

# The Pursuit of Individual Value and Free Expression: A Comparative Study of the Eastern and Western Renaissance and Its Impact on Modern Society

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to explore the connection between the Renaissance in Europe from the 14th to the 17th centuries and the cultural Renaissance in China from the Song to the Ming dynasties. In particular, it focuses on the research background of the two historical periods, and the research theme includes a comparative analysis of the historical background, conceptual nature, artistic expression and social impact of the Eastern and Western Renaissance. The study found that despite the significant differences in the background, core ideas and ways of expression of the two revivals, they both reflected the universal spiritual needs of human beings - emphasizing individual values and pursuing free expression. At the same time, these two Renaissance not only profoundly changed their respective regions, but their global influence also affected the whole world through channels such as the Silk Road. In addition, the paper examines the role and influence of these revival movements in the context of global cultural exchange. The results show that they have promoted the reconciliation of previously hostile cultural circles and formed a stable state of peace. Thus, by studying the East-West Renaissance, in this paper, the author can gain a new perspective on cultural exchange and understanding in the current era of globalization.

**Keywords:** Renaissance, New culture movement, humanism, ideological liberation movement.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Conceptual Explanation of the Renaissance

The Renaissance, originating from Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries, derives its name from the Italian word "Rinascimento," meaning "rebirth." This historical period marked a significant transformation of Europe from the Middle Ages to the modern era. During this stage, culture and knowledge experienced a revival, with an unprecedented emphasis on rational thinking, individualism, and secular values. The ideas and forms that emerged during this time had profound effects on social and political structures, and they contributed to the scientific revolution. As Greenblatt stated, the Renaissance became a key catalyst for shaping the modern world [1]. Similarly, China witnessed a similar cultural revival during the Song to Ming periods, although its historical context, core concepts, and manifestations differed significantly from the Western Renaissance. It is worth noting that the New Culture Movement in China, which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, launched a vigorous critique against feudalism and traditional cultural constraints. This spirit of criticism and the desire for individual liberation resonated in many ways with the ideals of the Western Renaissance [2]. However, the understanding of the Renaissance in both the East and the West should not be limited to descriptions of their respective internal developments. Instead, it should be examined in the broader context of cultural exchanges. As a global historical phenomenon, the Renaissance not only transformed Europe and China but also influenced the entire world. For example, the opening of the Silk Road intensified material, cultural, and knowledge exchanges between the East and the West, thereby exerting profound impacts on the Renaissance on a global scale [3]. Moreover, these exchange processes facilitated reconciliation between initially hostile cultural spheres and established stable conditions for peace [4]. Based on this premise, this study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the historical background, conceptual essence, and social impacts of the Renaissance in the East and the West using a literature analysis approach. The study seeks to reveal the tensions

between the differences and commonalities between the two, with particular attention to how both East and West Renaissance movements reflected universal human spiritual needs by emphasizing core concepts such as individual value and the pursuit of freedom, thus achieving similar cultural revivals in different cultural contexts. Additionally, this research will explore the insights that the East and West Renaissance offer to today's globalized era, aiming to provide a new perspective on cultural exchange and understanding in the contemporary world.

## 1.2. Literature Review

From the Chinese perspective, Hu Shih's "The Renaissance of China" and Luo Zhitian's "Inheritance in Fission: Chinese Culture and Academia in the Early 20th Century" provide profound insights into the New Culture Movement in China [5]. They emphasize the importance of intellectual liberation and knowledge renewal in driving social progress in China. The articles by Shi Xiaojun and Sun Changwu, on the other hand, analyze in detail the complex situations faced by the Tang Dynasty's ancient prose movement and the Ming Dynasty's Seven Masters' literary revival movement in challenging and integrating with tradition from a literary perspective [6,7]. Wang Shuizhao's "Mr. Chen Yinke's Perspective on the Song Dynasty" explores the influence of the Renaissance period from a historical perspective [8]. From the Western perspective, Burckhardt's "The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy", Huizinga's "The Waning of the Middle Ages" and Greenblatt's "The Swerve" reveal the profound impact of the European Renaissance on art, politics, science, and social transformation [1,9,10]. Lu Xun's two works, "A Madman's Diary" and "The True Story of Ah Q," demonstrate the complexities of the New Culture Movement from a literary and societal perspective as it challenges old orders and breaks free from traditional constraints [2]. Thus, this research case covers the ancient prose movement in the Tang Dynasty, the Confucian reform movement and the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, the literary revival movement of the Seven Masters in the Ming Dynasty, and the New Culture Movement in China. In the Western context, this paper selects the Italian Renaissance, the social transformation in the late Middle Ages, and the role of ancient Greek classical works in inspiring the Renaissance as case studies. These cases span various fields such as history, literature, philosophy, and culture, providing specific and vivid empirical materials for understanding the Renaissance movement in this paper.

## 2. Historical Background and Essence of Ideas

### 2.1. The Western Renaissance

The term "Renaissance" originated from the period in European history from the 14th to the 17th century, and this era witnessed Europe's transition from the Middle Ages to the modern period, bringing about a revival of culture and knowledge. This transformation reshaped humanity's understanding and appreciation of reason, individualism, and secularism [9]. Scholars typically position the European Renaissance movement between the 14th and 16th centuries. However, world literary masterpieces such as Cervantes' "Don Quixote" and Shakespeare's four great tragedies did not emerge until the early 17th century. Similarly, significant works by individuals like Francis Bacon and Descartes, the formulation of Galileo's three laws of motion, the development of Harvey's physiology, and the masterpieces of artists like Rembrandt all appeared after the late 16th century during the era of the European Renaissance. Regarding the temporal boundaries of the European Renaissance, experts compiling "A History of the European Renaissance" held six national conferences and ultimately reached a consensus, establishing the upper limit of the European Renaissance as the period when Dante published "Divine Comedy" (1307-1321). Dante's ideas precisely reflect and embody a series of fundamental viewpoints from the end of the Middle Ages, and this characteristic is more apparent in his seminal work, "Divine Comedy," compared to the related works of writers such as Petrarch and Boccaccio. However, there are still differing views regarding the lower limit of the Renaissance movement. Some domestic and foreign publications broadly assert that the Renaissance ended in the late 16th century. Certain foreign works claim that

the European Renaissance came to a close with the beginning of the German Lutheran Reformation in 1517, or they consider the sacking of Rome by Emperor Charles V in 1527, known as the "Sack of Rome," as a symbol of the decline of the Renaissance. Some domestic works also argue that the European Renaissance "began in the mid-15th century and declined in the 16th century," or suggest that it ended with the death of the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei in 1642, and so on. It is generally accepted that the lower limit of the Renaissance period can be marked by two renowned works: Francis Bacon's publication of "Novum Organum" in 1620 and René Descartes' famous work "Discourse on the Method" written in 1637, placing the lower limit of the period in the 1630s. Bacon has been praised by Marx and Engels as the "true ancestor of British materialism and modern experimental science," while Descartes has been referred to by Hegel as the "advocate of modern philosophy." In the 1620s and 1630s, with the emergence of significant works by Bacon and Descartes, there was a gradual transformation of ideologies leading into the modern era. Therefore, it is evident that the Renaissance was not solely a return to the classical period but rather an assimilation and exploration of classical culture in order to achieve innovation and progress. The thinkers, artists, and scientists of that era revered the knowledge and achievements of the classical period. However, they were not content with merely replicating ancient ideas and forms. On the contrary, they sought to break free from traditional constraints, explore new possibilities, and engage in groundbreaking experiments. Thus, the Renaissance was indeed a transitional period that both inherited the legacy of antiquity and foreshadowed the birth of the modern era.

## **2.2. The Renaissance of Arts and Literature in China**

Although ancient China was trapped within the confines of feudalism, with the people oppressed and stifled like eels entangled in nets, there were still several instances of intellectual enlightenment. Although these instances of enlightenment are not commonly referred to as a "renaissance" in academic circles, as Hu Shi believed, a renaissance is not merely a revival of art and culture, but more importantly, a movement of intellectual liberation and social transformation. During these periods, both in the East and West, individualism was emphasized, knowledge and science were pursued, human-centered ideas were promoted, and profound reflections on social structures took place. These core elements of the Renaissance make it appropriate to refer to them as a "renaissance". Throughout thousands of years, from the Song to Ming Dynasty, Chinese cultural progress echoed many aspects of the Western Renaissance. In modern times, the New Culture Movement challenged traditional notions while also drawing inspiration from Western achievements in art, philosophy, and science. This similarity in goals and significance between the New Culture Movement and the Western Renaissance implies that both movements were committed to promoting social progress, pursuing knowledge renewal, intellectual freedom, and social reform. They encouraged individuals to break free from old constraints and guided China towards modernity, resulting in comprehensive advancements and innovations in Chinese culture. Furthermore, Hu Shi initially referred to the New Culture Movement as China's Renaissance, aiming to emphasize its profound impact and important position in Chinese society [5]. Additionally, by drawing parallels with the Western Renaissance, he sought wider attention and recognition for China's cultural movement internationally [5]. Therefore, this paper adopts Hu Shi's definition of the "renaissance" in China, classifying it as a parallel to the ancient Chinese movement of intellectual liberation and including the far-reaching influence of the New Culture Movement in the historical category of "renaissance." Ultimately, these five "renaissance movements" can be summarized as follows.

### **2.2.1. The Tang Dynasty Ancient Prose Renaissance Movement and the Emergence of Chan Buddhism**

This marked the first revival of Chinese culture. The Tang Dynasty Ancient Prose Movement emphasized a return to the language and style of ancient times, advocating for simple and direct expressions, while rejecting the ornate style of parallel prose. Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan emerged as prominent figures in the Tang Dynasty Ancient Prose Movement. Their compositions of poetry, prose, and other literary works not only revealed the allure and expressive power of ancient prose but also

exerted influence on the subsequent development of literary criticism and appreciation. This movement championed aesthetic standards and systematically assessed literary works, thereby fostering the advancement of literary criticism. Furthermore, the proponents of this movement held ancient culture as an exemplary paradigm, placing significant emphasis on upholding traditional values. Concurrently, in the realm of religion, Chan Buddhism, a reformed version of Indian Buddhism, emerged and gained popularity during this period. Both of these movements contributed to the revitalization of Chinese culture, imbuing it with distinctive local characteristics and innovation. As a result, the movement made a positive contribution to the preservation and transmission of Chinese traditional culture. In conclusion, the Tang Dynasty Ancient Prose Movement, characterized by its return to ancient language and style and its emphasis on simplicity and directness in expression, exerted far-reaching effects on Chinese culture and literature.

### **2.2.2. The Song Dynasty Confucian Reform Movement and the Rise of Neo-Confucianism**

The Confucian reform movement in the Song Dynasty represented the second revival of Chinese culture. Throughout this process, a strong secular philosophy of Neo-Confucianism emerged, gradually overshadowing and eventually replacing the religious influences of Buddhism and Daoism, thereby secularizing Confucianism. This transformation not only strengthened the position of Confucian thought but also enriched the essence of traditional Chinese culture.

### **2.2.3. The Literary Retrogression Movement of the Seven Masters in the Ming Dynasty**

The literary retrogression movement of the Seven Masters in the Ming Dynasty marked the third revival of Chinese culture. They aimed to restore ancient literary styles and moral standards as a means of criticizing the social turmoil of their time. This movement showcased a complex interplay between challenging tradition and adhering to it, emphasizing both inheritance and innovation. However, it is unlikely that such thoughts could have originated from small producers under conditions of the small-scale agricultural economy, especially considering their self-interested "human nature" of love described in the General History. For example, the Taizhou School was an early 16th-century heretical movement that opposed Neo-Confucianism and feudal ethics. While the General History somewhat acknowledges their ideological system as having "partially achieved the interests of the oppressed and exploited class," it raises a question regarding their representation, whether they represent their own identity as the "oppressed and exploited" or another group. Requiring liberation from the feudal cage in pursuit of freedom and equality, their anti-feudal nature should classify them as representatives of the early stage of capitalism and humanists in China. In summary, these three movements—the Tang Dynasty Ancient Prose Renaissance Movement, the Song Dynasty Confucian Reform Movement, and the Ming Dynasty Literary Retrogression Movement—played significant roles in the revival of Chinese culture. Each movement responded to the social changes and challenges of its time, contributing to the progression and transformation of Chinese cultural traditions.

### **2.2.4. The rebellion and revolution against Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties in the 17th century**

This marked the fourth revival of Chinese culture. During this stage, people began to challenge the authoritative position of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and proposed a new method that emphasized the significance of philology and historiography, strictly adhering to the importance of textual criticism. This transformation revealed a re-examination and critique of tradition, opening up a more diverse and enriched perspective for cultural studies. In the 17th century, a crucial transformation took place in Chinese history, marking a profound critique of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and the emergence of new methods for studying Confucian classics based on philology and historiography. This period was characterized by challenging social circumstances, including the collapse of feudal order, social unrest, and the infiltration of external influences, which led people to reflect on traditional knowledge systems and values. The rebellion against the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism mainly manifested as a challenge to its moral principles and worldview. Led by

thinkers like Li Zhi, the "School of Mind" emphasized the integration of cognition and action, breaking away from the dogmatic approach of focusing solely on inner moral cultivation while neglecting practical social issues. This rebellion not only shook the authority of Neo-Confucianism but also revealed a profound reevaluation of traditional knowledge systems in transitional Chinese society. Simultaneously, a new method for studying Confucian classics called textual criticism, advocated by scholars such as Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu, emerged and developed [11]. They emphasized the use of philology and historiography, rigorously examining historical documents to conduct textual criticism, and placing emphasis on empirical research and text interpretation. For instance, Gu Yanwu's "Book on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Counties and States in the World" employed textual criticism as a method to conduct in-depth investigations and studies on various issues concerning politics, economy, and culture across different regions at that time. Compared to the abstract speculation of Neo-Confucianism, this new research method prioritized empirical study and practical application, emphasizing the investigation of real-world problems. The introduction of this method not only opened up a more diverse and enriched perspective for cultural studies but also represented a profound reform of traditional methods for studying Confucian classics.

Therefore, it can be said that the 17th century was an important stage in the revival of Chinese culture. During this period, the intellectual activities and methodological transformations led by thinkers such as Li Zhi, Huang Zongxi, and Gu Yanwu had a profound influence on future generations, laying a significant foundation for historical research and cultural development in China.

#### **2.2.5. The New Culture Movement: the Culmination of China's Cultural Renaissance**

The New Culture Movement, which began in 1915 and lasted until 1923, was a significant cultural trend in early 20th-century Chinese modern history, often referred to as China's cultural renaissance by intellectuals like Hu Shi [12]. Firstly, in terms of historical context, the New Culture Movement emerged at a critical moment when China was undergoing a transformative period of modernization. By the end of the 19th century, China faced aggression from foreign powers, the collapse of feudal social order, and a profound impact on traditional cultural values. This crisis spurred intellectual awakening and introspection among Chinese intellectuals, leading to the questioning of traditional culture and institutions. Against this backdrop, the New Culture Movement gave rise to a series of cultural revolutions aimed at propelling Chinese society toward modernization. It advocated values such as science, democracy, freedom, and equality, critiqued feudal ethics and Confucian traditions, and championed individual independence and free thinking [13]. The proponents of the New Culture Movement actively disseminated these new ideas through the establishment of journals, lectures, and publications, calling for the pursuit of freedom, rationality, and modernization. Furthermore, the New Culture Movement had far-reaching effects on Chinese culture. It promoted the popularization of scientific knowledge, facilitated the dissemination and absorption of Western advanced culture, and brought forth a new cultural vitality in China. In the field of literature, the movement broke away from the constraints of traditional literature, advocated the use of vernacular language and realism in creative works, and pioneered new literary styles. Simultaneously, the New Culture Movement provided theoretical support and mobilizing force for China's social revolution, establishing an ideological foundation for social change in China. Overall, the New Culture Movement played a crucial role as China's cultural renaissance in modern Chinese history. It reflected the transformation and crisis faced by Chinese society in its historical context and called for intellectual liberation and knowledge renewal at its core [13]. Undoubtedly, it rightfully stands as China's fifth "renaissance" in the realm of arts and culture.

### **3. Comparative Analysis of the Societal Contexts and Impacts of the Renaissance in East and West**

The European Renaissance from the 14th to 17th century and the "Renaissance" during China's Song to Ming period signify significant epochs of intellectual awakening and cultural transformation. Despite their commonalities in numerous aspects, due to differing societal contexts, they exhibit

notable distinctions on certain key elements. The concept of Renaissance can be understood in two ways: rebirth of classical culture on a literal level, and awakening of societal advancement and culture intrinsically.

### **3.1. Europe**

In Europe, the Renaissance is considered the product following the Middle Ages characterized by profound religious fanaticism, stagnation of technological advancements, and rigid societal structures. Prior to the Renaissance, culture predominantly belonged to the clergy or political elite due to the church's commanding control [10]. However, with the advent of the Black Death and substantial population reduction, radical changes occurred in societal structures and ideologies. These cataclysmic events inadvertently galvanized societal progress and afforded necessary room for new ideas and practices [1]. Thus, the earliest evidence of Renaissance phenomenon was in Florence, Italy, characterized by its secular atmosphere and economic prosperity, from where the influence of Renaissance gradually pervaded Western Europe.

### **3.2. China**

Conversely, China experienced no interruption of classical culture, and despite disruptions, it mostly maintained continuous development. Therefore, literally, China lacked the conditions for "rebirth." Nevertheless, the emergence of a "Renaissance" in China occurred during the transitional period from Song to Ming dynasties. During this period, widespread social turbulence and economic transformations provided fertile ground for the resurgence of culture and knowledge [14]. For instance, an antiquarian literary movement in the Chinese literature of the 16th century can be traced from the Tang and Song Dynasties classic prose movements, through the transformation of Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, continuing from the beginning of the 16th century until the Tianqi period. Antiquarian dissidents utilized their perspective on literary development to promote individualism, criticize the classic imitation that dominated the literary field, claiming it eroded originality, ultimately ending conservative domination. The philosophy of "expressing one's spirit unabashedly without conforming to conventions" represented the core thought of this movement.

### **3.3. Faith and Religious Ideas**

The relationship between faith and the Renaissance during these periods becomes particularly crucial. In Europe, novel religious ideas stimulated the pursuit of personal religious freedom but concurrently incited religious wars and social disturbances. In China, Confucian thought was challenged, while Buddhism and Taoism grew increasingly influential, revealing the critical role traditional religious concepts played in societal transformations [4].

### **3.4. Culture Exchanges among the World**

In the backdrop of global exchanges, the transformations of the Renaissance in East and West materialized. Global exchanges of materials, culture, and knowledge, such as the opening of the Silk Road, offered abundant resources and inspiration for the European Renaissance [9]. Concurrently, the shared values of promoting the humanistic spirit and individualism in the East and West foreshadowed the coming age of globalization. Hence, despite being influenced by different societal environments, the Renaissances in East and West shared similarities in many facets. Such commonalities reveal the universality and cross-cultural nature of the Renaissance, demonstrating humanity's universal pursuit of knowledge, freedom, and individual value. These influences enabled the modern Chinese Enlightenment movement to undertake profound societal changes by engaging with and assimilating the values of the Western Renaissance [5].

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the above studies, this paper argues that both the Western Renaissance and China's "Renaissance" (i.e., the New Culture Movement), as well as earlier movements such as the Tang Dynasty's ancient prose movement and the Ming Dynasty's Seven Masters' classicism movement, represent processes of intellectual liberation, knowledge renewal, and social progress. These movements do not simply reject tradition; rather, they challenge and surpass tradition while also drawing inspiration from and inheriting certain elements of tradition. They demonstrate a complex and vibrant relationship between tradition and innovation. Moreover, these movements are inevitable trends toward modernization in their respective societies.

In conclusion, as a cultural concept, the Renaissance has profound historical roots and reflects humanity's aspirations and pursuit of the future. Although there are many differences between Eastern and Western Renaissance, the underlying spiritual aspirations - the pursuit of knowledge, freedom, and individual worth - demonstrate astonishing similarities. This commonality reveals universal human needs and heralds the arrival of the era of globalization. On the one hand, the comparative study of the Renaissance in the East and West can facilitate a better understanding among contemporary individuals of the impact of the Renaissance on modern China and its significance in the cultural revitalization of China. The Western Renaissance emphasized individualism and rational thinking, and these values were transmitted to China through various channels, exerting a profound influence on China's modern enlightenment movement. On the other hand, these commonalities are further expressed and interpreted in the core concepts, such as the emphasis on individual value, the pursuit of self-expression, and the respect for knowledge and learning, which form the cornerstone of human cultural history and aesthetic quality. However, the commonalities of the Eastern and Western Renaissance also have their negative expressions: both lack a conscious understanding of their historical mission, manifested by (1) the absence of conscious promotion and clear defense, as well as a distinct struggle against old ideologies; (2) both were spontaneous evolutions of historical trends, and in the face of conservative forces, only had vague and unconscious struggles, easily overwhelmed and swept away. Without conscious factors, these movements are merely spontaneous processes of revolution, without achieving revolutionary transformations. However, despite being weak and conservative, such renaissances still brought new paradigms to future research through their focus on language, concepts, and scientific research methods. They made efforts to cleverly coexist with old paradigms, ultimately digesting them and becoming part of their own new paradigms and ideological studies. Therefore, understanding and analyzing the Renaissance can not only help researchers better understand the past but also inspire us to think about the present and future.

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