

Deshun Li

On Chinese Culture



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ISBN 978-981-10-0277-9 ISBN 978-981-10-0279-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-0279-3

Jointly published with Heilongjiang Education Press

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015958078

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Preface to the English Edition

“Culture” seems to be a concept with difficultly defined boundary both in connotation and in denotation but remains flexible and widespread in application. Such phenomenon particularly exists in Chinese academic context. Different subjects share little normalized common view on culture. Due to speakers’ different western or eastern knowledge background, what and how to talk about culture all depends on their own wish, imagination, and their topic intention.

Therefore, this book, as invited, aims to give a description of the nature and common state of culture on the perspective of philosophy and in the way of Chinese traditional thinking. It also attempts to confront the history and reality and applies them to the reflection and critique of Chinese traditional culture and the development and exploration of Chinese culture modernization.

In the author’s opinion, the nature of culture rests with “humanization” including humanizing human himself, that is, “civilization.” So in the analysis and discussion of culture, we lay importance on human’s lifestyle and thinking method and finally combine culture with human’s own living and growing right and duty. While in the reflection and prospect of Chinese culture, we follow the ideas such as (in culture) “What do we have?”, “What are we lack of?”, “What do we want?”, and “How should we do?.” Obviously, these ideas help to surpass the controversy over pure concept of culture and make the related theories and research methods broaden, profound, and complex, which produce more and sharper discussion- and debate-worthy issues about culture than other works.

As a set of “Chinese-styled” culture theories, we concern whether it will attract some attention in international academic dialogues and then become a new comment target and a new conversation platform and whether it will bring further mutual understanding and greater mutual consolidation to humanity thinking under different contexts. This calls for more cultural communication bridges and composes the original purpose of presenting this book to English readers.

This book was initially published in 2000 and ten years later revised into its second edition in 2010. Now, further necessary changes and adjustments have been made by the authors for translation and publishing abroad.

A statement must be made here that two of my students and close partners have participated in the whole process of writing this book from the initial manuscript to revisions; they are as follows:

Weiping Sun, doctor of philosophy, researcher of China Social Science Academy, vice director of Research Institute of Philosophy, and supervisor of doctoral candidates

Meitang Sun, doctor of philosophy, professor of China University of Political Science and Law, deputy dean of School of Marxism, and supervisor of doctoral candidates

They have been cooperating with me for a long time in team research, deep discussion, individual writing, and cowriting. Although I am the person in charge of the whole book writing and organization, their contribution has inseparably gone through many details of this book. So I must take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Weiping Sun and Dr. Meitang Sun, and declare that they both own the same right as me to this book.

Beijing, People's Republic of China
December 2012

Deshun Li

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Homeland of Culture and Man

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a new round of profound changes happening to man's living condition, which consequently start off a series of conflicts: the decline of each country's tradition with the evolvement of modernization; a greater complexity of the different values and conflicts among civilizations coming along with the deepening of globalization; increasing perplexity of consumers at the poverty of their spiritual life against the prosperity of market economy and commercialism; a unprecedented debate about humanity, natural resources, and environment with numerous miracles created by science and technology, etc. The changes to man's living condition are so sharp and profound that many people, not to speak of the whole people and country, overwhelmed by their bewilderment and feel urged to reraise and reconsider questions such as "who are we?", "how are we supposed to live?" and "whereupon shall I rest my soul?".

1.1 The Living Situation of Contemporary Man and His Cultural Reflection

All the aforementioned questions can be traced back to one pivotal word—culture. Reflection upon culture, to some extent, is no less than a resettlement of our spiritual homeland.

A re-examination of man's system of culture and values is the first issue proposed by the conflicts between modern material life and spiritual life.

Essentially, the great miracle of modern industrial civilization comes from putting as-many-as-possible resources and energy on earth into consumable products in the shortest time possible; meanwhile, the profits and market mechanism encourage people to promote this transformation by enhancing production efficiency, circulation of products, and consumption. As a result, material production begets more consummation, thus producing a mechanism of positive feedback. This mechanism will, indeed, bring breathtaking amount of consumer products to the society, but it also brings lamentable aftermath.

1.1.1 Dire Environment Crisis

Modern industrial civilization results in the depletion of energy and natural resources, decline, degeneration and distinction of species, environment pollution, wrecked ecosystem, etc. Since the middle of twentieth century, despite the effort on the side of many environment-minded activists to call for environmental protection, and despite the prevalence of ideas such as “we’ve got only one earth” “sustainable development,” the environment is still suffering from damages. Such phenomenon is popularly attributed to the “human-centered” values, but can our values be human-centered? Clearly enough, the rub is not about being human-centered or nature-centered, but the value system unique to an industrialized civilization—one that views the world through the lens of profits and interests, obscuring what nature can offer us aesthetically, religiously, and morally. Hence, in front of nature, the cultural dimension of man vanishes into thin air, leaving only natural dimension. The man–nature relationship works through the human network, which is complexity itself. Problems such as conflict of interests and values render it impossible for human being to unravel the conflicts between man and nature in an orderly and reasonable way. In other words, a reflection at the ecocrisis has to start with a reflection at man and culture.

1.1.2 The Danger of Being Materialized

Under the mandatory power, products of science and technology and material life have put contemporaries in the danger of materialization.

Carl Marx was the first to see through the nature of material life supported by capitalism: The society produces are not for consumption, but for exchange. The insatiable desire for profits has transformed the capitalist into “capital in flesh” and the worker into tool that provides surplus values, reducing man to a slave to the product of his own labor. Since then, numerous Western thinkers such as Simmel, Satre, Hawke Heimo, Adorno, Marcuse, and Baudrillard have been reflecting on one single question: Where lie the value, dignity, and subjectivity of human being in a time reigned by commercial products and technologies?

Today, the situation has not improved and even worsened to some extent. Development or GDP growth has become the ultimate, even the only, goal. Abroad, competition among countries is backed by GDP; home and regional governments blunder a lot in order to “develop.” In a sense, we have proved what Marcuse has said: The advancement of technology indicates the extension of the ruling power over man. Network and information highway put us under the administration and control of the government; the interlock among knowledge, economy and power controls every corner; “authority” and “technology” produces countless “powerful expressions,” which as obscure jargons and comparable to “black boxes,” are forced upon us...

1.1.3 An Upcoming Postmodern Lifestyle Led by Symbol Consumption

Every minute, we are aroused to buy under the seduction of dazzling products and commercials, surrendering our way of living to commercial products and the market logic. Buying for fashion, style, and self-identity or following commercials and trends constitutes a postmodern culture, which leads to a pathologic development of material consumption and foreshadows the first decade of global economic crisis in twenty-first century.

Under the shadow of the expanded material life, the state of our spiritual life is worrying. With the departure of the spiritual world supported by traditions and traditional culture, beliefs and values have lost their purity and piety. Serious academic works and elegant arts are put on the shelf; the contemporary culture, colorful as it appears, consists mainly of consumer culture and some transient, shallow “bubble culture.” Spiritual life is gradually lost to an ignoble and unholy “fast-food culture,” and people accept it not with the urge for personal improvement, but with the purpose to consume, to entertain themselves.

How shall contemporary man find a balance between his moral, economic, cultural, and material self? What kind of spiritual life do we need? What is the nature of high culture and popular culture? How are material life and spiritual one related to each other? Before pondering over these questions, we have to start with the questioning of culture itself.

A demand for reflection at man’s culture-and-value system is also put forward by the conflicts between science and humanity.

The twentieth century has given birth to many great scientific discoveries, such as the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, information theory, and the theory of the double-helical structure of DNA, just to name a few. They have paved the ground for research in high-tech fields like information and technology, human intelligence, nanotechnology, space technology, and bioengineering. Progress made in these high-tech fields can be put to a wide application to industry, agriculture, communication, medical science, and military, exerting profound influence on or even change the way we live, from which springs up unprecedented moral issues.

Most of us hold a mixed feeling about science and technology: We crave for it yet are afraid of it, are excited about it, and worried by it. Science and technology did have large impact on a moral and social level, but such impact was limited to a formal and external one compared with today’s achievements. The challenges it has posed for humanity are far more earthshaking, touching upon fundamental questions as to “what is man?”, “where lies the demarcation between human and non-human?”, and “is human being a species able to continue to exist?”. Science and technology in the past affected and changed how one produce and live, while high-tech changes man himself: if, with the help of technology, DNA can be randomly reassembled, can one update his DNA sequence anytime he feels like to? Can man at his will create certain species—say, as the combination of Einstein’s intelligence, lion- and tiger-like ferocity and Hitler’s viciousness? As the progress

achieved by human intelligence technology renders the birth of robot that outsmarts human by leaps and bounds possible, will such robot lord over human being? One day, will nanomaterial leak out and thus rewrite the nature of every matter on earth, brewing a new-type bacteria destructive enough to kill most of the living things? Given that the current nuclear weapon in the world can destroy the earth several times, is human being immune from self-destruction? In a very short time, topics like clones, brain transplant, robot, matrix, gene weapon, and star wars are on the lips of everyone, from authorities and scholars to ordinary people. We cherish a mixed feeling of admiration and a sense of awe, not being able to tell whether they belong to reality or sci-fi.

How to evaluate science and technology in a humanistic way? Normally, popular attitudes are divided into technological optimism, technological pessimism, and eclecticism. But what we need is a vision that transcends putting science and humanity in an antithetical position, but one that combines the two on a higher, newer level. Actually, we should not simply accuse overadvancement of technology for the decline of humanistic spirit, and our problem stems from the lack of a complete and profound vision and value to negotiate between science and humanities, and the incompetence to balance people's varied opinions and interests. Our wisdom is being tested to create a greater system of culture and values, so as to employ science and technology in a better way to serve the happiness and dignity of human race. We will discover and create a brand-new frame for the coordination of scientific spirit and humanistic spirit, and the harmonious relationship between science, technology, and morality. To be more precise, we shall integrate science and technology into a new humanity system.

1.2 China and the World, Facing Future

Since the "geographical discovery," people from all over the world have taken a gradual departure from the state of isolation and become the world citizens in the "earth village" more and more engaged in global economic and cultural interactions. Since 1970s, globalization has moved on to a new phase: World financial system becomes more integrated, with transnational enterprises and regional organizations penetrating into every corner of the world. Standardized administration makes people from different countries produce and live in a more and more similar way, connecting them with Internet and information highways. What has become "globalized" are also the problems confronting us: depletion of energy and resources, environment pollutions, destroyed ecological balance, the threat of high-tech war, terrorism, transnational crimes, etc. The world as a whole is in danger, and a solution to these problems can only be obtained through the joint effort of all countries in the world.

The reality requires cooperation among countries and people to confront crises and share progresses, thus forming a win-win situation, building a harmonious world with peaceful interactions. But the fact is far worse from such ideal:

European, American, and Asian millionaires hoard loads of wealth, while countless lives of poor people in Africa and Asia are lost to poverty, starvation, and diseases. Transnational companies from developed countries do not penetrate into developing countries for poverty relief, but to exploit resources, wolf off market shares, and conduct unequal exchanges. Therefore, globalization results in a Matthew effect, worsening the unbalanced development in South and North of the world, making the poor poorer and the rich richer. This is a telling fact that despite the breath-stopping amount of riches, we lack the wisdom to share them in a reasonable and civilized way.

The global economy has played quite a joke on us when many were eulogizing economic globalization and embracing organizations like WTO. The end of the twentieth century was caught with Asian financial crisis, and the world is stricken by a widespread financial storm right at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Taken aback by these crises, we should start to ponder over the failure of the two financial systems: one being a “unique capitalist economy mode” often interpreted as a superior Asian-value-centered economic system devoid of disadvantages in Western capitalism; the other being the result of interlocked world economic relations and complicated financial system, in which the collapse of both systems happens at the prime of entrepreneurs, investors, and consumers’ days. What kind of message does this convey? Does it toll the bell for capitalism’s fall or the inevitable decline of globalized economy? Does it foretell the disillusion of Asian values or the crisis of Western culture? In what way shall we re-examine the culture, value, social relations, and the rule of the game behind globalization?

Technical, economic, and cultural globalization has linked people from around the world, but their interests and values vary widely from one another and may even go into conflicts. Based on the differences and contradictions, American scholar Professor Huntington puts forward the concept of “civilization conflict,” while we may not agree with Huntington’s theory of reservation; to some extent, what he says does cut to the core issues of our time. It is reflected in the incorrigible differences between Oriental and Occidental cultures, conflicts among religions and races, and ethnical division and wars, telling us that the root of illness lies culturally, in the formation of today’s world civilizations.

In today’s world, international affairs and disputes are settled by rules set by Western countries, especially the USA. Western culture, especially American culture, consists of two fundamental principles. Within Western culture hemisphere, values and related rules of democracy and human rights dominate, while between Western and non-Western culture, the USA and other non-Western countries, what is being employed in survival and competition is “the law of the jungle.” Inevitably, the domination of such rules guiding international affairs and shaping the world will result in hegemony and unequal international relations, causing arms race and competition of comprehensive state power, thus flaming modern wars where the weak distinct and the strong survive. At the turning of this century, wars launched by Western countries led by the USA toward Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq bear the bitter fruit of such rules. Peace will never come with such rules dominating

international affairs and world formation; civilization is no where to be found when men act in accordance with such rules.

The deepening of globalization and worsening of global issues have prompted many scholars and thinkers around the world to think. One of our greatest questions since the end of the twentieth century, whether at home or abroad, is that do different classes, countries, cultures, and interest groups share some common values? If yes, on what level and to what extent do we share them? How can they be established? Is it possible to achieve them? A group of theologians, religionists, and moralists represented by Hans Kung are trying to incorporate some similar doctrines among religions and classics such as Christianity, Islamism, and Confucianism, thus building up a prevailing value and morality. There are also efforts in China to elevate concepts such as “Harmony”, “Benevolence and Kindness”, “The Law of Lord”, “Do not put anything unto another that you would not have him do unto you” and “Cosmopolitanism” onto universal value. Despite their good will, the result of such efforts is far from satisfactory, because it is neither practical nor fair. The formation of pluralism has dictated a departure of the time when the task to “forge the conscience of the world and work for the welfare of the people” is shouldered by a few intellectuals. How to read the interlocks among different cultures in a globalized age and how to read the significance of “universal value” have also become a focus of global introspection.

Caught between the current of modernization and globalization, Chinese people and Chinese civilization are facing both unprecedented opportunities and unpredictable challenges.

Backboned by a 5000-year-old civilization, ancient China used to lead the world with its brilliant culture. But in several hundreds of years before the middle of the twentieth century, China has lagged behind modern civilization and tasted the bitterness of humiliation and hardship. Since the end of the twentieth century, the resilient and persistent Chinese people are back on their way to reform and rejuvenation. A reflection at the twists and turns of China’s modern history draws different conclusions. Some are convinced that Chinese traditional culture contains the essence for mankind’s future civilization; therefore, the rise of China and even the salvation of mankind depend on this outstanding cultural tradition; while others hold that most part of that traditional culture belongs to the past, the hope for future rests on reform and innovation made to it. On its way to modernization, Chinese society is undergoing a profound and arduous economic transformation—from traditional natural economy and planning economy to modern market economy. During the process, the urge and need for cultural transformation are felt everywhere. New economic system and production can only ripen under the frame of related social culture, without which all economic and social reform will halt at the last half mile, all economic and political progress will left unsecured. Hence, we have witnessed the conflict between the new and old springing up through a sea of economic, political, social, moral issues and belief crisis, constituting conflicts unique to transformation times.

1980s bears the witness to exceptional changes in China's economic mechanism and the rocky progress in political mechanism reform. The difficulty can be attributed to the complicated nature of political transformation. Many problems demand resolutions, and many mind-sets need changing before we can move from the culture of "politics rules all" to one of "politics serves economic and social development." For example, it is still an open question as to "whether the relation between politics and economy is monistic or dualistic." Guided by their own values and restrained by their stereotyped mind-sets, there are not a few who keep compromising to satisfy their own economic or political demands, while endorsing the purity of politics, and requiring some distance kept between it and economy.

Bearing a history of thousands of years, China's traditional, political, and judicial culture is in need for a fundamental reform. Traditional Chinese society may be the most advanced secular polities in the world, a patriarchal despotism that builds upon the hierarchical system that "respects the respectable and befriend the friendly." On the contrary, modern political and judicial system holds that power as a public resource shall be equally distributed to everyone. If China is to establish its socialistic market economic system successfully, it must build up a modern political civilization congenial to it, which requires settling several political issues such as: What stance shall we take as regards to mass value-loaded Western cultural concepts and values like freedom, democracy, human rights, and constitutional government? What's the nature of public power and how to build up a workable public power system? How to choose between the rule by man and the rule by law, and the relation between morality and law?

A strong inclination to moralize constitutes a major characteristic of Chinese traditional culture. The conflicts of cultural transformation, more often than not, are first and most strongly felt through moral conflicts. Recent years, the attention Chinese paid to moral issues is no less than economic and political system. However, the focus of conflicts and debates lies not only on questions like "shall we act morally" but also more fundamental ones like "what is morality?", "why shall we abide by it?", "how shall we abide by it?", and "what's the nature of morality?". We ask questions as to how shall we evaluate "moralism" and "non-moralism," whether morality's nature is "universal" or "subjective," whether it serves as a "pushing force" from outside or inside, whether its relation with economy is dual or monistic, whether the current moral trend in society is "slipping" or "improving," how to evaluate and judge social morality "ideally" or "socially and historically," from now on shall we embark on "restoring good traditions" or on "reforming and rebuilding," whether morality should be based on group, individual, or collective civilians, etc. These debates, involving the nature, ground, significance, and function of morality, form a kind of think-and-choose process on a "metatheoretical" level. For any who knows to examine culture through the prism of morality, these debates are more than enough to prove how profound, complex, and conflicting the cultural transformation and reform in front of us is.

Among mankind's thinking culture, none can compare with belief in mirroring one's mind or generating huge spiritual power. Culture springs from value, and value takes the highest form in belief. The strength and charm of a culture is primarily demonstrated by the homage paid to its value by the mass. Belief is pinned by conviction: People who are convinced by some values and facts embrace them as the highest and ultimate principles of living philosophy, and such conviction forms his belief. Always associated with paramita, transcendence, and worship, belief is the backbone and support of the worshiper's life. Traditional Chinese society has its own belief system, such as the worship of the way of Heaven, ancestor and the power of the Emperor, and the belief in "the law of nature and conscience." Since modern times, scientific reasoning and Marxist world view are also having an influence over people's faith. Generally speaking, Chinese people (the Han people especially)'s faith lacks the systematic characteristics and the piety of religions. It is more earthbound, utilitarian, and more human-centered, hence more spontaneous and natural. Therefore, during the transformation of social, material, and cultural life, belief like this is more susceptible to conflicts and more vulnerable to profound changes. The loss of faith and bewilderment coming with it brings more pain and chaos than any mistakes and hence requires stronger reason to exert self-control. And it is by no means an easy and independent job to affirm and consolidate a set of organic and positive public belief.

1.2.1 A Macro-Culture Vision in a Brand-New Age

Cultural phenomenon is ubiquitous in our daily life, and we face it and think about it every day. And yet it is impossible to come up with a unanimous, comprehensive, accurate, and authoritative definition of culture from hundreds of versions at hand. This may be an indication that our prospective of and approach to cultural phenomenon is not clear and mature enough.

For example, when discussing "what a concept is all about," we usually first come up with its extensions, i.e., the objects the word signifies. And in contemporary Chinese context, the word "culture" covers different layers of meanings and signifiers that are shown in accelerating range below:

- the narrowest sense of "culture" is often used as a synonym for knowledge in colloquial language. He who "has culture" is someone who has been to school and received formal education and hence is literal and knows something about science.
- a comparatively broader sense of "culture" has an administrative dimension: "Cultural administration" refers to all the sectors and departments subordinate to the State Department of Culture. It excludes economy, politics and military affairs and does not cover issues of science, theory, and education. On this level, "culture" indicates literature, art, and cultural relics. Of course, this categorization is for the convenience in administration and therefore shall not be hold as a strict and accurate definition of culture.

- a much wider sense of “culture” is essentially “spiritual,” containing science, theory, education, art, politics, morality, religion, and so on. Generally speaking, it covers the whole range of intellectual and spiritual life, and the so-called cultured people are people whose work is related to these fields. It is suggested by some to confine culture to this spiritual phenomenon based on what Chairman Mao once said about “culture as a conceptual form.” However, the logic seems a little bit far-fetched, for Chairman Mao has never dismissed the existence of “culture as a material form” or “culture as a structural form.” A confusion of culture with social ideology may result in a tendency to politicize. Therefore, a broader vision of culture is championed by many in the academic field.
- “Macro-culture” encompasses culture on the level of material, mind, and social systems. Embracing them into the examination of culture is no different from viewing human society and its history as the conveyor and form of culture, announcing that “all that belongs to and is related to man falls in the realm of culture”!

The encompassing concept, on the one hand, enables the discovery, categorization, and naming of culture in any field; on the other hand, it enfeebles the power of extension—nothing is culture equals everything is culture! A culture fever catches on with the popularity of “macro-culture” concept. There is a competition to talk about culture and show their “culture” card on the table. Sometimes such behavior is not so stylish or mature. For example, it is believed by some that to appear sophisticated and cultivated, one only needs to pick up a few lines that are “cultural,” or hold an event or two and peddle some slogans about culture. Hence, one gets the impression that “culture is one big basket in which one can put everything and anything.” It is no denying that this culture fever, at its best, can be interpreted as people’s attention to culture and their effort to search for it on a new level. Creditable as this cultural awakening is, it may not have captured the true essence of culture.

What’s the essential meaning and general characteristics of culture? To answer this, one shall first change the approach to think about culture. Taking that aforementioned “nothing is culture if everything is culture” as an example, such statement merits interpretation from a positive perspective. Every object has its color, but none of them is color itself—so is the same with culture. Culture is not limited to something or some kind of thing, and it is not an object that exists solely at one place and one time, nor is it certain activity performed in certain sphere as somebody’s profession. Culture is the characteristics, nature and meaning of human mind, feeling, behavior, and its result. Or to be more precise, culture is the “humanness” (man’s state and way of living, his ability and competence to live) contained in and demonstrated by it.

It may sound somewhat general and abstruse to conclude that culture is the essence of humanity encapsulated in objectification. Pardon me to ramble on for a few more words to clear it up.

It is recorded by ancient Chinese in Book of Change that “one examines the heaven to perceive seasonal change and examines humanity (wen) to govern the state,” which is as early the origin of the word wenhua (later used to translate the English word “culture”) can be traced in Chinese. In ancient Chinese language, the character wen originally refers to colorful, exquisite texture, or well-written articles and essays; then, its range broadens to obtain the meaning of “making something orderly, proper, and good looking,” which means wen indicates the process to make something conform to man’s standard, changing its standard and effect with man’s measurement. And hua remains the meaning “to change” “to convert something (completely) into something else.” “One shall examine humanity to govern the state” can thus be interpreted as “to use what is humanized to build the world of man.”

In Latino language like English, culture originally means what is been invented by man such as cultivation, skills, customs, and civilizations, now it can also be used to describe activities both artificial and skillful and their products. The trace of humanization of mankind from its natural state is still preserved in the word.

A look at Chinese and Western lexicology of culture tells one common nature about it: a human act to change (humanization) and be changed (civilization). Humanization is done by changing and creating the world in man’s own way, and by characterizing everything with the humanistic; while civilization is mankind’s act of using humanistic progress to improve, equip and cultivate oneself for a fuller, freer development of man. Although circumstances vary from place to place and one people to another people, human being as a whole lives and develops, thus continuing to change the world and let himself be changed by it. To use an abstract concept to generalize the fundamental way, process, state, and result of living and developing, we come up with a verbal word—culture.

Having various aspects and each aspect changing all the time, humanization and civilization together form an endless elevating spiral cycle, which presents the possibility for cultural advancement. During this uplifting movement, each phase appears different aspects and the process of humanization and civilization differs, contributing to different observations of culture. But the ongoing process will always remain the same.

And that is the philosophical dimension of the “macro-culture” concept.

Based on different understandings of the nature of culture, varied interpretations and summarizations of its history can be drawn, and different tasks and strategic goals for cultural development can be set, thus resulting in varied operations and responsive stratagems.

This book will try its best to shed light on the nature of culture based on the idea of macro-culture concept, describing its characteristics, tracing its development, and conceiving blueprint to grasp and build it. Of course, it is not going to be easy. But we hold the conviction that affirming the macro-culture concept stands on its own significance.

This concept demands an in-depth approach to understanding cultural phenomenon. One shall begin with grasping its essentials, its nature, and soul as a whole, instead of lingering on details, forms, or superficialities.

Firstly, given that “culture is all about humanization and civilization,” then it is integrated with our real life, existing and evolving within rather than without our life. Recent years, there are two kinds of opinions on cultural development audible in China—Westernization and traditionalization. To put it simply, Westernization, focusing on what we lack, encourages us to learn from the West so as to promote modernization by picking up what we lack, while traditionalization, bent on digging and emphasizing what we used to have (especially good qualities), encourages us to rejuvenate Chinese civilization by carrying on good old traditions. The former suggestion looks outward, while the later searches backward. However, as being discussed before, the understanding on the nature of culture urges us to adopt a third thinking mode—one that searches within and looks forward. China’s cultural construction concerns only contemporary Chinese, not our ancestors or foreigners. We shall practice on a brand-new path to cultural construction with contemporary Chinese as subject.

Secondly, it is highly significant that we understand and treat cultural traditions properly. But where shall we find those traditions? In order to understand our culture and tradition, book-searching, the act of drawing equations between classics and traditional culture, is far from enough; we should search in reality. Cultural tradition of a country represents the character and image of its people formed in its history, and to a large extent, it speaks what kind of people and society it was, is, and will be. Today’s Chinese culture not only stems from its thousands of years of tradition, but also (especially in recent hundreds of years) absorbs some influences from modern Western civilization; the half-century-long reform and construction also forge a tradition of reform, including features and conformities cultivated under the frame of a planning economy. Therefore, the culture of Chinese society is in fact a melting pot of different civilizations and cultural factors; it is also the true tradition that the future is heir to.

How a nation views its past, present, and future determines the way its culture and tradition are being treated. Viewed on this level, cultural construction lies first on clarifying the rights and responsibilities of the subject to live and develop in reality. It is the country that has the right and responsibility to reform its culture.

Part I
Introduction to Culture

Chapter 2

Culture as Humanization

The answers to many complicated problems usually lie in simple and basic facts, so is the same with the problems of culture. We believe that the problem of culture is the problem of man: We shall search in the facts of “being human” for the nature of culture. In short, culture is a process of humanization, both the humanization of the world and the man itself (civilization).

2.1 Culture and Non-culture (Nature)

Where and how the word culture comes from is a complicated question. British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor thus wrote in his book *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871:

“Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹

Later, American scholar Clyde Kluckhohn and A. L. Kroeber noted that:

“A culture is a historically derived system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designated members of a group.”²

American scholar Philip Bagby, after repeated examinations and comparisons, defined it as “modes of behavior, internal and external”,³ excluding modes that are hereditary. Despite of unanimous definitions, there is certain fundamental common feature perceivable among these theories that “to change man and the world around him according to human standards and ideals in order to establish himself.”

¹Edward Burnett Tylor. *Primitive Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, digital version, 2010. p. 1.

²Kroeber, A. L. and Kluckhohn, Clyde. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. New York: Vintage, 1963.

³Bagby, Philip. *Culture and history: prolegomena to the comparative study of civilizations*. U.S.A: University of California Press, 1959. p. 81.

On general, the word “culture” originally means the opposite of “natural state,” specifically, a “human state” and “socialized state.” The antithetical words of “cultural” are mainly “natural,” “inborn,” “instinct,” “primitive,” etc. In Western language, “culture” comes from Latin (*cultura*), meaning “to cultivate, nourish, educate, develop, and respect”; hence, we know that it initially means the cultivation of land and planting, then refers to the physical and spiritual development of mankind, then the definition extends to cover all the wealth and experience obtained by man during the process of conquering and evolving. Heinrich Rickert thus differentiates “culture” and “nature”: “Natural products are what grow naturally out of the earth; while cultural products grow from the seeds we sowed in the soil.”⁴ Culture is not about natural, intrinsic things or states, but about the state and result of how man changes the world (including himself). Nature existed and will continue to exist with or without human act to change the world—it has nothing to do with culture. Without man’s activities and influences, planets continue to circulate on their orbits, rivers flow after its course, plants flourish, and whiter away; they follow the law of nature. There are no wills, no aims, no emotions and feelings, and no intentioned pursuits or pretensions. Nature’s creatures look disciplined, aimed and harmonious to man’s eyes. This impression, however, is in fact no more than a coincidence that happens when some characteristics in nature, by chance, have evoked esthetic experiences or feelings in man, rather than a conscious will to please and entertain. The adaptability to environment in some species is exceptionally marvelous, as if governed by some outstanding wisdom, which, again, is only the result of natural adaptation and selection. We cannot say those species possess aims and voluntary consciousness in a strict sense.

In conclusion, what is antithetical to “non-culture” is essentially a “human act.” “Culture as humanization” suggests that culture is a human act to change the environment and make improvements based on what suits him and befits him, and the activity and its result constitute culture. In other words, culture is about how one lives and exists: pursuing and enjoying certain value-loaded products, while improving oneself and the world around him through realization of these values.

The emergence of man interrupts the unity of nature and develops a man-made world apart from the natural one. This world is manufactured out of man’s needs, goals, ideals, and abilities. Although it cannot be severed from its material ground, it has taken on a completely different nature and significance—it is essentially a product conjured up, designed and created by man. It is on this level that we will discuss about culture. It makes sense to say that culture is a man-made state that starts from nature and transcends it.

Apart from his biological features (culture, of course, is not about pure biological issues), man is the only living species that is different from natural state, the only one who’s blessed with unique emotion, wisdom, and character. These features unique to man are what culture is about. Man alienates himself from natural state out of his own free will and by his endeavors in practice, hence beginning his

⁴Rickert JH. *Cultural Science and Nature Science*. The Commercial Press: Beijing, 1996. p. 20.

creative activities. According to natural discipline, his own needs for developments and esthetic ideals, man designs, works, and creates, changing nature in a way that fits his purpose. He makes use of rivers, improves species, and explores the universe. Nature awakens to find its imprinted on human features such as aims and meanings. In this sense, primitive forests are natural, while forests planted, protected, and enjoyed by men is cultural; raw stones are natural, while stones moved (for appreciation), grinded, and carved by men are cultural; wild animals are natural, while fowls fed by men are cultural; mountains and oceans whose esthetic value remains hidden are natural, while scenic views whose esthetic value discovered by men are cultural; the mystery of the universe inexplicable to men is natural, others that have been provided explanations (whether authentic or not) are cultural, the list goes long.

“Human act” is a human-oriented act that changes natural world and imprints it with human behaviors to make better living environment for man according to his own standard, aim, ideal, and need. The word “cultural” being antithetical against “innate” or “natural” suggests the fact that it consists of activity and its products to go beyond and change natural state, of conscious, aimed-at actions and its results, of artificial, skillful creative activity and its products, of conquering one’s distinction to create values backed by ideas and convictions, and of getting rid of estrangement toward nature, alienation, and gloominess to shed light on nature. In general, it is a willing act for survival and development, an act to humanize the natural world and its products.

Our act to humanize nature is done simultaneously on a conceptual and a practical level:

(i) Conceptually, during the process of thinking and spiritual activities, man turns the whole world and everything in it into objects to observe and change. This is humanization done in the most prevailing, universal, and fundamental fashion. The word “object” itself indicates someone’s “behavioral objective.” Once an object becomes man’s behavioral objective, it has established with him a subject-and-object relationship. By viewing everything in the world as his objects, man assumes the role of subject and lives actively. One of the expressions of this subject-and-object relationship is for him to observe, describe, think about, imagine, and build the world from his perspective and in his own way. Such a world is tinted with the color of man. The fact that this objective world is viewed with human viewpoint and explained with his logic and granted with significance in human world means that it has been “humanized.”

Mankind comes from nature. But one feature that makes man being man lies in his ability to alienate himself from nature, to live independently in the world, to distinguish himself with other natural beings, and to treat his surroundings from where he stands and in his own way. Consequently, what’s purely objective becomes “good” or “bad”; nature is divided into “resources” and “non-resources”; species fall into categories of “good” or “bad”; we have good weathers and bad weathers, congenial and hostile environment, fertile and sterile land, etc. Things that naturally exist with or without man, once thus viewed by man, becomes something related to man, something exploitable or non-exploitable; even things

that did not exist in the first place or whose existence is beyond proof—say, imagination, association, mystery, fiction, speculation, fortune-telling and many designs—can be associated with and created out of observation and knowledge through watching and thinking. For example, languages, thinking, religion, science, philosophy, or art do not spring from nature but out of man's life and mind, and they assume the role to reflect the world from certain aspects.

Normally, man grasps the world with a set of semiotic, linguistic, and interpretive system, through which he can first reassemble and can make sense of the natural, chaotic world. Out of the same reason, some regard culture as a set of semiotic system.

Basically, once man objectifies something, he is including it into his range so as to represent, describe, pass judgment, and make choices from his viewpoint. Hence, the world in man's eyes is a conceptually humanized world.

(ii) In a practical sense, by means of hard work and other practices, man has changed the natural world into a habitable, humanized world. He not only understands the world in his own way, but also materializes those humanized concepts, turning what he has seen, thought and hoped into reality, changing nature and creating a man-made world in his own fashion. He changes nature out of needs and ideals, produces results via creative work, including wares, systems, or spiritual arts, and these products as objects serve the end of man's survival and development. For example, what nature has to offer are primitive forests, lakes, lawns, and caves, out of which man has created material necessities such as clothes, food, houses, roads, and even cities.

To sum it up, men's practice is essentially a voluntary act to render nature (including external world and man himself) into a more suitable place. Hence, the more advanced man's practice gets, the more advanced human civilization will be; therefore, the more widespread and universal the coverage of this humanized world will become, further estranging man from the natural state and pushing him into an artificial environment. The difficulty to set foot on natural soil is a common feeling shared by modern city dwellers. The land under our feet, even if not being paved by asphalt, cement, or marble, has been turned over, organized, and decorated long time ago. We were living in a self-objectified world, one in which what we create become our objects. Instead of breathing natural air, we breathe through air-conditioners; instead of drinking natural water, we drink all sorts of beverages. We socialize in a more and more unnatural way, relying on advertisements, mass media, phones, e-mails, and blogs rather than face-to-face interactions. Our dependency on automobiles, airplanes, and so on grows heavier and heavier. In a word, we move farther away from nature and closer to a more humanized world.

Despite of the fact that "moving further away from nature" is not the whole story (the other side of the story is that we were actually digging deeper into and relying more heavily on natural resources. Such as the reliance on electricity is in fact a reliance on electricity-generating resources such as coal, hydraulic power, gasoline, solar energy, and nuclear energy) or the only trend, it is a fundamental fact which is becoming more and more overwhelming. Confronted by this fact, people are perceiving problems, around which arise serious doubts and scruples: Is this increasing

estrangement from nature good or bad? Whatever the answer is, there is one thing undeniable: Increasing estrangement from or heavier dependence on nature means changing nature according to human standard, just as environment contamination and protection both occur through action to make it a more friendly, congenial place to live in.

The humanization of nature, whether in theory or in practice, means personifying nature based on men's knowledge and mastery of natural laws, and turning one's demands, goals, and intentions into reality through creation, that is what we call "culture" "humanization" and "subjectification of objects." Further speaking, "humanization" means lending the world certain significance and set of values through human interference. This process epitomizes human values like needs or aims. He wants to realize and experience values such as truth, goodness, interests, happiness, harmony, freedom, sublimity, and nobility. They form the motivation and urge in man to change nature. Judging from these values, we have good reason to view values as the essence of humanization, the core of culture.

All in all, in man's pursuit, creation, and experience of certain value system, culture emerges with a human face because of the penetration of value.

2.2 From Humanization to Civilization

Culture signifies both the humanization of nature and the man himself. As man push the external world to the pole of human and civilization, he is also pushing his natural state to the pole of civilized state, moving from being beastlike, primitive, and ignorant to being human and more humanlike. We call this process "civilization."

Finding himself in an unnatural, non-distinctive existence different from other animals or living things, man's essential characteristics are not naturally ordained, but selected and created on his own. As he chooses and becomes the individual, he or she is also pondering upon and responding to a series of problems: What is and should be human? How shall he live, and with what kind of spirit? Where lies the meaning of this life and living? Toward where shall the race move? Questions like these make up the core issues of culture.

These reflection and resolution are shown in the following aspects: (i) the extent to which man as a natural being is humanized; (ii) how he has become fully socialized and how he builds up his spiritual homeland.

2.2.1 The Humanization of Man as a Natural Being

The humanization, or the progress of civilization, is preconditioned that man's natural features, such as his physical condition and distinctive needs, are improved and civilized. Back to when human race first came into being, man does not differ

much from animals. We can conjure up the image of Yuanmou man, Java man, and Neanderthal man, who were not that dissimilar with apes. The sight of them eating raw meat, living in the wilderness naked must be very uncivilized too. But what set them apart from any other living beings lies in that they live by labor. And as they labor (even in the dumbest or lowest form), their activities and products also shape them in return. As man makes fire for warming, cooking, and self-protection, fire and the way it is being used also work their changes on him—cooked meat changes his diet structure and his physiological functions, fire-making teaches him how to make best use of natural resources, and the power of fire sparkles his imagination, encouraging the advancement of thinking power. Learning to distribute different tasks to limbs, development of the brain and other developing physiological features are all symbolic of becoming human and civilized. Man prides himself so much on features different from other animals that he decorates himself in different ways, wishing to look better and appear more “civilized.”

Culture means gradually replacing animal features with humanities. When contrasted with beastly, animalistic, and distinctive state, culture means the suppression of one’s primitive inclinations, and what’s vulgar and material in how he lives and what he produces. Among other living species in nature, animals stand the nearest in relation to man; hence, there is still a lot of animalistic traces left in man. Physically, man belongs to the category of animal; hence, there are difficulties for differentiation from man and animal. Sighed Mencius once: “How little man differs from beasts!” But man is the last one that wishes to be confused with animals. The severest way to insult a man would be calling him “beastlike” or “below a beast.” The word “culture,” incidentally, suggests lifting oneself from animalistic state. A “cultured” man is someone who improves upon his animalistic instincts, purely physical nature through education, cultivation, and training to satisfy the standard of civilization and human expected by the majority in certain society and time, thus becoming a man in a real sense. Therefore, only when something or some act must encourage one to go beyond his animalistic nature and beastlike qualities so as to achieve sublimity and nobility can it qualifies as “cultured.” If certain living style or act can only arouse one’s primitive instincts and satisfy his animal needs, possessing no other virtue rather than meeting the most vulgar material desire, then it is not cultural, or even anti-cultural.

Of course, the change of one’s nature takes place over a long span of history; hence, culture, as a concept, is also a relatively historical one. On their long way to depart from homo-erectus, some may look more “human” than other, their human features more eminent and polished; or vice versa. From its extent to which animalistic qualities are replaced by humanities, we make distinctions between the civilized and the primitive, the enlightened and the ignorant.

The word civilization receives different interpretations and applications from one linguistic system to another. Fukuzawa Yukichi once noted that: “... Hence the term civilization in English. It derives from the Latin *civilitas*, which means ‘nation.’ Civilization thus describes the process by which society gradually changes for the better and takes on a definite shape. It is a concept of a unified nation in contrast to a state of primitive isolation and lawlessness.” And he further explained,

“Civilization is all-important; it is the goal of all human endeavors. We can discuss civilization in terms of its various aspects... Civilization is like a great stage; the institutions, learning, commerce, and so forth are actors.... Civilization is also like an ocean, and its various institutions, book learning, and the like are the rivers which feed into it.... Civilization is also like a warehouse. Everything goes into the warehouse—daily necessities, capital, human energies.... What, then, does civilization mean? I say that it refers to the attainment of both material well-being and the elevation of the human spirit. It means both abundance of daily necessities and esteem for human refinement.... Civilization ultimately means the progress of man’s knowledge and virtue.”⁵

We can see then the expansion of civilization and culture overlaps completely or partly; their distinction lie in their essence: Civilization is more direction-conscious, suggesting the direction of progress. It is mainly posed as a comparatively developed civil state and its products in contrast to that of an ignorant, primitive, underdeveloped condition. Compared to the neutrality of culture as a descriptive word, civilization is more directional word in a favorable sense. This distinction is demonstrated in Chinese contemporary linguistic system, in which we call our human ancestors, who then were still somewhere between apes and men, and a step from enlightenment, we can only refer to them as “Lantian tribe” and “Yuanmou tribe” instead of “Lantian culture” or “Yuanmou culture”; it is after they have acquired qualities present in modern human beings and possessed basic humanities do we start to think of them as culture entities, such as “Longshan culture,” and “Hemudu culture”; and after they reached maturity as human being, we call their cultures civilizations, such as “Chinese civilization,” “ancient Egyptian civilization,” “ancient Indian civilization.”

2.2.2 *The Completion of Man’s Socialization*

The process of humanization is not simply a biological development or physical transformation, but also a process of socialization.

One of the characteristics of culture is its power to civilize, pushing man to change himself according to human criteria and demonstrate the qualities of and potential as man in order to enjoy his rightful status. Therefore, the nature of culture and man do coincide. But what is man? What’s the criteria and rightful state of being man? To this complicated question, Marx has famously provided an in-depth answer when commenting on man’s nature: “human nature is not an abstraction inherent in a single individual. In reality, it is the sum of all social relations.” It cautions us against observing man as isolated individuals, which reveals more physical and animalistic features, whereas the nature of man remains something

⁵Fukuzawa Yukichi. *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1995. pp. 30–33.

abstract and permanent. It is revealed through their social attributes. Only when man connects to and interacts with each other in the society can we spot his real existence and his nature. Culture shows how man is shaped by his social relations and conditions, its conveyor, and embodiment being society as a whole.

How man is shaped by society and becomes civilized can be analyzed from the following two aspects:

As a group, civilization happens on a social level. With isolated individual (if such individual exists at all) without profound social connections, he accumulates his experience, thoughts, and wisdom from scratch; his power and mobility being limited, he lives narrowly with no possibility to create culture. His discoveries, thoughts, skills, and labor experience sparkle and vanish, with no means to be preserved, developed, and disseminated, bearing no chance to breed culture. Only when living in a social community can one really enjoy the advantage of predecessors' accomplishments to develop intellectually and accumulate power and experience. Each man's labor and its products will not die with the laborer but join into the society as a whole. Society enables the sharing of experience and progress, thus developing common languages, living styles, conformities and mass psychology, and forming common thoughts, wisdom, knowledge, skills, and values. Social culture is based on languages, lifestyles, knowledge, skills, techniques, and values that go beyond the individual.

A set of complex social relations are thus formed economically, domestically, ethically, politically, and judicially. These social relations, on the one hand, are determined by social realities; on the other hand, are also the creation of each country, nation, and its people. It embodies their understanding of humanity and culture, of human existence and fundamental values; it is the crystallization of reality and ideals, and represents the way man exists, hence belongs to culture. Every social relation is permeated with certain humanistic spirit: The way a society holds itself up as a whole shows people's understanding and pursuit of values such as truth, virtue, beauty, benefits, justice, right, and responsibility. Its economic, political, and judicial relations can also be viewed as the objectification of its ideology. Culture lies deep in such relations.

For each individual, humanization and civilization are exemplified by how he participates and lives in the society; how he accepts its knowledge, values, modes of behavior, customs and traditions, and social role imposed on him; how he develops his social subjectivity and cultural character, thus becoming civilized in a real and complete sense, forming a core element, a cell in a certain social system. Meanwhile, society will convert outsiders into ones it acknowledges through the influence of complex social relations, rules of the game, and cultural values.

We were born into a pre-established social network with certain fixed characters, identities, status, and social roles. We were standardized and ruled by this complication as a social reality. Our cultural characters are built up according to the mold in which we are located. We acquire cultural characters and value identities through social interaction, whereas we acquire humanity by being accepted into social network through interaction with family members, relatives, and community. We are assimilated and cultivated as we live and "play the game." We apply what