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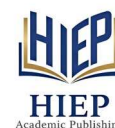
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Echoes of Ideas Across Mountains and Seas:

A Review of Zhang Xiping's *A History of Mutual Learning between Chinese and Western Civilizations*

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Abstract: In his work *A History of Mutual Learning between Chinese and Western Civilizations*, Professor Zhang Xiping adopts a global historical perspective to examine the two-way interaction between Chinese and Western civilizations from 1500 to 1800, depicting the rich practices of Western learning spreading eastward and Chinese learning spreading westward during this period. The eastward transmission of Western learning introduced Western religion, logic, science and technology, and art into China, promoting the innovation of traditional Confucianism and the rise of the trend of practical learning. Centered on Confucian classics, the westward transmission of Chinese learning exerted a profound influence on the ideological orientation and institutional construction of the European Enlightenment. In addition, Chinese knowledge in medicine, geography and other fields laid a foundation for the development of Western sinology. Based on solid historical materials, the book adopts rigorous empirical research and theoretical interpretation as its research methods, breaking through the traditional perspectives of one-way transmission and the clash of civilizations. It reveals the essence of mutual learning among civilizations: equality and mutual respect constitute the premise of inter-civilizational dialogue, value compatibility is the key to inter-civilizational communication, and pluralistic coexistence is the inevitable trend of civilizational development. Although this period of equal mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilizations was relatively short in the

long course of history, it provides a paradigm for upholding the contemporary vision of civilizations featuring equality, mutual learning, dialogue and inclusiveness, and offers important enlightenment and practical significance for overcoming current civilizational estrangement and advancing the common development of human civilization.

Keywords: Eastward Transmission of Western Learning; Westward Spread of Chinese Learning; Mutual Learning among Civilizations

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标题: 跨越山海的思想回响——评张西平的《中西文明互鉴史》

摘要: 张西平教授在其著作《中西文明互鉴史》中以全球史视野梳理了 1500-1800 年间中西文明双向互动的历史图景,呈现了这一时期西学东渐与中学西传的丰富实践。西学东渐为中国带来了西方的宗教、逻辑、科技与艺术,推动了传统儒学的革新与实学思潮的兴起。中学西传则以儒家经典为核心,深刻影响了欧洲启蒙运动的思想走向与制度建构,中国的医学、地理等知识也为西方汉学发展奠定了基础。著作立足详实史料,以扎实的实证考据与理论阐释为研究方法,突破单向传播与文明冲突论的传统视角,揭示出文明互鉴的核心要义,即平等尊重是文明对话的前提,价值契合是文明传播的关键,多元共生是文明发展的必然。这段中西文明平等互鉴的历史,虽然在整个时间长河中维系时间不长,但却为当代坚守平等、互鉴、对话、包容的文明观提供了典范,为破解当下文明隔阂、推动人类文明共同发展带来重要启示与现实意义。

关键词: 西学东渐; 中学西用; 文明互鉴

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Civilizations are enriched by exchanges and diversified through mutual learning. The collision and integration of different civilizations constitute an important force driving the progress of human society. The period from 1500 to 1800 was a highly iconic phase of exchange in the developmental processes of Chinese and Western civilizations. During this era, free from capitalist plunder and power politics, the two civilizations engaged in equal and cross-continental interactions. The eastward transmission of Western learning injected new vitality into traditional Chinese thought and science and technology, while the westward spread of Chinese culture profoundly shaped the ideological trajectory of the European Enlightenment, forming a precious chapter in the history of intercivilizational learning.

For a long time, studies on the history of Sino-Western civilizational exchanges have often been trapped in a narrative of one-way transmission or fallen into oppositional frameworks influenced by the clash of civilizations thesis, failing to present the true nature of their interactive relationship. Professor Zhang Xiping's *A History of Mutual Learning between Chinese and Western Civilizations* breaks through the limitations of existing research from a global historical perspective. Based on extensive and reliable multilingual primary sources, through solid empirical research and in-depth theoretical analysis, the book sorts out typical cases of the eastward transmission of Western learning and the westward spread of Chinese culture, outlines the genuine pattern of two-way interaction between Chinese and Western civilizations during this period, and reveals the essence of civilizational mutual learning.

Taking *A History of Mutual Learning between Chinese and Western Civilizations* as the research subject, this paper explores the process of Sino-Western civilizational interaction presented in the book, interprets its condensed ideas of civilizational mutual learning, and excavates the practical enlightenment this history offers for overcoming contemporary civilizational barriers and upholding an equal, inclusive new vision of civilization. It aims to explore a universally applicable way for human civilizations to coexist and develop together by connecting past and present.

1. Outlining Cross-Continental Two-Way Interaction

In the history of mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilizations, the interactions from 1500 to 1800 represent an exceptionally precious period. Hu Shi described cultural exchanges between China and Europe during this time as “a model of love at first sight” (Zhang Xiping, 2024, p. 437). This was an era of friendly interaction based on genuine equality. Professor Zhang Xiping argues that “in studying the history of Sino-Western cultural exchanges, we need an objective and fair perspective and a broad humanistic spirit conducive to the development of global culture” (Lu Sihong & Jin Daoyuan, 2023, p. 80). In *A History of Mutual Learning between Chinese and Western Civilizations*, the author narrates the history of the eastward transmission of Western learning and the westward spread of Chinese culture from the perspective of human civilization, demonstrating the process of mutual exploration and nourishment between the two great civilizations and providing a valuable model for understanding the nature of intercivilizational learning.

1.1 The Eastward Transmission of Western Learning

The wave of Western learning spreading eastward during the Ming-Qing transition left an indelible mark on the development of Chinese culture. Missionaries who came to China served as pioneers, building bridges of cultural communication between China and Europe. Their exchanges extended far beyond the propagation of Christian scriptures, covering astronomy, calendar studies, mathematics, geography, logic, medicine, painting, and many other fields, all becoming important carriers of Sino-Western cultural interaction.

After Portugal occupied Malacca, it attempted to conquer China by military force but failed in three battles against the Ming Dynasty. Thereafter, a 300-year period of equal exchange with China began. During these three centuries, Christianity was introduced to China three times. Among the missionaries, Matteo Ricci and others proactively adopted the adaptive strategy of “accommodating Confucianism and transforming

Buddhism,” appropriately handling the relationship between Christianity and indigenous Chinese culture, creating favorable conditions for a spiritual encounter between Chinese and Western cultures.

After adopting appropriate communication strategies, missionaries urgently needed to translate Christian scriptures. The translation of the Bible showed a continuous lineage: Emmanuel Diaz Junior first produced an annotated translation *Direct Explanation of the Bible*, which directly influenced later translators such as Jean Basset. Basset’s version in turn became a model for Robert Morrison and Joshua Marshman. Notably, Jean-Paul Gobi was the first Jesuit missionary in China to complete a full Chinese translation of the Bible. In his translation practice, he clearly proposed the vernacular principle centered on “rendering into colloquial language,” pioneering the use of vernacular Chinese in Bible translation. This represented a major advancement in Jesuit translation endeavors in China and provided a reference for the subsequent localized dissemination of Christian scriptures.

In their missionary work, missionaries keenly perceived the profound differences in modes of thinking between Chinese and Western cultures: traditional Chinese thinking lacked systematic logical support, whereas Western culture possessed strict logical rules. Aristotle’s logic thus became a representative work introduced to China. *Exploration of Logic* (Mingli Tan), a collaborative work by Francisco Furtado and Li Zhizao, and *Study of Ultimate Reason* (Qiongli Xue), translated by the Belgian missionary Ferdinand Verbiest, introduced the deductive system of Western logic to China, which “injected a breath of fresh air into the Chinese intellectual scene amid the decline of Yangming’s Neo-Confucianism” (Zhang Xiping, 2024, p. 3). Scholars of the Ming-Qing period such as Fang Yizhi and Dai Zhen actively absorbed these ideas. Fang Yizhi and his three sons “formed an important thread in the interaction between Confucian classics and science in the early Qing Dynasty” (Zhang Xiping, 2024, p. 197). Dai Zhen’s “greatest contribution was introducing the method of rigorous logical deduction based on axioms into the study of Chinese philosophy” (Zhang Xiping, 2024, p. 202), as best exemplified in his work *Correcting the Meanings of Terms in Mencius*.

Furthermore, profound influences emerged in art, science, and technology. Missionaries including Giovanni Gherardini, Matteo Ripa, Giuseppe Castiglione, Jean Denis Attiret, and Jean-Paul Gobi integrated Western painting styles with Chinese artistic traditions, creating a unique aesthetic form. Matteo Ricci’s *Meaning of the Heaven and Earth* introduced Western astronomical knowledge, while the *Chongzhen Calendar* was the first comprehensive adoption of Western calendrical systems. His translation of *Elements of Geometry* with Xu Guangqi, which included definitions, axioms, and propositions, introduced a new deductive reasoning method to China. His *Universal Geography* enabled the Chinese to intuitively understand the geographical worldview of Europeans, breaking through traditional Chinese cosmology. The dissemination of such scientific and technological knowledge was not a simple one-way import, but aligned with the practical learning trend of the Ming-Qing period, laying groundwork for the spirit of “practical governance and application.”

1.2 The Westward Spread of Chinese Culture

Alongside the eastward transmission of Western learning, the westward spread of Chinese culture flourished. Chinese culture, too, through translation and dissemination by missionaries, profoundly influenced the

European Enlightenment and social development. To meet practical missionary needs, the Spanish missionary Juan Cobo translated the popular moral text *Mirror of the Mind* (Mingxin Baojian) literally in the Philippines and published four versions. Later research confirmed that the Italian missionary Michele Ruggieri produced a Latin translation of *Mirror of the Mind*, entitled *Collection of Famous Sayings from Various Masters*, which remained unpublished. Their joint efforts opened the prelude to the westward transmission of Confucian classics.

The westward spread of Confucian classics formed the core of Chinese culture's transmission to Europe. In 1687, Philippe Couplet compiled *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (The Chinese Philosopher Confucius), published in Paris, which included translations of *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *The Analects*. This marked the first relatively complete introduction of Confucian thought into European academic circles. Although the work emerged amid the Chinese Rites Controversy and aimed to justify Matteo Ricci's accommodationist missionary strategy, it unexpectedly sparked widespread European intellectual interest in Confucianism. Confucian ideas—emphasizing natural reason, the political ideal of governing through virtue, and the moral principle of “Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself”—highly coincided with the European Enlightenment's call to oppose theology and promote reason, becoming a ideological weapon for Enlightenment thinkers to criticize feudal theocracy. The absorption and admiration of Confucian culture by Enlightenment thinkers became the most influential achievement of the westward spread of Chinese culture. Examples include the founding of the Physiocratic school by François Quesnay, the father of modern Western economics; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's research on *The Book of Changes*; Voltaire's praise of traditional Chinese ethics; and Montesquieu's commendation of rule by virtue.

Beyond Confucian thought, Chinese medicine, botany, and geography also spread widely across Europe. Published in 1735, *Description of the Chinese Empire* was one of the three great works of early Western Sinology. It systematically translated and introduced traditional Chinese medical classics such as *The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic* and *Compendium of Materia Medica*. Although Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's evaluation of Chinese medicine carried Western cultural biases, he acknowledged it as a unique system refined through thousands of years of practice.

The book's introduction of Chinese medical theories of yin-yang and five phases, pulse diagnosis, and medicinal properties allowed European scholars to comprehensively understand traditional Chinese medicine for the first time, exerting a significant impact on European natural history and medical circles. Michael Boym's works *Flora Sinensis* and *Clavis Medica* became essential sources for Europeans to learn about Chinese plants and medicine, directly stimulating the rise of professional Western Sinology. Professional sinologists such as Jean-Pierre Abel Rémusat established new paradigms of Western Sinology based on these missionary studies. Michele Ruggieri's *Atlas of China* provided the first detailed Western account of China's administrative structure, social conditions, and regional products, correcting earlier vague European perceptions of China and becoming important historical materials for studying early European views of China.

2. Solid Historical Support and Scholarly Argumentation

The depiction of cross-continental Sino-Western civilizational interactions in this book rests on solid,

systematic, multilingual primary documents—everything is evidence-based and verifiable. This is the most prominent feature and greatest strength of the work. To gain an in-depth and meticulous understanding of Sino-Western civilizational exchanges during this period, the author devoted an unimaginable amount of time, conducting extensive research in Germany, France, Portugal, Italy, and elsewhere. His tireless work can be found in major collections including the Berlin State Library, the Manuscripts Division of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Vatican Library, the Arquivo da Ajuda in Portugal, the former Collegio di Cinese in Naples, and the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (Yao Junling, 2023, p. 57). To read multilingual original documents, the author continued to study German, French, Latin, and other foreign languages well into middle age, overcoming linguistic barriers. This dedication and perseverance in scholarship fully embody a scholar's sincerity and responsibility, earning sincere admiration.

To restore this precious episode of Sino-Western interaction, the author abandoned empty speculation and invested enormous effort, combining empirical textual research with theoretical interpretation. Through extensive archival work and detailed argumentation, he presents a nuanced picture of Sino-Western cultural exchange. Take the introduction of Western logic to China as an example. When tracing the transmission and translation of two core works—*Exploration of Logic* and *Study of Ultimate Reason*—the author compares Aristotle's original logical texts with the concepts of "five kinds" and "ten categories" in *Exploration of Logic*, clearly showing how Western logical concepts were transformed within the context of classical Chinese. He further compares corresponding terms in Latin, English, classical Chinese, and modern Chinese to clarify the evolution of terminology. In addition, he maps the chapter correspondences between the Latin base text *Commentary on the Whole Dialectic* and *Exploration of Logic*, clarifying their inheritance and differences, and compiles detailed tables summarizing the fascicle arrangement, translation sources, and original base texts of the fourteen surviving volumes of *Study of Ultimate Reason*. In many places, footnotes occupy more than half the page to fully elucidate related content. This single example reveals the book's immense workload, exhaustive annotations, and rigorous textual research—and it is only one among countless such cases throughout the work.

It is precisely the author's rigorous and pragmatic scholarly attitude and the resulting solid historical foundation that culminated in this book, enabling him to examine this period from a global historical perspective. "Studying Chinese history must place it within the context of world history to explore the characteristics and patterns of the development and evolution of Chinese history and culture through civilizational mutual learning" (Zhang Xiping, 2024, p. 151). Only in this way can one transcend internal limitations, objectively restore this historical period, uncover the value of Chinese culture, absorb nutrients from Western culture, and continue this legendary story of cross-continental civilizational exchange and mutual learning.

3. Echoing the Ideals of Civilizational Mutual Learning

Three hundred years of two-way Sino-Western civilizational exchange during the Ming-Qing transition left not only rich historical traces but also profound ideological echoes. Through meticulous textual research and in-depth analysis in *A History of Mutual Learning between Chinese and Western Civilizations*, Professor Zhang Xiping reveals that civilizational mutual learning is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but a

spiritual collision, dialogue, and integration among different civilizations. Its ideological core challenges the thesis of the clash of civilizations and provides a harmonious path for the development of distinct civilizations.

The fruitful achievements of Sino-Western exchanges from 1500 to 1800 stemmed crucially from the formation of an equal framework of civilizational dialogue. Therefore, equality and respect are prerequisites for civilizational mutual learning. The practice of Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci serves as an exemplary model. Rejecting a mentality of cultural hegemony, he proactively studied Confucian classics and proposed the adaptive strategy of “honoring earlier Confucianism while criticizing later Confucianism.” Although his characterization of Confucianism was limited by his Christian perspective, he pioneered equal dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures.

By regarding Confucianism as philosophy rather than religion and respecting Chinese rituals of ancestor and Confucius worship, Ricci’s attitude of harmony without uniformity embodies the essence of civilizational mutual learning. In contrast, Portugal’s colonial conquest of Malacca during the same period—based on power politics, cultural expansion, and violent plunder—stands in sharp contrast to equal Sino-Western exchange, indirectly confirming that equality and respect are foundational to civilizational coexistence. This idea found further resonance in the European Enlightenment. Thinkers such as Voltaire and Quesnay set aside Eurocentric prejudices and proactively absorbed reasonable elements from Confucianism, proving that genuine mutual learning can only occur when different civilizations respect one another on an equal footing.

The profound mutual influence between Chinese and Western civilizations across continents was rooted in overlapping value pursuits in their respective cultures and ideas. Western logic and science were accepted by Chinese scholar-officials largely because their practical spirit aligned closely with the pragmatic intellectual trend of the Ming-Qing period. Similarly, Confucian thought profoundly influenced the European Enlightenment because its emphasis on natural reason and rule by virtue matched Europe’s contemporary need to break the shackles of theocracy and pursue secular rationality. The practices of Leibniz, Quesnay, and others demonstrate that the vitality of civilizational transmission lies in value compatibility. Such demand-oriented mutual learning reveals that every civilization possesses an intrinsic value core, and effective communication and integration can only be achieved by identifying points of convergence.

History eloquently proves that the diversity of civilizations is not a source of conflict, but a driving force for mutual learning. Only pluralistic coexistence offers a sustainable way forward.

Chinese and Western civilizations emerged from distinct backgrounds and possess markedly different characteristics: Chinese civilization emphasizes harmony between heaven and humanity and an ethics-centered worldview, while Western civilization stresses rational logic and scientific exploration. Yet these differences did not lead to civilizational isolation; instead, they fostered complementary coexistence. Western logical thinking and scientific methods compensated for the tendency of traditional Chinese thought to emphasize intuition over empirical verification. Chinese ethical wisdom and principles of governance provided new perspectives for Europe to break through theocratic authoritarianism. This practice of pluralistic coexistence directly refutes Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis and fully proves that different civilizations can harmoniously coexist while preserving their unique identities. Just as the spread of Confucius Sinarum Philosophus in Europe shows, Confucian thought did not replace European traditions, but became a

vital force in their intellectual renewal. This model of “each beauty beautifying the other, beauty in shared beauty” represents the ideal form of civilizational mutual learning.

Professor Zhang Xiping’s discussion in *A History of Mutual Learning between Chinese and Western Civilizations* allows us to rediscover this underappreciated historical period. “Revisiting this history is intended to bring us back to the cultural narratives of China and Europe and to the fundamental principles of civilizational mutual learning” (Zhang Xiping, 2024, p. 438). By drawing wisdom from history, we can discover a timeless way for civilizations to coexist. Matteo Ricci’s “Confucian accommodation” policy teaches us that cross-cultural communication requires respect for the other’s cultural traditions and proactive adaptation to achieve intellectual resonance. The selective absorption of Confucian thought by Enlightenment thinkers shows that civilizational mutual learning is not blind imitation, but creative transformation and innovative development. Against the backdrop of today’s backlash against globalization and deepening civilizational divisions, this ideological resonance is particularly precious. It inspires both China and the West to move beyond Eurocentrism. China should shift from an apprentice-like stance to an equal participant in civilizational dialogue, enhancing cultural self-confidence. The West should abandon its sense of superiority and recognize the global significance of other civilizations. In this way, the two civilizations can return to the path of mutual learning, uphold a new vision of civilization, and achieve pluralistic coexistence, integration, and mutual enrichment. Therefore, Professor Zhang Xiping’s effort to revisit this history carries profound significance. It helps us stand in the present world, uphold a civilizational vision of equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness, promote understanding among civilizations through exchange, build consensus through mutual learning, pursue common development, and jointly write a new chapter of prosperity and progress for human civilization.

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