

Chinese “Dao” and Western “Truth”: A Comparative and Dynamic Perspective

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Abstract

In the Pre-Qin time, pursuing “Dao” was the main task in the scholarship of most of the ancient Chinese philosophers, while the Ancient Greek philosophers considered pursuing “Truth” as their ultimate goal. While the “Dao” in ancient Chinese texts and the “Truth” in ancient Greek philosophic literature do share or cross-cover certain connotations, there are subtle and important differences between the two comparable philosophic concepts. These differences have deep and profound impact on the later development of Chinese and Western philosophy and culture respectively. Interestingly, while the modern Chinese philosophy has gradually accepted and established the Western conception of “Truth” on its way towards modernization, the “post-modern” Western philosophy is just undergoing a process of deconstructing its traditional concept of “Truth”, thus, in a certain sense, going closer to the traditional Chinese “Dao”. From a comparative, relative and dynamic perspective, there could possibly be a fusion of horizon between the Chinese “Dao” and the Western “Truth”.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy, Dao, Truth, Pre-Qin time, Post-modern

1. Introduction

“Dao” is a polysemous word in ancient Chinese language, with multiple meanings of “way”, “road”, “walk” and “speak” etc. It is also one of the most important philosophic concepts in ancient Chinese philosophy with fundamental (sometimes ontological-metaphysical) significance. The constant and never stopping searching for “Dao” has been the basic feature of ancient Chinese philosophy ever since the Pre-Qin time. All the Pre-Qin schools and scholars were pursuing and talking about their “Dao” or “Daos”. Needless to say the Taoism (or the “School of Dao”), the Confucianists also took searching and exercising “Dao” as the ultimate purpose in their academic and social activity. Confucius once said: “If I in the morning hear the Dao, I may die in the evening without regret.” (Analects, 4:8) (Note 1) He also commented on himself as a man “with sincere faith he loves learning, and holds firm to death the good ‘Dao’.” (Analects, 8:13) He thought that a “Junzi” (Gentleman or a man of virtue) should “set his mind on Dao” (Analects, 4:9), “take the Dao rather than food as his object.” (Analects, 15:31) Mencius as well said that: A great man should “go along the great ‘Dao’; when he achieves his ambition he shares the ‘Dao’ with the people; when he fails to do so he goes on the ‘Dao’ alone.” (Mencius, 3B:2) (Note 2) The scholars of other schools were also searching and talking about the “Dao” as they understood. Although the concrete meaning of the “Dao” talked by them were varied, they similarly considered searching the “Dao” as the goal of their scholarship, thinking that no matter in personal behavior, in public affairs or in doing any other things, people always should know the “Dao”, have a “Dao”, persist on the “Dao”, follow the “Dao” and obey the “Dao”. As indicated by the title of one of A.C. Graham’s famous works, all the pre-Qin scholars were “disputers of the Dao” (Graham, 1989).

The Pre-Qin scholars’ enthusiastic attitude in pursuing “Dao”, was quite similar to the attitude of the ancient Greek philosophers in pursuing “Truth”, which was considered as the ultimate goal in their philosophic pursuing. The ancient Greek philosophers thought that there is nothing more akin to wisdom than Truth. Plato said that the real philosophers were “those whose passion is to see the truth” (Quan, 1981, p.83). Aristotle said that “philosophy should be called knowledge of the truth” (Metaphysics, 993b) (Note 3). Although they differed in

their definitions of what is “Truth”, for instance, Plato believes that “Truth” is something belong to the unchangeable eternal reality that is beyond the world of changing and decay, while Aristotle thought that the “Truth” is a correspondence between thoughts or statements and the real things or objects, they all generally considered the “Truth” as the ultimate object of philosophy and wisdom, and as well the rule or law that people should obey. Therefore, in a certain sense we may generally conclude that: the goal of ancient Greek philosophy is to search the “Truth”, while the goal of pre-Qin Chinese philosophy is to search the “Dao”.

It is not a strange or uncommon idea to think that the “Dao” in Pre-Qin Chinese philosophy is an equivalent of the “Truth” in Ancient Greek philosophy. When the Western philosophy and the Chinese philosophy encounters, people are apt to come to this connection in mind and understand it in this way not without any legitimacy. For instance, Confucius’ saying of “If I in the morning hear the Dao, I may die in the evening without regret”, and “holds firm to death the good ‘Dao’”, has frequently been interpreted as a persistent spirit of pursuing and adhering to “Truth” and even preferring dying for “Truth”. For example, in the English translation of Confucius Analects by the famous Chinese scholar Lin Yutang, the Chinese character “Dao” in this quotation has simply been translated as the English word “Truth” (Lin, 1942, p.829). Obviously, in this translation, the Chinese concept of “Dao” has been self-evidently interpreted, or simply replaced by the concept of “Truth”. This kind of interpretation happens not only in the Chinese-English translation, but also in the ancient-modern Chinese interpretation. In their philosophic research works, modern Chinese scholars are also frequently using the concepts such as “the universal principle”, “the objective law”, “intrinsic nature” etc., which are obviously borrowed from traditional Western metaphysical theory of “Truth”, to interpret and explain the “Dao” in ancient Chinese philosophic texts.

Incontestably, the Chinese “Dao” and Western “Truth” do share something in common. But the question here is if the two can be simply considered as exact equivalents. And the related question is: does ancient Chinese philosophy has “metaphysics” in sense of ancient Greek philosophy, or does it has metaphysics at all? This question has perplexed scholars of Chinese philosophy for a long time, and it has become ardent in recent years again (Wang, 2004; Jia, 2006; Yu, 2007).

Philosophic conception as one of the important components in the category of ideas is closely related to the cultural particularity of the culture from which it emerged. So there could be hardly any absolute equivalency between philosophic conceptions from different cultures. Chad Hansen once pointed out that: “classical Chinese philosophers had no concept of truth at all.”(Hansen, 1985) Hansen’s inference is acceptable if by “Truth” he means only and exactly the “Truth” in sense of ancient Greek philosophy. But this will also means that Hansen’s standpoint is still deeply rooted in the Western philosophic tradition, which believes that there could be only one “Truth” for each thing, including the “true” definition of the concept of “Truth”. However, from a comparative and relative perspective, we may appropriately declare that the “Dao” is a Chinese version of “Truth” and “Truth” is a Western version of “Dao”, since from the viewpoint of some ancient Chinese philosophers, co-existence of different “Daos” are not only a reality, but also sometimes acceptable, as we will discuss later.

Nevertheless, by serious and careful research and comparison we may find that, despite the fact that the “Dao” in Chinese philosophy and the “Truth” in Western philosophic tradition do share something in common and can be replaced with each other in certain contexts without causing too much misunderstanding, there are critical and important differences between the two which can not be neglected. The “Dao” is not simply an exact equivalent of “Truth”. In this sense we may say that: what the ancient Chinese philosophers want to search for is not the “Truth” in the sense of traditional Western philosophy; it is the “Dao” in the sense of Chinese philosophy. If we simply identify and equate these two concepts with each other, some important features and characteristics of both philosophic traditions will be veiled. Therefore, a comparison between Chinese “Dao” and Western “Truth” will be helpful in deepening the discussion of the perplexing issue of “Chinese metaphysics”.

The study in this paper will first compare the subtle differences between the “Dao” in Pre-Qin Chinese philosophy, especially in early Confucian philosophy, and the “Truth” in Ancient Greek philosophy. Then it will discuss the influences of the motive of pursuing “Dao” and that of pursuing “Truth” to the Chinese and Western culture respectively. Finally it will also discuss the interesting dynamic phenomena concerning the comprehension and hermeneutics of “Truth” or “Dao” in Chinese and Western intellectual world during the past century, when China is going on its way of modernization and Western world comes to the so called “later-modern” or “post-modern” time.

2. The subtle differences between Chinese “Dao” and Western “Truth”

First let’s make some comparison between the “Dao” said by Confucius and Mencius, and the “Truth” talked by Plato and Aristotle, to show the subtle differences between the Chinese “Dao” and the Western “Truth”.

2.1 In terms of nomenclature and etymology, the Western philosophic concept of "Truth" and the Chinese philosophic concept of "Dao" originated from quite different sources of daily languages.

The meaning of "Truth" was come from "true", refer to a quality of fidelity, veracity, faithfulness, sincerity, etc., or a truly, faithful correspondence to the real fact or reality. While the original meaning of "Dao" just refers to a way or a road, which is walked out by human being and is for people to walk on. In its latter extended meaning it also means "speak" or "talk" (Note 4). The Chinese ideographic character of "Dao" is a combination of two parts which means "human steps" and "human head" respectively. Another writing form of this character, which can be found in the newly excavated bamboo script of Lao Zi from the Guodian Chu State Tomb of the Warring State Period, is a combination of "ren"(human) and "xing"(walk).(Jingmen Museum,1998, p. 3, 111,112) Both the two characters strongly indicate that the "Dao" originally means something closely related to human activity and practice. Even when "Dao" has been extended to the abstract meanings, or as a metaphor of "method", "principle" etc., it still keeps within it its original connotations: it is something created by people and can be grasped and applied by people. Although as philosophic terms, "Truth" and "Dao" has acquired special meanings that can not be equated with their etymological origins or their meanings when used in ordinary daily speaking, their indivisible and intrinsic relations with the later can not be neglected. The emphasis of "Truth" is the objective and existing "true" reality, while the emphasis of "Dao" is the usefulness and value that it can be followed by people, used by people. "Dao" has nothing to do with "true" from its origin, although it does acquire the meaning of true objective existence in its later development as an abstract philosophic concept. Actually, the equivalent of English "Truth" and "true" in the modern Chinese vocabulary, i.e., "zhen li" and "zhen", have never appeared in early Confucian Classics. We can not find the character "zhen" in anywhere in Confucius' *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Rituals*, the *I Ching* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and even in all the so call "13 Classics". The character "zhen"(true or real) only began appearing abruptly in a batch in the book of *Zhuang Zi*, but the "zhen" in *Zhuang Zi* still can not be equated with "Truth"(Xu, 2002). So we can say that there is no exact equivalent of "Truth" in early Chinese philosophic texts in the sense as it appeared in ancient Greek philosophy.

2.2 "Truth" in traditional Western philosophy means something objectively existed and can only be discovered or recognized by people, while the "Dao" in Chinese philosophy is more or less something that can be constituted by people in their practice, or in other words, it is a result of interaction and construction between subjects and objects.

In ancient Greek philosophy, as the objective object of human knowledge, the "Truth" refers to the unchangeable and eternal substance or essence of the concrete things or facts, as Aristotle said: "The principles of eternal things must be always most true (for they are not merely sometimes true, nor is there any cause of their being, but they themselves are the cause of the being of other things), so that as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth."(*Metaphysics*, 993b) That means, the "Truth" exists even before there are human beings, and it is permanent and can never be changed according to human will. Human can only try hard to recognize and discover the "Truth", but they can never create or constitute the "Truth". However the "Dao" in ancient Chinese philosophy was different. Confucius said: "Men can enlarge the Dao, while the Dao can not enlarge men." (*Analects*,15:28). Xun Zi said: "The wise men are the controller (or the key) of Dao, as they are the 'Dao-keys' under the heaven."(*Xun Zi*, VIII:65-66) (Note 5) Even Zhuang Zi, who was fond of exaggerating and deifying his "Dao" with allegorized language, once also said that "Dao comes into being by people's walking; things come into being by people's naming." (*Zhuang Zi*, II :33) (Note 6) Therefore, the "Dao" is enlarged by people, is a result of people's walking, just like there were no road at all in the world before people's walking. The road, and the "Dao" as well, is explored and constructed or constituted by human being. As a result, the "Dao" or the "Daos" in the vocabulary of Confucius and Mencius, and even in the vocabulary of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, are frequently attributed to certain person, such as "the Dao of Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun", "the Dao of King Wen and King Wu", "the Dao of the Master", "The Dao of Sages", "the Dao of previous Kings", etc., or related to certain purpose of human activities, such as "the Dao of ruling the state", "the Dao of moral cultivation", "the Dao of regimen", etc. It is also for this reason, the ancient Chinese scholars often emphasize the importance of learning "Dao" from "Shi"(the teacher) or those masters who have already had the "Dao". Mencius once said: "The Dao is like a wide road. Is it difficulty to know it? The trouble with people is simply that they do not look for it. You go home and look for it and there will be teachers enough for you" (*Mencius*, 6B:2)

2.3 The "Truth" in ancient Greek philosophy is supposed to be the exclusive Oneness, while the "Dao" or "Daos" in early Chinese texts can be diversified.

Although the "Truth" as it presented in people's knowledge is almost always relative, i.e., different philosophers and different schools are differing in the concrete content of what they believed as "Truth", nevertheless, the

“relative Truth” is always believed to be the absolute, exclusive, unchanging and eternal “Truth” in ideas. So ideally, the “Truth” should be the only One, only the “Truth” reveals the eternal reality. However, in the ideas of Confucius and Mencius, there is not alone an absolute, exclusive, unchanging “Dao”, there are different “Daos”, such as “the Dao of sages”, “the Dao of Junzi (gentlemen)”, “the Dao of Yang Zhu and Modi”, etc. And in the Taoist text Zhuang Zi, there is even a “Dao of robbers”(Zhuang Zi, X:10-12). People may “not lay plans for one another because their Daos are different” (Analects, 15:39), but no matter how, their “Daos” are still “Daos”, and sometimes the different Daos under the Heaven might “operate simultaneously without any collision among them.” (The Doctrine of the Mean, 30:3) (Note 7). And Mencius was even citing Confucius as saying: “There are two Daos in general: benevolence or not benevolence.”(Mencius, 4A:2) Benevolence or not can both be named as a “Dao”. But from the viewpoint of ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle, if the “A” is a “Truth”, then the “No A” must be fallacy, the law of excluded middle is the most indubitable principle. So the opposite of “Truth” can only be a fallacy. It is impossible that a truth proposition and its opposite can both be called “Truth”, or a real “Truth” can be applied together with a fallacy and without causing any collision.

2.4 Searching for “Truth” in traditional Western philosophy mainly asks the question of “What is?” While searching for “Dao” in Pre-Qin Chinese philosophy mainly asks the question of “How to?”

According to Ancient Greek philosophers, knowledge or a statement is called “Truth” only because it accurately represents or corresponds to objects, which could be either the actual state of existing things or facts, or the absolute forms or system of ideas that are considered as the real “Bing”. If there is the accurate correspondence, then it “is”; if there is not, it “is not”. Aristotle said: “Each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth.” (Metaphysics, 993b15) “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.” (Metaphysics, 1011b25) This is Aristotle’s definition of “Truth”. Therefore, the inquiring in “Truth” searching is whether it objectively “is” something. But it seems that in the “Dao” searching of Confucius and Mencius, this “is/is not” question in terms of correspondence theory of truth is not so important. They care more about how to do certain things, or what is “suitable” or “not suitable”, what is “appropriate” or not “appropriate”, what is “acceptable” or “not acceptable” under certain conditions, between subject and object and among different subjects. As Mencius once mentioned, the Confucian “Dao” was a “Dao” of “timely correct” (shi zhong), which means the correctness of the “Dao” is depends on different times, places, objects and surroundings. For instance, Confucian “Dao” of how to decide if he should take a position in office was that “When it was proper to go into office, then to go into it; when it was proper to keep retired from office, then to keep retired from it; when it was proper to continue in it long, then to continue in it long; when it was proper to withdraw from it quickly, then to withdraw quickly.”(Mencius,2A:2) Therefore, the “Dao” is a suitable way of correctly handling the relations between man and man or man and his situation, constructed by man under certain historic situation and during the dynamic interaction process between subject and object and among subjects, rather than some permanent objective existence out there waiting for our knowledge to exactly correspond with.

The above comparison intends to illustrate that there are important differences between the Chinese concept of “Dao” and the Western concept of “Truth” so we should not just take for granted that these two can be equated with each other. However, this does exclude certain similarities between the two concepts. Actually they do share something in common under certain context, for instance both “Dao” and “Truth” is often featured by generality, objectivity, etc., which has not been discussed in this paper since the topic of this paper is mainly addressing the differences.

3. The Culture of Pursuing “Dao” and the Culture of Pursuing “Truth”

Both the ancient Greek philosophy oriented by “Truth” searching and the pre-Qin philosophy oriented by “Dao” searching have deep and profound influences on the later evolution and development of the Western and Chinese cultures respectively, thus bred the two great cultural traditions with respective characteristics. As the kernel part of the cultural spirit, philosophy obviously plays an important role in the general evolution of a civilization. The different nuance of the two philosophic traditions of pursuing “Truth” and pursuing “Dao”, has also deeply affected the forming and developing of some of the different characteristics in the Western and Chinese cultures. The culture motivated by pursuing “Truth” and the culture motivated by pursuing “Dao” each has some advantages and disadvantages. In general, the differences are demonstrated in the following three aspects:

3.1 The “Truth” orientation has led to the thriving of a spirit of scientific reasoning, which is more suitable for the development of natural science and technology; the “Dao” orientation has nourished the thriving of a spirit of practical reasoning, which is more suitable for the development of social morality and political art, etc.

The targets of scientific research are usually supposed to be the objective and external true reality. What the

scientists want to find or discover is what the true existence really “is”. That natural reality may be changing, but that changing is also objective, following its own course or rule, no matter people like it or not. That is the “Truth” or the real “Being”. This kind of firm belief or presupposition of the existence of an absolute “Truth” provides pushing power and incentive for those who want to explore the mysteries or “Truth” of the nature, thus promotes greatly the development of natural science. However, in the academic realm of society and humanity, although there may be some “objective” rules or phenomena, these objective things are only objective to individuals, not as objective to human being as a whole. Some social Beings seems objective to “me” may be just a creation of the subjectivity of many other “mes”. Therefore, in the realm of human society, humanity and arts, generally speaking, any “Truth”, “rules” or “principles”, can not be independent from people’s practice and the activity of human consciousness. Without human practice and consciousness, the realm of society and the realm of humanity would have not existed at all, let alone the objective rule or “Truth” of it. Therefore we may say that, in the realm of social and human science (if it can be called “science”), there is no “Truth” in the sense of Ancient Greek Philosophy, there is only the “Dao” in the sense of Pre-Qin Confucianism which is more useful and instructive for a man to handle his relation with others, and with the society in general; there is no absolutely objective and human-independent “Being”, there is only applicability or acceptability under certain conditions or circumstance of interaction between subjects and objects, and sometimes among subjects.

3.2 The motive of pursuing “Truth” is apt to cultivate an indomitable and aggressive will, but sometimes it will lead to bigoted or self-opinioned stances; while the orientation of pursuing “Dao” is apt to cultivate an attitude of incorporating and all-embracing, but sometimes it may become too slick and sly and lead to relativism.

When people firmly believe that there is an objective and unchangeable “Truth” which can eventually be recognized or discovered by them, they will act with indomitable will and firm resolve without turning back. It is just like someone believes there are some gold on the top of a mountain waiting for him to find so he will desperately climb that mountain regardless anything else. While the “Dao” oriented people are just like someone coming to the mountain for a tour, what he wants is just finding a road which should be both safety and having good views of scenery. When “Truth” explorers believe they have really found the “Truth”, they are apt to becoming bigoted or self-opinioned and tend to deny the theories of others. Actually they can only declare what they have found is the real “Truth” after negating the theories of others, since the “Truth” should be the only “One”. Consequently, the intellectual history of pursuing “Truth” usually demonstrates a continuing chain of successors’ criticizing and negating their predecessors, and an ever lasting process of new “Truth” replacing the old “Truth”. Sometimes the new generations of Western philosophers even simple “set aside” rather than “argue against” their predecessors. (Rorty, 1979, p.6) However, the “Dao” is not something independently existed out there, rather it is like something emerging and extending underneath the foot steps from our ancestors to ours, and will continue to extend to our next generations. So the Chinese “Dao” explorers usually intend to seek common ground between ancient and present, between different “Daos”, and put aside their differences, rather than resolutely negate and refute the “Daos” of ancient or of others. They usually respect and follow the “Dao” of their predecessors, as Confucius once said: “I am only a transmitter and not a creator, believing in and loving the ancients.” (Analects, 7:1) Almost all the later philosophers in Chinese history seemed never even think about to “set aside” their ancestors and produce something totally new, rather they usually like to declare themselves as the real successors of the ancient tradition of “Dao” (or “Dao tong” in Chinese) and would like to continue the discourse of those ancient masters. So the intellectual history of “Dao” searching usually demonstrates phenomena of going back to ancients and giving new interpretations, with the feature of all-embracing and harmoniously blending of diversified theories or opinions. But the corresponding weak point of this is an unprincipled tolerance to diversified, contradictory and confusing arguments and theories in knowledge, and an attitude of “no difference”, “this is right, that is also right” in practice, thus apt to lead to a kind of relativism in epistemology.

3.3 The “Truth” pursuing focuses more on, and cares more about the final goal, in order to achieve the final goal sometimes any means may be taken. While the “Dao” pursuing emphasizes more on the process itself, sometimes even doesn’t care about the final goal.

When pursuing “Truth”, we have a very clear final object which is of fundamental and ultimate significance, so we will take any means to get that goal. It is just like the ordinary fishermen’s fishing, the goal is to get the fish, the more the better, so they will use any means, the fishing nets, the fishgigs and hooks and whatever. But people who searching for “Dao” sometime are just like the legendary Jiang Taigong of the former Zhou dynasty, who persisted in fishing with a straight hook without a bait, since he seemed don’t care so much about if he could get any fish. To him the more important thing was that he was fishing. The tangible success and fruitful results are highly valued and praised in a “Truth” oriented culture, so the people are incited and stimulated to compete for

success. Therefore this kind of society in general is comparatively more efficient in terms of quantizable “developing” or “progressing”. In contrast, in the “Dao” oriented culture, people always say that “heroism cannot be judged on the basis of success or failure”. If someone has not succeeded in a competition, or has not achieved a certain goal as quickly as others simply because he persists in doing it with the right “Dao”, he should be sympathized and praised. For even he has failed in reaching that goal, he has already got the “Dao”. So the “Dao” in a sense can be understood as the whole process of searching itself, rather than just the end of that process of searching. However, it is just because paying more attention on the process rather than on the concrete results, the “Dao” oriented culture seems not so efficient in terms of “developing” or “progressing”, especially when judged by the quantitative method.

4. Dynamics of Chinese “Dao” and Western “Truth” in the Past Century

Any general comparison between the differences of different cultures like the one above might inevitably face the criticism for being over generalized, and could be easily challenged with some particular historical and textual evidences. This is understandable since the differences are just comparative and relative rather than absolute. After all the Western and Chinese cultures are all human cultures, and there are more similarities than differences between them. As mentioned earlier, emphasizing the difference between Chinese “Dao” and Western “Truth” and warning that they can not be simply equated, does not mean to deny and neglect the similarities or common features of the two. The meanings of “Dao” in the theories of different philosophers of ancient China are also varied in great deal, sometimes they do cross cover the meaning of “Truth” in the sense of traditional Western philosophy. For instance, in the Taoist tradition, some Taoist philosophers using exaggerated allegories to describe their “Dao” as some permanent thing existed even before the Heaven and Earth. The famous Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu of the Han Dynasty believed that the great origin of “Dao” comes from Heaven. If the Heaven will never change, the “Dao” will change neither. The Neo-Confucian scholars of the Song Dynasty in their searching for “Dao” had comprehended the concept of “tian li”, which literally means “Heavenly reason” and shares more in its connotation with the traditional Western concept of “Truth”. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that ancient Chinese philosophers’ searching of “Dao” sometimes does have the similar meaning of pursuing “Truth” in sense of traditional Western philosophy. Nevertheless, generally speaking, ancient Chinese “Dao” is still “Dao” with its particular meaning, not an exact equivalent of “Truth” in traditional Western philosophy.

Interestingly enough, however, in the past century and more, intellectual dynamics concerning the issue of “Truth-Dao” has happened in both China and the Western world. That is, while the majority of Chinese intellectuals have gradually accepted and established their concept of “Truth” in sense of Western traditional philosophy, along with the process of China’s modernization, the “later-modern” or “post modern” Western philosophy has just been undergoing a process of deconstruction of their traditional “Truth”.

The modern history of Chinese revolution sometimes is described as a history of Chinese people’s pursuing for “Truth” and liberation. The “Truth” (or “zhen li” in Chinese) means both the scientific truth in natural science and the rules or principles in historical and social evolution and development. And the direction of their “Truth” searching is the Western world. Eventually the intellectuals of Chinese Communist Party believe that they have found the “Truth” of history and society, which is Marxism. Marxism is also called “truth of scientific communism” in China, and was believed as the “universal truth” that can be applied properly in anywhere in the world. The conception of “Truth”, especially in sense of traditional correspondence theory of truth, has been well accepted by majority of both intellectuals and ordinary people in China. Chinese people don’t talk so much about “Dao” any more, while the “Truth” appears more frequently in their argumentations in no matter natural science or social science and humanity. One of the most important nationwide events in the intellectual circles of China after the Cultural Revolution is the great discussion of the “criterion of truth”, which finally come to the conclusion that “practice is the sole criterion for testing truth.” In today’s China, not many people still believe Marxism as the only “Truth” which can solve all of their economic, social and political problems, and they need to follow Mr. Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic theory of “grope forward by feeling for stones to cross a river”, which is in a sense similar to ancient Chinese philosophers’ searching for the right “Dao” according to particular situation. Nevertheless, the general “Truth” belief is still well established and unshakably. Marxism is still officially considered as the “Truth” which should be used as the guidelines for our scientific, productive and social practice. “Adhering to truth” is not only considered as a principle in academic research and political activities, but also a praisable personal moral quality. If someone in China today declares that he does not believe “Truth”, he will look not only ridiculous but also absurd.

Paradoxically and ironically, during the past century, especially the later 20th century, the Western philosophy and even Western intellectual world in general is undergoing a trend towards an opposite direction, which

sometimes is called “postmodernity” or “latermodernity”, featured by deconstruction of the traditional concept of “Truth” and other similar concepts related to fundamentalism.

Some of the “post-modern” Western philosophers of our time have conducted deep theoretic introspection on the traditional Western philosophy, and try to breakthrough the ideological hedge set by it, thus demonstrate a new turn in the development of contemporary Western philosophy. For thousand of years, the Western philosophy set its task as finding the ultimate existence, establishing a knowledge system based on the absolute “Truth”. But now the postmodernism waves the banner of “anti-fundamentalism” or “anti-essentialism”, negates from the root the ultimate existence and absolute “Truth” which was considered as the foundation of knowledge, and advocates diversity, uncertainty, randomness and ambivalency.

The postmodern philosophers oppose the traditional metaphysics; they have deconstructed many axiomatic concepts, propositions and principles presupposed by Western traditional view of “Truth”. They deny that “Truth” can truly represent any objective entity or property and can exist totally independently from people’s thinking and practice. In traditional Western philosophy, “Truth” itself has nothing to do with the goals, needs and interests of human being, people can only search and discover “Truth” without any bias and prejudice. However, in the point of view of Richard Rorty, one of the prominent contemporary representatives of postmodernism, “Truth” is constructed rather than discovered. He said: “Truth cannot be out there— cannot exist independently of the human mind” (Rorty, 1989, p.5); “only sentences can be true, and that human beings make truths by making languages in which to phrase sentences.” (Rorty, 1989, p.9) This can not help but reminiscent of the ancient Chinese philosophers saying that “Men can enlarge the Dao, while the Dao can not enlarge men.” (Analects, 15:28). “Dao comes into being by people’s walking; things come into being by people’s naming.” (Zhuang Zi, 2/69).

As understood by some of the Western philosophers in 20th century, there is no corresponding relationship between a “Truth” and an objective existence. Martin Heidegger once said: “Truth has no means the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the object).” (Heidegger, 1927, p.261) “Truth” sometimes is only considered as a kind of belief or assertion constructed or made by people to adapt to a certain historical circumstance and conditions, it is contingent on convention, human perception and social experience, or it is simply a rational consensus agreed upon by a certain group of people under a condition called by Jürgen Habermas as “ideal speech situation” (Habermas, 2003, p.251). Or as Richard Rorty said: “ ‘Objective truth’ is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on.” (Rorty, 1979, p.385). And the value of “Truth”, as understood from the point of view of pragmatic theory, is just its effectiveness when applied to actual practice. In other words, the question of “What is true?” in traditional Western metaphysics is not so important any more, the important question now is “What is acceptable?” and “What is applicable?”

Consequently, according to some contemporary Western philosophers, discovering “Truth” is no longer the goal of philosophy, as Rorty suggested “edifying philosophy aims at continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth.” (Rorty, 1979, p.373) Or as suggested by philosophic hermeneutics, “Truth”, if there is any, is something resulted from the process of “conversation or dialogue”, and the so called “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 2004). In other words, “Truth” is no longer so “true” as it was in sense of ancient Greek philosophy; it is more like the Chinese “Dao” which is a result of human practice and human language. This will also lead one to think that, if the “Truth” in sense of “post modern” Western philosophy can still be called “Truth”, then Chad Hansen’s inference that “classical Chinese philosophers had no concept of truth at all” (Hansen, 1985) is somewhat unjustified.

5. Conclusion

From a comparative and dynamic view, there are no absolute and permanent definitions of either Chinese “Dao” or Western “Truth”. Perhaps under the background of globalization, there might also be a “fusion of horizons” between the Chinese “Dao” and the Western “Truth”, as well as a “fusion of horizons” between the Chinese metaphysics and Western metaphysics. If the “Truth” in its traditional sense has almost been deconstructed or even undermined by some “postmodern” philosophers, introducing Chinese conception and discourse related to “Dao” into Western philosophic vocabulary might not without any help for handling the complicated issues related to “Truth”, just as the “Truth” conception was introduced into Chinese philosophy hundred years ago and had greatly enriched Chinese philosophy and intellectuality.

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Notes

Note 1. The citations from Confucius Analects in this paper are from Zhu (1936), English translation refers to Legge (1960), Waley (1989) and Lau (1983), sometimes with my own revision.

Note 2. The citations of Mencius in this paper are from Zhu (1936), English translation refers to Legge (1960), Lau (2003), occasionally with my own revision.

Note 3. The citations of Aristotle's Metaphysics in this paper are from Ross(1924), marked according to convention.

Note 4. For the important significance of the relation between “Dao” and “speak” or “talk”, i.e. language, see Xu (2005), pp.43-45.

Note 5. The citation of *Xun Zi* is from Wang (1891), translated into English by myself, and marked according to the *Xun Zi Yin De*, no.22 in the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index series.

Note 6. The citation of *Zhuang Zi* is from Guo (1894), translated into English by myself, and marked according to the *Xun Zi Yin De*, no.20 in the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index series.

Note 7. The citation of *Doctrine of the Mean* is from the Chinese origin in Zhu Xi (1936), translated into English by myself with reference to the English version in Legge (1960).