advance by degrees and its base-line ethics is integrity. Therefore, integrity not only becomes the foundation of the value of fairness and justice, which in turn is the foundation of integrating pluralistic values, but also provides a vast space to cultivate and promote morality.

Keywords

1 Introduction
People increasingly identify, no matter in experience or in theory, with such a fact that the value system has a decisive influence on individuals and the society. We may even safely assert that the value system of the individual decides one’s way of life and that the value system of the society decides the development patterns of it, which is exactly expressed as that the mind decides the realm and the horizon decides the world. The radical change of the social development and the value system along with the Reform and Opening up Policy shows that it is the change of the value system triggered by the emancipation of the mind that boosts the extensive change of the social structure of China. All the same, people increasingly identify with the fact that it is a progress of the history that the value system changes from the monism during the “Cultural Revolution” to the present pluralism which demonstrates a scattering trend. And the change is in fact in accordance with the development and needs of human beings. However, one problem arises in such conditions, that is, whether we need to identify a monistic value that is extensively recognized by the society while we affirm the rational existence of the pluralistic values of individuals and groups. If it is true, what is the monistic value? And how to deal with the relation between monism and pluralism and to keep them running in a concerted and harmonious way? The paper is devoted to probe into the problems mentioned above.

2 The social transformation and the radical change of the value system
The social transformation refers to the change of the society from one type to another, that is, the change of the social structure. China is experiencing the social transformation since the carrying out of the reform and opening up and this process will last until the complete establishment of the socialist market economy. With the transformation of the society goes the radical change of the value system, which refers to views and ideas about the needs of human beings and about how to satisfy those needs. This radical change of the value system could basically be divided into three stages: the break from the monism in the 1980s’, the co-existence of pluralistic values in the 1990s’, and the serious conflict between monism and pluralism in the early 21st century. And it should be pointed out that such a division of the three stages is not a strictly historical and statistical one, but a general description of the development.

The break from the monism was triggered by the emancipation of the mind, which developed with the extensive discussion about the truth criterion in 1978. The discussion targets directly at the
“Cultural Revolution” and as to the influence of the revolution to China, it causes chaos in politics and slow development and stagnation in economy. Even worse, the “Cultural Revolution” influences negatively on ideology and value system of people and forms a single polar way of thinking and value evaluation standard. And such a single way is a monistic value system centering on “class struggle”. The extensive discussion about the truth criterion and the “Life and Death Contract” signed by the 18 local villagers in Xiaogang, Anhui is a break from the old monism. And the important achievement of the mind emancipation is the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, which decisively abolishes the focus of “class struggle” and the party’s thinking line of seeking truth from facts is re-established. The session also shifts our focus to the economic construction and makes it clear that to meet the needs and realize the value of people is the basis on which our party makes courses, guiding principles and policies. And it is because we set the fulfillment of people’s needs as the basis to evaluate values, that it becomes possible to break from the monism and develops towards pluralism.

The co-existence of pluralistic values was triggered by the second mind emancipation, which developed with Deng Xiaoping’s “Talk in the South” in the spring of 1992. After the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee and with the shift of the party’s focus, the reform begins with the rural household contract responsibility system and the opening up begins with the establishment of the four special economic zones — Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen. The reform and opening up further develops after the 12th Congress of the Party and in particular Deng Xiaoping’s “Talk in the South” in the spring of 1992 further answers important cognition problems, which have manacled the thought of people for a long time. And the reform and opening up and the modernization step into a new stage thereafter. Deng’s “Talk in the South” not only breaks our understanding of socialism from the rigidity of a single mode, but also cultivates a pluralistic way of thinking and evaluation standard in human behavior and mind, which is totally different from the old monism.

And the serious conflict between monism and pluralism occurred in the early 21st century. The economic and social development of China shows a series of new stage features since the new millennium and President Hu Jintao summarizes these new features in eight aspects in the report to the Seventeenth Congress of the Party, that is, in economic development, socialist market economic system, living standards of people, harmonious development, socialist democracy, socialist culture, social vitality and opening up to the outside world. And President Hu lists the achievements and problems in these eight aspects, among which, the conflict between value systems is the root for many realistic social problems, such as food safety, lack of integrity etc.. Though these problems are only shown in the social practice level, the root cause, however, is the distortion of the value system.

The social transformation and the radical change of the value system show that it is the advance of history to develop a people-oriented value system, which encourages individuality and personality and fully respects the diversity of people’s needs. However, one problem arises in such conditions, that is, a matching monism has not been established and developed while pluralistic values are in full swing, and therefore, it is urgent to solve the conflict between monism and pluralism if we want to achieve the smooth and successful transformation of the society.

3 The conflict and harmonious development of the pluralistic values

There is no doubt that the existence of pluralistic values of individuals and groups is reasonable, viewed from the humanity standpoint. All these values satisfy a certain value need of different individuals and groups, be it the great ambition and long perspective or being realistic and pragmatic, atheism or theism, fatalism or personal strivings, etc.. However, the problem is that these different values are not irrelevant to each other. Instead they may have friction, contradiction, or even conflict. And with the rapid development of pluralistic values in particular, the borderline between the right and the wrong, the good and the evil, the beautiful and the ugly, the noble and the nasty becomes vague. The end seems to justify everything. And in order to reach the end, any means possible could be used. And even worse, people get used to such weirdness and become indifferent, from turning a deaf ear to calling black white. As consequences, a series of evaluation criteria are breached and subverted and
therefore how to integrate different values and develop them on the basis of extensively recognized monistic value becomes the key to balance and coordinate the contradiction and conflict of pluralistic values.

Viewing from the social cooperation, no matter how diverse or even opposite peoples’ interest concerns and value systems are, all parties of the society would seek and adopt the value system which keeps the interests of and binds all social members, thus the basis of social cooperation and the interests of its members would not be impaired because of the social disintegration. Just as Harry Lewis, former Dean of Harvard College, puts in his Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education, “Civil society needs people with different backgrounds to have shared values” (2007, 42). And this is the monistic value we advocate and it is the value of fairness and justice according to historical experience and the expounding of thinkers.

As is known, Adam Smith proposes “Broker Hypothesis”, but even with Smith, people with self-serving bias will keep a socially recognized foundation in order to co-exist, and the foundation is justice. Smith points out, “Society, however, cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another. The moment that injury begins, the moment that mutual resentment and animosity take place, all the bands of it are broke asunder, and the different members of which it consisted are, as it were, dissipated and scattered abroad by the violence and opposition of their discordant affections. If there is any society among robbers and murderers, they must at least, according to the trite observation, abstain from robbing and murdering one another. Beneficence, therefore, is less essential to the existence of society than justice. Society may subsist, though not in the most comfortable state, without beneficence; but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it.” (1997, 106) A similar opinion towards justice and beneficence is held by John Rawls. He asserts that “Benevolence is at sea as long as its many loves are in opposition in the persons of its many objects”, and that “the principles of justice are needed to guide”. (1988, 478) Furthermore, Rawls distinguishes the sense of justice from the love of humans. While the former is the natural obligation and a matter within one’s duties, the latter is a matter out of one’s duties. Thus from Smith to Rawls, despite their different hypotheses towards humans, they are consistent in one point, that is, to regard justice or sense of justice as the basis of social existence. And that is also the primary reason for Rawls to characterize “a well-ordered society as one effectively regulated by a public conception of justice”.

And in fact the criticism towards capitalism and the vision towards the future by Marx and Engels, in a degree, are based on the value of fairness and justice. As Engels asserts, “True freedom and true equality can only be realized under the communist institution, which is exactly what justice requires” (1956, 582). And it is based on such cognition that Premier Wen Jiabao points out that “fairness and justice is the first value of socialist state institutions” (2008).

4 The rebuilding of the value system in social transformation — the base-line ethics and the morality cultivation

On the relation between monism and pluralism, a variety of understandings exist. During the “Cultural Revolution”, pluralistic values were neither admitted nor allowed to exist. The single way of mode, voice, costume and behavior is the typical representation of the monistic value at that time. Does that mean that we do not need a monistic value after the break from the old monism? The answer is of course negative. The essence of the problem, therefore, is not whether the monistic value is necessary or not, but what kind of monistic value is identified with, after the break from the old monistic value, to be extensively recognized and to become the social value.

As mentioned above, the basis of social cooperation is the existence of monistic value and only on such a basis will the development of pluralistic values, which promotes the uniqueness of individuals and groups, not cause the disintegration of the society. As to the relation between monism and pluralism, therefore, only by practicing the values of individuals and groups on the basis of the social monistic value, will we not harm ourselves by harming the foundation of the social existence. The rebuilding of the value system, then, is to establish a monistic value of fairness and justice, and, based on its foundation, to promote the harmonious development of pluralistic values, which is the underpinnings and preconditions for the smooth and successful transformation of the society.
Strictly speaking, fairness and justice are two interrelated but different concepts (Shi Ruijie, 1999), however, to avoid complicating matters and conform to people’s terminology in experience, here we use fairness and justice together and regard it as the being-rebuilt monistic value. As to fairness and justice, it is the reflection, measurement and evaluation of the interpersonal relations in freedom, equality and interests. Though different people in different periods may have different understandings towards fairness and justice, it is commonly held that fairness and justice conforms to humanity and public interests, and contains the ideal pursuit for virtue and perfection. Further research shows that the value of fairness and justice is not one folded or abstract, but one with the content of advance by degrees. The content could basically be divided into three aspects, the self-relation, the relation between the self and others, the relation between the self and the society. The self-relation includes no self-deception, confidence and no deception of others; the relation between the self and others includes taking responsibility, demonstrating heroic deeds, and enjoying doing good; the relation between the self and the society includes team spirit, national emotions and international awareness. In the concept of the value of fairness and justice, a progressive sequence is formed from no self-deception to international awareness, a form of interrelated and gradually deepening ideas. The self-relation is the foundation for the other two relations and this foundation is integrity, which is the most basic and natural duty and obligation. And “Cheat and disloyalty is always unjust, for it violates the principles of natural duty and obligation”, therefore, “damage to the trust and betrayal of the friendship should be forbidden in particular”. (Rawls, 1988:478) The internal mechanism of integrity is that being honest to oneself is no self-deception and therefore the confidence is built and that being honest to others is reached, that is, no deception of others. Therefore, integrity becomes the foundation of the value of fairness and justice, which in turn is the foundation of integrating pluralistic values, and if integrity is breached, injustice will result, and therefore this becomes the so-called base-line ethics. If we reach up from this base line, we will have a vast space to cultivate morality.

Fairness and justice could be understood from two aspects. Viewing from the society, it is a social structure problem related to the basic institution arrangement, and viewing from the individual, it is a morality problem related to the uplift of humanity. A “well-organized society” is not only regulated by a public conception of fairness and justice, but also supported by the individual sense and behavior of it. And the cultivation and development of individual virtue of fairness and justice is not only an individual morality problem, but also the guarantee for the smooth running of the basic social institution arrangement. The establishment of base-line ethics, therefore, becomes particularly important, in view that China is in the social transformation. As to the value goal for socialist market economic system, however, base-line ethics alone is not enough, for the socialist fairness and justice contains much richer and nobler contents besides the base-line ethics, which requires us, besides establishing and adhering to the base-line ethics, to further cultivate the behavior norms and moralities of advance by degrees, internally demanded by fairness and justice. The socialist fairness and justice also requires us to make the value of fairness and justice be the trend of leading social behaviors and moralities. The base-line ethics and the morality cultivation, therefore, lay a solid foundation and provide a developing guide for the integration of contradictions and the harmonious development of pluralistic values.

In the building of base-line ethics and morality cultivation, the government and members of the government shoulder the responsibility of demonstration and guidance, and all the citizens bear the unshirkable social duties. And what if someone or some groups are determined to breach this base line? Of Course the punishment from laws and regulations will be necessary then. How to use laws and regulations to guarantee that the base-line ethics will not be breached? And how to create a good environment and atmosphere for the cultivation of advance-by-degree morality? These are beyond what is discussed in this paper and new papers will be devoted to that.

References
Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. 1956. Works by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume I),
Beijing: People’s Publishing House.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Shi Ruijie, Deputy Secretary of Communist Party Committee, Tianjin Normal University; Ph.D. of Nankai University (Postdoctoral in sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), Professor
E_mail: ruijieshi@tjcu.edu.cn Tel.13821631791