

Globalization, national culture and the search for identity: A Chinese dilemma

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China faces the predicament of maintaining an official version of its 'national culture' while being confronted with globalization and diverse searches for cultural and local identities. Chinese endeavours to protect and preserve Chinese culture reveal two orientations: one is the state strategy which emphasizes creating and reinforcing an official version of 'national Chinese culture'; the other features the different and innovative efforts of many individuals and grassroots communities, who have taken into their own hands the mission of conserving traditional and local customs, cultures and diversity.

'Culture is the map of human livelihood.'

An anonymous netter

On 29 August 2004, the night of the closing extravaganza of the Athens Olympics, hundreds of millions of Chinese stayed up into the early morning to watch an eight-minute 'spectacle of China' on TV by Zhang Yimou, the country's best known director. Staged in Athens' Olympic arena for the global audience, the show had been expected to extol the cream of Chinese culture. The theatrical event combined many well known 'Chinese symbols' such as red lanterns, dragon dancing, kung fu, Peking opera costumes, Chinese musical instruments, Oriental women in modified changshan, etc. and triggered an immediate outcry nationwide and on the Internet despite flattering coverage by the state media.

It was criticized as an embodiment of 'pseudo-Chinese' symbols appealing to western tastes with commercial interests. This exemplifies the dilemma that the Chinese government's strategy of national culture faces today: What is Chinese culture? Who is in a position to define it? Are centralized approaches adequate to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of a nation with a 5,000-year-old history and 1.3 billion people?

Never before has China been so committed to globalization and the world system of capitalism. It has transformed so rapidly into an industrialized and market-oriented society that it seems remote from the cultural tradition that has been uniquely 'Chinese' for thousands of years. Every aspect of Chinese culture, from its language, political system, modes of production, law, military, education, architecture, to customs, values, family structure, entertainment, even costume and cuisine, has undergone tremendous change. Modern Chinese people, in the hasty break with anything deemed 'traditional' and the headlong rush for economic wealth, have suddenly found themselves at a sad loss within Chinese culture, identity and even the landscape.

Amid perplexity about national identity, there are endeavours along two paths engaged in protecting and preserving Chinese culture. One is the state strategy that emphasises creating and reinforcing, mainly through government sponsorships and the mass communication system, an official version of 'national Chinese culture.' The other features diverse and innovative efforts by many individuals and grassroots communities throughout the nation, who have taken into their own hands the mission of protecting and preserving local customs, cultures and diversity. Sometimes, the undertakings of these two tracks join in a similar trajectory; at other times, they proceed on separate courses, or even clash in the form of control and contestation.

What has been most significant in the Chinese people's pursuit for cultural diversity is vibrant and spontaneous individual efforts aimed at rediscovering and reclaiming the Chinese heritage that has been sidelined by the state drive for development and not been explicitly sanctioned in the official 'national culture,' such as the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions and regional diversity.

National culture and grassroots efforts

State efforts to preserve an 'official' national culture have always complied with the national development strategy. As the state has made economic development its top priority in the past decade, 'national culture' has inevitably been wrapped in the rhetoric of 'development, progress and globalization'. Destruction of many traditional buildings, cultural heritage sites and ancient artefacts are often explained as a necessary move towards advancement.

On the other hand, for millions of Chinese, this tremendous change in the natural environment, landscape, neighbourhoods, dwellings, lifestyles etc. is uprooting the basis on which they have nurtured a sense of belonging for generations. Striving to maintain their own meanings of existence, they are engaged in their own initiatives, outside of the state sponsoring system, to preserve and protect the cultures they have identified with and cherished dearly.

Grassroots efforts are multidimensional. One area is the protection of traditional housing and neighbourhoods. As old-style quarters and markets have been bulldozed in every Chinese city to make a way for commercial high-rises and modern blocks, many individuals have started their own campaign for cultural preservation. Xu Yong, a photographer in Beijing, was the first to organize a hutong (alleys) tour in the capital 10 years ago to promote local architecture and enhance awareness of preserving native courtyard life.

This project was derived from his love of traditional Beijing alleys. In 1990 he took a camera to photograph old houses, streets, lifestyles and landscapes in the city (China Business, 2002). Now, with the government's new policy encouraging individuals in hutong conservation, a rising number of people are investing in the purchase of old-style houses 'Siheyuan' in Beijing, hoping to preserve this unique architecture.

Feng Jicai, a writer and native of Tianjin, has been fighting since the mid-1990s against the local government's plan to demolish city quarters with a 600-year history. He had persistently appealed to the authorities to halt the plan, but his petition fell on deaf ears. He then gathered a group of people with a similar interest to draw a street map of the 'Old City' and photograph numerous historical houses. By the time the picture album *Perishing Images of Old City* came out, half the city was in ruins.

A few years later, when he heard that another old business street was to be demolished, he immediately organized a team of volunteers. They first published a set of postcards with photographs of the street, then they organized a public sale of the postcards on the site. Tens of thousands of people came to the event. Days later, many local business owners and residents in the street put up signs demanding that the government shelve the plan. Under public pressure, the government finally came up with a modified plan taking cultural preservation into consideration (Dong, 2001).

In recent years, more and more local governments have started to recognize that the preservation of cultural heritage is not a financial burden, but a precious legacy. It could also contribute to economic growth. Many cities and towns have taken advantage of their respective cultural heritages in developing a tourist industry with local themes. Various cultural festivals sponsored by local governments and actively participated in by residents and business communities are popular everywhere. The most successful case so far was the first 'Cultural Heritage Days' of Henan Province on 26-27 November 2005.

During these two days, 67 famous heritage sites, museums and parks were open to the public for free and received an extraordinary response from local residents. The well known historical sites in Zhengzhou, Luoyang and Anyang alone attracted over 3 million visitors (Chen, 2005)! This indicates that ordinary people have a deep passion for their cultural heritage and are a sustaining force in the mission of cultural preservation if governments have a committed policy.

National culture and traditional knowledge systems

The official "national culture," in particular, reflects a hybrid ideology of the current state establishment, embodying such inherently contradictory elements as Maoism, socialism, capitalism, modernism and globalism (Liu, 2003). Such an ideological medley contributes to an ambiguous and inconsistent vision in the conservation of national culture. With the withering influence of communist ideology, the government has increasingly resorted in recent years to the cultural repertoire of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in its reconstruction of "national culture". Several traditional rituals of memorial services have been instituted to worship Confucius and the legendary Chinese founders Yan and Huang. Sacred tours of Buddha's revered finger bones are authorized. Traditional holidays like the Chinese New Year, Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and Moon Festival are given more attention and coverage in the national media.

This shift comes as a semi-official ratification of what has been practiced and advocated by many individual Chinese in reviving Confucianism and Classical Chinese studies. One of the most vocal advocates of modern Confucianism is Jiang Qing, who used to be a college teacher in Shenzhen. In 1996, Jiang started building his Confucius-style lecture house in a remote mountain village in Guizhou. The place now is not only a home for Jiang to practice and lecture on Confucianism, but also a centre for the neo-Confucian movement in China.

Jiang has written many books on Confucianism and its values in modern society, and compiled a 12-volume series of "Recital Books of Chinese Cultural Classics" aimed at educating children in Confucian values. It was finally published by the Higher Education Press in 2004, the first time that such a complete series of Classics for children was published in China since 1912 when the Chinese Republic abolished the Classics Recital classes in elementary schools (He, 2005).

Jiang's devotion is resonant of one of the consistent sentiments in the country about Confucianism. More parents, teachers and pupils have participated in Classics recital rituals and turned to old-style private schools to learn traditional Chinese virtues and values. On 30 July 2005 thousands of teachers and pupils attended a mass recital of Confucian Classics on the Great Wall to demonstrate their devotion to the Chinese tradition (Feng, 2005). Three months later, another old-style private school, Juzhai Sishu was opened in Suzhou to teach children, in particular, Confucian Classics (Nanjing Morning Post).

This trend of introducing the Classic Recital into elementary education was pioneered by an elementary school in Guangzhou in 1998. Starting from the fall semester 2005, over 50 elementary schools in Jinan, Shandong Province, have incorporated the Confucian Classics Recital in their curriculum (Jiang, 2005). Overall, it is estimated that more than eight million children in over 100 cities have participated in the Classics Recitals, and more private Confucian schools are in demand.

Higher education institutions have also joined the trend to train more scholars with Confucian Classics expertise. Wuhan University set up an experimental programme in Chinese Classics four years ago. In May 2005, People's University announced that it would establish the College of Chinese Classics, the first of its kind in China since 1949 (Jiang, 2005). It was inaugurated on 17 October 2005.

Another concession that official "national culture" has made to Chinese traditions is the re-establishment of memorial rituals to Yan and Huang, the legendary founders of the Chinese nation. The annual homage services at their tomb sites by emperors and high officials were institutionalized in the imperial system in ancient China for thousands of years. This tradition was interrupted after the founding of the People's Republic of China, although unofficial worship rituals by local communities never stopped.

Since the mid-1980s these annual services have been resumed by non-governmental groups and become increasingly magnificent and ceremonious in their displays and procedures (Bai, 2004). In recent years, more officials of higher rank in the central and provincial governments took part in the worship ceremonies, giving the events a more authoritative status through nationally televised

media coverage.

However, there has been ongoing debate about the values and usefulness Confucianism and other indigenous knowledge offer to Chinese society in modern times. It is still unclear how far these traditions could be reclaimed and incorporated into the official 'national culture' and into the everyday life of ordinary people.

National cultural and local diversity

Although the official 'national culture' has been compromised ideologically to some extent to accommodate Confucianism, it persists in adhering to its principle of uniformity, particularly in the national TV system. Cultural representations on CCTV tend to be too uniform – a uniformed nation with a uniform language. Such a holistic image conceals and suppresses a rich variety of regional diversity within China which, besides 55 ethnic minorities, also entails astonishingly diverse local cultures within the Han nationality alone.

Not only are the states increasingly unable to handle on their own the cross-border flow of ideas, images and resources that affect cultural development (UNESCO, 2003), the state-cultivated 'national culture' itself would likely have a homogenizing impact on the cultures in question, as in the Chinese context. Considering China's long history and huge population, of which 91.6% are of Han nationality, it is important to state that the issue of preserving regional/local diversity in China should be an indispensable element of protecting cultural diversity.

Regional identity is one of several primary identities a Chinese person holds. Each major region is distinguished from others by its own dialect, landscape, native crops, cuisine, history, famous persons, heritage sites, regional customs and characteristics. It is these rich and diverse regional cultures that have made Chinese culture so unique and mesmerizing. However, this regional diversity, particularly the diversity in dialects, is not represented on China's television. Central government has a strict rule against using vernaculars on the local screen, although there are several formally approved ethnic minority languages (Tibetan, Mongolian, Uigur, and so on) used in their respective regions. TV programmes from various regions are strikingly similar; they are almost all in Putonghua, and thus lose the most distinctive flavour of local cultures.

Recently more and more local TV stations have started producing sitcoms and news programmes in local dialects to attract audiences. One of the first dialect TV sitcoms 'Night Talk of Foggy City' was initiated by Chongqing TV and has been the most popular programme of the local station for 11 years (Cai, 2005). In 2000, Guangdong TV launched the Cantonese dialect sitcom series 'Local Boys and Wives from Afar,' which immediately became a hit programme with top rating for the local station (Zi, 2002).

Hangzhou TV in 2004 introduced a news column in the Hangzhou dialect 'Ah Liu Tou on News' and was immediately successful. Many local stations in neighbouring cities of the Yangtze River Delta followed suit and started news shows in local dialects (Cai, 2005). GDTV, with three Cantonese channels, launched a satellite channel in Cantonese in July 2004, which is the only authorized dialect channel transmitted through the national satellite system (Cai, 2005). There were also projects to make foreign TV shows in local dialects.

To reverse this trend, the State Administration for Radio Film and Television (SARFT) issued a new regulation on 28 October 2005 reiterating that local dialects should not be used in TV soaps and sitcoms. This is the third directive in two years that reaffirms a ban on using local dialects in TV programmes. These new regulations have set off a heated debate, and in particular have met with unyielding resistance from TV stations in southern provinces. Claiming that the new language rules favour northern dialects, southern TV stations insist on producing TV shows in local tongues (Cai, 2005). The Ningbo Station in Zhejiang Province even defied the rules by launching a dialect programme immediately after the new regulation came into force (Yu, 2005).

Control and contestation over dialect programming on TV indicate the predicament facing

‘official’ national culture, which is essentially mediated through the state TV system. By rejecting regional dialects that are the daily communicative languages of a majority of population in their respective localities, this formal national culture maintains an aloofness from the livelihood of people at the grassroots level. It therefore becomes a form of culture engaged and communicated, for a large part of the population, merely in a more superficial and outside layer of social life. Its standard form tends to homogenize the kaleidoscopic vista of regional diversity that has been a sustaining source for Chinese civilization. Such an ‘outsider’ culture may not be as strongly identified with as local ways of life and therefore lack vitality to re-invent itself creatively and resourcefully under the siege of globalization and western commercialism.

New vision: Harmony in diversity

It is important that a new vision conceptualize cultural pluralism within Chinese national culture. Four principles should be established. First, harmony of diversities (heer butong): this holds the central value in Chinese cultural pluralism. Diversity is a natural environment and foundation for achieving harmony, an ideal state of human society (Liu et al, 2003). Secondly, one entity with plural elements (duoyuan yiti): this indicates how to conceive cultural pluralism (Liu et al, 2003). In this way, Chinese culture should be viewed as a single whole that contains a multitude of different elements. Accordingly, the Chinese nation encompasses 56 ethnicities; the Chinese language includes a Chinese written system (two types: old characters and simplified characters), a common spoken language (Putonghua) and varieties of local dialects.

Thirdly, incorporating elements of a diverse nature (jianshou bingxu): the goal for cultural pluralism is not to homogenize differences, but to maintain the environment that respects diverse elements and allow them to exist side by side. Lastly, internalization of heterogeneous elements (neihua yizhi): the capability to accommodate and absorb heterogeneity.

To conclude, Chinese society is undergoing an unprecedented transformation with its romantic embrace of globalization of capitalism and commercialism. Never before have the issues of ‘Chineseness’ and how to preserve it become so pressing for every individual Chinese. Who are we Chinese? Where do we come from? Where do we want to go?

State efforts to recreate ‘Chinese culture’ are not only limited in their efforts to protect and preserve all cultural heritages from disappearing, but also ambiguous and inept in envisaging the course and direction of cultural protection. Beyond the state system, millions of ordinary Chinese are striving to re-define ‘Chineseness’ by themselves and thus to reclaim their own ‘Chinese culture.’ With growing penetration of the Internet and mobile communications, this vigorous search for diversity and identity is gaining momentum. Its impact on Chinese society is still unfolding.

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