

The Confucian Concept of “Harmony without Uniformity” and Its Implications for the Paradigm Shift in China-ASEAN Intercultural Communication Competence Theory

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Abstract: Deepening regional cooperation between China and ASEAN urgently requires innovative paradigms for intercultural communication competence. This study focuses on the implications of the Confucian concept of “harmony without uniformity” for constructing a China-ASEAN-specific theoretical framework of intercultural communication. By reinterpreting classical texts and reconstructing the philosophical meaning of this concept, the study reveals its core value: the dynamic unity of embracing differences while fostering consensus. The current dominant Western paradigms guiding China-ASEAN intercultural communication practices exhibit structural limitations in both respecting cultural heterogeneity and seeking common values. The concept of “harmony without uniformity” thus offers a valuable indigenous theoretical resource. It suggests a shift from mere transplantation of foreign models to the development of a more inclusive and effective theoretical framework centered on cultural symbiosis. This new framework advocates for constructive dialogue to identify shared interests and cooperative opportunities, while fully acknowledging and respecting cultural diversity, thereby achieving harmonious coexistence and mutual development. Based on these insights, the study proposes practical pathways for theoretical transformation, including reshaping intercultural education concepts, enhancing adaptability in multicultural contexts, and strengthening policy coordination. The goal is to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the steady and long-term development of China-ASEAN relations.

Keywords: Confucian concept of “harmony without uniformity”; China-ASEAN; Intercultural communication; Theoretical paradigm; Intercultural ethics

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1. Introduction

The establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and ASEAN—aimed at peace, security, prosperity, and sustainable development—relies not only on close economic and trade ties, but also on deep cultural understanding and value communication. In this process, an effective paradigm shift in intercultural communication competence theory has become a key theoretical support for deepening regional cooperation. Rooted in the fertile soil of Chinese civilization, the Confucian concept of “harmony without uniformity” embodies profound wisdom in managing intercultural relations. It emphasizes the pursuit of value consensus and harmonious coexistence through constructive dialogue, on the premise of fully respecting cultural heterogeneity. This offers an important indigenous philosophical resource for rethinking and reconstructing contemporary intercultural communication theory ^[1]. The core of this concept resonates strongly with the goals of critical cultural relativism, particularly in the pursuit of cultural equality and reciprocity. It also provides a distinct Eastern perspective for overcoming the limitations of cultural centrism embedded in Western intercultural communication paradigms. In coping with ASEAN’s highly heterogeneous and pluralistic cultural ecology, the inclusive dialogue and consensus-building model advocated by “harmony without uniformity” demonstrates significant theoretical compatibility and practical potential.

Currently, global intercultural communication theory is undergoing a profound paradigm shift—from emphasizing unidirectional “cultural adaptation” to stressing bidirectional “cultural co-construction.” Traditional models either focus on static comparisons of cultural differences or demand that weaker cultures adjust unilaterally to dominant ones. Such approaches often fail to respond effectively to complex, dynamic intercultural interaction contexts. The Confucian idea of *he* (harmony), embedded in “harmony without uniformity”, inherently calls for the creative transformation and mutual empowerment of different cultural actors through equal interaction, ultimately guiding them toward dynamic balance and symbiotic development based on mutual understanding ^[2]. This paradigm shift poses a dual challenge for theoretical construction: on one hand, it must break free from long-dominant Western discourse frameworks to avoid falling into the trap of simplistic “theoretical transplantation”; on the other, it must guard against tendencies toward “cultural essentialism”, which risk solidifying differences into unbridgeable and static divides. Against this backdrop, drawing from indigenous intellectual traditions to construct a theoretical system with regional characteristics and cultural subjectivity becomes particularly important.

This study aims to systematically elucidate the theoretical insights offered by the Confucian concept of “harmony without uniformity” for promoting the paradigm shift in China-ASEAN intercultural communication. By deeply deconstructing its threefold logical dimensions—acknowledgment of difference, dialogic rationality, and ethics of coexistence—the study seeks to lay a solid philosophical foundation for building a regionally tailored intercultural competence assessment framework, negotiation mechanisms, and conflict transformation strategies.

2. The ontological implications and contemporary transformation of “harmony without uniformity”

2.1. Philosophical foundations of traditional meanings

The Confucian concept of “harmony without uniformity” (from *The Analects*, “Zi Lu” chapter) reveals at the ontological level a fundamental law of existence: “harmony” refers to a state of dynamic unity achieved through diversity, while “difference” points to the inherent uniqueness and heterogeneity of all things ^[3]. These

two aspects form an inseparable dialectical unity. Traditional commentaries emphasize that harmony is not homogenization that erases differences, but rather an organic integrity and balanced state formed through the interaction of diverse elements—an embodiment of the Way of Heaven. Neo-Confucianism in the Song-Ming period, especially Zhu Xi's theory of li (principle) and qi (vital force), elevated this notion to an ontological height. Li is immanent in all qi, and the diversity of qi is a necessary condition for the manifestation and fulfillment of li, jointly forming the ontological structure of all existence.

This ontological awareness profoundly shaped Confucian practical philosophy, whose core affirms that difference is the premise—rather than an obstacle—to generating harmony. Guo Xiang's "Theory of Individual Transformation" in the metaphysical tradition explains how individuals, while maintaining self-sufficiency, naturally integrate into the cosmic whole through mutual interdependence (xiang yin) ^[4]. Traditional political-ethical practices also reflect this structure by unifying respect for individual difference with the pursuit of collective harmony. The ultimate goal is to achieve a higher level of order and vitality through coexistence in diversity.

2.2. Ontological structure: Difference, harmony, and dynamic coexistence

From an ontological perspective, the essence of "harmony without uniformity" lies in constructing a dynamic equilibrium structure based on the acknowledgment of difference and harmonious coexistence. This structure first establishes the ontological legitimacy of difference—difference is a fundamental attribute of all existence, the very source of vitality and creativity in the universe. To negate difference is to negate existence itself ^[5]. Second, harmony is defined as the optimal state of coexistence achieved through non-antagonistic interaction among differences. It is not a static end state, but a continuously adaptive and dynamic process ^[6].

Harmony and difference exhibit a mutually constitutive and co-creative relationship at the ontological level: without difference, harmony becomes a hollow sameness; without harmony, difference degenerates into disorder and conflict. This relationship is vividly exemplified in complex systems such as the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, where "One Country" provides the structural unity, and "Two Systems" coexist and evolve through dynamic interaction. Its resilience stems precisely from institutional tolerance and integration of differences ^[7]. This ontological structure provides a fundamental insight for intercultural communication: effective communicative paradigms must transcend superficial conformity or suppression of difference, and instead aim to build dynamic balancing mechanisms that accommodate, coordinate, and transform differences—treating cultural heterogeneity as an ontological resource for constructing more inclusive and creative communities.

2.3. Theoretical transformation pathways of ontological reconstruction

The ontological reconstruction of "harmony without uniformity" seeks to transform its classical wisdom into core theoretical resources for addressing contemporary intercultural dilemmas. The first task in this reconstruction is to affirm the ontological legitimacy of incommensurable difference. This means recognizing, at the philosophical level, that distinct cultural systems possess unique value logics and modes of existence grounded in their own historical trajectories. It requires communicative agents to discard cultural hierarchies and to respect the heterogeneity of others while maintaining their own cultural subjectivity. Liang Shuming's comparative work on Chinese and Western cultures serves as a model of creative dialogue rooted in cultural subjectivity at the ontological level ^[8].

The core of the reconstruction lies in deconstructing the static ideal of harmony and affirming its ontological meaning as a process of dynamic consensus-building. This entails moving beyond the traditional focus on “adaptation” or “assimilation” in intercultural theory toward an understanding based on dialogic rationality and mutual construction. The aim is not to eliminate differences to achieve absolute sameness, but, as seen in the Confucian idea of *minben* (people-centeredness), to pursue overlapping consensus and cooperative frameworks based on the fundamental needs of multiple cultural agents. This ontological transformation offers deep philosophical legitimacy and direction for constructing a new China-ASEAN intercultural communication paradigm—such as designing difference-sensitive evaluation indicators based on regional cultural characteristics, building negotiation mechanisms grounded in mutual empowerment, and developing strategies that transform rather than suppress conflicts. Ultimately, it points toward achieving sustainable symbiotic prosperity through cultural diversity.

3. Theoretical paradigm of China-ASEAN intercultural communication competence

3.1. Existing theoretical paradigms and their limitations

Current theories on China-ASEAN intercultural communication primarily transplant the Western cognition–adaptation paradigm, represented by Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and Byron’s competence model. These models have shown instrumental value in the early stages of regional cooperation—for instance, through the use of power distance analysis to inform policy design or cultural intelligence to enhance business localization effectiveness^[9]. However, this paradigm has structural flaws. It presupposes an absolute opposition of cultural differences, falling into the trap of difference-centrism, and reduces ASEAN’s “unity in diversity” cultural ecology into a static source of conflict. Its deeply embedded Western modernist value assumptions also fail to explain the interactive tradition of “harmonious coexistence” between China and ASEAN. More critically, its explanatory power at the regional level is insufficient. The paradigm focuses on resolving technical conflicts but obscures the mechanisms through which shared values are generated. In scenarios such as deep cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, it cannot support the construction of strategic mutual trust or explain the disparities in cultural influence under asymmetric power relations.

These limitations call for a fundamental shift in theoretical logic—from “managing differences” to “creating consensus”—moving beyond instrumental rationality to construct a culturally inclusive dialogic framework. This new model should integrate the wisdom of traditional Chinese culture with ASEAN’s unique characteristics to build a novel analytical paradigm. Such a transformation is not only an academic innovation but also a theoretical cornerstone for building a China-ASEAN community with a shared future.

3.2. Structural dilemmas in regional practice

In regionalized contexts, the limitations of the current paradigm manifest as a dual dilemma of unidirectional cognitive frameworks and fragmented practical pathways. Theoretically, it sticks to the binary mode of cultural opposition, simplifying communication into a linear process from identifying differences to making behavioral adaptation. This leads to cultural relativism fatigue and an overemphasis on differences, causing actors to overlook inherent cultural connections—for example, value-based deadlocks in China-ASEAN business negotiations. Such rigid thinking cannot explain the coexistence mechanisms of ASEAN’s multiculturalism and hinders the formation of a deeper cooperative consensus.

Practically, the absence of consensus-building results in weakened action effectiveness. The shared development aspirations driven by ASEAN's regional community awareness are narrowed into mere "difference adaptation" goals, shrinking spaces for dialogic negotiation. In collaborative areas like transnational environmental protection or cultural heritage preservation, cultural diversity has failed to become an innovative resource and instead has led to the dilemma of "each appreciating their own beauty, but unable to achieve mutual beauty." The lag in theory seriously hampers the construction of a regional community of shared humanity, necessitating the development of an operational framework that balances cultural uniqueness with regional integration.

3.3. The inevitable path of paradigm transformation

The deepening of China-ASEAN relations from economic cooperation to a community of shared humanity makes paradigm transformation essential in three respects:

First, it is necessary to integrate variables such as geopolitical factors and historical memory to cope with complex cultural interactions in emerging contexts like the digital economy; Second, it is critical to overcome the fundamental tension between Western instrumental rationality and the region's cultural gene of "harmonious coexistence"; Third, the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative demands a shift beyond conflict-oriented assumptions to the proactive building of shared value foundations.

Confucian philosophy of "harmony without uniformity" offers both philosophical and methodological support for this transformation. Its ontological foundation of "dynamic balance in coexistence of differences" challenges absolutist views of cultural difference and underpins a theory of cultural co-construction. Its advocacy of the "hehe (harmonious integration)" path enables the transformation of differences into sources of innovation, and concretely guides a three-dimensional practical framework: building a multi-dimensional evaluation system that emphasizes both cultural differences and commonalities, establishing a consultation mechanism based on overlapping consensus, and developing a "difference-empowered" model of cooperation.

This transformation signifies a paradigm leap from "managing differences" to "co-creating symbiosis", offering a regional epistemological model for building a community with a shared future for humanity.

4. Insights from the concept of "harmony without uniformity" for paradigm transformation

4.1. Direction and objectives of the transformation

The Confucian concept of harmony without uniformity sets the core direction for transforming intercultural communication paradigms: to break free from the binary logic of "cultural conflict-adaptation" and build a three-dimensional framework of "difference-consensus-symbiosis." By drawing on the practical wisdom of "zhong he" (attaining harmony through balance), it transforms cultural differences into resources for dialogue. This requires the theoretical system to establish inclusive evaluation criteria and methodological tools that allow for equal interpretation of Chinese and ASEAN cultural traits ^[10]. The transformation aims to construct mechanisms for dynamic balance. In terms of cultural identity, it seeks to transcend the binary of "assimilation/isolation" and foster a model of mutual subjectivity. On the level of interaction strategies, it integrates ASEAN's indigenous wisdom with the Confucian notion of hehe (harmonious integration) to form a flexible operational framework that unifies cultural authenticity with behavioral adaptation.

The ultimate goal is to construct a community of symbiotic intercultural communication development.

The historical wisdom of “bringing harmony to all nations” (xie he wan bang) provides a valuable reference for contemporary practice. The theoretical system should activate the economic and social value of cultural differences by designing mechanisms for knowledge sharing and resource integration, transforming differences into drivers of innovative development. Given the unique advantages of China and ASEAN in terms of geopolitical complementarity and civilizational dialogue, the paradigm shift must respond to regional integration needs. Institutional arrangements should protect cultural diversity, ensuring that the enhancement of intercultural competence and the growth of shared interests become mutually reinforcing ^[11]. Essentially, this transformation reconstructs the cognitive paradigm of intercultural communication—turning difference from an obstacle into a catalyst for mutual learning among civilizations, and offering a theoretical reference rooted in Eastern wisdom and regional characteristics for global research.

4.2. Theoretical reconstruction of ethical values

The ethical value system embedded in the harmony without uniformity concept provides a core compass for paradigm transformation ^[12]. The ethical standard of “a gentleman seeks harmony without being the same” constructs a dialectical relationship between difference and consensus, reflected in three key dimensions: Cultural subjectivity emphasizes seeking common values on the basis of recognizing uniqueness, urging communicators to reject assumptions of cultural superiority and avoid unilateral output; Dialogue mechanisms go beyond the “conflict–fusion” framework by employing the principle of “appreciating one’s own beauty and the beauty of others” to achieve value amplification; Ethics of cooperation reframe differences as creative resources. The Zhong He methodology guides intercultural cooperation beyond utilitarian aims toward sustainable value co-creation.

This ethical reconstruction drives a dual transformation of the paradigm: from an assimilationist mindset of “eliminating difference” to a symbiotic mindset of “respecting difference”; from zero-sum cultural competition to a collaborative path of value co-creation. It not only offers ethical guidance for resolving cultural conflict but also constructs a theoretical framework for multicultural coexistence, marking a paradigm shift in intercultural research from instrumental rationality to ethical rationality. This transformation aligns with global consensus on preserving cultural diversity and lays a cultural-ethical foundation for the China-ASEAN community with a shared future.

4.3. Systematic construction of practical pathways

The practical pathways inspired by harmony without uniformity begin with educational innovation. Inclusive values should be embedded into curricula to form a pedagogy oriented toward mutual cultural learning. Through immersive experiences such as classical text study and international practice bases, dynamic cultural cognition can be fostered, laying the cognitive groundwork for paradigm transformation ^[13]. Training in cultural sensitivity must be systematized, establishing a cognitive path of “difference–understanding–integration.” With the aid of situational simulations and case studies of conflict, symbol recognition skills can be enhanced, guiding individuals from defensive reactions to adaptive participation, and ultimately cultivating empathetic intercultural strategies.

At the policy level, a long-term cooperation mechanism is needed. Dedicated funding should support academic exchange and language training to promote bidirectional knowledge flows, while a cultural resource database should be built to provide normative support. Policy design must avoid cultural superiority and ensure

that the principle of harmony without uniformity permeates institutional structures.

Together, educational reform, experiential training, and policy support form a three-pronged drive that collectively pushes the paradigm from a unidirectional adaptation model to a bidirectional mutual-learning model—achieving synergistic advancement amid cultural differences.

5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the philosophical core and contemporary transformation logic of the Confucian concept of harmony without uniformity, in light of the practical context of China-ASEAN intercultural communication. It reveals the dual ontological and methodological support this concept provides for paradigm transformation. The research establishes the dialectical structure of “recognizing differences — seeking consensus — harmonious coexistence” as the core pathway to overcoming limitations in existing paradigms. By replacing cultural negation with respect for difference and surpassing adaptation-assimilation mechanisms through negotiated consensus, the concept effectively addresses structural shortcomings in Western theoretical frameworks. This inclusive mindset not only aligns with the multicultural coexistence demands of the global era but also anchors values for regional cooperation.

Differences in political systems, religious beliefs, and other dimensions between China and ASEAN can be transformed—through the dialogic principles of harmony without uniformity—into constructive resources for building new regional relationships. Intercultural communication practices must go beyond surface-level cultural comparison and instrumental training, toward a synergy mechanism centered on shared values, structured through institutional collaboration, and connected via mutual cultural learning. This transformation represents not only a contemporary activation of Confucian *hehe* wisdom but also a contribution to intercultural theory for constructing a community with a shared future for humanity. While theoretical interpretations of harmony without uniformity are increasingly mature, practical validation remains underdeveloped. Future research should focus on the China-ASEAN cooperation context, establishing an evaluation framework that integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to systematically assess the concept’s empirical effectiveness in cultural conflict mediation, dialogic discourse construction, and regional trust-building—especially its adaptive application in deep cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

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