

The Contemporary Value and Significance of Chinese Culture

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1. Introduction

History has endowed the Chinese people with a very influential and unique culture, which advocates harmony in diversity and integrates different cultures in practice. While unfolding a spectacular scene, and spreading benefits around the world, it also quietly nourishes ordinary households without even being noticed. More importantly, having witnessed many thousand years of vicissitudes, it has never stopped developing. It demonstrates the great perseverance and cohesion of the unique Chinese civilization and highlights an inclusive and open attitude regarding interactions with other civilizations.

As our profoundest intellectual treasure, our culture nourishes and enables the Chinese nation to grow and thrive, forming salient strength and strong soft power. Today, unprecedented importance is attached to the creative transformation and innovative development of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation. Recently, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued *Opinions on Carrying Out the Work of Inheriting and Developing the Excellent Traditional Culture of the Chinese Nation* and notified all regions and departments to carefully implement the Opinions based on their actual conditions. This move highlights a new direction for Chinese culture and a guiding concept of “consolidating tradition while embracing innovation” under new circumstances.

Today, we launch a new column named “Seeking the Root of the Chinese Spirit: Traditional Culture Series” and invite renowned experts and scholars to interpret the value connotations of our excellent traditional culture and decode the spirit of the Chinese nation. This new column aims to make our frequently used yet seemingly

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invisible Chinese culture “visible” to the Chinese people. Meanwhile, concerning the mistakes and problems in current practice of traditional Chinese culture, it makes analyses and reflections and rectifies deviations in a bid to regain our rational judgment on, and respect for, our traditional culture. Only by accurately pinpointing the root of the Chinese spirit, both in theory and practice, can we expect to truly absorb the essence of our excellent traditional culture, and at the same time open our eyes to the world and make China’s voice heard in the international arena.

The core of the Chinese people, or the essence of the Chinese nation, is more cultural and spiritual than physiological. Without Chinese culture, there would be no room for the survival of the Chinese people or the Chinese nation. Only by securing the sustainable development of the Chinese nation can we truly appreciate the essential value of Chinese culture.

Chinese culture is fertile land for socialism with Chinese characteristics. Socialism with Chinese characteristics is an internal extension of Chinese culture. For this reason, socialism with Chinese characteristics has a range of Chinese culture-related needs, such as building and consolidating the cohesion of Chinese nation, enhancing moral and value construction, and learning the governance experience and wisdom from Chinese history.

Centering on the major issues facing the world development, by virtue of the wisdom of Chinese culture, we should strive to come up with “Chinese solutions” embodying China’s stance and values. The Chinese civilization vests us with a world view and capabilities to handle complicated issues, forming an inherent strength to support the Chinese nation to maintain sustained development for thousands of years.

Regarding three major characteristics of Chinese history and culture, three questions have

correspondingly been raised by modern historians. How did the Chinese ancestors manage to exploit this vast territory and develop such a large population? How did China achieve such high-degree of national integration rarely seen elsewhere? How can the Chinese civilization maintain sustained development over the whole span of human history? According to some historians, judging from the abovementioned three features, there is bound to be a great power driving the Chinese nation throughout the history of human civilization. What exactly is that great power? No definite answer has yet been given by any modern historian or cultural scholar. Now, we hereby present our own answer—that power is the national spirit of the Chinese nation, which endows the Chinese nation with great vitality and cohesion. One of our major tasks today is to inherit and vigorously develop Chinese culture, particularly the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation, so as to promote the development of the Chinese nation.

2. The significance of Chinese culture to the Chinese nation

Culture is the soul of a nation. The 5,000-year-old Chinese culture embodies the spiritual pursuit of the Chinese nation and has become a symbol of spirit unique to those of other nations. Its core values have shaped the mind of the Chinese people, and its basic values have formed a cultural gene of the Chinese nation. Over time, Chinese culture has developed into the spiritual lifeblood of the Chinese nation. Inheriting Chinese culture means maintaining the spiritual lifeblood of the Chinese nation. The Chinese nation and Chinese culture are interdependent. Without the Chinese nation, there wouldn’t be Chinese culture. Likewise, without Chinese culture, there wouldn’t be the Chinese nation. The core of the Chinese people, or the

essence of the Chinese nation, is more cultural and spiritual than physiological. Without Chinese culture, there would be no room for the survival of the Chinese people or the Chinese nation. The spiritual character and value pursuit of Chinese culture has supported the sustained development of the Chinese nation for thousands of years. It still is and shall always be a strong spiritual power of our nation. The ethos of Chinese culture is the “Chinese spirit” we are advocating today. The advocacy of the Chinese spirit is key to bringing together Chinese strength and firmly sticking to the Chinese path. Without a thriving and prosperous Chinese culture, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation would not be possible. Therefore, we must fully realize the importance of Chinese culture.

In the history of world civilizations, the Chinese

nation has created our time-honored Chinese culture featuring its unique cultural traditions, value systems, ethnic characteristics and historical course. Its long-term evolution shapes our cultural identity, brings about great vitality and creativity, and develops our unique development route. In the meantime, the cultural connotation of the Chinese civilization, with great values transcending time, space and national boundaries, makes great contributions to the progress of human civilization and shared values. Today, we are shouldering the great responsibility of our national development. Under such circumstances, we must safeguard its vital nutrition and carry forward its conviction. The fundamental approach to keeping our national character and carrying on our national spirit is to promote Chinese culture. Only by securing the



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sustainable development of the Chinese nation can we truly appreciate the essential value and significance of Chinese culture.

3. The value of Chinese culture to contemporary China

The long lineage of the Chinese civilization is a profound historical origin of and realistic basis for the Chinese path. Carrying forward Chinese culture echoes the real need in the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. President Xi Jinping's series of remarks made since the 18th CPC National Congress affirm Chinese culture as the fertile land for socialism with Chinese characteristics. Xi reiterates that socialism with Chinese characteristics must take root in Chinese culture and that Chinese culture is the historical origin of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Chinese culture is of primary significance to socialism with Chinese characteristics in contemporary times. As there is an earth-root, or source-river relationship between the two, we should regard socialism with Chinese characteristics as the internal extension of Chinese culture. Given that, "Chinese characteristics" is not an external manifestation of the historical development of Chinese culture, but an inherent fruit of its own development. There is an intrinsic continuous relationship between socialism with Chinese characteristics and Chinese culture. To build socialism with Chinese characteristics, we must consciously understand such a relationship and identify Chinese culture as its historical origin. The original essence of Chinese culture provides abundant resources and nutrients for socialism with Chinese characteristics. And socialism with Chinese characteristics can expect better development by fully absorbing the nutrients of Chinese culture. This is also the direct and realistic significance of carrying forward Chinese culture.

The practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics is a process of all-round social development, which has a variety of needs for Chinese culture. The most important of all is to build and consolidate the cohesion of the Chinese nation. Today, with the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation well under way, Chinese culture serves as a fundamental driver to unite over 1.3 billion Chinese people and bring together our national strength. The extensive and profound Chinese culture provides all Chinese people with a unified culture, shared values, as well as common thoughts, emotions and spirit, thus enabling the Chinese people to build a sense of belonging, cultivate a recognition of Chinese culture, and lay a foundation for enhancing national cohesion. Chinese culture has always advocated patriotism, placed collective interests over individual benefits, and attached great importance to the interests of the country and the Chinese people. Thanks to this, the Chinese nation has been able to unite to accomplish national rejuvenation. Second, we should enhance our moral education and value construction. Chinese culture emphasizes ruling the country by virtue and influencing others with virtue, and forming a sound and complete system of moral culture. Since ancient times, China has enjoyed the laudatory title of "land of propriety and righteousness." This highly developed moral culture is a prominent feature and integral part of Chinese culture, and the great commitment to safeguarding a stable and harmonious society is one of its important characteristics. Inheriting and developing this system of moral culture is the core and principal part of cultural-ethical development in contemporary China. The excellent moral tradition of Chinese culture is the source of core socialist values. Without inheriting and carrying forward such an excellent moral tradition, our core socialist values would be groundless and our shared values wouldn't be developed in contemporary China.

Third, we should learn governing experience and wisdom from Chinese history. As a country with a long history, China enjoys abundant books and records, among which are historical writings on state governance. With a humanistic view of the world, Chinese culture attaches great importance to the past and present development course, and advocates to learn experience and lessons from history to form a correct governance concept. One important reason for the Chinese nation's permanent development lies in its capability to keep drawing on the experience and lessons from history to enrich its governance concept. Today, the Chinese government is faced with governance challenges more complicated than ever before. Even so, the rich experience reflected in our culture plays a vital role in inspiring the current government. There are many ideas in Chinese culture, such as "people-oriented governance" and the "whole world as one community," which can be geared to modern society and guide our development.

The active inheritance and development of Chinese culture is part of our due responsibility of national development, and at the same time responds to the actual needs of social development in contemporary China. As aforementioned, Chinese culture is of great significance to the core value of socialism. Since the launch of Reform and Opening-up, the Chinese society has been in a process of modernization, with its market economy thriving. Yet at the same time, accompanied with such an economic boom are a series of tough challenges, such as loss of social values, moral decline and rampant corruption. Under such circumstances, it is urgent for China to reshape its social values and ethics. Through thousands of years of development, Chinese culture has formed a value system centering on benevolence, filial piety, integrity, propriety, righteousness, frugality, honor, loyalty and forbearance. This system dominates and influences China's economic, political and legal

systems and policy implementation and supports the ethical relations in the Chinese society. Also, it guides the Chinese people's actions, fosters their values, promotes social stability, and advocates kindheartedness. This system is the value basis of the excellent Chinese qualities of self-improvement and social commitment. In other words, it is the value connotation of our national spirit. The Chinese nation's continuous development over the past several thousand years is closely associated with this core value system. And it is precisely this value system that forms the essential nature of the Chinese people. The Chinese nation, along with its unique vitality, originates from these values and their practice. In fact, these values have been fully embodied by the heroic undertakings made by numerous people with lofty ideals since the Opium Wars. These values are the source of our core value system of socialism.

In the context of socialist market economy, the society's core value system features both similarities with, and differences from, the value system of ancient China. This means we need to pay attention to innovation while inheriting the Chinese ideology and culture to adapt to the changes and requirements of the time. The social order and ethical values cannot be separated from history or traditional ethical culture. In terms of reassuring people, traditional Chinese culture plays an irreplaceable role in establishing the basic law of social life, code of ethics, as well as culture ascription. For thousands of years, our people-oriented traditional culture has contributed greatly in reassuring and inspiring the Chinese people, and promoting a harmonious society. For modern society, however, some traditional values may be directly applied to practice, while others need to be updated before use. This "update" means rearranging and summarizing the essence of those values in accordance with current challenges and needs to transform them into the core values of the new era.

4. The implications of Chinese culture to the challenges facing the world

Regarding its contemporary significance, Chinese culture is vital to the survival and development of the Chinese nation and the current development of the Chinese society. More importantly, it can be helpful in resolving the conflicts and tensions facing humanity today. In this contemporary era, there are five major conflicts in need of immediate solutions, which respectively are; the conflicts between humans and nature, between humans and society, between people, between individuals and their egos (inner world), and between civilizations. Throughout human history, these conflicts, in various degrees, have always been there. It is just that the process of modernization intensifies those conflicts and tensions, making them a worldwide challenge. People have more and more realized that it is impossible to rely solely on modern Western values to solve those conflicts and tensions. Subsequently, insightful men have turned their eyes to other civilizations, like the Chinese civilization. For example, Chinese culture advocates the principles of “unity of nature and man,” “loyalty and forbearance,” “harmony in diversity” and “integration of individuals with community.” Unity of nature and man focuses on the harmony between man and nature and helps to alleviate the tensions between the two. Loyalty and forbearance emphasizes do not do to others what you would not have them do to you, which can be useful in solving interpersonal disputes. Harmony in diversity is conducive to the exchanges between civilizations. Integration of individuals with community can help to solve the conflicts between individuals and society. Chinese culture contains many ideas which can inspire people to solve conflicts in the world.

Therefore, one important purpose of inheriting and developing Chinese culture is to tackle the

major challenges facing global development today by presenting concepts, proposals and solutions which represent China’s stance, wisdom and values. It is hoped that the Chinese civilization, along with the world’s other civilizations, can offer ideological guidance to all humans. What solutions can best represent Chinese characteristics? Evidently, the solutions best representing Chinese characteristics are those which combine the philosophy and wisdom of Chinese culture with real practice and subsequently propose ideas in line with the actual situation and with universal significance. From a perspective of civilization, China is among the world’s major civilizations. Through thousands of years of uninterrupted development, this extensive and profound civilization has supported its huge population scattered around a vast stretch of land. Being highly cultivated and mature, it developed and grew in Asia, delivering a far-reaching impact on East Asia. By virtue of its rich experience and accumulated wisdom, it made immense contributions to human civilization in the past and can definitely contribute to the world today. As we know, over 2,500 years ago, Confucius advocated the concepts of “do not treat others what you would not treat on you” and “harmony in diversity,” which not only serve as universal rules to deal with human relationships but also demonstrate the Chinese people’s wisdom in addressing human challenges. The same is also true of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” proposed in the 1950s. In its own way, this represents the best of China. Given that, it is necessary for us to comprehensively sum up the experience of China’s historical development, thoroughly explore its practical wisdom, carefully appreciate the world view and values contained in Chinese culture, and cultivate a consciousness of civilization. Only by doing so can we expect to formulate truly feasible Chinese solutions to address human challenges. The Chinese characteristics

in the Chinese solutions is based on our ancient civilization's profound culture accumulated over the past 5,000 years. Without the inheritance and development of that traditional culture, there would be no way for us to present any Chinese solution. In terms of soft power, Chinese culture vests us with a world view and capabilities to handle complicated issues, forming an inherent strength to support the Chinese nation to maintain sustained development for thousands of years. The inheritance and development of the Chinese civilization requires using the Chinese wisdom to confront the challenges of our time with people from all over the world. This helps to win respect for China in the international arena. It is in this sense that we should stand our cultural ground, inherit our cultural traditions, showcase our cultural wisdom, and above all enable Chinese culture to contribute even more to humanity.

Chinese philosopher Feng Youlan used to

argue, "China is among the world's major ancient civilizations. In contrast with the decline of other ancient civilizations, China survived the vicissitudes of time, and successfully transformed into a socialist country. As a country, China is both old and new. There is a saying in the *Book of Songs* that 'although Zhou Kingdom is an old country, it has a mission of reform.' An old country with a new mission is exactly the term to describe contemporary China. What we need to do is to give full play to these characteristics." "Old country" refers to a country with a long history and rich cultural deposits, while "new mission" means its willingness to keep renewing itself. We must always remember our original intention, learn the experience from other countries, and be future-oriented. That means enhancing the vitality and influence of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation and reviving and supporting the best of Chinese culture.

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