

# The Etymology of "Talent" and the Comparison of "Origins" Between Chinese and Western Views on Talent\*

Yanhua Li

School of Marxism

Xi'an University of Science and Technology

Xi'an, China 710054

**Abstract**—The difference between Chinese and Western views on talent is essentially the difference of their history and culture. In ancient China, the word referring to talent that meant people stored for use like timber preceded the one that meant people having ability in a particular field. The former first appeared in the Warring States of the Pre-Qin Dynasty in the form of non-word phrase structure. In the early Western Han Dynasty, evolving from a verb phrase to a fixed noun, it gradually had the meaning close to that of "talent" in modern Chinese. In the West, the earliest etymology of talent was "daimon" in ancient Greek, which was directly translated into "genius" by Latin translators. The word "talent" in English comes from the Greek word "talanton". The word "talent" in modern English should be a combination of "daimon" and "talanton". By exploring the social concepts related to talent in the early stage of human civilization between China and the West, some common points of universal significance are found in the comparison of the differences.

**Keywords**—talent; etymology; Chinese and Western; comparison of similarities and differences

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is a significant difference between Chinese and Western views on talent. The essence of this difference is the difference in history and culture, and it is difficult to disappear, because for quite a long time they are restricted by their initial forms and concepts. Opening up the long chronicle of human society, the value of talent can be traced back to the periods of pre-Qin and ancient Greece, ancient Rome. Language and words are the specimens of human civilization. Exploring the etymology of talents can not only help us understand the wisdom of ancient talents, but also help us to follow history and better discover and cultivate talents.

## II. ETYMOLOGY OF "TALENT" IN CHINA

"Talent" is a combination of "human" and "wit". According to Chinese word-formation, it belongs to a compound word of coordinating relation. Then, the

\*Fund: This paper is a stage achievement of the special scientific research project of Shaanxi Education Department in 2016, "Research on Growth and Success of New Generation of Migrant Workers in Shaanxi Province" (Project No. 16JK1480).

etymology of talent in our country is investigated from the order of "人", "才" and "人才". The etymology of talent in China can be traced back to the pre-Qin period.

Regarding "人", Liezi recorded: "Man has hair, teeth and body, difference between hand and foot; man can stand and run". [1] Here "人" generally refers to man in natural form. The ancients believed that "人" shall first have the material carrier of body form, physical appearance and function. Shuowen Jiezi said: "Man is the most precious creation in the heaven and earth. The character in Zhouwen font looks like an arm." [2] It emphasizes that man is the most spiritual and precious creature. Chinese character "人", evolving from hieroglyphic "𠤎", consist of one stroke to the left and another to the right. It can be seen that men not only have body but also have the internal to support. In Book of Rites, man is described as follows: "故人者，其天地之德，阴阳之交，鬼神之会，五行之秀气也。……故人者，天地之心也，五行之端也，食味别声被色而生者也。" [3] The meaning of this sentence is that man is the most outstanding species in the world. It is precious because man brings together the virtues of heaven and earth, and the spirit of Yin and Yang. Body is the shape of man, and virtue is the soul of man. Man consists of invisible and tangible parts. The invisible part refers to body, including body shape, physical appearance and functions. The tangible part refers to virtue. In ancient times, the concept of "virtue" covered a wide range, including intelligence, ability, personality and moral character. In addition to the ontological interpretation of "人", in ancient Chinese, it has the meanings of race, king of man, talent, a person of action, people and so on. From the point of view, man is not only a species of noble moral character, but also a kind of "材" that can be made. Man has the ability to do things and the potential of becoming "king of man".

Shuowen Jiezi interpreted "才" as "艸（草—笔者注）木之初也。从丨，上贯一，将生枝叶。一，地也。" [2]. It means "一" represents the land; "丨" represents stem (tender shoot) of grass and tree; "丿" represents sprouted branches and leaves. In ancient Chinese classics, "才" is generally used as "材". In this regard, Shuowen Jiezi gave such an explanation: "'材' refers to upright trees and trees produce '才'" [2]. Here, "才" is not the exclusive of man but a physical property, form and nature of a specie. Xu Yue said, "tall and upright trees are useful, so we say we enter into mountain to cut timber. The meaning of man

with “才” also came from this”. [4] It shows that “才” is just like “木材”. Only on a good basis can it thrive. This foundation is the quality of seeds and the fertile degree of land. In addition, if we want to cultivate good “才”, we must prune and cultivate carefully, in order to make “优材” out of “才”. We call useful wood “材”, useful material “财” and useful man “才”. That is to say, “材”, “财” and “才” are of same source. Later, people used “才” to express a kind of quality of people. “We call man with abilities talent which is the inside of the man”. [2] “才” refers to the ability that a person possesses.

Before the combination of “人” and “才”, the ancients used the terms "timber", "sage", "capable person" and "hero" to express the meaning of “人才”. With regard to the time when the combination of “人” and “才” (or “材”) came into being as a compound word, some more precise and important information was obtained from the Ancient Chinese Corpus of the Center for Chinese Linguistics Studies of Peking University. First, the use of “人材” preceded “人才”. Secondly, as a non-word phrase, “人材” first appeared in the Warring States of the Pre-Qin Dynasty. Yizhoushu ·Chengkai 47 describes: “政尽人材, 材尽致死”. At this time, “人材” is a verbal phrase structure, referring to the use of talent fully. Thirdly, in the early Western Han Dynasty, this word changed from a verb phrase into a fixed noun, and close to the meaning in modern Chinese. In Book of Songs ·Xiaoya ·Qingqing Zhe’e ·Preface, it is recorded in the early Western Han Dynasty that “菁菁者, 乐育材也, 君子能长育人材, 则天下喜乐之矣。” [5]. Huainanzi, written by Liu An, the king of Huainan in Xi'an, also says, “夫先知远见, 达视千里, 人才之隆也”. Later, “人才” gradually replaced “人材”. The new meaning of the modern connotation of “人才” developed from the inherent meaning of this word in the Western Han Dynasty.

Ancient Chinese society has long noticed the problem of talents. It can be said that China has a long history of researching the phenomenon of talents. But the term “人才” has appeared quite recently, which is related to the use of “材” or “才” alone in ancient times to express talents. “人” and “才” come together, which means that “人” is used according to “才”, “人” is complete because of “才”. On the contrary, “才” is produced by “人”, and “才” is different because of “man”. In ancient China, the formation process of the term “人才” fully demonstrated the unity of "tangible" and "invisible" talent subject. Mencius put forward the idea that "all people can be Yao and Shun" in the pre-Qin period. This sentence comes from Mencius ·Gaozi Zhangju II, which is rooted in "the theory of good nature" and to encourage everyone to be good and everyone can do something. It can be seen that "emphasizing talent and respecting morality" and "combining virtue and talent" are the traditions of cultivating, understanding and using talents in China since ancient times.

### III. ETYMOLOGY OF "TALENT" IN THE WEST

There are two ways to study the etymology of talent in the West: one is what the etymology of talent in modern English is. Another is what is the earliest ancient Western vocabulary with the meaning of talent? These two routes reflect different contents but are interconnected. They need to be screened and examined, and cannot be confused.

#### A. Etymological Meaning of "Talent"

There are no words in English that correspond to “人才” in Chinese, only words that have very close meanings. Throughout many writings about talent published in the modern western society, the title of the works often uses talent to denote “人才”, such as "The War for Talent" [6] (人才战争), "The Truth about Talent" [7] (人才真相), and so on. Chinese academia also tends to translate “人才” into talent.<sup>1</sup> According to these clues, we traced their origins.

The word talent has a history of hundreds of years. In modern language, it can be translated either as “ability” or directly as “talent”. However, it is not well known that talent first appeared in ancient Greece, Rome, Hebrew and other places along the Mediterranean coast in the ancient West. It was used to refer to a currency called Tarant. At first, it did not mean "talented person". Its connotation of "talented person" has undergone a long process, which can reflect the primitive embryonic form of modern western talent concept to a certain extent. Through a large number of searches and reviews of English literature and authoritative dictionaries, it is found that there are three explanations that can explain talent's etymology and its derivation. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, talent first appeared before the 12th century. "The word is medieval English; ancient English writing is *talente*, from Latin *talenta*; it is the plural form of *talentum* (unit of weight or currency), while *talentum* comes from Greek *talanton*. Second, Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology explains talent's etymology as follows: A. comes from Latin *talntum*, it means "hobbies and ideological tendencies"; B. comes from the Greek language *talanton*, which is an ancient unit of weight and currency; C. later extended to "intrinsic talents or qualifications", which is used to describe talents. [8] Thirdly, Online Etymological Dictionary explains that the term talent evolved from the ancient English *talente* in the late 13th century, while *talente* originated from the Latin *talenta* (plural form of *talentum*), in which *talentum* originated from the Greek *talanton* (unit of weight and currency); in the mid-14th century, Latin meaning was extended to talent or talented person through allegorical stories. [9] Although the above explanations are slightly different, they clearly outline the historical evolution of the word talent in modern English from ancient to modern, i.e. through the evolution of Greek “*talanton*” — Latin “*talenta*” — ancient English “*talente*”.

So, there is a question: since talent comes from the Greek word *talanton*, who changed the way it was written, why did *talanton* develop from a unit of measure of weight or money to a word of talent? According to textual research, in 1382, British theologian Wilcliffe used the word talent to translate the monetary unit of ancient Greece (Babylonians and Sumerians used "Tarant" for exchange and circulation). Therefore, it is generally assumed that talent was a unit of money before the first half of the 14th century. In the 15th century, a lexical shift took place through a fable story. According to Chapter 25 of Matthew of New Testament of the Bible, there was a man who entrusted money to three servants

<sup>1</sup> As early as 1990, domestic scholars have suggested translating “人才” into talent and “天才” into genius. Refer to Sun Miwen's Talent Science, Jilin Education Press, 1990: 1.

when he went out. He gave them different amounts of money according to their respective abilities, giving one of them 5 talents, another 2 talents, and the third 1 talent. When the master returned, the first two servants had twice money as much as the master had given them, so they were rewarded by the master. The third servant buried his money for fear of losing it, so he had still a talent. The more talents he had, the stronger his ability. Thus, talent was extended and has the meaning of wealth, ability and talent.

#### *B. The Earliest Word with Talent Connotation, Ancient Greek "Daimon"*

In ancient Greek, "daimon" is a combination of good and evil. It has a very distinct dual image. It is literally translated into "demigod" (a species between man and god). Later, the meaning of the word split and became the etymology of demon in English. In introducing the evolution of demon, Oxford English Dictionary says the idea of good daimon did not completely disappear from Christian doctrine, but changed to the idea that "guardian angel" is the power of personal destiny. Genius (guardian god, talent) is a copy of the ancient Greek concept of daimon. Thus, the Latin translator translated daimon directly into genius. In ancient Greece, the adventurous spirit of national migration, the pioneering consciousness of overseas colonization, the psychology of winners in competitive activities, free trade at sea, the democratic system of city-states, and the prevalence of argumentation, the concern for self-fate and value and the thirst for knowledge made personal qualities, abilities and talents play a decisive role in their social status, and those with outstanding talents are easy to be prominent. Philosophers, writers, artists and so on were often versatile and enjoyed a lofty position. This kind of consciousness is quite distinct in Greek mythology. In Greek mythology, ordinary human beings have their own destinies, but they are dominated by Zeus and the goddess of destiny. At this time, the group that opposes destiny came into being. The heroes and geniuses in mythology refer to the descendants of gods with human beings, that is, the daimon. They have become guardians of mortals, defenders of disasters and misfortunes. Prometheus, as we are familiar with, who stole heaven fire to help man, is the typical image of talents in ancient Greece. So there is a positive side to daimon. Socrates used daimon to express "spirituality" or "spirit", which is an expression of a person's internal independent thinking ability. Excellent inspiration and strong artistic expression are regarded as a genius. Genius and talent take the place of God. They have their own laws like God.

In order to explain the problem thoroughly, we must explain the other word genius mentioned above. In the 14th century and before, when talent had no modern meaning, Western society used genius more to mean talented person. According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, the word came from the Latin genius and its original meaning was "guardian angel". According to ancient Roman mythology, every human being was born with a patron saint between gods and human beings assigned to guard human beings for life. The patron saint is called "genius" in Latin. People hoped that the patron saint could give their children excellent qualities and extraordinary abilities. In the 16th century, influenced by the

Renaissance Movement, people gradually got rid of the theological domination. Humanistic talent concept began to replace theological talent concept. The word meaning of genius began to expand from previous spirit or guardian spirit attached to human body controlling them to do something beyond human ability, to subjective talent or personal qualifications, gradually getting rid of external manipulation. By the 17th century, genius had developed a modern meaning of "talent" and "talented person" was equivalent to "genius". Since the 18th century, the term "genius" has been widely used to refer to people with outstanding abilities. Genius absorbs the religious connotations of "divine enlightenment", "mysterious inspiration" and "divine attachment". When people get rid of divinity and made it secular, they began to use an external source to explain and express personal creation and achievement, that is, "rich inspiration". The inspiration here is no longer from others' powers but from their own, and it is an inherent quality of human beings. This quality is not because of diligence in learning, but a natural gift.

Through the above textual research, it is found that the etymology of talent of the West is ancient Greek daimon, which is the literal translation of genius, while talent in English comes from ancient Greek *tánton*. The talent semantics of modern English is the combination of daimon and *tánton* in ancient Greek. In ancient Greece and Rome, people's understanding of the origin of "talent" was full of mysticism. Ancient Greek philosophers believed that "talent" came from apocalypse and attributed the essence of talent to god. Plato's Ian thought that the poet's genius was embodied in inspiration which was given by the god of poetry. The poet was the spokesman of god. Atheists in the pre-modern West thought that talent came from nature or will, and that talent was the result of natural gestation or release of life. This understanding gradually became the mainstream of western talent thought in the era after Kant. On the basis of the understanding of the idealistic talent view, it also acknowledges the objectivity of genius. But this objectivity rejects the traditional teaching mode, and holds that receiving traditional education will hinder the formation and development of talent creativity, making those social talents who are not subject to formal education and learning popular and appreciated.

#### IV. THE DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN VIEWS ON TALENT FROM ITS ETYMOLOGY

From the overall evolution process of the etymology of talents in China and the West, we can see that at first, the pre-Qin period, ancient Greece and ancient Rome were almost no time for the integration of Chinese and Western civilizations. Talents had different forms of language and writing expression, reflecting the different social concepts of talents in ancient China and the West. Behind these differences, we also found common points with universal significance.

##### *A. Differences*

1) *People's "talents" come from different sources:* Ancient Greeks believed that not everyone could become a person with thinking and knowledge. Socrates said that all kinds of

craft and technology, such as architecture and shipbuilding, were scientific, while virtue and political technique were non-communicable, gifted and the result of some kind of "spirituality" or inspiration from god in one's heart. Who can become philosopher, ruler, poet or writer is born, is an insurmountable division of labor. Plato advocated the innate concept, adhered to genetic determinism, exaggerated the theory of lineage, and thought only one or secondary levels of people are wise, slaves have no right to education, there are classes of education. Galton, the representative of modern genius science in the West, insisted on the theory of heredity of genius, believing that the success of genius is determined by heredity, which is innate. Guan Zhong, a Chinese thinker in the Pre-Qin Dynasty, said, "After a year of cultivation there will be a harvest of crops; after ten years of cultivation there will be a harvest of timber; after a hundred year of cultivation there will be a harvest of talents"[10]. The main channels for acquiring knowledge and increasing talents are to receive education and insist on learning. He advocated providing education for all people without discrimination. "A wise man will achieve nothing if he does not study"; "So-called saints must learn to be saints"[11]. Neo-Confucianism in Song and Ming Dynasties also insists on "the theory of cultivating saints". The key to success lies in the activities of the subject itself, hard study and education.

2) *The basis of talent identification is different:* In ancient Western society, talent was valued while morality was despised. Athens's democracy has created many talents. For example, the People's Congress allowed citizens to express their views freely; people could fully defend on the court; players could fairly compete on beauty and power in the arena; it made the development of individual talents and abilities, individual talents prominent in social life. But their requirements for "morality" were not high, which caused a certain social disaster. And it triggered philosophers to think the relationship between knowledge and virtue. The result of thinking was that they equate virtue with knowledge. They didn't realize moral education, and didn't know the good lies in knowledge while the evil comes from ignorance. This concept also had a profound influence on the modern West. In *The Rise and Fall of the Elite*, it was said that "the elite refers to the most powerful, vigorous and capable people, whether good or evil"[12]. China advocates putting virtue first and having both talent and virtue, which is indispensable to both talent and virtue. It emphasizes that virtue is greater than talent, and that talent with virtue can be used, and that morality should be internalized. Confucius put forward the idea of "promoting virtuous people" very early. It is the guarantee of carrying out the line of ruling the country by virtue to cultivate talents with internal virtues. This is explained in Report on the Study of Talents Theory: "There is no word in English that completely corresponds to Chinese phrase '人才'. The closest word to '人才' is talent, which means "talented person" and "person with special talent". Genius also means '天才'. These words only focus on the gift

of human beings, while the connotation of '人才' is more rich. It contains two meanings of 'both virtue and talent'. The application of '人才' is wider." [13] The difference in the emphasis on talent elements between China and the West reflects their different expectations and pursuits for human growth and development.

3) *The scale of talent evaluation is different:* In the West, "talent" has been transformed from the Greek monetary unit *talanton* (*τάλαντον*), whose talent evaluation is difficult to surpass the material level. It is the direct origin of "wealth-based heroism" in Western society. The British bourgeois economist, Alfred Marshall, thought that the profit of businessmen is positively related to their ability. The more profits they get, the greater their ability is, and vice versa. Western society generally believes that talents and social elite groups are often "those individuals and groups who have greater advantages in power, prestige and wealth", and this utilitarian tendency in talent evaluation has its own historical and cultural roots. In ancient Chinese culture, value belongs to goodness. Mencius said, "可欲之谓善, 有诸己之谓信, 充实之谓美" [14]. This sentence means people with quality and resources are good and valuable; individuals who meet the needs of the outside world are trustworthy. That is to say, when personal qualities and abilities are accepted and used by the outside world, resources are recognized and developed by the outside world, this person is valuable or talent. If there is no contribution to society, no matter how skilled and profitable they are, they are not talents.

#### B. Similarities

First, they all embody the harmony and unity between individual talents and nature. Chinese ancestors believed that "人" had the charm of spiritual virtue convergence, and "才" is obtained from learning. The spirituality and understanding ability of talent were the result of the unity of heaven and man. Han Feizi said in *Guanzi*: "A tree planted on a high mountain can overlook the abyss. It is not because the height of the tree, but the height of its position" [15]. The ancients in the West emphasized "spirituality", "inspiration" and "creative trait". They emphasized the influence of innate nature on individual talents. The formation and display of talents were the result of natural enlightenment and life release, and also reflected that the process of talents' growth and development was restricted by objective factors. Horace believed that to create a good poem, "it is useless to study hard without abundant genius, to have genius without training; the two should be used for each other and combined with each other." [16] Horace knows very little about how to "use and combine them together".

Second, they all embody the harmony and unity between individual development of talents and social development. Talents are the dominant force of social development. The influence of talents on the early progress and reform of Western society can be seen from the legendary heroes in Greek mythology. They have indomitable spirit of resistance and struggle against alien forces, increasingly non-frustrated beliefs in resistance and struggle, and the aspiration and pursuit for a better future, and promote the progress and

development of human society. The legends of Chinese characters passed down from generation to generation tell the same truth. In ancient Chinese documents, many legends and deeds about celebrities were recorded, which reflects the role of various talents in promoting the development of ancient Chinese society. For example, there are Chao who taught people to build wooden house to prevent wild animals, Suiren who drilled wood to make fire and taught people to cook food, Shennong who taught people grafting and raising animals, Yao, Shun and Yu, all of whom reflect individual talents in the changes of lives of the ancients.

## V. CONCLUSION

The difference between Chinese and Western views on talent is essentially the difference in history and culture, which is difficult to disappear. For a long time, we are constrained by our initial forms and concepts. In ancient China, the use of compound “人材” preceded “人才”, and it first appeared in the Warring States of the Pre-Qin Dynasty in the form of non-word phrase structure. In the early Western Han Dynasty, the word evolved from a verb phrase to a fixed noun and was close to the meaning of talent in modern Chinese. In the West, the earliest etymology of talent was "daimon" in ancient Greek, which was directly translated into "genius" by Latin translators. The word "talent" in English comes from the Greek word "talanton". The word "talent" in modern English should be a combination of "daimon" and "talanton". Chinese and Western views on talent are rooted in their respective cultural traditions, and their development trajectories are deeply influenced by traditional thinking logic. By exploring the social concepts related to talent in the early stage of human civilization between China and the West, we have found some common points of universal significance in the comparison of differences, which helps us to find a mutually beneficial point in the clash of civilizations, eliminate the cultural barriers to the international flow of talent, and optimize talent policy by thinking of “the other” from the perspective of "the other", so that human resources can serve the common well-being of mankind.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Zhang Changfa. Annotation of Liezi, Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2010: 72. (in Chinese)
- [2] (Han) Xu Shen. Shuowen Jiezi. Social Sciences Literature Publishing House, 2005: 101, 36, 308, 68. (in Chinese)
- [3] Proofread by Cui Gaowei. Book of Rites, Liaoning Education Publishing House, 1997: 7. (in Chinese)
- [4] Chen Tingjing, Zhang Yushu. Kangxi Dictionary (latest edition 2), China Bookstore, 2010: 742. (in Chinese)
- [5] Fang Yurun's Commentary, Zhu Jieren's Guidance. Book of Songs, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2009: 191. (in Chinese)
- [6] Michael, Ed Handfield-Jones, Helen Axelrod. The War for Talent. Boston: Beth Harvard Business School Press. 2001.
- [7] Jeremy Kourdi. The Truth about Talent. John Wiley & Sons Press. 2010.
- [8] Edited by T. F. HOAD, Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology. NY: Oxford New York. Oxford University Press. 2000: 481.
- [9] Online Etymology Dictionary. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/talent?s=t>. (in Chinese)

- [10] (Spring and Autumn Period) Guan Zhong, Edited by Wu Wentao and Zhang Shanliang. Guanzi, Beijing Yanshan Publishing House, 1995: 35. (in Chinese)
- [11] (Eastern Han) Wang Chong. Lun Heng, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1974: 399, 402. (in Chinese)
- [12] Italian Pareto. The Rise and Fall of Elites, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2003: 13. (in Chinese)
- [13] Office of the Central Coordinating Group for Talents Work. Report on the Theoretical Study of Talents Work (1st Edition), Party Building Books Publishing House, 2003: 71. (in Chinese)
- [14] (Warring States) Meng Ke. Mengzi · Jinxin Zhangju II, Vol.14, Four Series of Jingsong Large-character Edition, 119. (in Chinese)
- [15] (Warring States) Han Feizi. Proofread by Qin Huibin. Han Feizi. Liaoning Education Press, 1997: 76. (in Chinese)
- [16] (Ancient Rome) Horace, Translated by Yang Zhouhan. Art of Poetry, People's Literature Publishing House, 1962: 158. (in Chinese)