

The Placement of “Nostalgia” and Protection of Folk Culture in the Context of Urbanization

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Abstract: During the rapid growth of urbanization, the nostalgic culture has been further activated, propelling the progress of the “urbanization of man” that puts people first. The increasing prevalence of nostalgic culture is not accidental, but rather a reflection of the spiritual loss and dejection of modern people caused by the high level of material civilization. This inspires calls for return to “man” and focus on ordinary people, which to a large extent is in line with the aim of folk culture. Therefore, to strengthen the protection of folk culture, take the initiative to add into it a human dimension and take good care of the living world of modern people is an important approach to well placed “nostalgia” and the advancement of a healthy, rapid growth of a new-type of urbanization.

Keywords: nostalgia; urbanization; folk culture; the living world; approach

Since December 2013, when the central urbanization work conference established the direction of a new-type of urbanization—“to integrate cities into nature so that urban dwellers can enjoy the view of mountains and waters and are reminded of their hometowns,” nostalgic culture has become a hot research topic in academia. A theoretic construction was launched by scholars, with each discipline, such as philosophy, literature, geography, sociology and architectonics,

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contributing their due portion by delving into this very cultural ideological trend that is both traditional and modern. Folklore was also an active participant in this trend. Shandong University, for example, held the Forum for Nostalgic China and the Construction of New Urbanization shortly after the urbanization work conference, inviting folklore experts to actively explore how folklore should be embedded and nostalgic culture leverage to advance a new-type of urbanization. Researcher An Deming opened a column discussing frontier topics in the magazine *Forum on Folk Culture*, which incorporated essays like his “Nostalgia as an Object: the Concept and Expression Strategy of Hometown in Chinese Traditional Folklore Records”, Yue Yongyi’s “Nostalgia that Follows Urbanization” and Zhang Bo’s “Interpretations of Traditional Villages and Homesickness: Reflections on the Legitimacy and Methods of Protecting Traditional Villages at Present”. These essays have offered their distinctive interpretations of nostalgia from the perspective of folklore. Yet, these explorations have yet to become well known in contemporary research, especially the correlation between folk culture and nostalgic culture. Folklore is a discipline that is most characterized by concern for subjectivity, as well as communication of and reflection upon feelings. Talking about nostalgic culture, folklore’s viewpoints are still “abducted” or clouded by mainstream disciplines and are blocked from voicing their own opinions. Nor are the characteristics of folklore exhibited as a discipline. Therefore, this paper, focusing on the concept of nostalgia, begins with a discussion about urbanization, explores the innate common ground between folk culture and nostalgic culture, and tries to find an approach to accurately place “nostalgia,” retain the nostalgic memories and strengthen the protection of folk culture to better serve China’s construction of a new-type of urbanization.

1. Growing urbanization vs nostalgic China

Urbanization is an inevitable trend for development and has been an important concern of the CPC and the Chinese government in recent years. It has witnessed striking growth since the launch of Reform and Opening-up. According to relevant statistics, through nearly thirty years of rapid growth, China’s percentage of urbanized areas increased from 25% in the mid-1980s to 53.73% in 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). This rapidly growing urbanization necessarily leads to the extinction of traditional villages. “In 2000, there were 3.6 million natural villages in China. But the number plunged to 2.7 million in 2010. Within ten years 900 thousand villagers had disappeared, almost 250 per day. Among those lost villages were some that were very old” (Zhang, 2014). The extinction of a large number of villages not only took away great amounts of tangible heritage (ancient buildings, alleys, drama stages and squares), but also brought harm to copious amounts of intangible cultural heritage (*quyi*, dramas, recreational sports, ballads, legends, proverbs, arts and crafts). The traditional villages and their subsidiary intangible cultural heritage are the foundation of Chinese civilization and the basis of the continuation and development of the glorious Chinese culture that evolved over five thousand years. Objectively speaking, urbanization has made extraordinary achievements, but owing to the influence of Western industrial civilizations, binary thinking has saturated the local practices of urbanization, and sometimes the traditional villages and modern cities are even regarded as two ends that are not in any way compatible with each other. This fickle philosophy of development, which is characterized by the excessive pursuit urbanization, chasing farmers into cities and forcing the old to give way to the new, is awful and perilous for the inheritance and development of Chinese civilization. Being traditional is not

necessarily the opposite of being modern. Rather, the two can complement each other and converge during development. Traditional culture, as the basis and starting point of modern culture, is pointing to the future in a linear chain. “Only when traditional culture becomes the cornerstone can modern culture be accumulated and developed. No modern civilization can exist without an earlier traditional culture. The two, instead of being opposites, or replaceable, or excluding each other, in fact inherit and enrich each other... The source of Chinese civilization is an agrarian culture, and its cradle lies in the old villages. The villages, as the carrier and source of traditional culture, are also the foundation and support for our modern culture” (Liu, 2014, p.164).

Comparatively speaking, the percentage of urbanized area used to be an important measure of urbanization, which was characterized by the prominent binary philosophy of development. This philosophy, as it “fermented” during local practices of urbanization, made harmony between traditional cities and villages less and less possible and both urban and rural development sank into an undisciplined state. The rural areas naturally bore the brunt. Traditional neighborhood relations became more complicated, while freedom, harmony and warm feelings, replaced by doubts, envy and insecure feelings, were nowhere to be found. This “urban disease” permeated into rural areas. At nights when there was no farm work, people, instead of visiting their neighbors and having a great conversation, tended to close their door early and watch TV to kill time. In the context of rapid industrialization and urbanization, rural development itself was severely challenged, the soil for traditional culture deteriorated, the rural labor force flowed into the cities, and the old, women and young were left

behind forming a so-called “Army 993861.”^① Villages are reduced to a dilapidated state, just as described in the doggerel, “Seen from outside it is a village; inside no figure of man is found; the old houses are abandoned, and the field is cropless, overgrown with weeds.” “The large-scale transfer of rural labor not only hollows out the rural population, but also causes a chain of negative effects, such as an agricultural brain drain, failure to provide social assistance to the left-behind groups, destruction of the overall rural layout and an inheritor crisis for the rural culture” (Fan, 2015). The hollowing-out phenomenon not only befalls the rural population, but also hits the rural services, the land and the rural culture. The space which pastoral beauty is enshrined in our memory is reduced to something bleak, shattered, stagnant and voiceless.

The hollowing out of villages not only bestows several problems on the rural areas but also, indirectly, hampers the development of urbanization, for China’s rural issues are always a basic concern and the problems of Chinese farmers are a top concern. The massive transfer of farmers and the hollowing out of villages necessarily affects urban development, and the quality and progress of urbanization. As huge numbers of rural people flow into cities, yet fail to fit into them, being far away from family and friends, hearing no more their local tongue, and suffering from a culture shock, they often feel lonely and withdraw from social communication. In terms of economy they cannot afford an expensive urban life, of social status they could not obtain equality and respect, and of culture they get no empathy. They migrate like migrant birds between cities and villages. This migrant-bird-style urbanization, however, has numerous side effects and poses many problems for cities, such as the surging urban population growth that degrades mass transit,

① It is a vivid saying that refers to senior citizens (for Double Ninth Festival), women (for the March 8 Women’s Day) and children (for the June 1 Children’s Day) left behind in the wake of the massive outflow of rural labor force. The hollowing out of villages has led to a chain of negative impacts. Facing up to and solving the problem is an important step for resolving today’s problems for agriculture, farmers and rural areas.

puts extra demands on the supply of energy and resources which further increases the cost of economic growth, increases damage done to the ecological environment which reduces the quality of life, creates mounting social problems and accelerates social strife, complicates community-level administration, and further weakens cultural identity.^① Cultural identity is particularly difficult, for migrant workers come from different areas, carrying with them the customs of their hometowns. They, owing to their diverse cultural backgrounds, often bear exclusion, doubts and apathy towards each other, and there might then be disputes and contradictions among them, resulting in a lack of friendship, belief and intimacy. No warm feelings exist between neighbors, just as the saying goes, “Each house is enveloped with iron bars, and guarded by peepholes. Though thousands of conversations happen on the phone, none occurs between neighbors.” Such a scenario for society can easily make the migrant workers feel like a lonely island even though they are living in the bustling city. They feel like transitory travelers who never belong to the cities, and that brings them ever closer to their hometown.

“Nostalgia” naturally develops against such a historical background and cultural ecology. By some measure, this “nostalgia” is also an “urban anxiety,” which reflects the feelings of loss, helplessness, disorientation and longing for the good old days in the face of the rapidly developing monopolar material development of the cities. Just as American Lewis Mumford (2005) put it, “In a development model setting the growth of economic indicators as the core goal, even the highest achievements in urban material construction cannot conceal the fact that the spiritual essence is gone” (p.317). The more intense the monopolar urban development gets, the more memories of and longings for the hometown

and family as well as old friends urban residents will harbor. To be sure, nostalgia is not merely something that happens to migrant workers. Urban residents from all walks of life have nostalgia in their own forms and in different degrees. “Nostalgic culture is the unforgettable sum of tangible and intangible material and spiritual wealth from hometowns, which was incessantly created and accumulated throughout human history and social development” (Zhou, 2015). This nostalgia is also closely linked with distance and features a spatial scale effect. The farther people are away from their hometowns, the stronger their nostalgia will be. Nostalgia can be as concrete as a memory of or a longing for certain village, township, town, county, province or state. It can also be as abstract as a regret or a reflection of the never-to-return friendship, kinship, neighborliness and other warm, happy feelings. To a large extent, nostalgia is represented as a psychological and emotional state, which contains psychological unease, helplessness, alienation and exclusion towards the rapid, rigid urban development, as well as a longing for, a lamentation over and a memory of the forever-gone hometown, local tongue and kinship. Nostalgia in nature is neither tangible nor reversible. It is a psychological state based on a long-term accumulation of psychological “boycott” against the non-benign urban development, and also a benign release or dissolution of depressed feelings.

With urbanization, material living standards are increasingly raised, and stylish buildings become urban landmarks and faces, urban landscapes, however, are becoming more and more similar. All cities are pursuing higher, wider and brighter urban buildings, which in turn leads to the mediocrity of cities. Urban planning is overly overlapped, mocked as “a combination of vulgar taste and hollowness

① For the “urban diseases” brought by the rapid growth of urbanization, please see also “The Efficiency and Dimensions of Folk Culture’s Regurgitation-feeding in the Context of New Urbanization”, *Folklore Studies*, 2015 (3).

prevalent across China.” This style of urbanization also lowers, thins and disrupts the moral culture, leading to interpersonal aloofness, apathy and doubts, depriving people of reassurance, and ushering in nostalgia from the bottom of their heart. The anxiety for the never-to-return hometown is also a kind of worry relating to cities. Those people flowing to cities from villages are not only concerned for their hometowns but also anxious to fit into the cities. “Longings for hometowns” comes from “worry about urban life,” while the former strengthens the latter. The complete meaning of “nostalgia”^① should contain both (Liu, 2014), neither of which falls merely on migrant workers—the group flowing from villages to cities that never finds a way to fit in. Instead, nostalgia should be extended to all urban dwellers. Feelings of helplessness, loss and exclusion are universal among all urban dwellers and migrant workers during rapid urbanization. Hence nostalgia, containing both regrets and hopes for urbanization has become prevalent across the country. Nostalgic culture in China thus becomes a straightforward portrayal of the complex psychology of people that hold bitter-sweet feelings towards Chinese urbanization and magnify the good side of “pastoral China.”

“Nostalgia, as an emotional memory, is thus a deposit of time and history, which in a way implies a fate that will become extinct or pass away, forming a sort of confrontation with the present (or the immediate goal and short-term interest)” (Li, 2015). The growing nostalgia, in some measure, is also conveying a message: the current pace of urbanization is much too fast and rash; while the material construction is advancing, the moral and cultural construction lags. It inspires thoughts of correction and improvement

of urbanization development, which necessarily calls for a new style to rectify prior urbanization problems. That is where a new-type of urbanization comes in as a necessary approach to Chinese urbanization. The new-type of urbanization is to lay a foundation for the sustainable development of Chinese cultural ecology as well as the inheritance and continuation of Chinese civilization. It is a call from the ages to “stick to the path of a new-type of urbanization with Chinese characteristics, push forward people-oriented urbanization, promote the coordinated development of mega-cities, mid-sized cities, small cities and small towns, promote the integrated development of industries and cities, advance urbanization and the building of new rural areas in a coordinated manner, improve the urban spatial structure and management patterns, and enhance the urban comprehensive carrying capacity.”^② The new-type urbanization is an urbanization that views people as the core and gives well-rounded consideration to urban comprehensive carrying capacity while propelling coordinated development between urban and rural areas. It not only focuses on the material life of man, but more importantly stresses their spiritual life, their mind and soul. The new-type urbanization is a benign kind of development based on the heritage of our outstanding traditional culture. It respects the laws of nature, esteems nature and emulates the way nature works. By proposing “to integrate cities into nature so urban dwellers can enjoy the view of mountains and waters,” it not only seeks a beautiful natural environment and a comfortable life, but also, standing at the height of human subjectivity, pursues the liberation of humanity and values man’s spiritual abode. “Reminding urban dwellers of their hometown” marks a great

① The author holds that the subjects of nostalgia should include migrant workers, urban dwellers and those in foreign countries far away from their homeland. The content of nostalgia contains a remembrance of and yearning for the homeland, tongues and former beloved ones, as well as feelings of rejection, resistance and loss in the face of the rigid urban development. Considering the geographical inconvenience, nostalgia discussed in this paper is only limited to migrant workers, urban dwellers and people wandering in alien areas (exclusive of foreign wanderers temporarily).

② Decision on major issues concerning comprehensively deepening reforms. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-11/15/content_2528179.htm.



enjoying the view of mountains and waters

transcendence over the prior urbanization philosophy. It is the highest standard for the new-type of urbanization, and also a warm expression that can best exhibit a cultural dimension, humanistic concern and dignity of life.

2. Common genes shared by nostalgic culture and folk culture

Nostalgic culture has a long tradition. Owing to empathy and connectivity of emotions, experiences of nostalgia were amply documented and studied in and outside China. Foreign concern for nostalgia may date back to the 17th century, when nostalgia was expressed by soldiers in battlefields far away from their hometowns as “homesickness.” From the 1970s, however, the feelings of nostalgia began to contain

a longing for the old life before industrialization and urbanization (Zhou & Chen, 2015). In Chinese history, experiences of nostalgia were first recorded in *The Book of Songs* at the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty. Many poems in the book, such as *Odes of Bin: Eastern Mountain and Lesser Court Hymns: Plucking Wei*, indicate that soldiers dispatched to guard the border missed their families and loved ones. Later, the scope of homesickness expanded to people struggling for life in an alien land, soldiers guarding the frontier and demoted officials, and the content of nostalgia mainly included longing for the homeland and loved ones, woes about living in an alien place, and reminiscing during holidays. Poems of the Tang Dynasty cover a wide range of topics concerning nostalgia. “Poetry was very popular in the Tang Dynasty. Tang poems, focusing on feelings

and thoughts about wars, demotions, traveling, and parting with loved ones, usually struck a chord” (Yan, 1985, pp. 40-41). For example, “So deeply I miss my hometown there, and so much sound and fury here,” “Like sharp swords, stand many pointed hills by the sea; Into pieces my anxious heart, cut they would,” “Just hearing the tunes will turn a traveler’s head white overnight! Oh! Envoy Su Wu’s nineteen-year-sufferings who can comprehend?” and “Cold and hungry wandering far from my home, I weep till my pillow is soaked with tears.” Nostalgic poetry came to be an important genre. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, especially since the 1980s, urbanization was gaining a striking momentum, the integration of urban and rural areas accelerated and the “hollowing out” of rural areas worsened. Villages, the last spiritual home for man, were disappearing, or being mutated. Alienation from industrialization and urbanization, combined with the never-gone memory of the homeland, native tongues and loved ones, marked the tone of nostalgic culture. In terms of subjects, nostalgia was no longer limited to people who studied, ran businesses or made a living elsewhere, far away from home. It also involved most migrant workers who struggled for a living in the urban areas, and local urban residents, both groups experiencing nostalgia at various levels and meanings.

Nostalgia is not easily visible. Instead, it is a psychology hidden deep inside and is only occasionally stirred by sudden occurrences. It is an internal feeling of the mind and soul that is displayed by straightforward emotional experiences. Nostalgia as a part of the traditional Chinese culture, and its connotation contains three dimensions; the moral dimension, the institutional dimension and the material dimension (Zhou, 2015). The objects of nostalgia, such as the homeland, tongues and people, inherently include houses, buildings, wells, stages for performances, alleys, lifestyles, customs, trends, conventions, etiquette and proverbs of the homeland.

These tangible or intangible carriers also form the key content and basis of the folk culture. Therefore, nostalgic culture and folk culture intersect and overlap. They enjoy innate connectivity and correlation and partially share the same cultural genes.

2.1 Being closely tied with the distance in time and space

As the renowned poet Wang Wei in the Tang Dynasty depicted in his *On the Mountain Holiday Thinking of My Brothers in Shandong*, “All alone in a foreign land, I am twice as homesick on this day.” Nostalgia becomes intense if a geographical alienation is involved. The source of nostalgia is usually being far away from one’s hometown. This spatial element contributes to nostalgia even today. Nostalgia is also attributed to time. It is usually a longing in retrospect, cherishing a memory and an attachment to the past. Therefore, nostalgic culture exhibits a prominent sense of the distance in time and space. “Nostalgic culture stems from the passage of time and a spatial mismatch, without which nostalgia could not have been formed or produced” (Peng, 2016). The folk culture, from the perspective of time, is also a yearning in retrospect, a retrospect and attachment to the past folk life vivid with beautiful memories. This forms a kind of distance in time. The distance in space is represented by the attachment to the old folk life caused by the gap between urban and rural areas. Or for urban residents, if the urban environment is changed by urban development, a distance in space can also be created. Therefore, both nostalgic culture and folk culture are tied with a sense of distance in time and space. Their emotions are all produced by comparisons between now and then, here and there.

2.2 Presenting a mentality that “looks back”

Nostalgic culture and folk culture, in terms of their external manifestations, seem to prefer to “look back,” and return to a former place. Nostalgia as a culture conveys a feeling of intimacy, security and belonging towards one’s former acquaintances and encounters.

The gesture of returning to one's homeland, pointing to man's inner yearnings, is the return of the mind after a seeking-the-source-of-culture journey. To be sure, this kind of "looking back" has negative impacts. But it also has its positive outcomes. "It is in nature a resistance against and a reversal of the 'disenchantment' that modernity imposes upon nature and traditional culture. It is in fact the 're-enchantment' advocated by ecologism, which aims to restore the mystique, sacredness and potential aesthetic value of nature... Looking back leads to a necessary reflection that helps man to conclude and learn, and timely adjust their directions and locations on their path towards development" (Zhong, 2008). Folk culture, for a long time, used to be viewed as something outdated. Even today, while its modernity is emphasized, its tangled intersection with the "looking-back" mentality must be recognized in an objective sense. "Folk culture is a culture that is passed on among the people. Its principal parts, formed in the past, are part of the traditional culture" (Zhong, 1998). Folk culture, though evolving and serving today's economic, social and cultural construction, must be traced to the past to find its root. Despite the special attention and recognition it receives today, folk culture still has to attribute its forms and cultural connotation to its being passed and recreated through generations, which then reconstructs people's empathy for it. The inheritance, growth and evolution of many folk icons were naturally integrated with attributes of the time, but they could never be without empathy for the folk culture, especially the collective, unconscious drive based on "looking back."

2.3 A mixture of rejection and hope

Nostalgia is a psychological state that congeals into a feeling of loss, loneliness and rootlessness. But it does not in any way oppose socio-economic development. The congealed nostalgia, seen from outside, is a rejection of and a resistance to socio-economic development, yet lingering on this view is a very partial and short-sighted act, for nostalgia

is rather a reaction to the failure to realize expected dreams through socio-economic development. It implies an implicit effort to correct the socio-economic development, and a mixture of rejection and hope, thereby as a collective mentality advancing the benign socio-economic development and providing more private space and respect for ordinary people. Nostalgia mainly reflects psychological languages and emotional experiences shared by people. In some measure it is romantic, with things such as odes of and longings for the lost homeland, tongues and acquaintances. But it is also realistic, for it is a psychological hint internalized to "deny" today's achievements of socio-economic development, under the influence of feelings like alienation, loneliness and resistance caused by distance in time and space. "Nostalgic culture typically extols the past and criticizes the present during the passage of time and spatial mismatch, thereby reconstructing the values belonging to the present moment and space" (Peng, 2016). To be sure, this mixture of rejection and hope is not absolute denial in a real sense. Instead, it implies a call for the government and society to identify the problems and solve them, to learn from the more harmonious model of social development in that past that bears man's emotions and memories. That is parallel to the inner philosophy and aspirations of folk culture. Though this hope and pursuit is somewhat perfectionist, it is still meaningful as a way for man to reflect upon the present situation while pushing social development forward.

2.4 Accentuating the dilemma of modern human life

In the context of globalization, fast development of high technologies, and rapid improvement of people's material lives, those primitive human instincts and desires for material wealth hidden deep inside are further swelling, hedonism, consumerism and instrumental rationalism are becoming pervasive, technology is mastering all, the worship for money is rampant, human moral and cultural needs are

becoming flat, monotonous and homogeneous, depth is missing in culture, thoughts and emotions, and human relationships are increasingly characterized by aloofness and apathy. Against such a historical background, nostalgic culture becomes popular. It mainly accentuates the dilemmas of modern people's lives, their solitude, helplessness and woes after being deprived of their spiritual abode. "Today's nostalgia is, to a large extent, changed in its nature and form. The original forms still exist, but new forms are already emerging. It is a nostalgia that is concerned about one's life, a nostalgia that reveals the spiritual rootlessness and hardships of living" (Qian, 2016). The evolution of nostalgia's connotation and its orientation of demand provide for the benign running of society and a reference standard for self-assessment, self-reflection and self-repair. It helps to reconstruct a harmonious relationship among individuals, society and the country, and propels the dynamic balance among science, culture and the economy. Nostalgic culture's focus on modern people's spiritual abode is in line with the pursuit of folk culture. The latter is a culture about the ordinary lives of ordinary people and cares about people. It seeks harmony and uniformity among man, society and nature, and takes care of the life and emotions of ordinary people. Folk culture is a customary set of rules that were accumulated over time by the whole society. It follows the law of the development of society and nature, projects the collective thinking, thoughts and consciousnesses of all human beings, stands the test of time, and inherently contains harmonious cultural genes. "The reason why folk culture can bring harmony to society is that folk culture itself is harmonious. Even if an inharmonious folk culture does exist, it can be naturally eliminated as time goes by (Wan, 2005). Currently, traditional culture is fast disappearing, while the economy, society and modern sciences are gaining momentum. The unbalance between the material life and the moral & cultural life is also expanded. This contrast further

arouses people's yearning for the traditional folk life, and the folk culture is thus able to revive, reoccur and be reconstructed, magnifying the dilemma of modern human life as well as human feelings of loss. In that sense it is closely linked to the palette of life painted by a nostalgic culture.

2.5 Directing a deeper level of human development

Both nostalgic culture and folk culture are an implicit form of culture that is conveyed by human emotions and feelings, showing concern for humanity and emotional experiences, in their rejection-like "passive" resistance trying to divert social attention to man's living circumstances, calling for a return to the purity of the soul, and promoting a deeper level of human development. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a human being has five levels of needs, namely physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. Nostalgic culture and folk culture, directing to the moral and cultural dimensions, mainly represent the latter three kinds of needs. The process of balancing social development and human development and satisfying the individuals' moral and cultural needs is also a process for individuals to obtain social recognition, respect and be respected, build self-confidence and enthusiasm for society, realize their aspirations, and feel their own value as well as the beauty of living. To be sure, limited by certain production conditions, social development may not truly be able to satisfy the needs of human development, and may even repress them in some way. "There always exists a certain degree of confrontation between the progress of human productivity and the production capacity. This confrontation was seen throughout history and is very likely to be enlarged and deepened. Meanwhile, human beings, as an element of the system of social production capacity, are continuously in clashes with other elements of the system, such as the means of production and nature"

(He, 2014, p.58). This confrontation, of course, will not be antagonistic in a socialistic society, for as the production capacity grows, the confrontation will be gradually weakened, and human development will be brought to a “kingdom of freedom” from a “kingdom of inevitability.” Since social development and human development are compatible with each other, the nostalgic culture and folk culture, directing to a deeper level of human development, will inspire social introspection on the problems arising in development through a rejection-like emotional appeal, thereby propelling the benign development of society.

3. The placement of nostalgia and the protection of folk culture

China’s rapid urbanization and achievements are unprecedented in history. But obviously it also has its weaknesses; the hollowing out of villages in the wake of the construction of cities, then the massive extinction of traditional architecture and folk culture, and the improbability of the continuation of urban cultural bonds. Such damage is irretrievable, for a city not only lives on today and tomorrow, but also must have memories and go on living through memories. Feng Jicai(2006) held that “Each of us has in our mind a memory of our own past and growth. So does the city, which also possesses a complete course of living, from birth and childhood, to youth and adulthood. All those enriched and unique processes are voicelessly preserved in its gigantic body. The cities are not only a place to inhabit or use for us, but they also have their own value, personalities and meaning for culture... Vertically they record the urban history and the passing down of things; horizontally they display the depth and breadth of the past encounters. In this crisscross intersection each city has its own personality woven”. All the tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the cities, such as houses, buildings, squares, avenues, customs, proverbs and conventions are carriers of their

history and support traditional cultural bonds. Here is an analogy, if it does not sound too inappropriate. Imagine if a person suffers a memory loss, then what meaning can today and tomorrow, however beautiful they might be, possibly have for him or her? There is no longer a standard to reference, nor any emotional experiences, nor a source to remember. Only through the tangible and intangible cultural heritage that deposits vestiges of history can the cities link memories of yesterday, today and tomorrow, see their future in the infinite tunnel of time, and exude vivacity and meaning. Just as Lewis Murnford (2005) said, by means of the lasting buildings and institutionalized structures, as well as the more lasting symbols of literature and arts, the cities are able to link together the past, the present and the future (p.105). Therefore, the expansion mode of urbanization characterized by extensive demolition and construction must be prevented. China’s urbanization must draw on experience of its Latin American counterparts, stride over the middle-income trap, blaze a new trail that could bring out its full potential, put people first, aim at a well-rounded, well-coordinated and sustainable development, take care of the urban dwellers, store the memories of the cities and “let the urban dwellers be reminded of their hometowns.”

The new-type urbanization revolves around the “urbanization of man,” “which is based on the communitization of man. Folk traditions like festivals, etiquette, recreational forms, beliefs and family ties should be important to the establishment of communities during modern urbanization” (Zhang, 2014). Therefore, the new-type urbanization, while being proactively promoted, must focus on man, stress the harmonious development among man, cities and nature, protect and pass down the folk culture and build harmonious communities, thereby turning nostalgia into an inner impetus for social progress, and enhancing urban dwellers’ sense of happiness, achievement and belongingness. Nostalgia, despite

being a “looking-back” style of culture and harboring a resistance and rejection of reality, is also brewing a hope for a social self-repair in its resistance. “In nature, nostalgia has a complicated set of attributes, such as a comparison between an ideal version of the homeland and a realistic version, conflicts between emotions of bitterness and happiness or contradictory memories, the tension between spatial flows and longings for stable inhabitancy, the variability and complexity of the subjects, and the transformation of measures of hometown and home country. Though it is irreversible, and an illusion, an ideal, a goal as well as a starting point, nostalgia, by serving as a goal and ideal set for actions, could end up inspiring thoughts about protecting our cultural heritage on both the theoretical and practical levels” (Li, 2015). Nostalgia is a dream that hangs over one’s mind. It is a beautiful imagination that is from and above reality. The orientation of nostalgia, though necessarily contradictory with the trends of social development, plays a positive part during benign social development as a thing to be reflected upon and repaired. Nostalgic culture parallels folk culture in some aspects. Nostalgic culture cannot live without the sites reserved in memory, such as villages, squares, houses, buildings, alleys, ancient wells and bridges, nor the elements of folk culture, such as proverbs, ballads, legends, etiquette, conventions, customs and recreational forms. Even the tangible sites in memory are infiltrated by folk cultural elements like villages, neighbors and rural daily life. Those sites would not be if folk cultural elements were removed. The folk culture and the sites in memory it depends upon are where nostalgia comes from and runs along. To place nostalgia well, it is necessary to firmly insist on the continuation of folk culture and the preservation of memories and take effective measures to protect and pass down our folk culture.

Folk culture, as a key part of traditional culture, is the root of a nation’s culture, constructing and deciding how far, how broad and how high a national

civilization can go. The protection and inheritance of our folk culture must adhere to the baseline of “focusing on protection, prioritizing salvation, and achieving reasonable use, inheritance and development,” take a holistic view, seek rational ways of protecting and inheriting folk culture, such as integrated protection, dynamic protection and productivity protection, invigorate the folk culture from inside, and adding modern elements to it, thereby protecting our folk culture through dynamic inheritance. The protective measures must follow the inherent law of folk culture development. They must also make reasonable use of folk culture while seeing it well protected. Currently, problems keep emerging in the protection of folk culture, commercialization and industrialization are rampant, folk culture is reduced to a mere stunt used by individuals or companies for commercial development, and the weird phenomenon of exploiting culture for commercial purposes remains. Fake folk culture is pervasive and real folk culture is being hollowed out and changed into a delicately-parceled shell. Therefore, academia, society and government must unite and volunteer to resist the prevalence of fake folk culture, promote true, living, great folk culture, jointly inherit folk culture and effectively let it play its due role in educating people, shaping their code of conduct, maintaining emotional bonds, bringing people together, providing recreation and boosting social harmony thereby proactively advancing China’s cultural construction. To be sure, the protection and inheritance of folk culture never means to “keep things as they were,” and treat folk culture as a specimen. Instead, the core is to protect the cultural connotation, genes, the key techniques, follow its inherent law and promote a “lively kind of protection” rather than a “rigid protection,” for folk culture does not belong to the past. Though deviating from social development, it is still a culture about living, and is still changing. It is a dynamic culture. “Folk culture is a dynamic mode of culture. It is an objective social existence that is forever

‘changing’. This ‘kinetic energy’ is in folk culture’s blood. It has been incorporated into it since its birth” (Wan, 2005). Follow its dynamic character, preserve it in a dynamic way, inherit it in protection, combine it with modern elements, and invigorate it from inside—that is the only reliable approach to protect and inherit folk culture.

Protecting folk culture, preserving its dynamic character and diversity, sustaining the traditional cultural bonds and carrying on the memories of the cities is in line with the requirements of the new-type urbanization which stresses the development of meaning. “Whether it is in the past, or at present, or in the future, the protection of diversified folk culture and

the inheritance, development and use of its diversity will always accompany and influence the progress of the dream of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, overwhelmingly unite people in pursuing dreams and encourage them along the way, and provide an inexhaustible source of power for the construction of a new-type of urbanization” (Li & Xu, 2013). Today, as competition in science and culture increasingly intensify, the cultural economy has become a very important dimension in international economic development. The Chinese nation enjoys rich and unique folk cultural resources, which have crystallized and deposited Chinese people’s cultural wisdom throughout history. Therefore, if folk culture is



preserving folk culture in a dynamic way

actively protected and inherited, and further effectively used, if modern elements, humanitarian dimensions and creative ideas are added to reconstruct its roots, if the nostalgia is better carried, felt and placed, if people's demand for a cultural life and a spiritual abode is well addressed, if modern people's lives are taken care of, and the beautiful vision of "letting urban

dwellers be reminded of their hometowns" is realized, if the new-type urbanization is supported by a solid culture, and if Chinese soft power based on culture is effectively increased, the Chinese dream (the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation) is sure to come true soon enough.

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