

# **Interpretation of Traditional Chinese Thinking using a Systems Theory**

## **Approach: A Harmonious Society**

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**Abstract:** A human society is an organic entity. Traditional Chinese thought is profoundly holistic. This essay first explains traditional Chinese thought according to systems theory. It then explains the flow of society, the formation of class hierarchy, social differentiation and integration, the optimization of social structure, the formation of a harmonious society and the driving force of social development according to traditional Chinese thought, i.e., by adopting the viewpoints, methods and language of the theory of qi and the yin-yang theory. The ancient Chinese ideologists and philosophers, especially Laozi and Confucius, produced a lot of important discourse on social harmony. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to know and understand their theories of social harmony.

*Keywords:* Harmonious society; Chinese traditional thinking; Systems theory; Dynamical system; Eigenvalue

### **1. The dynamic system of society**

If resources are scarce in a society, a minority of people, or those who possess better ability or power, can seize more resources for themselves. This creates a division

based on specific standards, such as differences in economic and political status.

Our desires and demands are the driving forces of society as a self-organizing system.

We endeavor to satisfy our demands by gaining more living space and higher economic and social status. The flow between social strata represents the vitality of a society.

In a healthy society, there is no obvious class division between strata. A class hierarchy may generate a kind of resistance that can restrict the flow of society. The intermediate stratum is the only route for the flow of society. In case of a serious drain from the intermediate stratum, the lower stratum is deprived of the chance to reach the higher stratum. No matter how hard people work, their efforts will not be reciprocated. Thus, people may lose faith in society and their accumulative complaints may become a time bomb.

There is a certain class hierarchy during each period of a society. The polarization and combination of social strata reflect changes in the social structure. The social strata depend on the allocation of social resources, i.e., wealth distribution. If the society lags behind economic growth, an unfair distribution of income may occur, thus causing contradictions or even conflicts among the strata.

The flow of society impels the flow of talents and the redistribution of social resources. Only this flow can bring about equality. The flow of talents meets the social demand for talents and provides an impetus to the normal operation of social functions. Meanwhile, everyone has the chance to bring his or her skills into play, thus allowing them to change their fate, realize their dreams and create more wealth through own efforts, knowledge and skills. These provide the motivational power and cohesion of the cycle of society.

If this is a distribution problem, it should be a holistic problem. Each part of a society must bring its function into play harmonically. A society requires multiple social

functions and structure to maintain its operation.

In this essay, we consider society as an open dynamic system. A society is always interconnected with nature and other social civilizations. An environment that is fit for mankind to live in is essential, so nature is the basis of our existence. A society may have more or less economic and physical relations, personal contact, political and cultural exchanges with other societies, so their economies and ideologies are bound to influence the running of the society. The social system must have energy, material and information exchange with the external environment to form an open system.

The social mechanism is based on interpersonal contact, from simple to complicated and from lower to higher levels, which gradually forms an orderly and purposeful system with certain functions and structure. The social system is composed of social elements with specific functions, and thus is a complex system with a certain structure. Human society consists of three fundamental functional subsystems with specific basic functions and structures, namely, the social economic system, the social political system and the social consciousness system. Qian Xuesen said that, “while in the field of macro research of social systems, it is well known that any society is of three social formations, i.e. the economic social formation, the political social formation and the ideological social formation. Social system can be divided into three integral parts, i.e. the social economic system, the social political system and the social ideological system”.<sup>[1]</sup>

The social economic structure refers to the essence of productive relations in tune with productivity, which is the basis of the social economy. The social political structure refers to the political system and facilities based on a certain social economy and the associated basic status. The social consciousness structure refers to a structure consisting of various social ideologies that are interacting and mutually restrictive.

A social system is a dynamic system. Society is unceasingly moving, changing and

developing, so birth, senility, illness and death are unavoidable. The disappearance of an old society symbolizes the birth of a new society.

Social activities include material production and ideological activities, which are unceasingly running, interacting and jointly developing. The structure of a social system is also dynamic. New mechanisms and contacts are generated, and outdated ones are washed out to guarantee the smooth running of the system. The social structure is decisive to the running of a society, while the latter changes the former. A change in the entire social structure is bound to affect the equilibrium state, thus leading to a radical transformation.

In this essay, we study an object within a complex system: a nonlinear, open and dynamic system that features contact with the outside world and the internal operating mechanism. It can be written as

$$\dot{x} = f(x) \quad x \in \Omega, \quad (1)$$

where the state vector  $x \in \Omega$  consists of  $n$  components,  $x_i, i=1,2,\dots,n$ , are the state variables,  $\Omega$  is an open subset of  $R^n$ , and  $f$  is a sufficiently smooth nonlinear vector function. The state vector  $x_0 \in \Omega$  is called the equilibrium point of the system if  $f(x_0) = 0$ . At the equilibrium point  $x_0$ , the linearized system can be written as

$$\frac{dx}{dt} = Ax \quad (2)$$

where  $A$  is the Jacobian matrix evaluated at  $x_0$ ,  $A = Df(x_0)$ .

Society is constantly moving between relative rest and conspicuous change. In the state of relative rest, the system is close to its equilibrium state; in the state of conspicuous change, the system is far away from its equilibrium state. Nothing can be in a permanent equilibrium state, otherwise it may lose vitality. Similarly, it is impossible that the equilibrium state cannot be reached for long. If the system moves far away from its equilibrium state, the changes will exceed their tolerable scope

sooner or later, thus leading to a qualitative change. In other words, the social form may experience radical transformation. As pointed out by Mao Zedong in *On Contradiction*, "There are two states of motion in all things, that of relative rest and that of conspicuous change. Both are caused by the struggle between the two contradictory elements contained in a thing. When the thing is in the first state of motion, it is undergoing only quantitative and not qualitative change and consequently presents the outward appearance of being at rest. When the thing is in the second state of motion, the quantitative change of the first state has already reached a culminating point and gives rise to the dissolution of the thing as an entity and thereupon a qualitative change ensues, hence the appearance of a conspicuous change."<sup>[2]</sup>

Yin and yang are part of the fundamental ancient Chinese philosophy and have a specific meaning and attributes. The original meaning referred to the forward and reverse directions of sunshine. Later, yin and yang were used to describe the rules of movement. According to Zhuangzi in *the natural course of events*, "Shares the virtue of yin when he is still and shares the movement with yang when he is active."<sup>[3]</sup>

We use the state variables to define social activities and the flow of society. The state space defines  $q_i$ , which can be divided into yin  $q_i$  and yang  $q_i$ . The state space of the dynamic system in Eq. (1) can be decomposed into two invariant sets, which are similar to yin  $q_i$  and yang  $q_i$ .

An equilibrium point  $x_0$  is said to be hyperbolic if the Jacobian matrix  $A = Df(x_0)$  has no eigenvalues with zero real parts. Each eigenvalue of the matrix  $A$  has its corresponding eigenspace. The stable eigenspace  $E^s$  is the space spanned by the eigenvectors whose corresponding eigenvalues have negative real parts, and the unstable eigenspace  $E^u$  is the space spanned by the eigenvectors whose corresponding eigenvalues have positive real parts. If  $x_0$  is a hyperbolic

equilibrium point, the stable and unstable manifolds of Eq. (1) can be defined as

$$W^s(x_0) = \left\{ x \in \Omega \mid \lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \varphi_t(x) = x_0 \right\}$$

and 
$$W^u(x_0) = \left\{ x \in \Omega \mid \lim_{t \rightarrow -\infty} \varphi_t(x) = x_0 \right\},$$

where  $\varphi_t(x)$  is the flow of the nonlinear system of (1). We may write  $\varphi_t(x) = x(t)$  as the solution curve or trajectory starting from  $x$ . The stable manifold  $W^s(x_0)$  denotes the set of points that flow forwards in time to the equilibrium point, and the unstable manifold  $W^u(x_0)$  denotes the set of points that flow backwards in time to the equilibrium point. The stable manifold pertains to yin, which means the kinetic energy lessens toward rest over time and finally reaches the equilibrium state, while the unstable manifold pertains to yang, which means the kinetic energy increases toward movement with time and finally evolves in opposition to the equilibrium state. As Engels pointed out in the *Dialectics of Nature*, “Hence the basic form of all motion is approximation and separation, contraction and expansion — in short, the old polar opposites of attraction and repulsion.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The yin-yang theory can be briefly described as opposition, interdependence, waxing-waning and the transformation of yin and yang, which can explain the contradictory movement of objects. We use the yin-yang theory to explain social development and changes.

## **2. Social differentiation and integration**

### **2.1. Social differentiation**

Social differentiation is an integral part of social development, meaning that old social elements are substituted with new ones. Old social elements are dispelled while new social elements are being generated, restructured and reinforced, thus forming new

social structures and functions. Social differentiation stems from functional differentiation. When social elements are being dispelled, society will become increasingly complicated and diversified, and social functions will become increasingly specialized and varied in the course of restoration and restructuring. Meanwhile, new functional subsystems are generated and the social system is provided with multiple structures of different types. The functional subsystems are independent of the main system, and each forms its own operational mechanism and value system.

## **2.2. Stratum differentiation**

Social differentiation causes the structure of the social system to overlap. Social groups feature further subgroups with a sophisticated division of labor, thus the interests of these subgroups become differentiated. In other words, changes in the social structure destroy the original social norms and exchange rules. People in each stratum have to maintain their respective benefits and the social criteria of their values become disordered, thus causing polarization. The value system of each functional subsystem is mutually independent, so the differentiation of social values may accelerate social differentiation.

## **2.3. Positive effect of social differentiation and the harms of excessive differentiation**

Social differentiation plays an active role in social development, which makes society more diversified and social organizations more varied, so everyone can attain due social status through their own efforts. However, excessive differentiation may impel mutual independence between social elements, which move, step by step, farther away from the main system. When each element can no longer effectively coordinate and bring its respective function into play, the social benefits will gradually deteriorate.

The differentiation of social values increases the disparity of economic benefits and social status among people of different classes. An underprivileged group emerges and cracks between the strata become inevitable. When the structure of the social strata changes and the differentiation between them increases, the social contradictions and conflicts may become increasingly fierce and an imbalance in social development is almost inevitable.

#### **2.4. Positive effect of social integration and the harms of excessive integration**

Social integration refers to the coordination and cohesion between various functional social elements to form an organic entity. Social integration can promote unity between people in different strata, relieve conflicts arising from earlier social differentiation, enhance social cohesion, maintain a coordinated labor division of social elements and effectively bring the roles of functional subsystems into play. However, excessive integration will cause society to lose vitality and become rigid. In particular, it becomes difficult for people to express themselves or show dissatisfaction in an open manner. When the environment changes or society cannot prevent the accumulation of dissatisfaction, pressure will start to build and will eventually result in social riot.

#### **2.5. Relationship between social differentiation and social integration**

Social differentiation induces the mutual independence of social elements against the main system, so it features instability. Conversely, social integration enhances social cohesion, so it features stability. Like yin and yang, contraction pertains to yin, while expansion pertains to yang. That is to say, social integration pertains to yin and social differentiation pertains to yang. Yin and yang must be interdependent, so social integration and social differentiation are strongly complementary and inevitably coexist in the course of social development.

The waxing and waning of yin and yang refers to the alternate changes between yin



and yang. Similarly, a society continues on a course of repetitive differentiation and integration. When a relative balance between social differentiation and social integration is reached, a society can enjoy sound development, but when they are in a state of imbalance, riots may occur.

### **3. The optimization of social structure**

Social differentiation betokens social progress as a kind of driving force for social development. Social differentiation results in a diversified, complicated and specialized social structure that is favorable to the development of productivity. However, an unfair distribution of income, tense productive relations and the like always accompany the development of productivity. In contrast, social integration optimizes social structure, thus improving the functions of the economy, politics and culture. As Karl Marx pointed out in the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.”<sup>[5]</sup> In other words, the social structure is evolving towards perfection in the course of unceasing differentiation and integration.

### **4. The driving force of social development**

The development of productivity provides an impetus to the growth of the social economy. When productive relations lag behind the development of productivity, the vast majority of people do not enjoy a reasonable income distribution along with

economic growth. On the contrary, their real income is decreasing even though the economic aggregate is increasing, thus the wealth gap is further enlarged. As the gap increases, there may be a serious drain from the intermediate stratum, and the lower stratum is almost entirely deprived of any chance of promotion. However, some interest groups not only possess the means of production, but also take advantage of their money and power to manipulate politics and monopolize the means of production and natural resources. Those with vested interests form a political group to interfere in the government's operations and decision making. In other words, the country becomes a machine to serve the consortiums. When the country is unable to respond to the basic appeals of the underprivileged strata, they may lose their sense of identity.

Social polarization influences the social flow, the mark of social vitality. A society without flow has no meaning of existence and social polarization distorts social relationships. During the early days of a society, a government that represents advanced productivity boasts strong vitality. However, if the government continues to support the old productive relations no matter how much productivity changes, the vast majority of people, who are striving to promote productivity but are completely neglected, may accumulate a great deal of resentment and lose heart. The only way to overthrow the old productive relations is to establish a new regime via revolution.

These are the contradictions between productivity and productive relations and between the economic base and the superstructure. These contradictions are decisive to the changes in society, the transition of social strata, the formation of a class hierarchy, class conflicts and the replacement of the regime. As Karl Marx pointed out in the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in

legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure."<sup>[6]</sup>

A rigid social structure symbolizes the ageing of a society. When the environment changes and the social structure is out of tune, social functions will cease to be effective. Moreover, an inharmonious structure will increase society's running costs and consume more resources, thus it will become less efficient. In the wake of higher productivity and increasing aggregate of social productivity, the social consciousness and ideology will change accordingly. However, if the social structure is too rigid and the productive relations fail to make proper self-adjustment, the most vigorous forces consisting of social productivity and social ideology will impel the society against the equilibrium state, thus riots may take place.

If the society compromises and endeavors to solve the conflicts in an organized way through negotiation, the riots may turn out to be the instigator of reforms and the society will find a suitable equilibrium state. However, if the social conflicts become fierce, causing radical changes in the primary social structure, productivity will be destroyed. The society must seek a new equilibrium point during this turbulent process. Social conflicts may be relieved as long as a new equilibrium point is found. In other words, if a compromise can be reached and a new social structure can be constructed with coordinated productive relations and productivity, the reform of the economic system can lead to a new mode of production and the new social structure will inject new vitality into the society. With a new social structure, especially one with new and enlightened productive relations, the social system may experience a substantive leap. This is how social history evolves from the lowest to the highest

level.

The mutual transformation between yin and yang refers to the interconversion of yin and yang under abnormal conditions. When an object evolves to the extreme, the structure of that object may be radically changed both quantitatively and qualitatively, i.e., the equilibrium state may be broken. When the social structure changes, there will be an evolutionary process from relative tranquility to turmoil, and from turmoil back to relative tranquility. As pointed out in *Suwen-Comprehensive Discourse on Phenomena Corresponding to Yin and Yang*, “extreme yin turning into yang, extreme yang turning into yin”<sup>[7]</sup>. Figure 1 shows the system transition from one equilibrium point to another. The yin-yang of the system also changes from yin into yang and yang into yin.

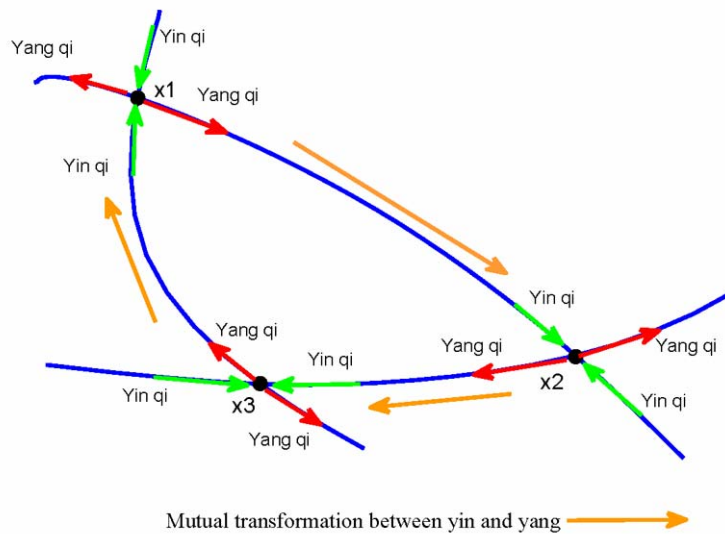


Figure 1.  $x_1$ ,  $x_2$  and  $x_3$  are equilibrium points. The system moves from one equilibrium point to another equilibrium point through the mutual transformation between yin and yang.

## 5. Harmonious society

As a society progresses, it will encounter new problems and contradictions. A harmonious society cannot just conceal contradictions to enjoy transitory tranquility.

On the contrary, a harmonious society should come to an agreement through consultation to solve various social problems. Overall, a harmonious society should be without conflicts and turmoil, it should be vigorous and diversified and it should be capable of accepting all kinds of people from all walks of life.

“The philosophy of yin and yang makes up Tao.” A society optimizes its social structure through the cycle of differentiation and integration. Everyone is a cell in a society and a contributor to its social construction. As long as the society can adapt itself to environmental changes and meet people’s demands, it will grow in strength. At this time, the society is supposed to be around its equilibrium state. Whether or not this is in the case of contraction or expansion, it represents the pulse of time as well as the social vitality. The healthy development of any society depends on whether these elements are under control.

## **6. The idea of harmony in ancient China and Confucius’s golden mean**

Shibo, of the Western Zhou Dynasty, said that “harmony is necessary for the creation of everything. The identical thing is unable to exist for ever. So we shall mix different things together to reach a balance. This is so called harmony. Thus, all things on earth could flourish. Here, the same things will be abandoned if they are piled up. Therefore, the emperors in the past create everything with the combination of earth, gold, wood, water and fire” (Guoyu·Zhengyu). Shibo thought that the pursuit of absolute equality could hamper the development of objects. A new object may come into being when different objects are combined; also, their respective traits can be mixed to create new traits and functions. Everything in society will become old after a time, while mixing old and new objects can endow the new object with improved functions that overcome deficiencies and adapt better to changes in the external environment.

Compared with piled up, harmony is endowed with deeper meaning. In the Spring and

Autumn Period, Yanzi said, “Harmony is like a broth. Water, fire, vinegar, meat juices, salt, and plum are used to boil fish meat. It is made to boil by the firewood, and then the cook mixes the ingredients, harmoniously equalizing the several flavors, so as to supply whatever is deficient and carry off whatever is in excess.” By reaching a state of “harmony,” an object is freed from both “deficiency” and “excess.” Living beings shall also be viewed as complete. Here, “deficiency” and “excess” are further considered in relation to the process of motion.

In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius interpreted the meanings of “medium” and “harmony” as follows: “When joy, anger, sorrow and happiness are not revealed, they are ‘zhong,’ in the mean. When they are revealed, they are ‘he,’ in harmony. ‘Zhong’ is the base of everything and ‘he’ is the right way to reveal everything. If ‘zhong,’ and ‘he’ are achieved, the world would run smoothly.”<sup>[8]</sup> Both “medium” and “harmony” are the status of a thing in the process of motion. Tao is the rule of development. When the object is not interrupted by people, its motion is the “medium.” If the thing involves people with different emotions, they compromise and follow according to the rule of development, which means “harmony.”

When the rule of development deviates, the problems of “excess” and “deficiency” may occur. When the human body gets sick, “excess” and “deficiency” also occur. The *Neijing* interpreted the “harmony,” “excess” and “deficiency” in the human body. In *Plain Questions, Great Treatise on the Subtleties of Six*, “When its time has arrived and the qi arrives, that is harmony. When its time has arrived and the qi does not arrive, the incoming qi is inadequate. When its time has not yet arrived and the qi has arrived, the incoming qi has a surplus.”<sup>[9]</sup> The qi in the human body is subject to inter-promotion and inter-restraint in relation to the five elements to realize the balance of yin and yang. *Yi Chuan Copulative* said, “the philosophy of yin and yang makes up Tao.” Everything has its own rule of movement. An “excess” or

“deficiency” of qi means that problems will occur.

In *To Zhang Wentian*, Mao Zedong<sup>[10]</sup> expounded on “too much” and “too little,” meaning “left-leaning” and “right-leaning,” respectively. From our viewpoint, when objects are moving to a certain extent in time and space, it is necessary to ascertain the qualitative change from quantitative relations, i.e., the “golden mean of the Confucian school” or “standing in the middle at any time.” If the state of an object is changed, it means it is “too much” or “left-leaning.” If the original state remains and no progress is made, it means the object is old or the concept is outdated, conservative, stubborn, right-leaning and “too little.”

Too much is as bad as too little. At any moment, the object may change beyond a certain degree, and radical qualitative changes take place. If no proper actions are taken, it might lead to social polarization in a society. In other words, those who are radical will become more radical, while those who are conservative will become more conservative. A fierce struggle may occur if they cannot compromise. Eventually, the nature of the society may be changed.

The solution is the golden mean. "The two extreme ways of governing, but preferred to govern the people according to the way of the mean."<sup>[11]</sup> Contradictions can be reconciled to solve polarization, so that the object can return to a state of smooth development.

If a society vital, its social structure can make proper adjustments in favor of social development, which then relieves contradictions. In an ageing society with a rigid social structure, the two sides of a contradiction can be compared to two different running modes. There is a huge gap between one mode and the other, which causes more fierce conflicts. Therefore, the society needs to solve some deep contradictions as early as possible to avoid a vicious circle of turmoil. As both radical and conservative parties represent the interests of a portion of people, we must endeavor

to reconcile their differences and guide them to exchange and cooperate in national affairs. This is the state of the “golden mean,” in which no one intends to arouse fierce conflicts but instead seeks to find an acceptable compromise. It is very hard to reach the “golden mean,” so we need study and acquire inner concentration to help us grasp the rules of development for dynamic objects, i.e., “keep the golden mean at any time.”

## **7. The enlightenment of Laozi’s harmonious ideas to modern society**

Laozi stressed quiet. His philosophy is based on the “Tao,” which is the rule for the development of everything. “All things connote the yin and yang. The yin and yang keep acting upon each other and thus things keep changing and unifying themselves.” So, according to Laozi, both yin and yang apply to everything. One is relative rest and the other is conspicuous change. Everything can develop stably if the order of nature is observed. Therefore, there is no need to add personal preference to interrupt the development of everything.

### **7.1. Laozi’s system theory**

“Cycling is the movement of the Tao; being weak is the function of the Tao” (Chapter 40 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup> refers to an object’s alternate strong and weak state. When one state takes hold, it will move in the opposite direction, so that the other state can enjoy the leading role. The weakness means more development space. “If you want a thing to contract, you should stretch it first; if you want a thing weakened, you should strengthen it first; if you want a thing gotten rid of, you should promote it first; if you want a thing taken away, you should give to it first” (Chapter 36 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. “Disaster hides itself behind good fortune; good fortune leans against disaster” (Chapter 58 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. All of these quotes reflect Laozi’s ideas about the meeting of extremes.



Tao grows out of nothing, thus everything develops from nothing; that is, “fictitious pole” and “quiet” – no motion – begin. Afterwards, life is regained. Eventually, the thing passes its zenith and is on the wane. In moving from “dynamic” to “static,” the process of birth, death, illness and old age is completed. “I try my best to be in an extreme emptiness of mind; I try to keep myself in a state of stillness. From the vigorous growth of all things I perceive the way they move in endless cycles. All things, full of vitality, finally return to their own roots. Returning to roots means stillness, also means a return to destiny. A return to destiny is known as the law of eternity. To understand the law is known as enlightenment. He who is ignorant of the law, if acting rashly, will be in great trouble. But he who knows the law is tolerant, and the tolerance leads to impartiality; impartiality to thoroughness; thoroughness to nature; nature to the Tao; the Tao to eternity. Thus he will not be endangered all his life” (Chapter 16 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. This quote reflects the idea of circularity.

There are two types of Tao, “the Tao of heaven” and “the Tao of man”. Everything you do influences everything else. “The Tao of heaven” is not affected by the people. Everything grows according to the natural law. “So the Tao of heaven means to compensate the deficient by reducing the excess” (Chapter 77 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. This motion is just like negative feedback; the thing restrains itself from moving forward from a state of quietness and fairness. “The Tao of man.” is different: it gives to one who already has more than enough by taking from one who is in want” (Chapter 77 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. People have selfish motives and hope to obtain benefits for the rest of their lives. This motion is just like positive feedback; in this case, the state of fairness moves further and further away.

## **7.2. Contentment is happiness**

Selfishness creates lust. Hence, Laozi thought that “No crime is greater than greediness; no disaster is greater than the lack of contentment; thus the contentment of

feeling content is an eternal contentment” (Chapter 46 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. As Karl Marx pointed out in the *Relation of Wage-Labour to Capital*, "A house may be large or small; as long as the surrounding houses are equally small it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside to the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut".<sup>[13]</sup> When people want to obtain things that are not attainable, disputes, stealing and robbery may occur. Desire is unending. Therefore, Laozi advised people to have a content mind.

### **7.3. Action through inaction**

Due to their selfishness, the dominators will also use their power to seek greater fortunes and higher positions, and will sometimes use other people’s interests as a stake to meet their wild ambitions. When the dominators obtain greater fortunes and reputations, others will compare themselves unrealistically. When the super stratum gain more social resources, they will harm the interests of those at a lower level, which causes polarization, “it gives to one who already has more than enough by taking from one who is in want” (Chapter 77 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>.

Over time, social activities have created the rule of movement. Man-made control is the main cause of chaotic situations. Due to the selfishness or wild ambition of the dominators, any intervention by them may have a negative influence on society. “If I have acquired a little knowledge, I will be afraid of going astray when I walk on the road. The road is even, yet people prefer to take by-paths. While the court is corrupt, the fields lie waste; the granaries are empty; there are persons who are still dressed gaudily, wearing ornamented swords, satiated with fine food and drink, in possession of extravagant goods. They can be called the chieftains of robbers. What a phenomenon against the Tao!” (Chapter 53 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. “The more prohibitions there are in the world, the poorer the people; the more weapons the people own, the more chaotic the state; the more skills the people have, the more strange things occur; the

more laws and orders are issued, the more thieves and robbers there are” (Chapter 57 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, Laozi advocated “The Tao always remains inactive, yet it acts upon everything in the world. If lords and kings can keep it, all creatures will grow and develop naturally” (Chapter 37 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>.

#### **7.4. The supple and weak overcome the rigid and strong**

“The supple and weak overcome the rigid and strong” (Chapter 36 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. “Being weak is the function of the Tao” (Chapter 40 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. “While alive, a man’s body is supple; when dead, it becomes hard. While alive, grass and trees are supple, when dead, they become dry and stiff” (Chapter 76 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. Here, soft is the life force, and weak is the variability or plasticity of the structure. It is such plasticity that allows things to grow.

Soft means the thing can grow through changing its structure, so that it becomes more vigorous. The change in the structure can also reach a balance so that the movement can achieve a harmonious state and has sufficient pace for expansion.

In relation to society, soft infers a changeable and adjustable structure and system, which can comply with changes in the situation and the development of society.

#### **7.5. Enlightenment from Laozi’s philosophical thought for a harmonious society**

A harmonious society should be free from instability and disturbance, which are caused by unfair social distribution and the ruin of hope.

The development of productivity arises from the endeavors of the majority of people over a long period of time. However, owing to the backward productive relations, the fruits of productivity growth are not shared with the vast majority of people. The people with vested interests own most of the fruits through legitimate means, while the majority of people at the grass roots become victims. Due to the inflexible structure of the social economy, politics and culture, society lacks the motivation for reform, so that the productive relationship shackles the growth of productivity.

The function of political culture declines, for it only serves a fraction of the people and turns into a tool for ruling over civilians. Furthermore, the unfair distribution of income may lead to two classes, namely, an underprivileged class and a ruling class with real power. Various conflicts will then arise. If the society fails to reconcile these conflicts, they may evolve into aggression and turmoil.

If those with a vested interest are reluctant to share, the masses cannot dress warmly and eat their fill, so they are bound to lose heart and rebel to overthrow the government one day. “The hunger on the part of the people is the result of exorbitant taxes on the part of the ruler; thus the people are hungry. The unruliness on the part of the people is the result of meddling actions on the part of the ruler; thus the people are unruly” (Chapter 75 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>.

If the ruler is concerned about the people, he is less likely to act in ways that may impair their benefits, and can cope with national affairs with less interference. Society will then soon return to normal. “Thus the sage says, if I prefer inaction, the people will naturally crave for peace; if I act little, the people will be naturally rectified; if I am not meddling, the people will naturally become rich; if I get rid of desires, the people will naturally become simple” (Chapter 57 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>.

The harmonious society that Laozi had in mind features no conflict; it is a peaceful and ideal society. There are no fights between people and a peaceful coexistence can be realized between nations. “The people will have delicious food, beautiful clothes, comfortable living quarters, cheerful customs. Though within easy reach of neighboring states, the dog’s barking and the cock’s crowing in one state are heard in another; the people of one state will never have dealings with those of another, even if they get old and die” (Chapter 80 of *Laozi*)<sup>[12]</sup>. “Serenity” is the prerequisite of this perfect society; however, trees may prefer calm but the wind will not subside. If there is no cohesion in a society, people cannot enjoy good food, nice clothes, a peaceful

abode and a relaxed life. If the next country can be seen, external material enticement may cause social differentiation, so a harmonious society must be a vigorous and peaceful society with no conflicts. In such a way, people will be ready to struggle for their goals and construct their own society.

## **8. Conclusion**

People are the cells of society, which has become a very complicated organic integrity. Social development is always accompanied by the contradictions of productivity and productive relations, from the lowest to the highest level, and by the evolution from one social formation to another. People have to endure great misery during periods of social change, so we should cherish and maintain our harmonious, stable and peaceful environment and contribute to our society with effort. The traditional Chinese culture implies abundant harmonious ideas, which are of great practical significance to the construction of a harmonious society.

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