

SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EASTERN PHILOSOPHY AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

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***Abstract:** The article compares Eastern and Western philosophy, emphasizing the similarities and differences between these two major traditions of thought. Eastern philosophy, shaped within Asian agrarian societies, is closely tied to ethics, religion, and practical life, employing intuitive and holistic thinking while aiming for harmony between community and nature. In contrast, Western philosophy, originating in ancient Greece, values reason, logical analysis, individuality, and independence, while gradually separating itself from religion and laying the foundations for modern science. What they share is the pursuit of answers about human beings, the universe, and the ideal society. The East–West comparison helps us to recognize cultural diversity, foster equal dialogue, promote knowledge exchange, and encourage interdisciplinary applications. For Vietnam, this comparison suggests opportunities to harmonize Eastern and Western values—preserving national identity while promoting integration and modernization.*

***Keywords:** Eastern philosophy, Western philosophy, Comparison, Thought, Ethics, Science, Culture, Vietnam, Globalization*

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is one of humanity's highest forms of social consciousness, reflecting the aspiration to understand the world, human beings, and their interrelationships. Throughout history, two great traditions of philosophy—Eastern and Western—have evolved, leaving a profound legacy. Each system of philosophy mirrors the historical, cultural, and social characteristics of its region of origin, while also extending its influence beyond geographical boundaries.

Comparative research on these

two philosophical traditions not only deepens our understanding of the diversity of human thought but also provides a foundation for cultural dialogue and intellectual integration in today's context of globalization.

CONTENT

1. Characteristics of Eastern Philosophy

Eastern philosophy emerged in the context of large agrarian societies,

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particularly ancient China and India. Human life was closely connected to nature, heavily dependent on weather cycles and the environment; therefore, philosophical thought early on centered around achieving harmony between humans and the cosmos. A prominent feature of Eastern philosophy is that it does not separate philosophy from religion and ethics; instead, they are usually seen as a unified whole. This explains why doctrines such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism are at once philosophical, religious, and normative social systems.

Another important characteristic is that Eastern philosophy is oriented toward practical life. Philosophy here does not merely aim to explain the world but also to provide norms of behavior for everyday living, helping individuals cultivate virtue and society maintain order. For instance, Confucianism emphasizes personal moral cultivation and social order through categories such as *ren* (humaneness), *li* (ritual propriety), *yi* (righteousness), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (trustworthiness). Daoism emphasizes harmony with nature, encouraging people to relinquish ambition and live simply in accordance with the “Dao”. Buddhism, originating in India, addresses human suffering through the insights of impermanence and non-self, offering a path to liberation through spiritual practice. These systems exemplify the moral and social orientation of Eastern

philosophy, in which knowledge is not merely understanding but also a means to live in harmony with the community and the universe.

In addition, the East often employs intuitive and holistic thinking. Problems are approached not by isolating and analyzing separate parts but through a comprehensive and interconnected perspective. Eastern philosophy is concerned with the “Dao” the overarching order rather than individual phenomena. This mode of thinking enabled Eastern philosophy to develop profound insights into human existence, ethics, and religion, though it limited the growth of natural scientific theories.

The value of Eastern philosophy lies in its emphasis on humanism, community, and the intimate bond between humans and nature. It helped build the long-lasting civilizations of Asia on strong ethical and moral foundations. Yet its limitations are also clear: the underdevelopment of individual critical reasoning and scientific analytical capacity contributed to the slow modernization of many Eastern societies (See: Nguyen Huu Vui 2001).

2. Characteristics of Western Philosophy

Western philosophy originated in ancient Greece, within a very different historical context. The Greek city-states possessed a thriving commercial economy, a democratic political life, and an open cultural environment.

In response to the need to rationally explain the universe and society, ancient Greek philosophers laid the foundations for the Western philosophical tradition. Figures such as Thales, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are inseparably linked to this formative stage. They pioneered logical reasoning, dialectical argumentation, and the conceptual analysis that would shape the future of philosophy.

Over more than two millennia, Western philosophy has developed through multiple stages: from Medieval philosophy, closely tied to Christian theology, to Early Modern philosophy, which emphasized reason and freedom, and finally to Modern and Contemporary philosophy, encompassing diverse movements such as rationalism, empiricism, existentialism, linguistic analysis, and postmodernism. Despite their differences, a consistent trait across all periods is Western philosophy's orientation toward analysis, rational explanation, and logical demonstration. Here, philosophical knowledge serves not only as a guide for living but also as a tool for understanding, explaining, and laying the foundations of science (See: Russell 1945).

One striking feature of Western philosophy is its gradual separation from religion, particularly from the Renaissance and Enlightenment onward. While philosophy remained deeply influenced by Christian theology in the Middle Ages (e.g., Thomas Aquinas),

from the 17th century, thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant constructed secular philosophical systems that emphasized the role of reason and human freedom. This separation created favorable conditions for the rapid growth of natural science and technology, making the West the center of the scientific and industrial revolutions.

Western philosophy also places great emphasis on individuality and independent critical reasoning. From Socrates' maxim "Know thyself" to the Enlightenment slogan "Dare to know!" (*Sapere aude*) proclaimed by Kant, Western thought has consistently affirmed the individual as an autonomous subject of thought, endowed with freedom and social responsibility. This marks a fundamental contrast with Eastern philosophy, which tends to stress community and social order.

However, the Western overemphasis on analytical rationality has sometimes led philosophy to drift away from spiritual life, contributing to crises of values in modern society. Many 20th-century philosophical movements, such as existentialism and postmodernism, can be understood as reactions against this tendency, seeking to restore the role of personal experience, emotion, and diversity in human knowledge.

3. A Direct Comparison Between Eastern and Western Philosophy

Although Eastern and Western philosophies originated from distinct

historical and cultural contexts, they share certain fundamental similarities. First of all, both originated from the need to explain the world and to answer foundational questions about being, the cosmos, and the place of human beings within it. Eastern philosophy, with Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and Western philosophy, with the schools of ancient Greece, both sought answers to questions such as: How did the world come into being? How should humans live? What constitutes a good society? This common ground demonstrates that philosophy, whether Eastern or Western, aims to orient human beings in both thought and action. Beyond theoretical reflection, both traditions share the goal of building a just and stable social order while upholding the ideal model of humanity, even if their approaches and emphases differ.

Nevertheless, there are striking differences between the two traditions, especially in methods of thinking, value orientations, and their relationship with religion. Eastern philosophy leans toward holistic, intuitive, and harmonizing modes of thought, emphasizing the interconnection between human beings, nature, and community (See: Tran Van Giau 1999). This approach helped Eastern philosophy establish enduring ethical and social foundations, but it limited the development of natural science. In contrast, Western philosophy, dating back to ancient Greece, has emphasized

reason, analysis, and logical argument, laying the groundwork for the emergence of modern science. While the East emphasizes the maintenance of social order and personal moral cultivation, the West places greater weight on freedom of thought, individual development, and the pursuit of objective truth.

Another crucial difference lies in the relationship between philosophy and religion. Eastern philosophy often integrates with belief systems and moral doctrines; for example, Buddhism is both a philosophical system and a religion with soteriological teachings. In contrast, Western philosophy especially from the Renaissance and Enlightenment onward gradually separated itself from theology to become an independent discipline, forming the basis for rationalism and modern science. This allowed Western philosophy to advance further in its exploration of the natural world, while Eastern philosophy exerted a profound influence on cultural and spiritual life, as well as social organization, in Asia.

Thus, the similarities between Eastern and Western philosophy show that philosophy is a universal human need. At the same time, the differences reflect the unique historical conditions, cultural milieus, and developmental demands of each region. If the East represents community, morality, and harmony, the West represents reason, science, and individuality. Both traditions, despite their differences, complement each other

and together form a rich tapestry of human thought's history.

Comparing Eastern and Western philosophy allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and intellectual diversity of humankind. Each philosophical system is the product of specific historical conditions, natural environments, and social contexts, resulting in distinct ways of interpreting the world and humanity. When placed side by side, these traditions reveal that no single mode of thought is absolute or exclusive; rather, the very richness of philosophy testifies to the limitless creativity of the human spirit.

In the current context of globalization, dialogue and cross-fertilization between East and West are becoming increasingly essential. Eastern philosophy, with its emphasis on harmony and social ethics, can complement Western philosophy with the humanistic values necessary to counteract the alienation caused by extreme individualism and pure rationalism. Conversely, Western philosophy, with its traditions of logical analysis and scientific spirit, can help the East overcome the limitations of intuitive thinking, thereby fostering innovation and international integration (See: Kenny 2012). This combination carries not only academic significance but also practical value in shaping policy, education, and social development in an interconnected world.

For Vietnam, the comparative study of these two traditions brings

many important lessons. On the one hand, Vietnam needs to preserve and promote the quintessential values of Eastern philosophy that have long been embedded in the nation's cultural and ethical life. On the other hand, it must selectively adopt the scientific spirit, rational thinking, and aspiration for freedom from Western philosophy to advance modernization and international integration. The harmonization of these two traditions will enable Vietnam to develop a distinctive philosophical and intellectual identity one that is rooted in national heritage while open to the knowledge of humankind.

4. Overcoming the East–West Divide in the Context of Globalization

One of the greatest barriers to the globalization of philosophy lies in the profound differences between Eastern and Western traditions. For many centuries, Western philosophy has held a central position in the international academic system, while Eastern traditions have often been regarded as mere “wisdom” or “ethical thought,” not fully recognized as a systematic philosophy. This has not only created inequality in academic dialogue but also posed an obstacle to genuine exchange and mutual enrichment between philosophical cultures. For this reason, at the 25th World Congress of Philosophy, under the theme “*Philosophy Crossing Boundaries*,” the issue of overcoming the East–West divide was identified as a truly global task.

First, equal philosophical dialogue must be considered the fundamental pathway to overcoming these barriers. Dialogue is not merely an exchange of viewpoints; it also entails recognizing the legitimacy and equal value of different philosophical traditions. Only when Eastern philosophy is approached and analyzed as an independent philosophical system, and Western philosophy refrains from imposing itself as the “sole standard,” can genuine encounters take place. International forums, such as the World Congress of Philosophy, should evolve into multidimensional spaces for dialogue, where differences are not viewed as obstacles but as opportunities for comparison, reflection, and mutual enrichment.

Second, cultural–philosophical acculturation serves as an important method for transforming differences into creativity. Acculturation does not mean passive borrowing, but rather selective adoption, restructuring, and innovation through interaction and mutual influence. Vietnam can serve as a typical example: deeply influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism from the East, yet also strongly absorbing Western philosophy and science in the modern era. Positioned at this crossroads, Vietnam can play the role of a bridge, transforming divergent values into creative forces and thereby contributing to the development of a diverse global philosophy.

Third, interdisciplinary application enables philosophy to move beyond abstraction and engage directly with contemporary challenges. Global issues such as climate change, the development of artificial intelligence, social inequality, and moral crises all demand a philosophical orientation. Here, Western rational and analytical thought needs to be complemented by Eastern humanism, harmony, and ethical reflection. For instance, in debates on artificial intelligence, the West often emphasizes technical and economic aspects, whereas the East can provide perspectives on ethics, responsibility, and social harmony. Integrating these approaches can yield more comprehensive policies and solutions.

Thus, overcoming the East–West divide in philosophy must be understood as a necessity rather than a mere option. To “overcome” does not mean erasing differences or assimilating into a single model, but rather fostering dialogue, complementarity, and joint efforts in building a global philosophy diverse yet unified. This, in turn, is a prerequisite for philosophy to continue its guiding role and to contribute effectively to addressing the urgent problems of humanity in the twenty-first century.

5. Significance for Vietnam

For Vietnam, overcoming the divide between Eastern and Western philosophy carries particular significance. First, Vietnam has long

stood at the intersection of multiple cultural and philosophical traditions, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism from the East, as well as Christianity and various modern and contemporary Western thought currents. This layered heritage creates both complexity and opportunity, enabling Vietnam to absorb the quintessence of both traditions. Positioning itself within an East–West dialogue allows Vietnam to harness its “intermediary” advantage, transforming diversity into a creative resource for philosophy, culture, and society.

Second, in the context of deep international integration, philosophy can provide the intellectual foundation for policymaking, education, and the development of cultural identity. The selective adoption of Western values, such as rationality, the rule of law, and science, can support the nation’s modernization. In contrast, Eastern values, including humanism, community, and harmony, can help ensure sustainability and preserve national identity. This synthesis is essential for Vietnam to integrate without losing itself, to globalize without being “dissolved” in globalization.

Third, participation in international philosophical forums, such as the World Congress of Philosophy, also allows Vietnam to affirm its position and contribution within the global academic community. Vietnam can become a cultural–philosophical

bridge, where Eastern and Western values meet, complement, and give rise to new models of synthesis. This role is not only academically important but also contributes to enhancing Vietnam’s national standing on the international stage.

In summary, overcoming the East–West divide in philosophy is not only a universal necessity for humanity but also an opportunity and a mission for Vietnam. It is the path through which the country can both engage with the world and preserve its own identity, contributing to the construction of a global philosophy that is diverse yet unified.

CONCLUSION

Eastern and Western philosophy, with their distinct characteristics, values, and limitations, have together created the rich tapestry of human thought. The differences in approach Eastern philosophy’s emphasis on intuition, morality, and harmony, versus Western philosophy’s focus on rationality, analysis, and systematization are both strengths and barriers to global philosophical dialogue and integration. Yet, in the turbulent context of the twenty-first century, these barriers must be recognized not to eliminate them, but to transform them into drivers of dialogue, complementarity, and synthesis.

The 25th World Congress of Philosophy, with its theme “*Philosophy Crossing Boundaries*,” has pointed the way forward: philosophy can only continue to serve as a guide for humanity

if it learns to transcend boundaries, among which the East–West divide is most prominent. To transcend does not mean homogenization, but rather the joint creation of a global philosophy - one in which different intellectual traditions are listened to, respected, and allowed to complement one another.

For Vietnam, participating in this process not only enables the country to absorb the essence of world philosophy but also to assert its role within the global philosophical community. With its historical and cultural advantage

as a meeting point of East and West, Vietnam can become a philosophical bridge while at the same time drawing practical lessons for nation-building and development in an era of integration.

Thus, the comparison between Eastern and Western philosophy is not merely of academic value but also of profound humanistic and practical significance: it helps humankind better understand itself, fosters equal dialogue, and opens the possibility of constructing a global philosophy that is both diverse and unified.

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