

# Citizenship from a Comparative Perspective between China and the West

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**Abstract:** The concept of citizenship is fundamentally different between China and the West, which inevitably leads to differences in understanding on many issues. The article uses the theory of Marxism to analyze the origin of the different cognition of citizenship between China and the west.

## 1. Introduction

In a speech at the Miller Center at the University of Virginia in May 2020, Deputy Assistant to the US President for National Security Affairs Andrew Pottinger said that the heirs of the May Fourth Spirit are Chinese citizens with a sense of citizenship. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying retorted that the May 4th Movement was not what she called a “populist” movement. The May 4th Movement broke out when the Chinese nation was in danger. It was a thorough anti-imperialist and anti-feudal great patriotic revolutionary movement. The core of May 4th spirit is patriotism. Here, the different pronunciations reflect the different perceptions of citizenship in China and the West. I will combine this case to illustrate the different understanding of citizenship between China and the West, and the root behind the understanding.

## 2. The Related Concepts of Citizenship

### 2.1 Citizen

“A 'citizen' is one who realizes that he is not only a member of a family or a tribe, but also a member of a city-state. A citizen is one who participates in the life of assembly, that is, in the public life of a city-state.”<sup>[1]</sup> Rousseau regards the citizen as the “sovereign” who establishes the republic by forging a social contract with other individuals and forming the general will. Thus it can be seen that citizen is the appellation of the social members who get out of the natural state and enter the civilized society and whose rights are regulated and protected by law, and is a political actor with the ability to actively participate in public affairs. This definition contains the legal, social and political dimensions of the concept of citizenship.

The legal dimension of citizen definition delimits the category of citizen and embodies the characteristics of citizen. The social dimension defined by citizen emphasizes the unique historical environment of “civilized society” in which the citizen lives and describes the existence state of the citizen. The political dimension of citizen definition depicts the active role of citizen as a participant in public affairs and describes the behavior pattern of citizen action.

### 2.2 Citizenship

Citizenship and citizen have different meanings. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines citizenship as follows: the relationship between the state and the individual, which may require the individual to remain loyal to the state while enjoying the protection afforded by the state. In a sense, citizenship is a free identity of responsibility.<sup>[2]</sup> Citizenship represents a special relationship between the individual and the state, especially between the individual and the modern nation-state.

Citizenship symbolizes not only the status of citizens, but also all the rights and obligations that citizens have. Therefore, a complete definition of citizenship should be: citizenship is the identity of

the relationship between the individual and the state, is a symbol of the rights and obligations of the citizenship status, and equality is the basic value contained in the modern citizenship concept.

Citizenship embodies the relationship between the individual and the state in three ways: legal relationship, political relationship and social relationship. Legal relationship means that the state must provide legal protection for the individual rights of citizens and provide legal provisions for the individual rights and obligations of citizens. Political relationship refers to a certain sense of loyalty, participation in public affairs and fulfillment of necessary political responsibilities. The social relation refers to the society as the communication medium between the individual citizen and the state, which can ease the tension and coordinate the contradiction between the two.

### **2.3 Why the Importance of Citizenship?**

Citizenship is directly related to rights and duties. Rights and duties are the extended meaning of citizenship and have long been the basic elements of citizenship.<sup>[3]</sup> T. H. Marshall regarded citizenship as a unity composed of civil elements, political elements and social elements. Each element corresponds to many different rights. For example, what is linked with the social element is the citizen's welfare rights, such as the right to work, the right to rest, the right to education, the right to housing, the right to medical care, etc. The 20th century was the peak of the development of social rights, which was associated with the development of educational institutions and other public service institutions.

The emphasis on the duty of citizenship is most typical of republicanism. Republicanism chiefly emphasizes civic virtue. He believes that citizens need to resist all temptations to miss and devote themselves to their country. In addition to civic virtues, there is a need for constant interest in the affairs of the state, constant participation in the public affairs of the state, and the formation of a cohesive community with other citizens. The value of citizenship is embodied in collective freedom rather than individual freedom. Without the community, neither citizenship nor freedom will exist.

## **3. The Western Perception of Citizenship is Based on Individualism**

### **3.1 Individualism is the Ideology of the Atomic Individual**

The origin of this individualism lies in civil society (that is, capitalist society). Civil society is a society formed by the exchange of disparate atomic individuals, or what Marx called "the independence of man based on the dependence of things". Individualism is the basic principle of civil society, and western citizenship is associated with individualism, or in other words, the ideology of citizens in capitalist society is individualism. This ideology is premised on the self-isolation of the independent individual, on the separation and opposition of the individual from others, and the independence of the individual is based on the dependence of things.

### **3.2 The Limits of Individualism**

The combination of material dependence and human independence determines the bourgeois nature of "human rights" and "state sovereignty". Human rights are, in fact, the atomic right of the individual, that is, the right to separate from one another in order to ensure that each individual can achieve his own selfishness, his own self-interest without any hindrance, without prejudice to others. It is not the right to bring people together in order to ensure that all can develop together.<sup>[4]</sup> This view of human rights regards the collective as a bondage to the individual and therefore, at best, a necessary evil that must be preserved. The state, as a collective, is also a necessary evil within the nation; However, in foreign relations, the nation-state becomes the unit of collective selfishness and self-interest of the nation, so it is regarded as an indispensable good by the bourgeoisie.

Pottinger's view stems from the fact that the cognition of citizenship in the West is based on individualism. Under the influence of such individualistic values, individuals and the state and society were in a state of opposition. Therefore, in the eyes of Pottinger, the May 4th Movement was a "populist" movement of the common people against the public power. This is obviously applying Western logic mechanically to Chinese reality. Hegel says that criticism is about clarifying

premises and drawing boundaries, and Pottinger fails to do that. This view is valid in western society, but not in Chinese society.

## **4. China's Perception of Citizenship Based on Collectivism**

### **4.1 Three Forms of Human Society**

In the Economic Manuscript (1857-1858), Marx talked about three major social forms, namely, the society of human dependence on human, the society of human independence based on material dependence and the society of human freedom and individuality.<sup>[5]</sup> In the view of Marx and Engels, man is an object being. This is not only to say that people cannot live without objects, without objects people cannot survive; And that is to say, human activities must be objective activities, only in the objective activities can people get real freedom. Freedom is not independence from nature and society in fantasy, but turning nature and society into one's own “inorganic body”.<sup>[6]</sup> Imagined freedom is not real freedom. Freedom through nature and other men is true freedom. This requires getting rid of the opposition between man and nature and man, and realizing the unity between man and nature and man. For Marx and Engels, freedom exists only in man and nature, and in man's agreement with man. Free personality does not mean that individuals can be separated from nature and society, but that nature and society no longer constitute the restriction and domination of individual activities, but only constitute the conditions of individual activities, helping and promoting individuals to achieve their own goals of activities.

### **4.2 Three Principles for Dealing with the Relationship between People and Society**

Corresponding to the three forms of human society, Marx believed that there are three principles in the relationship between individuals and society: the first is collectivism, which requires individuals to obey the collective; The second, known as individualism, holds that the collective is subordinate to the individual, and the two principles share a common premise: they set the individual against the collective. Marxism takes the unity of the individual and the society as the criterion, so it puts forward the third principle, communism or unionism, which advocates the unity of the individual and the collective, so that the collective becomes “the union of free people”. The communist society is actually a society of “the union of free people”.

From the realistic historical development, collectivism is the ideology of natural economy, individualism is the ideology of commodity economy, and communism is the ideology of product economy. China has experienced a long development of natural economy: one is the small-scale peasant economy which has existed for thousands of years; the other is the planned economy formed after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Both of the two kinds of economy aim at self-sufficiency and are based on the natural division of labor. Therefore, both of them inevitably take collectivism as their ideology. From this, a kind of familial collectivism is inevitably formed, which emphasizes the loyalty to home and country.

## **5. Conclusion**

The ultimate goal of socialism with Chinese characteristics is communism. In dealing with the relationship between individuals and society, China has a tradition of collectivism. At the same time, individualism has emerged as a result of the establishment of a socialist market economy. However, under the socialist system, individualism will be subject to strict restrictions, so that it does not take society as the means to achieve the end, maintain the goal of collectivism, and eventually transition to unionism or communism, and open up the way for the realization of human freedom and all-round development of human society. The construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics is consistent with the human society envisioned by Marx and Engels. Therefore, “citizenship” in the Chinese context has a profound collectivism color, which makes it understandable that the core of the May Fourth Spirit is patriotism. However, it should be noted that our emphasis on collectivism of citizenship does not negate or completely reject individualism, but advocates individualism led by communism, social development to promote social development, and social development to

ensure personal development.

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