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# *Envisioning the Profile of Chinese Culture*

—from the Perspective of the Social Value Theory

Pang Jingjun\*

**Abstract:** For a few decades China has undergone an enduring, drastic and complicated transformation. The structure and form of Chinese culture has been profoundly shaped and re-shaped during this process. With careful analysis of the history and the actualities, this paper presents a sketch of Chinese culture that highlights three significant traits; an elegant temperament featuring both classicality and novelty, an intrinsic value focusing on nature and freedom, and an encompassing structure marked by harmonious diversity. A new Chinese culture has already revealed her profile against the sunglow at the dawn of the new era. Beautiful and promising as it is, Chinese people believe that she deserves being heartily applauded, warmly welcomed, and boldly embraced.

**Keywords:** profile of Chinese culture; social value theory; classicality and novelty; freedom and nature; harmonious diversity

**A**ncient China endured over a long history. It evolved slowly as usual but in the 19th century its step was interrupted by Western invasions starting in 1840. Since then, China has undergone repeated social turmoil, institutional reforms, regime changes and conflicts of thoughts. What supported these upheavals was cultural transformation, indicating absolute and deep changes of the Chinese cultural structure and pattern. China has developed a new cultural pattern after repeated conflicts, choices and integrations in the past 170 years. Though cultural development is not complete at present, the new culture has already revealed her profile against the sunglow at the dawn of the new era.

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## 1. Classicality and novelty

Ceaseless debates have accompanied development of Chinese culture for over a century. All of them can be summed up into two issues, i.e., Chinese civilization vs. Western civilization and classical civilization vs. modern civilization. Therefore, Chinese culture will integrate these two issues. Let's describe it as classical and novel based on its external temperament.

Chinese culture is inclusive, syncretic and continuous. As a result, it has not been interrupted despite several external cultural invasions, regimes of alien races and social upheavals over thousands of years. Instead, it has acquired tenacious capabilities to survive and integrate. Even the unprecedented impact of modern Western culture has failed to interrupt development of the Chinese culture. It has survived and has been renewed by integration and innovation. Chinese Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan have been under deep impact of Western culture. However, traditional Chinese culture is still vigorous and expressive. The traditional Chinese culture suffered a serious breakdown in every aspect due to the May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Revolution. However, looking from the history of cultural development, the traditional culture has stuck to its primary path.

One event succeeds another. Today, the information revolution has brought fierce cultural shock and changed approaches to create, transmit, express and accept the traditional culture. However, it cannot extinguish or devalue the traditional culture. It is said that the tradition refers to the past amid the present and the present amid the future. Chinese culture will still be an extension of its past and present forms. Therefore, it will incorporate its classical features. The classical features do not simply refer to a long history. Nor does it mean anything out of date. It rather stands for a rich, vigorous and

enduring history. Throughout the pattern of cultural development in the world, the traditional Chinese culture is unique with respect to its volume and temperament.

The traditional Chinese culture is not only the occurred historical being but also the vigorous present being. However, its subject of value is the modern human being. The culture has set up rules for human beings. At the same time, human beings reflect on themselves, make choices and create the culture based on their needs and personalities. It has been debated for over a century on whether China should realize Western-style modernization or Chinese-style modernization without a conclusion. Actually, neither of these are relevant to the subject of value here. Lu Xun's grabbism seems to be relevant. However, the subject of value in that time disappointed him. Nowadays, the Chinese nation has been developed as a strong subject of value to coalesce its culture. Ancient cultural resources can be utilized to maximize the value for the Chinese nation. The "classical" feature in Chinese culture is not out of date, ruined, decayed or slow-witted. Nor does it adore the past to attempt to find a ready-made prescription there to solve the crisis in modern society. On the contrary, it reserves the traditional culture and creates a new national spirit to update ancient wisdom and values rooted deep in human nature. Chinese culture is not to satisfy the foreigner's curiosity. Nor will it be built into a sample bank or historical documentary.

In addition, the new culture should highlight its "elegance", which indicates a noble-minded, decent and delicate quality. It reveals the Chinese nation's temperament, cultural taste and values, based on which the Chinese nation, being the subject of value of Chinese culture, refines and sublimates the traditional culture to build tomorrow's Chinese culture to be elegant, noble, graceful and profound. Its feature of classicality fits a poem created by Jin

Nong, a famous painter in the Qing Dynasty. The poem goes like this: The longer Chinese plum grows, the more vigorous it will be; it can be seen near stalls by the riverside and mansions amid the mountain; seeing its lofty and refreshing image; I know both plum blossom and the moon are unworldly and elegant(Cao & Chen, 2008).

Except for carrying forward the essence of the traditional culture, Chinese culture will also be innovative, visionary and inclusive. Being vigorous, imaginative and creative, the novel Chinese culture has accumulated contemporary life experience, ideals and values and further developed a far-sighted and global temperament. Rooted deep in Chinese culture, the feature of novelty is just like drizzle in early spring and the bud sprouted on the branch, bringing up a refreshing image of Chinese culture.

Our modern Chinese nation has carried forward classicality of the traditional culture and learned novelty from the spirit of modern time and external culture while developing its subject of value. "Living far away from the crowd, I open the door and see the mountain; a river flows from east to west." Just like the poem implies, the Chinese nation has gathered Chinese civilization, Western civilization, classical civilization and modern civilization from which it can select, utilize and absorb resources and materials. "All things are already complete in oneself." The value subject should create a new cultural pattern that can maximize its value and satisfy its need for existence and development. That is the essence of the item. As for debates of Chinese civilization vs. Western civilization and classical civilization vs. modern civilization, these are superficial questions. The most important item is to benefit the subject. Chinese nation is the core, the subject and the entity during its value selection. In any case, classicality and novelty are essential features of Chinese culture. Chinese culture will complete its transformation in several decades. When the time comes, the Chinese nation

will display a unique temperament and charming culture to be admitted, appreciated, respected and praised by people from all over the world.

Currently, traditional Chinese culture has suffered a deep breakdown due to the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, Western consumerism prevails, temporarily driving away the genuine traditional culture. In addition, occasional superficial trends that aim to restore the things in the past tend to intermingle the good and the bad. On the other hand, novel cultural forms have been developed successively. However, their subjects and values lack self-awareness, creativity and humanity. As a result, these forms turn out to be merely imitative, fashionable, fickle and shallow, and lack spirit of modern time and foresight.

## 2. Freedom and nature

The national culture is similar to a person's personality. The core value is its soul which is displayed by its external temperament. Freedom and nature, two core values of tomorrow's Chinese culture, have supported its temperament of classicality and novelty. Rooted deep in humanity, these two values are essential value demands of human beings and rank top of their value system. A series of other concepts such as personality, democracy, equality, justice, right, efficiency, order, entirety and harmony can be derived from them.

Human beings exist in nature. Not even for a moment can they separate themselves from nature. The idea to get rid of nature is just as ridiculous as a person trying to be off the ground with his hair pulled up by his own hand. Nature is like a mother and a home for human beings. Their attachment and feelings to nature will be intensified no matter how long they stay in the world created by themselves. Nature is not merely an entity that can be applied and reconstructed for human beings to survive. Their

life and value attach to it. Nature is the source that derives amazing feelings of human beings such as the true, the good, the beautiful and love. It is their spiritual sustenance that pointed out the direction for human beings in the limited time and space to pursue ideals such as truth, infinity, power, mightiness, eternity and loftiness. For thousands of years, human beings have considered nature as both a friend and a mentor. They understand, love and learn from nature. They also connect to and integrate with nature.

However, human beings stand at the top of natural evolution. As a result, the relationship between nature and humans cannot simply be described as the whole and the part. Nor can it easily be described as an identical relation. Human beings have been superior in nature since they were born and developed a subject of value completely different from other species in nature. More importantly, they are aware of their subject of value all the time thanks to their spiritual attributes and consciousness. Freedom has been the fundamental rule of any subject of value.

The subject achieves and creates the value of life to the hilt based on its potential and demands. It has been the fundamental, the most universal and the loftiest value and exiting mode pursued by human beings spontaneously. Marx said, "Freedom is the generic essence of all spiritual existence" (Central Compilation & Translation Bureau, 2008, p.67). "Free, conscious activity is man's species-character" (Central Compilation & Translation Bureau, 2008, p.96). Freedom has been the supreme manifestation of man's subjective initiative endowed by nature during evolution. Human beings have not only accepted nature's endowment, but also developed and created it fully based on their capacities and value demands. They have improved continuously capabilities to know and transform the world to pursue freedom. They have invented numerous tools and technologies to construct and perfect complex social institutions

and patterns of life and create colorful cultures and arts. It seems that they have strived so hard to even create an artificial world utterly different from the natural one.

Freedom and nature have been the supreme ideals in life, culture and art of all forms of civilization and penetrated every aspect of material life and spiritual life of human beings. Their achievements can be seen as the essential criterion to evaluate social progress and well-being. However, historically speaking, the pursuit of freedom and nature has been imbalanced and out of sync with diverse manifestations among nations and cultures under different historical stages. For example, Chinese culture and Western culture have been developed toward obviously different directions. Generally speaking, Western culture focuses on freedom and Chinese culture values nature.

From Ancient Greece to modern Europe and the United States, freedom has been the soul for the Western society and history. It has become the core, optimal, absolute and basic value in modern times in the Western society, penetrating fields such as politics, economy, art and religion. On the basis of freedom, a series of specific values such as personality, right, democracy, human rights, equality, spirits of contract and rule of law have been derived, realized, institutionalized and implemented. In selections of Marxist works, freedom is the basic value and core concept for Marx to establish the ideal communist society. Currently, it has become a formidable and irresistible trend leading social development, especially in countries undergoing transition. For example, Medvedev, former President of Russia, spoke in his inaugural address on May 7, 2008 that "human rights and freedom are deemed of the highest value for our society and they determine the meaning and content of all state activity." He said, "I consider my most important task of further development of civil freedom, the creation of new,

most opportunities for self-realization of citizens—citizens, free and responsible, both for his personal success and the prosperity of the whole country” (Lu, 1978, p.62).

Freedom and nature are supposed to be supreme in the value system of human beings. However, they have degraded to utility tools in the modern society. Now that the Western society highlights freedom of the subject, it aims to know, conquer and remake nature. It has objectified nature and exploited excessively natural resources to satisfy survival needs and inflated the aberrant desires of human beings. The conflicts hidden in the value system have been increasingly intensified in the modern industrial society, resulting in social conflicts, human alienation, ecological crisis, environmental pollution and energy depletion successively. Faced with such a stern fact, great thinkers start to reflect disadvantages of the Western value system. They have put forward ideas such as “non-anthropocentrism,” “naturalism” and “ecologism” which emphasize the value of nature or even consider nature as the subject of value. At present, nature has become the core value in social development all over the world. In fact, looking from the perspective of the social value theory, it would be neither necessary nor possible to place nature ahead of man without efforts of these thinkers. The essence is not replacement of the subject of value but rather restoring the supreme ideological value to the misplaced and alienated nature.

Undoubtedly, traditional Chinese culture has suppressed freedom and valued nature due to complex reasons. Though freedom has been yearned for, no systematic freedom theory can be found there. Nor have political, economic and cultural institutions centered on freedom been established. Even though famous thinkers and writers such as Master Zhuang, Tao Yuanming, Li Bai and Su Shi have created the spiritual world to pursue spiritual freedom, their achievements were scarce and

scattered in the mist of history. A group of advanced Chinese has accepted the Western value since modern times. They have created the movement of cultural enlightenment to advocate freedom, a value fully developed in Western culture and rooted deep in nature of Chinese. Freedom is the soul of democracy and science. Back then, freedom was the brightest flag supporting revolutionists to fight for human rights and resist oppression against the autocratic government. Since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, freedom has been applied to various aspects in the social life such as marriage and speech. Along with execution of reform and opening to the outside world, the status of freedom has been improved. However, it still has not been regarded as a justly core value but merely an outcome of Western culture. It has been rejected and criticized together with liberalism and ultra-individualism.

Unlike freedom, nature has long been revered as a fundamental element in traditional Chinese values. It unites with man into a whole that is inclusive and organic, rather than preempts man to be the subject of the value system, or separating itself from man as their opposite. The Chinese believe that nature equates man, only larger in size, while man embodies the concentrate of nature. In Chinese culture, nature, imbued with emotions, ethics, artistry and soul, extends man both spiritually and physically. Both are interlinked and integrated, and shares similarities. Respecting and integrating with nature in a peaceful coexistence, and enjoying the joy and freedom that life has to offer through immersing in nature have been two essential propositions deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Throughout the history of China, they have infiltrated into all aspects of the society, such as philosophy, literature, painting and calligraphy, politics, religion and medical science.

While naturalizing everything about man, Chinese endows nature with soul, ideal and life. In the eyes of ancient Chinese, instead of being

an object of conquest, renovation or profit-driven exploration, nature accommodates man in its inorganic body. As the sprites of nature, man is integrated and interlinked with it. The utmost joy that man could find is living freely and harmoniously in the humanized nature. The notions that Tao models itself after nature and man is an integral part of nature have always predominated Chinese culture and values while Xunzi's and Liu Yuxi's ideas of conquering nature remain the minority in all schools of Chinese philosophy.

In addition, Chinese combine their pursuit of spiritual freedom with the yearning for nature. Depressed and suffocated by reality, Chinese literati open a new realm of life by resorting to nature for emotional sustenance and escape from loneliness and desolation. In the process of building this unique cultural value, they have forged the philosophies of life, happiness, life and death and belief at the pinnacle of traditional Chinese culture. Such architecture underpinned the various schools of thought in the Pre-Qin Period, Confucianism of the Han Dynasty, Metaphysics in the Wei-Jin dynasties, the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism, the Lu-Wang school of Neo-Confucianism and even localized Buddhism. In modern times, Feng Youlan advocated the idea of "harmony between man and nature" as the apex of life in Chinese philosophy. In Qian Mu's late years, he summarized the core of Chinese culture as "unity of man and nature." Much like the westerners that underline freedom as the core value and the ruler of conduct, Chinese hold nature in great esteem to guide themselves in ways of life. In that sense, the meaning of nature can be extended to the point where all things evolve of their own accord. According to Lao Tzu's teaching, for I am abstracted from the world, the world from nature, nature from the way, the way from what is beneath abstraction. In the light of nature and the laws on which it operates, Chinese have unbridled their imagination on life and

society and developed the systems of social value and the value of life that are totally different from those of westerners. Based on that, Chinese have further built their social institutions and ways of living. They uphold the ideas of unity, order, harmony, hierarchy, superiority and inferiority, obedience and comity without the faintest urge to build and reform social systems by the laws of freedom. Dynasties rise and fall with power shifts as a result of struggle for life following the beaten track, not an institutional innovation based on the pursuit of freedom. In their daily lives, Chinese advocate the idea of "following the course of nature," exercise forbearance and moderation, and even submit to the will of Heaven. As long as they can survive, most Chinese tend to seek their own space for living and improve their survival skills instead of resisting with an attitude of "give me liberty or give me death" fight when their life and freedom are threatened. In times of finding themselves in a blind alley in the real world, Chinese literati long for "getting upon a raft and floating out to sea" and "seclusion in the Peach Garden." It's no wonder that figures like Tao Yuanming, Lin Hejing and Zhu Da are revered as the representative of noble men by generations of Chinese literati. The dividing line between western and Chinese cultural and value systems is that the westerners aspire to all-round development of individual potential while Chinese venerate the "harmony between man and nature." Such distinction would come to plain view with a gaze at the traditional Chinese landscape paintings and western portraits.

Nature is of significance in Chinese religious beliefs besides their spiritual and cultural domains. The stability of Chinese ideological systems and belief systems is largely attributed to their nature-centric values in a people without religions in the sense of westerners. The common Chinese worship spirits and gods, ancestors and natural beings. Their religious beliefs, influenced by Taoism and localized

Buddhism, are mostly the mix of utilitarianism and superstition. Failing to underpin their belief system, religion is laid aside by Chinese who view nature as the cornerstone. They place their belief in nature instead of the God or gods. The “Tao” in Taoism and “Heaven” in Confucianism share no resemblance to the all-mighty anthropomorphic God in western religions.

Chinese did not have and will never have a western-style religious belief system. However, their unique nature-based belief system has inspired Chinese to bridge between individuals and a magnificent, eternal and noble being for the utmost emotional satisfaction. Zhang Zai once said, “Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions” (Zhang, 1987, p.62). Besides its uniqueness, the nature-based Chinese belief system holds a futuristic and global significance. Since the Enlightenment, God still lives on as a solid foundation of the lives and cultural systems of westerners. However, its significance in their belief system withers away. Such tendency is particularly evident in the teachings of famous ideologists like Arnold Toynbee, Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, coinciding with the characteristics of the nature-based Chinese belief system.

As the most fundamental and universal quests deeply rooted in human nature, freedom and nature have shaped man the way as they are. They are not only the core values of modern humanity, but also the prime criterion to be followed in the transformation of China and development of a new social value system. Theoretically, freedom and nature, parallel in priority, are united on a higher level—for the purpose of life that maximizes the value of subjects.

However, the reality is more complicated. The people and civilizations have always preferred one over the other in their own ways yet without completely discarding the latter. Generally, throughout the history of mankind, Chinese and western cultures have traveled on their own roads under the influence of complexities, western cultures following the path of “freedom—nature—freedom and nature” and the other “nature—freedom—freedom and nature.” The west has developed a freedom-centric value system while China chose a nature-based one. Each system has its own strengths and flaws caused by partiality. Without a doubt, Chinese the nature-based value system is losing ground to the western freedom-centric one in the modern and contemporary clashes of civilizations. A modern society can no longer be founded on a value system that relies on traditions alone. Nevertheless, the value of freedom exceeds the limit and dissimilates severely during the post-modern transformation of the modern western society. The crisis in society development forces the west to look to the east as the influence of the Chinese nature-based value system amplifies. Nowadays, the tendency of integrative development of freedom and nature grows ever more prominent.

Suffice it to say, Chinese civilization has contributed in its own way to the development of common values of all humanity for fully acknowledging the value of nature, and gained an upper hand in its own transformation into a modern value system. In other words, Chinese has an advantage for its time-honored tradition of valuing nature, reminding them of their negligence of the value of freedom and giving them a head start to make amends. The time of integrating both values and thoroughly developing core social values has come. However, the reality is not so good. For more than a hundred years, Chinese has absorbed and practiced the western freedom-centric principle in terms of implements, institutions and life. The value



of freedom has never been fully recognized and justified by all as a part of the core values. But all modern issues induced by following the model of western industrialization are completely exposed, sparking concerns in the value of freedom. In the meantime, the value of nature, affected by society transformation and fractures in traditional culture, seems lost to Chinese, causing issues in resources, environment and pollution comparable to those of other countries.

The most pressing issues for Chinese are that they need to uphold the value of freedom that is not exclusive to the westerners and apply it to modernization, standardization and institutionalization; on the other hand, they must dig deep into traditional culture to find the values deep rooted in humanity and compliant with the needs of modern people and the orientation of human society development. And then they must summarize and refine the nature-based values and upgrade them in a modern way. Since values are the cornerstone of culture, the formation of a new Chinese society and civilization, revival of Chinese culture and rejuvenation of the Chinese people are all riding on the steady development of core values that center on freedom and nature.

### 3. Harmonious diversity

In the future, Chinese develops their culture with the aim at an elegant temperament featuring both classicality and novelty, and an intrinsic value focusing on nature and freedom, as well as an all-inclusive structure marked by harmonious diversity. Since *The Analects of Confucius* proposed the principle of harmonious diversity, Chinese have revered it as the code of ethics and norm of conduct for more than 2,000 years.

In his later years, Fei Xiaotong voiced his idea of “Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of

the Chinese Nationality” where different cultures understand, reconcile and co-exist with one another. Fei advocated “harmonious diversity”, which means the world will be a harmonious place if people appreciate their own beauty and that of others, and work together to create beauty in the world. To construct the framework of Chinese culture, this principle of ethics, sociology and politics should be elevated to the level of cultural value to integrate with the principles of reconciliation and cultural diversity with modern Chinese-style. In history, due to the predominance of political authoritarianism and cultural absolutism along with parochial small-scale peasant economy, “harmonious diversity” is more limited to individual morality in traditional Chinese society, far from being the voluntary norms for the development of cultural development and social institutions. What have been more evident are the political authoritarianism, cultural absolutism and ideological suppression. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the cultural “harmonious diversity” was reduced to empty talk due to the influence of far-left ideology. Therefore, the rectification and implementation of “harmonious diversity” is a must in the development of new Chinese culture.

According to the theoretical analysis, the diversity of subjects inevitably brings forward that of values and culture. The diversity and heterogeneity of culture is the prerequisite of its birth and development. To sustain the development, prosperity, competitiveness and creativity in culture, all cultures must be allowed to gain their positions with their own virtues. Therefore, to maintain the landscape of the coexistence of diversified cultures, the principle of “harmonious diversity” must be upheld. Throughout the history of China, its cultural booms are attributed to the implementation of this principle, which has given Chinese all the more reasons to hold on to the principle moving forward. It is known

that nature evolves by the logic of heterogeneity, interaction, integration and creation, so cultural diversity matters to cultural ecology just as much as biological diversity to natural ecology. From a global view, Chinese culture is bound to integrate with an internationalized culture more than ever and the interaction between Chinese and foreign cultures will be more profound and frequent. In the context of such tendency, “harmonious diversity” must be advocated and upheld to avoid assimilation and seclusion. From an internal perspective, for maintaining the vitality in Chinese culture with diversified components, China must implement “harmonious diversity.” So far, the integrations and collisions of Chinese and western cultures, traditional and modern cultures, and elite and mass cultures have underlain the cultural development of China. Therefore, the unwavering implementation of “harmonious diversity” is essential to the maintenance of healthy and prosperous cultural development.

As political democratization, economic marketization and cultural technicalization develop faster across the globe, the conditions of interracial, transregional and trans-time-space study and acceptance of cultures have become more and more accessible to individuals with their roles in cultural creation growing increasingly evident. The subject of culture is step by step shifting from country, ethnic group and community to individual as well as from cultural elite to common people. The emergence of

Internet-based new media provides greater platforms, channels and markets for the creation, dissemination and consumption of individual culture. The personality of each person is given the opportunity for embodiment in a cultural sense. Karl Marx’s ideal of community of free fully-developed individuals might first be realized through culture with the help of modern dissemination methods, and in return propel the development of politics, economies and social systems towards the same direction. In this new cultural context, each person is required to uphold the principle of “harmonious diversity” and act accordingly. Individuals will find their own life enriched and identify their own cultural value for harmoniously living with one another and staying true to who they are, and thus be rewarded with distinctive creativity and vitality.

Sun Yat-sen once said that all must rise to adversity in unity for a revolution to succeed. There are still many obstacles and distresses ahead, but the forthcoming Chinese culture with an elegant temperament featuring both classicity and novelty, and an intrinsic value focusing on nature and freedom, as well as an all-inclusive structure marked by harmonious diversity has revealed her profile against the sun glow at the dawn of the new era. Beautiful and promising as it is, the Chinese people believe that she deserves being heartily applauded, warmly welcomed, and boldly embraced.

*(Translator: Xiang Jiwei; Editor: Xiong Xianwei)*

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