

Market Economy and Moral Ideal

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Abstract

After the establishment of the new China, the socialist moral ideal centering on “serve the people wholeheartedly” came into being step by step and played an important part in Chinese society. Nevertheless, Since the market economy was introduced into Chinese society, more and more cold treatment and even sneer have been made on this moral ideal. Generally speaking, Chinese society today is in a condition lacking of moral ideals. The abovementioned circumstance of Chinese socialist moral ideal is caused by our mistakes made in moral construction and the result from long-term failure to identify or put right the position of moral ideal in the social ethic value system. In the moral construction under the current market economy conditions, we should fully draw these lessons. Firstly, we should keep on advocating on a large scale the moral ideal “serve the people wholeheartedly”. Next, we should strive to formulate and perfect various concrete moral norms that suit the market economy. Finally, we should also increase strength of moral dissemination and strengthen the functions of moral evaluation and moral consensus to try to form a correct and powerful guidance of moral value in the whole society.

Moral ideal, as people's conceptual construction in relation to what the social moral life ought to be, is established in accordance with the general value goal of social development, and on the basis of a critical reflection on what the social moral life current is. As an expression of the aspiration for and the pursuit of morality by the people in society, the moral ideal of a certain society represents a collection of moral values in that society. Where the moral ideal is placed in the moral value hierarchy (system) within a society and what influence it effects on the society have essential impact on the state of the moral life of that society, and the development of the whole society. This paper intends to reflect on the circumstances of the moral ideal in the contemporary society of China on purpose to recapitulate the experiences and lessons, as well as to promote a healthy development of moral construction under the current market economy of China.

I

Morality is the aggregation of behavior norms that regulate the relations between people, as well as between individuals and the

society. As an individual level in the social moral value hierarchy, moral ideal functions as a regulation of the social relations between people, and meanwhile changes and advances along with the development of the social relations between people. The moral ideal of the contemporary society of China has a close connection with the socialist production relations, and is established to regulate the social relations between people that are rested in the socialist production relations. However, in its little over fifty-year history of the Chinese socialist development up to date, China's moral ideal has undergone a fairly peculiar situation.

Following the foundation of the new China, the socialist moral ideal as a core content within the socialist moral value system gradually took shape in the effort to adapt to the need of a healthy development of socialist production relations and new socialist interpersonal relations. This socialist moral ideal, on the one hand, thoroughly reflects the essentiality of the socialist production relations and the nature of the socialist relations between people, and on the other hand, has absorbed enormous advantages from the traditional Chinese moral wisdom. The socialist moral ideal is abundant in its content, running the gamut from all fields of social life to every aspect of the interpersonal social relations, of which there are two fundamental aspects as follows: first, in dealing with self-other relationships (relationships between the self and others), the socialist moral ideal lay emphasis on " never think of self but only think of others ". Second, in dealing with the relationships between public and private interests (relationships between individuals, collective, society, and the nation), it highlights " selflessness and just" . The coupling of these two aspects comes to unselfish and selflessness, or " serve the people wholeheartedly". This is the essential content of our socialist moral ideal.

The aforesaid socialist moral ideal agrees with the requirements of the development of socialist production relations, and adequately represents the advanced character of socialist morality. During a fairly long period of time after the nation's foundation, this socialist moral ideal played an important part in normalizing and guiding people's social behaviors, sublimating spiritual state, and setting good social moral codes, and it thus became a significant spiritual impetus and intellect resource. The good social ethos and people's spiritual uplift that appeared during the 50s in China were inseparable from the advocacy of this socialist moral ideal.

Nevertheless, with the advent and prevalence of the extremely "left" trend of thought in the social and political fields, the contemporary moral life of China little by little deviated from the track of healthy development, and the socialist moral ideal became increasingly one-sided. Particularly during the "Cultural Revolution" period, the said socialist moral ideal was seriously distorted, and misunderstood as the behavior norms that all the social members should strictly abide by. Following this misconception, only those

behaviors that embodied such a socialist moral ideal as "serve the people wholeheartedly" could be accepted by the social moral views, whereas those that failed to come up to the demand of this moral ideal should be condemned morally. And then, in the social moral life of China, there emerged an either-good-or-bad dichotomy in moral evaluation with the moral ideal as fundamental criteria, namely, any behavior that conformed to the moral ideal was deemed good, while any behavior that deviated from the moral ideal was evil. Under this circumstance, any behavior concerning an individual's "privacy" and "interests" became the target castigated by the moral evaluation, and even the proper demand for individual interests was worded as "Bourgeois Individualism", and the ordinary life enjoyment was chided and deemed as "Bourgeois Life Style".

Since the reform and openness, especially with the establishment and development of the socialist market economy, significant changes in people's moral values and of the moral life in our society have taken place. On the one hand, some out-of-date moral values that prevailed in the past social life and that are not suitable to the requirements of today's economic and social developments are confronted with great challenges under the impact of the market economy whose goal is to pursue the maximum interests; meanwhile, the new moral values that accord with the market economy are forming, and the legitimate individual interests, demands and individual's values are increasingly respected by the society, and supported by the public social moral views. On the other hand, due to the relatively lagging behind in terms of construction of the legal system and morality, the commodity exchange principles have eroded into the social political and cultural life realms during the development of the market economy in our country, giving rise to such phenomena as "care for nothing but profit", "forget all moral principles at the sight of profits", "trading power for money" . Some social members' national sense, collective sense and contribution sense keep weakening, and the ideas of individualism, money worship and hedonism are expanding. With the dual effects brought to our moral construction by the development of the market economy, the said social moral ideal even gets cold-shouldered and sneered. Today, we seldom see the public dissemination and education about this socialist moral ideal centering on "never think of self but only think of others" and "selflessness and justice", as well as the mentioning in the public media of "serve the people wholeheartedly ". Generally speaking, our society is now at a scarce state of the moral ideal.

II

The above-said circumstance regarding the socialist moral ideal mirrors the very imperfection of the moral life in our society.

How- ever, this circumstance is not a natural concomitant of the socialist moral ideal, but instead, it was caused by our misplays in moral construction, as well as our misconception and misplacement of the moral ideal within the social moral value hierarchy.

A moral value system of any society includes two basic levels: moral ideal and moral norms, through which to indicate what the society advocates, accepts and prohibits. In a society, if a certain social thing or behavior shows or conforms to the moral ideal that the society advocates, it is endowed with a "good" moral value attribute and thus deemed as a noble thing or good behavior; conversely, if a certain social thing or behavior deviates from or violates the most basic moral norms of the society, it is given an "evil" moral value attribute and deemed as an immoral thing or evildoing. But, there is a vast inter-space between good and evil where the social things or behaviors neither come up to the norms required by the moral ideal nor deviate from the minimum moral norms, and therefore they cannot be called "good", nor aptly "evil" according to the moral value attribute, but fall into a category of "appropriate (or legitimate)", "acceptable" or "acknowledgeable" because of their conforming with the basic social norms. In other words, we can classify the different social things and human behaviors into three categories, depending upon the moral value system of a particular society: first, the good, these kinds of social things or behaviors demonstrate or conform to the moral ideal of the society; second, the appropriate, they conform to the basic moral norms of the society; third, the evil, they deviate from the basic moral norms of the society. Of which, both the first and second are acknowledged by the moral value system of a particular society and hence deemed as "moral", and only they may be at different levels in the moral value system; whereas the third is regarded as "immoral" and necessarily prohibited by the moral value system of a particular society. In fact, among the social things or behaviors that are acknowledged by the moral value system of any society, there are always only very few that demonstrate or conform to the moral ideal, the majority of the social things or behaviors is merely "appropriate" . When the "evil" prevails over the "appropriate", it means a collapse or dissolution of the society's moral value system, or even the entire social life. Should we ignore or deny the extremity in evaluating the good and evil, or amount the good and evil to the entire moral value attribute of social things and people's behaviors, and then simply regard them as either good or evil with a dichotomy, we could end up either making the good condescend to the appropriate, or putting the things that should have belonged to the appropriate into the evil category, consequently, weakening the normalizing function during the evaluation through the good or evil, obscuring or watering down the significance of removing evil in favor of good, and even blocking the normal development of social life.

The emergence of the above-mentioned circumstance of socialist moral ideal derived from the confusion of the two basic levels

of the moral ideal and moral norm within the social moral value system. Initially, unselfishness and selflessness or "serve the people wholeheartedly" were only meant to be a socialist moral ideal, and a goal that the socialist moral construction strived for. Advocating this moral ideal does not mean that every social member is required to take it as his/her behavior norm; but rather, it is in attempt to establish a correct value guidance and lofty moral aspiration in the entire society. In real life, even when people's behaviors cannot reach the moral level that the moral ideal requires, it still does not mean that their behaviors are immoral, and therefore they should be denounced on morality because these behaviors, despite their being out of accord with the socialist moral ideal, can still perfectly fall into the "moral" category due to their agreement with the socialist basic moral norms. Nevertheless, in the circumstances when the extremely "left" trend of thought prevailed as explained above, the socialist moral ideal was considered as a behavior norm that every social member must strictly abide by. Meanwhile whether people's behaviors showed or accorded to the moral ideal was considered as a basic norm to judge whether or not their behaviors were moral. On the surface, these understanding and practice seemed to have placed the socialist moral ideal on a very important position, but actually lowered it to the level of the moral norm, to the level of behavior norm which everyone was expected to live up to. More importantly, in a real society, those who can truly reach "never think of self but only think of others", "selflessness and justice", and "serve the people wholeheartedly" are above all only a tiny minority of people, and the majority can hardly live up to this moral level that socialist moral ideal requires. Therefore, when the socialist moral ideal is lowered to the level of moral norm and is set as behavior norm that every social member must strictly abide by, it is actually being turned into a kind of illusion that is incompatible with the real social life.

The mix-up with the moral ideal and moral norm in the social moral value system unavoidably leads to the confusion in the social moral evaluation. As we illustrated above, we should have divided the attributes of moral value of all the social things, people, and behaviors into three different categories-- good, evil and somewhere in between, that is appropriate (legitimate) as it is based upon the two levels of the moral ideal and moral norm in the social moral value system. However, if the socialist moral ideal is lowered to the level of moral norm and set as behavior norm that every social member must strictly abide by, just as it happened during the days when the extremely "left" trend of thought prevailed, and the entire social moral value system is given way to the moral ideal, which only should have been a subordinate level within the social moral value hierarchy, then, people could do nothing but use this moral ideal as basic norm to judge the attributes of the moral value on all the social things and people's behaviors, as well as to make a

moral value evaluation as either good or evil with dichotomy. In this moral evaluation process, on the one hand, as the socialist moral ideal is lowered to the level of the moral norm, the moral value attributes such as "good" or "lofty" that some social things and behaviors have and that are consistent with the socialist moral ideal are actually lowered to the "legitimate" level accordingly, while those role models who have lived up to the socialist moral ideal will no longer be thought having any exemplar effect and educational significance. On the other hand, since the socialist moral ideal is viewed as basic criterion to evaluate all the social things and people's behaviors as either good or evil, the social things or people's behaviors that are not according with this moral ideal but in the "legitimate" category are fated to be classified as "evil". It is without doubt that the function of moral evaluation is to remove evil in favor of the good. Suppose that the exceptional moral values such as "good" or "lofty" were not cherished, that the moral models in a society did not get honored as they deserved to, and that the "legitimate" things or behaviors would be damned by the social moral opinions, then what good does this moral evaluation do?

III

To review the past circumstances of the socialist moral ideal in our country and to analyze the causes of these circumstances are not on purpose to deny the previous achievements of the socialist moral construction, nor to sigh for our misplays in the moral construction in the past, but to better our socialist moral construction. As our country is presently working hard on the construction of a moral value system compatible with the socialist market economy, the previous circumstances of our socialist moral ideal can be served as important experiences and lessons for the present moral construction under the market economy.

First of all, to strengthen the moral construction under the market economy, we should continue to advocate strongly the moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly".

Engels once pointed out, "In a final analysis, people, consciously or unconsciously, always acquire their ethical conception from the actual relations upon which their class statuses based... from the economic relations in which they produce and exchange."¹ By the same token, the socialist morality also, in a final analysis, reflects the economic relations between people, which are concentratedly manifested in the relations of interests. It is the special nature of the relations of interests between people in socialist society that provides an objective ground for us to advocate the socialist moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly". On the one hand, in a socialist society, the relations of interests between people, which consist of three relations among individual interests,

collective interests and national interests, the relations between partial interests and the whole interests, as well as the relations between immediate interests and long-term interests and so on are all fundamentally consistent.

Given that the fundamental interests between people in a socialist society are consistent, it is possible that some advanced members of the society can reach such moral ideals as "serve the people wholeheartedly", "never think of self but only think of others," and "selflessness and justice," which might help make this socialist moral ideal not become chimerical. On the other hand, people in the socialist society, after all belong to different subjective of interests, and their interests still conflict or contradict in many ways. To regulate the relations of interests, and to harmonize the contradictions and conflicts of interests between people, it is absolutely necessary to advocate in the whole society the socialist moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly" that is based on, but higher than reality. Therefore, we should never doubt the rationality and necessity of the socialist moral ideal regarding "serve the people wholeheartedly" because of the circumstances it went through. In fact, as long as we correctly understand and place its position in the socialist moral value hierarchy, this moral ideal will play a very important role in the socialist moral construction, and this was well borne out by the achievements on the moral construction in the 1950's in China.

It is noteworthy that some, in the process of the moral construction under the present market economy, are focusing on the consistency between the moral value system and the market economy, but at the same time they have in great measure ignored the construction of socialist moral ideal. While these people have correctly seen the chimerical character lying in the past practice in that we required every social member to live up to the socialist moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly", they, on account of that, completely deny and abandon the socialist moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly", and interpret the socialist moral value system as some specific moral norms that are in accordance with the market economy. This is exactly why we referred to contemporary Chinese society as short of moral ideals in our above treatment. The tendency to completely abandon the socialist moral ideals, and satisfy with retaining people's social behaviors to the bottom level of morality will certainly bring heavy loss to our moral construction.

Secondly, to strengthen the moral construction under the market economy, we should strive to constitute and perfect all kinds of specific moral norms that are consistent with the market economy.

As two basic levels within the social moral value hierarchy, the moral ideal and moral norm are both necessary to the healthy

development of the social moral life, and neither should be overemphasized at the expense of the other because both perform different functions in social moral life. Of both, the moral ideal is an inspiring type and its main function lies in "artificially inflating," that is, to boost the moral level of the entire society by exemplifying a few advanced persons; while the moral norm is a prohibitive type and its main function is "sticking to the existing routine", that is, to maintain the social moral life on its conventional level by social opinion's suasion function. If there was no moral ideal, the moral life in a society would lose its spiritual force to progress and people's social behaviors would mostly be kept at the bottom level of morality; and if there were no specific moral norms, not only the moral ideal of the society would become illusive, but also the moral life in the entire society would run into extremely troubled waters.

Hence, we should neither replace the moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly" with some specific moral norms as those above-mentioned did, nor replace the specific moral norms with the moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly" as those did during the periods when extremely "left" trend of thought was prevailing. We should, in the moral construction under the current market economy, pay special attention to constituting and perfecting the moral norms in the public life of the society, which includes such fields as economic life, political life and cultural life, and each field should also have an integral set of moral norms. For instance, in the economic life, we need to strongly call for the moral norms such as honesty and credibility, fair competition and exchange at equal value and so forth. These are both required by socialist moral construction and the healthy development of market economy. It is in this sense that we call the market economy a moral economy. In addition to the moral norms of each field in the public social life, we should also consider highly of making and perfecting the moral norms that have important influence on each field of public social life, such as civil moral norms, the Party and government officials' and national civil servants' moral norms and so on. During the process of making and perfecting the moral norms of public social life, we should well deal with the relationships between the particular moral norms and the socialist moral ideal because they are two basic levels within the integrated socialist moral value system. By and large the socialist moral norms should manifest the socialist moral ideal of "serve the people wholeheartedly" as far as possible. This, by no means, recommends that all the moral norms be the embodiments of the moral ideal. If so, we will repeat the mistakes where we replaced the moral norms with the moral ideal. In fact different moral norms have different relationships with the moral ideal, and therefore we should treat them differently.

For example, making and perfecting the moral norms in economic life is primarily an effort to coordinate the relations of interests between people under the market economy and keep away from the market behaviors such as "care for nothing but profit" and

"forget all moral principles at the sight of profits" . Yet, making and perfecting the moral norms of the Party, the government officials and national civil servants are just to ensure that the officials of the Party and the government honestly conduct their duties and responsibilities, and to defend the interests of the people and the mass people. Thus, these moral norms should even more directly demonstrate the moral ideal of " serve the people wholeheartedly" .

Finally, to strengthen the moral construction under the market economy, we should also reinforce the dissemination of the morality, intensify the functions of the moral evaluation and moral consensus in an effort to form a correct and powerful guidance of the moral values in the entire society.

Under the socialist market economy, the moral ideal "serve the people wholeheartedly" and the various types of the particular moral norms that are compatible with the market economy are our criteria for moral evaluation.

With the moral evaluation criteria in these two levels, we can make appropriate judgment about the moral value attributes of social things and people's behaviors. But, we must reinforce the moral dissemination in order for the moral evaluation to really exert the effect of "restraining the evil in favor of the good".

During the dissemination of morality, we must adhere to coupling the advanced character and universality, that is to say, we should both fully endorse and morally support the things and behaviors that are consistent with different kinds of particular moral norms, and furthermore canonize the moral models or moral apotheosis who conform to or embody the moral ideal " serve the people wholeheartedly" . Only with the help of the moral dissemination and public moral opinions can we convert the "other-restraining" by different kinds of the moral norms into a conscious "self-restraining", internalize the moral ideal into people's conscious pursuit, and establish a moral trend in the general public of the entire society where "everyone yearns for good. "

Notes:

1. *The Complete Works of Marx and Engels*, Chinese version, vol.3, p.434.

(載 *Utopie Critique*, No. 35, Fourth Quarter, 2005.)