



A Brief Discussion on the Marxist Theory of the Essence of Culture

Han Meiqun*

Abstract: Marxism holds that the internal essence of culture lies in the inherent identity of culture and man, and in the spiritual essence of man and that there would be no culture without man and man's spirit. From the perspective of the source of culture, it is man's transcendence over nature. From the point of view of the process of its evolution, it is the sum of all human social relationships. Culture has the characteristics of man's sociality and is shared by an entire cultural community. The essential complexity of culture is the logical expression of human thinking, and the logic reflection of cultural practice. Cultural practice, i.e., human practice, is influenced and constrained not only by external practice, but also by the consciousness of man himself. Such two-way internal and external effects determine the particular law and logic of culture itself in its development, i.e., the dialectical unity between decisiveness and selectivity, and between nationality and cosmopolitanism, in the development of culture; the dialectical unity between the consistency of basic trends in terms of the law of cultural development and the diversity of choices of paths; and the dialectical unity between diversity and unity concerning paths for the development of culture.

Keywords: philosophy of culture, internal essence, value system, subjectivity, creativity

The Statement of Problems

Culture, as the soul of a nation, fundamentally impacts on and even determines the future of the nation. Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, specifically pointed out in the report to the 19th CPC National Congress, "Our country will thrive only if our

* Han Meiqun, professor, School of Marxism, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law.

* Fund Program: This paper is a phased achievement of the "Study on the Practice Path of Core Socialist Values in the Rural Areas from the Perspective of Cultural Tradition" (15BKS116), a project supported by the National Social Science Fund of China.

culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong.” It was the first time that the official document of the CPC Central Committee clearly and directly connects the rise and fall of culture with the destiny and future of the Chinese nation, and that culture is re-oriented and elevated to an unprecedented height. Due to the depth, complexity and particularity of culture itself, people disagree with each other with respect to such underlying questions as the essential contents of culture and the laws of its own development, no matter whether in the past or at present. For example, some hold that culture is just knowledge; some believe that culture means moral cultivation; some put forward that culture is no more than tradition, which is an historical product of man; and some argue that culture is living realities, extensively existing in such things as costumes, foods and beverages. Due to wide diversity in the opinions about culture, some people in academia propose to classify culture into different categories at different levels, for example, the theory of two-level culture or the theory of three-level culture; and some scholars suggest interpreting the concept of culture indistinctly and broadly instead of going deep into it.

Culture, which is the soul of the great revival of the Chinese nation, a key factor in the “five-sphere integrated plan” (to promote economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological progress) of the socialist cause with Chinese characteristics, and a more basic, more profound and more permanent force within the “confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics”, should never be ignored or belittled. Instead, we must see through phenomena to grasp its essence, reading the internal essence and development law of culture at all its aspects; that is the grounds and the prerequisite for Chinese people to keep to the socialist road of cultural development with Chinese characteristics to build a strong socialist culture in China in the new era. Culture is a phenomenon peculiar to human society: man creates culture, which advances man in turn and expands through various fields of human society. By reviewing the academic researches, we found that the research specially targeting culture and cultural systems possibly occurred in the West in the mid-19th century. In the 1940s and 1950s, cultural research in the West began to turn from a focus on analysis towards the tracing of thoughts combining specialization and generalization. As a result, cultural issues turned out to be the focus of different disciplines in the West, and multidisciplinary cultural research facilitated many relevant disciplines. Cultural research is still booming in the West.

In China, the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century brought cultural issues into people’s view. Not until the 1980s, however, were the minds of Chinese people totally emancipated thanks to the cultural debates and “cultural fever” caused by a profound social transformation and since the 1990s cultural research has received increasing attention in China. Nowadays, culture has penetrated a variety of fields and its influences can be found everywhere. Culture seems to be a self-evident concept. However, as scholars engaging in cultural studies turn their eyes towards this familiar but ignored concept, they find that it is difficult to grasp a definitive boundary of culture. If it exists in each detail of people’s everyday lives, culture must be a kind of real existence. But when we reach out to touch it, it is always beyond access. Thus, culture must be an intangible type of existence, which exists only inside the mind or spiritual world. However, after scanning various kinds of food, costumes, architecture and arts, various customs, rituals and taboos, we find that these multitudinous living cultural elements are visible and touchable. Therefore, culture is our real existence while at the same time the most unreal. It is both tangible and intangible.

A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn conducted in-deep research in 1952, summarizing and enumerating 164 definitions of culture made by academia during the 80 years between 1871 and 1951. Their findings were published in their book titled *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* and received extensive attention from academia. Since the 1950s, as cultural studies have constantly expanded, scholars of different disciplines and schools have defined culture from various angles respectively, including descriptive, historical, regulative, psychological and structural perspectives including cultural inheritance and cultural classification. This indicates that culture indeed has complicated contents and it is difficult to precisely represent it through linguistic techniques. Therefore it is impossible to give an accurate or precise definition to culture. Scholars differ greatly in terms of their focus on, and understandings of, culture due to their different horizons; accordingly, we cannot and need not eliminate such disputes to one-sidedly seek consistency. Although the difference in people's grasp of the connotation and extension of culture or in their focus on the connotations of culture leads to some epistemological discrepancies, we have found people still have a consensus in many aspects in their understanding of culture and this is where the internal essence and fundamentality of culture rest.

Humanization: The Ontological Perception of Culture

The inherent identity of culture and man reveals the emergence, development and essential connotation of culture, and is a key for us to understand culture. Although people differ greatly in their understanding of culture, they have a consensus at one specific point: the core of culture is "humans" and culture is simply "humanization".

First, from the perspective of its source, culture means man's transcendence over nature. In the sense of a natural life, man is just a matter of nature, going through a natural course from birth to death. However, man as man does not exist in a natural being, but in an awareness of the separation between man and nature, or in the unnatural existence of self. Such an unnatural existence is mainly realized through objectified practice. Marx (1996, p. 188) once vividly pointed out, "What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement". This indicates that man's objectified practice is essentially purposeful, conscious activities. The outcomes of such objectified activities are the humanization of nature, or the culturalization of nature. Therefore, culture is the outcomes of man's conscious or unconscious activities, the objectification and non-objectification of man's species-being activities, and it stands for man's transcendence over nature. To put it simply, eating when hungry, sleeping when sleepy or having intercourse at the need of sexual desires is all out of biological instincts, without any involvement of culture. When man shakes off the chains of nature and considers what to eat, how to sleep and why to enjoy the pleasure of sexual love, it is not about pure instincts anymore, but the typical signs of culture.

Second, from the perspective of its evolutionary process, culture is the sum of all social relationships. When they create culture, people also create themselves. As a part of a natural organism, people are also

constantly transforming themselves. Marx (1976, p. 4) once concisely summarized the social essence of man, saying that “The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations”. This not only discloses the essential attribute of man, but also the social attribute of culture. Man transcends nature and thus constitutes society, and this is the basis for culture to emerge and develop. Culture can constantly unfold and evolve just because man constantly transcends himself, and thus establishes social existences. In the complicated social relationships of man, two pairs of cultural contradictions are the most fundamental: the contradiction between “small self” and “big self” and that between “self” and “non-self”. A man as an individual appears as an independent “small self” and society as the species beings of men constitutes the “big self” to be cognized and transformed; a man himself constitutes “self” and other existences including other people and non-humans become “non-self”. In human society, the contradictions between “small self” and “big self” and between “self” and “non-self” forge such contradictory relationships as those between man and history, man and society, man and man, man and self, and so forth; accordingly, questions concerning politics, economy, society, ethics, morality and values are constantly raised and answered, which boosts the continuous enrichment and prosperity of culture. The infinite extensibility of culture is exactly a sign of man’s abundant social essence, the infinite unfolding of man’s essential force. Just as Marx (1975, p. 301) pointed out, “Through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being”. Culture is a sign of man’s social existence; it is affirmed in the world of phenomena through the essential strength of man, comes into being in social practice, and develops in the history of human society.

Third, culture is characterized with the sociality of man, and shared by an entire cultural community. Culture is closely related to the social practices of man, but this does not mean the accidental behaviors or ideas of each individual can constitute a culture. Individuals must always perform activities within certain cultural realms. Therefore, culture often plays a defining and compulsory role for the existence of individuals. However, man as the existence of freedom and self-consciousness is most sharply characterized with strong in-itselfness and for-itselfness. The cultural realm, which transcends itself, deviates from history and comes to be commonly followed by the majority as a group and thus becomes a part of man’s creative activities. As a new cultural form is accepted by the majority, a new culture thus appears. Such movements of contradictions constantly drive the innovation and progress of culture. Because culture has the characteristics of sociality, different social groups, including tribes, nations and countries, often develop different cultural forms or cultural patterns. For human society, therefore, culture is not unitary, and the multiple, diverse development of culture conforms to the law of the development of culture itself. But from the perspective of the essence of culture, man as a species which differs from other biological species has certain commonalities, i.e., the species traits of human beings. For example, a human as a human has his basic daily needs, which cannot be ignored, and this constitutes in turn the most profound and most essential source of the commonality or unity of culture, and the right prerequisite and basis of exchanges and integration between multiple cultures. As British historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1972, p. 444) pointed out that within a prevailing unity, a modicum of

variety can be afforded and human's culture will be the richer for this". The unity and diversity of culture and the dialectical interaction between these two constitute the typical characteristic of culture.

Spirit: "Core" and "Soul" behind Cultural Phenomena

We mainly stress that culture is the outcome of man's practice when we interpret culture as "humanization". To understand culture from the perspective of practice means much for our grasping the essential implication of culture. However, if we merely look on culture as the outcome of practice, it will mean that culture is totally inclusive, and becomes unable to explain anything in the end. Marx (1975, p. 276) once pointed out, "In creating a *world of objects* by his personal activity, in his *work upon* inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being". Such self-verification of man proves the core and fundamentality that underlie man as man, and meanwhile indirectly demonstrates the soul and fundamentality of culture, i.e. spirit; this is what the most profound essence of culture lies in. Spirit is man's consciousness, thinking, thoughts, ideas and values, and what it reflects is the internal world of man, which is intangible, and cannot be embodied except through external entities. However, this does not mean that the spirit of man is endogenous. On the contrary, it extends from the external towards the internal. The spirit of man mainly comes from his experience of, and thoughts about, his world of objects when he performs activities and transforms that world. The world of objects is reflected in man's brain through his feelings, senses, representations and consciousness, and thus results in spirit. In the process of the emergence of culture, such spiritual factors and contents constitute the essence of culture.

For man as an objectified existence, his basic way of existence inevitably contains a certain inherent kind of cultural spirit, or otherwise man's transcendence over nature would turn into an empty form or talk. Man as the subject of practice in free and self-conscious practice transforms the real world into the desired picture in the light of his own purposes and desires, but he has to observe the rules of the objective world and construct his ideal world in accordance to the inherent requirements of the objective world. So, values, moral norms, psychological qualities, the ways of thinking, aesthetic tastes, religious feelings and national ethos, etc., all of which are fostered and developed by the social practice and internal consciousness of man, lurk at the deepest levels of culture, reflecting not only the internal spirit of man, but also the spirit of the objective world. It is internalized in each stage and aspect of cultural development and accumulated at various levels of culture, serving as the core and soul of culture.

For long, people have been accustomed to classifying culture into multiple types and levels due to the complexity of the concept of culture. They typically sort it out into two types. First, in accordance to the sizes of the spheres it involves, cultures can be divided into broad, middle and narrow senses. Culture in a broad sense usually refers to all material and spiritual activities of man and the outcomes of such activities. This concept is the big culture view covering all achievements of civilization. Culture in a moderate sense refers to man's spiritual activities and the outcomes that such activities have created, especially to contents at a spiritual level. Culture in a narrow sense is the inheritance of a traditional view of culture, mainly referring to culture, art, poetry, music, dancing, drama, operas and so forth. The second classification method divides

culture into three types in accordance to the spheres of human activities and the main structure of culture: The first is the “culture of material production” that man creates in dealing with the relationship between mankind and nature, including the process of material production and material outcomes in the forms of entities. The second is “institutional and behavioral culture” that man creates in handling the relationships between man and society, including things at the institutional level such as systems, regulations, laws, rules, institutions and mechanisms, and the contents at a behavioral level such as customs, practices, rites and taboos. The third is the “culture of spirit and psychology” that man creates in dealing with the relationships between man and himself, which mainly reflects the internal world of man, including social psychological culture consisting of the ways of thinking, value orientations, ethics and moralities, aesthetical tastes, theories of politics and legal rights, and ideological culture in the forms of philosophy, religion, literature and art.

From the perspective of research, it is of great benefit to make a necessary classification of the contents of culture: It is helpful for people to comprehensively and profoundly grasp the contents of culture and carry out comprehensive cross-disciplinary research. However, some people mechanically interpret the concept, contents and classification of culture, thinking that we have to totally clarify the concept of culture when we research culture and related issues, and different classifications and levels of culture cannot be confused with one another as it would lead to misinterpretation. In fact, such an ideal understanding is just a misjudgment of the concept of “culture”. When making the necessary classification of culture in accordance to the needs of research, people temporarily classify it into two, three, four or more types considering logic. In the social practice, one cannot totally discriminate different types or levels of culture. When we accept the big culture view or the culture of material production, we cannot separate ourselves from the contents at the spiritual level; and the recognition of the view of spiritual culture must also be reflected through human behaviors or the tangible entities that man has created.

The complexity of culture is a logical sign of man’s thinking, and the logical reflection of cultural practice. Cultural practice is just man’s practice, and this is the most universal logic. It is influenced and constrained not only by external practice, but also by man’s consciousness. Such two-way internal and external influence demands that we should not be excessively mechanical or rigid in grasping the concept of culture, or otherwise we would fail to really recognize the essence and secrets of culture. One needs to pay special attention to three points if he wants to totally grasp the concept of culture:

First, culture is inseparable from the spirit of man. The more self-conscious a culture is, the more self-conscious the internal spirit and values of man will become. Without the spirit of man, there would be no culture. This is where the soul and the core of culture rest.

Second, culture is not a totally independent realm. Without abundant social practice, there would be no culture. People once subdivided the structure of human society into such fields as politics, economy and culture, thinking that culture was some spiritual existence determined by an economic base and political superstructure. From the perspective of man’s long history, such a general trend cannot be denied. However, when we apply this theoretical model into a certain period or field, such mechanical determinism obviously makes it difficult for us to understand the proper essence of culture in depth.

Third, culture is not a changeless or rigid fossil; instead, it stays in the balance between dynamics and

statics. When a cultural form is created, accelerated, recognized and accepted by a community, it is in a “static” state, showing relative stability, and consciously or unconsciously regulating people’s spirit and behaviors. This is also the epitomized sign of the inertness of culture. But when such a given cultural realm faces impacts from an exotic culture or is challenged by inside humanity (or the creativity of man), the previous stability of culture will be destroyed, and a new form of culture will replace or enrich the former cultural forms. Such balance, contradiction or tension between the statics and dynamics of culture has facilitated the constant development and progress of culture.

Logic in the Development of Culture and Its Inspiration in Reality

To interpret culture from the perspective of “humanization”. One focuses on the subjectivity and creativity of “man”. Therefore, all worlds belonging to man are cultural ones, and in this sense, man is also a cultural existence in nature. This is an ontological interpretation of culture, a fundamental standpoint when we research culture. This view of culture is usually called a “big culture view” in academia. When culture is perceived from the angle of spirit, one focuses on the “core” or “soul” behind the “big culture view” or various complicated cultural phenomena. In brief, cultural worlds are rich, varied and intricated, and all of them can be called culture in general; the internal ground is that the spirit of man rests therein. This is an intangible inherent system of thoughts and values, which reflects the system of man’s views in general and is usually externalized into particular behaviors in the forms of ideals and beliefs. Such a view of culture is usually called a “small culture view” in academia. Both the big culture view and the small culture view are important angles that we should simultaneously have when we study culture. Accordingly, we should pay more attention to the holistic in-depth contents of cultural issues or phenomena when we conduct cultural research.

Based on the above, I believe that culture as a particular sphere has its own special logic and laws for its development.

First, the development of culture is the unity of decisiveness and selectivity. The development of culture is after all determined by the mode of production and economic factors. It is relatively independent, and during a certain social period and stage, its development depends upon man’s free conscious activities and subjective choices, and “Will. . . react in turn upon the conditions and the course of production” (Engels, 2001, p. 60). The decisiveness in the development of culture is a term from the perspective of holism and the entire historical process of man, just as Engels (2004, p. 265) pointed out in his letter to W. Borgius in 1894, “Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But each of these also reacts upon the others and upon the economic basis. This is not to say that the economic situation is the cause and that it alone is active while everything else is a mere passive effect, but rather that there is reciprocal action based, in the final analysis, on economic necessity which invariably prevails”. On the contrary, during different historical periods, due to the “humanization” and spiritual characteristics of culture, people show great initiative and proactivity in their choice of the model, channel and path of culture. Engels (2001, p. 62) compared the development path of Germany with Britain and France, and the

development paths between France and Britain in his later years. As he pointed out, a backward nation can inherit the ideological resources and excellent cultural achievements of other nations, realizing the great-leap-forward development of culture, and “Economically backward countries can nevertheless play first fiddle where philosophy is concerned”. Therefore, the development of culture is the dialectical unity of decisiveness and selectivity based on practice, and the selectivity of the subject stays within the sphere delimited by the decisiveness, rather than being based on subjective wishes. The biased view, which either excessively overstates the selectivity of man or denies the subjective proactive role of man, is wrong just because it has failed to correctly grasp the law of development of culture itself. To build a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics in the new era, one must establish himself in the great socialist practice with Chinese characteristics, stick to the standpoint of Chinese culture, boost its creative transformation and innovative development, and take the path of cultural development with Chinese characteristics.

Second, the dialectical unity between the consistency of basic trends shown by the regular patterns of cultural development and the diversity of the developmental paths of culture. Regular patterns, including cultural patterns, merely point out the general trend and direction of the patterns of cultural development, but there are multiple channels and paths to be selected. The saying that “all roads lead to Rome” is just a vivid argument for the dialectic relationship between such consistency and diversity. Marx took an expressive amount of “ethnological notebooks” in his later years to conduct detailed research on this issue. For example, considering the historical materials provided by Maxim Kovalevsky, Lewis Henry Morgan and John Budd Phear, Marx investigated the cultural evolution of different regions and nations. Taking nations in Africa, Australia, Polynesia and America as examples, he pointed out that the development of culture in the history of man had multiple models and roads, “So geographically isolated that they go through different phases on their own” (Marx, 1974, p. 98). However, drawing on a great deal of historical facts from pre-history societies, one can find that the development of culture has its own patterns although it varies from one place to another, and that the basic trends of cultural development are consistent. Culture is the outcome of historical environments no matter what form it takes. Therefore, the forms of culture in the world have shown the characteristics of diversity and pluralism since the beginning. As exchanges between different cultures and civilizations become increasingly frequent, behaviors featuring consensus and unity accrue day by day. As socialism with Chinese characteristics enters a new era, cultural exchanges between different nations have become more frequent and universal and diversity and unity in the development of culture are being constantly enriched and developed through cultural exchanges which are complimentary in that they move forward together in a relationship of “harmony in diversity”.

Third, the dialectical unity between nationality and cosmopolitanism in the development of culture. The diversity and unity between cultural development is displayed through nationality and cosmopolitanism. The unity of the world lies in the diversity of a nation, while the diversity of the nation includes the unity of the world. To stick to the socialist path of cultural development with Chinese characteristics is not to obstinately adhere to nationality; instead, it is to unite nationality and cosmopolitanism. In the background of global multi-polarization, economic globalization, cultural diversity and social informatization since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, Xi Jinping (2017, October 28) has appealed for “The people of all countries



to work together to build a community with a shared future for mankind, to build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity.” Xi’s thoughts on a community with a shared future for mankind involves many fields such as international economics, politics, culture, ecological environments and security, and has been recognized by people all over the world. From the perspective of the cultural sphere, to build a community with a shared future for mankind means to respect the diversity of world civilizations, seek common grounds while shelving differences, and better still to increase common interests and dissolve differences, ensure that when it comes to different civilizations, exchange will replace estrangement, mutual learning will replace clashes, and coexistence will replace a sense of superiority. As an old Chinese poem goes, “When I glance at the visage of vernal breeze, I know that a thousand flowers of purple and red set spring aglow”. To cognize and grasp the dialectical unity between nationality and cosmopolitanness in the development of culture essentially demands respect for the self-worth of different nations, cultures and civilizations, and to seek wisdom and absorb nutrition from different civilizations in exchanges, to boost the simultaneous progress of civilizations. Just as President Xi Jinping (2014, March 28) pointed out in his speech at the headquarter of UNESCO, civilizations in the world are rich, equal and inclusive: they are worthy of exchanges just because of their diversity; such exchanges are based on equality, and driven by inclusiveness.

REFERENCES

- Engels, F. (2001). *Marx/Engels collected Works, Vol. 49*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx/Engels Collected Works. (2004). Vol. 50. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1974). *The ethnological notebooks of Karl Marx*. Assen: van Gorcum.
- Marx/Engels Collected Works. (1975). Vol. 3. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx/Engels Collected Works. (1976). *Marx/Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx/Engels Collected Works*. (1996). Vol. 35. New York: International Publishers.
- Toynbee, A. J. (1972). *A study of history*. New York: Weathervane Books.
- Xi Jinping. (2014, March 28). Speech by Xi Jinping at UNESCO headquarters. *People’s Daily*.
- Xi Jinping. (2017, October 28). Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era——delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. *People’s Daily*.

(Translator: Huang Deyuan; Editor: Xiong Xianwei)

This paper has been translated and reprinted from *The Central Plains Culture Research*, No. 1, 2019, pp. 77–82.