

Cultural Confidence, Cultural Awareness and the Innovative Development of Culture

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Abstract: Cultural confidence itself is an inevitable requirement for the self-development of culture. In cultural exchanges, cultural confidence refers to the conscious awareness of the development of one's own culture, rather than cultural arrogance or cultural inferiority. Cultural awareness promotes the innovative development of culture on a practical basis, which serves as the fundamental source of cultural confidence.

Keywords: Cultural confidence; Cultural awareness; Innovative development of culture; Cultural exchanges

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1. Introduction

Tylor put forward in *Primitive Culture*: "Culture, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" ^[1]. As a social phenomenon born alongside human activities and imprinting unique marks on human activities across different times and spaces, culture is something created by human beings, distinct from spontaneous nature and human biological instincts. It encompasses human productive activities and their tool systems, social institutions that bind people together, customs and habits that continue to exert influence in real-world social life, as well as theoretical thinking and values. Nevertheless, many anthropologists and sociologists (including Max Weber) tend to regard culture merely as "an ensemble of webs of significance man himself has spun; the analysis of culture is therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" ^[2]. From this perspective, culture constitutes the soul of a nation and a country, as well as people's spiritual home and spiritual banner. Accordingly, cultural confidence is inherently an inevitable requirement for the self-development of culture.

2. Cultural confidence as conscious awareness of the development of one's own culture

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, from the overall and strategic perspective of building a modern socialist country in all respects and advancing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in all respects, clearly states: “We will foster stronger cultural confidence. We will develop a great socialist culture by raising high the banner, rallying public support, fostering a new generation, developing culture, and presenting a good image. We will develop a national, scientific, and people-oriented socialist culture that is oriented toward modernization, the world, and the future.” “We will uphold the fundamental system for guiding ideology with Marxism in the ideological sphere; uphold the principle of serving the people and serving socialism; uphold the policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend; and insist on creative transformation and innovative development. Guided by the core socialist values, we will develop advanced socialist culture, carry forward revolutionary culture, and inherit fine traditional Chinese culture. We will satisfy the people’s ever-growing intellectual-cultural needs, consolidate the shared ideological foundation for the whole Party and people of all ethnic groups to work together in unity, and steadily enhance China’s cultural soft power and the influence of Chinese culture”^[3]. It follows that cultural confidence means a nation’s, a country’s, or a political party’s full affirmation and active practice of the values of its own culture, as well as firm faith in the vitality of its culture. Therefore, strengthening cultural confidence demands a clear understanding of what kind of culture people should build and how to advance cultural development.

However, in an era where profound changes unseen in a century are accelerating across the world, with the rise of anti-globalization trends and the obvious surge of unilateralism and protectionism, the understanding of cultural development is never a monologue of a single country or nation. The history of cultural inheritance and the course of civilizational development have repeatedly demonstrated the significance of inter-cultural exchanges. Ever since the formation of world history, the inheritance and development of the culture of any country or nation have been interconnected with those of other countries and nations, thus acquiring global significance. Particularly, the formation of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics has consistently been impacted by modern Western culture. Both total westernization and nativist-cultural dogma have ended in failure. After sober reflection, China has embarked on a path of cultural confidence. This represents cultural awareness and a correct understanding of the practice of fierce multicultural interactions and diverse national cultures since the emergence of world history. “Cultural awareness requires us to correctly understand our own national culture: to know its origin, formation process, its characteristics and its developmental trends”^[4]. Knowing its origin emphasizes the promotion of fine traditional culture. People’s cultural confidence is rooted in the inheritance of more than 5,000 years of civilization. Hence, people must strengthen the protection and exploration of historical-cultural heritage, trace cultural origins, and narrate history and culture in a complete and accurate manner. These constitute solid support for cultural confidence^[4].

The understanding of one’s own national culture cannot be separated from the understanding of world cultures. Without the existence of world cultures, people can neither correctly understand their own national culture, nor can national culture survive. The nationality and globality of culture are in a unity of opposites. Every culture manifests itself in the form of civilization. Every civilization is a crystallization of beauty, and demonstrates the beauty of human creation in practice. All fine things share common ground. Exchanges and mutual learning are inherent requirements for civilizational development. Only through exchanges and

mutual learning with other civilizations and drawing on each other's strengths can civilizations maintain vigorous vitality. Meanwhile, such exchanges and mutual learning ought to be reciprocal and equal, pluralistic and multi-directional ^[5]. Therefore, from the perspective of the development of human civilization, for the existence and development of diverse cultures, people should break barriers to cultural exchanges with an inclusive mind, foster a spirit of cultural tolerance, correctly understand their own national culture, respect the cultures of other nations, and promote diverse cultures to "let every flower bloom in its own beauty, appreciate the beauty of others, achieve shared beauty for all, and bring harmony under heaven" ^[6]. This inclusive and peaceful cultural spirit of respecting both one's own and foreign cultures serves as the ideological foundation for defusing cultural conflicts, developing national culture, and consolidating cultural confidence.

3. Cultural awareness is neither cultural arrogance nor cultural inferiority

Being conscious of one's own culture means cultural confidence, which must not be confused with cultural arrogance or cultural inferiority. Both cultural arrogance and cultural inferiority represent unhealthy cultural mentalities and can become major obstacles to social development. Cultural arrogance lies in complacent admiration for one's own culture, built upon the premise that one's own culture is unconditionally superior to foreign cultures. It inherently entails contempt and negative judgment toward other cultures, and refuses to recognize and absorb fine elements from alien cultures. In real-world cultural exchanges, it only allows one-way rather than two-way interactions. Its mission is to spread one's native culture, yet it pursues the goal of replacing so-called backward cultures it identifies. British scholar Tomlinson holds that modern Western culture functions as an emancipatory force ^[7]. Therefore, cultural arrogance shows severe disrespect for other cultures. Worse still, various forms of genocide in history represent extreme manifestations of cultural arrogance or cultural hegemonism. From the viewpoint that cultural ecology ought to be pluralistic and balanced, such occurrences are undoubtedly catastrophic for humankind's culture as a whole.

On the other hand, cultural inferiority manifests as negative judgment of one's own culture and blind worship and over-exaltation of foreign cultures, especially modern Western culture. People suffering from it fail to see the merits and strengths of their native culture, or exaggerate certain deficiencies of their own culture while deliberately belittling and obliterating its inherent fine qualities. In interactions with other cultures, cultural inferiority likewise reduces communication to one-way cultural import, and abandons native culture entirely on the pretext that it lags behind practical demands. In the 1920s–1930s, advocates of total westernization, represented by Hu Shi and Chen Xujing, argued that "whether we like it or not, modern Western culture is the trend of our times" and "the way out for Chinese culture lies in thorough westernization" ^[8]. Neither over-estimation nor self-denigration of one's own culture, nor blind worship or simple rejection of other cultures contributes to equal exchanges and mutual learning among different cultures in the context of world history.

Accordingly, cultural awareness must guard against the two extremes of cultural arrogance and cultural inferiority. Otherwise, inter-cultural exchanges will fail to achieve mutual learning through drawing on each other's strengths. National cultural inheritance will lose opportunities to incorporate new elements. Ultimately, cultural development may either lose its orientation for lack of contemporaneity, or lose its capacity for innovation for want of fresh sources of vitality, and may even trigger fierce cultural conflicts. Hence, a vibrant culture rejects any form of arrogance or inferiority. Notably, these two extremes are often

interlinked and may shift into their opposites. Precisely for this reason, history shows striking parallels: every cultural formation, upon entering a critical developmental phase, witnesses fluctuations or shifts in cultural mentality centered on the question of adequate self-confidence. In other words, how people treat cultural formations other than their native culture is inevitably posed as a serious issue for people to reflect on and respond to, and may even profoundly shape specific socio-historical processes.

4. Cultural awareness promotes innovative cultural development on a practical basis

Neither cultural arrogance nor cultural inferiority can effectively advance the sound development of culture, and thus cannot consolidate cultural confidence. Cultural confidence stems from the robust vitality of cultural development, and such robust vitality originates from consciousness of self-development and consciousness of the times. Real-world reasonable demands constitute the soil from which the spirit of the age takes root. Marx once stated that philosophers do not spring up like mushrooms out of the earth; they are products of their own time, of their own people. “Any true philosophy is the spiritual quintessence of its time. Consequently, there must come a time when philosophy not only interacts with the real world of its age internally through its content, but also externally through its mode of expression”^[9]. In other words, the precondition for the existence and development of any culture lies in accurately grasping the nature and characteristics of its own age. Deprived of its temporal foundation and failing to apprehend the spirit of the age in ideology and culture, culture will lose vitality for survival and development, or degenerate into traditional fetters and theoretical hegemony, and weaken critical awareness across society. For socialist culture with Chinese characteristics in the context of world history, such an ideological state would prevent people from clearly and correctly understanding their position amid profound global changes, and would make them lose their developmental orientation.

Promoting the innovative development of culture on a practical basis represents the practical requirement of the “Two Combinations.” “Combination” opens up space for innovation; “combination” itself is innovation^[10]. In the new historical era, grounded in the practice of Chinese modernization and set against the background of the globalization of world history, people should root themselves in both present-day China and historical China. Drawing nourishment from Chinese civilization, people inherit fine cultural heritage from more than 5,000 years of civilization, and distill and summarize advanced cultural spirit from the revolutionary, constructive, and reform-oriented struggles of the Communist Party of China. The starting point of human history is productive labor. “The logical starting point of historical materialism is not ‘human-being’, but ‘human productive labor’”^[11]. In regard to traditional culture, people should realize the integration of ancient and modern culture grounded in practice. All culture is human culture, which confirms human real-world subjectivity. Human real-world subjectivity presupposes historical subjectivity. Hence, historical subjectivity, as an established real-world force, constitutes the objective context that present-day culture must confront, and must be reflected in contemporary culture. On the other hand, human real-world subjectivity is grounded in real-world social practice. Therefore, culture must become the discursive form of real-world social practice so as to reflect real-world human subjectivity. This indicates that any new contemporary culture incorporates elements inherited from older culture formations and new discursive modes derived from real-world social practice. In other words, the historical process from historical subjectivity to real-world subjectivity, from “ancient” to “modern,” is not a process in which individuals

may freely exercise subjectivity. Instead, it is a process in which human beings continuously create and elevate subjectivity through practice under conditions prescribed by history and tradition. Successive forms of subjectivity possess no inherent rationality of their own; subjectivity acquires rationality only within real-world social practice. In this sense, the transmission of subjectivity and cultural inheritance gain practical operability. Otherwise, “valuing dead subjectivity above living subjectivity is essentially anti-subjectivism”; or alternatively, “severing history, negating tradition, and arbitrarily exercising one’s own subjectivity”, which impoverishes the connotation of subjectivity and renders it obsolete and hollow ^[12]. Accordingly, grounded in practice, people should transform and reshape subjectivities formed in past eras, so that ancient culture can adapt to new realities. “With cultural subjectivity established, we gain firm self-identity in the cultural sense, and cultural confidence acquires its fundamental foundation” ^[13]. Only then can culture “cultivate human beings” and provide conditions for human development.

Meanwhile, when confronted with foreign cultures, people ought to absorb as much as possible what foreign cultures have contributed to human civilization. Since modern times, the former relative isolation among nations was progressively broken by the bourgeoisie as it expanded across the globe. Universal global exchanges have been established, linking the practice of every nation closely to global social practice. Every national culture finds itself surrounded by foreign cultures amid the currents of world cultural development. Under such circumstances, no culture can escape immersion in the network of world cultures. To safeguard their spiritual home, people must absorb fine foreign-cultural elements to advance alongside world cultures. Since world culture resides within national cultures, every national culture constitutes part of world culture, bears unique existential value, can offer ideological references for other nations and for global issues, and can make its own contribution to elevating human subjectivity. Therefore, innovative cultural development demands the capacity for “absorption.” No culture is monolithic; it constitutes a system made up of numerous complex cultural factors with structure and overall functions, and the relations between the whole and its parts allow separability and compatibility. “Absorption” means incorporating fine cultural factors from diverse national cultural systems into one’s own culture for creative transformation into new cultural elements, provided that they satisfy practical demands and are compatible with one’s native cultural system. Precisely along these lines, Marx held that when world history takes shape based upon large-scale industry, and mutual intercourse and interdependence develop among nations in all respects, a world culture emerges out of numerous national and local cultures ^[14].

5. Conclusion

Marx once remarked: “Everything a nation does as a nation, it does for humankind” ^[15]. As socialism with Chinese characteristics enters a new era, Chinese modernization has broadened paths to modernization for developing countries, enhanced China’s international discourse power, demonstrated its cultural strength, and offered new alternatives for countries and nations across the world that hope to accelerate development while preserving their own independence. This represents the Chinese contribution made by the cultural confidence of socialism with Chinese characteristics to the development of world culture in a conscious manner.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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