

# The New Cultural Landscape in International Relations<sup>\*</sup>

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ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION is a hugely significant historical phenomenon, which is rapidly growing in scope. While facilitating a rise in global wealth, and increasing both the pleasures and pressure in our lives, it is also further widening the gap between the rich and the poor. As a result of globalization, many resources required for economic development are now available across the world. However, the global “cultural map” and mankind’s spiritual world remain diverse and multifaceted. The severe repercussions of the global financial crisis, the violent conflicts that have broken out in some regions, terrorist activities, climate and environmental problems, and natural disasters, alongside many other issues, have had a fundamental impact on people’s ways of thinking. In addition, the ever-changing modes of information transmission are posing unprecedented challenges to our abilities to comprehend, adapt and respond to the world around us. Thus, when considering the new international political and economic landscapes, we must not overlook the new cultural factors in international relations.

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I

WITH THE deepening of economic globalization, world cultures will interact and communicate with one another on a newer and broader basis. Since time immemorial, human beings have created a diverse variety of cultures, nurtured by nature and history. Due to differences in geography, climate, history, anthropology and transportation, world cultures have taken on abundant and diverse features. Since the 17th century, when the modern international system took shape, through the 18th century, when the Industrial Revolution began in Europe and through the 19th century, when the international political and economic system was formed and Europe established colonies around the world, the diversity of world cultures has always existed, but has been characterized by the dichotomy of Western vs. non-Western. On one side, stood the violent approach of aggressive Western cultures, and on the other side, lay the passive response and twisting fate of non-Western cultures. There is no one definitive means by which to understand and evaluate cultural interactions, and, especially not when evaluating the response of non-Western cultures to these. In other words, many non-Western cultures and civilizations have yet to find satisfactory answers as to how to respond to the challenges posed by modern Western cultures and civilizations. Marshal Chen Yi, then Vice Premier and Foreign Minister of China, composed a poem during a visit to Africa with Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964, which reads as follows: "To forgive? Who will agree? To call for retribution? Unnecessary might it be. The most ruthless thing is but the logic of struggle." Reading it again today, I couldn't help but recalling the rough and arduous path the Chinese nation has traveled in modern times, and came to appreciate the vision and insight of our predecessors.

During the 1990s, the world economy and politics entered a period of globalization, marking the dawn of the post-Cold War era of international relations. Western culture had defeated its ideological opponent, one that had challenged it for about a century, and the United States declared itself world leader. Mainstream

public opinion around the world supported this claim, believing that globalization equated to Westernization and Americanization. Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Phillips Huntington explored this idea further in their books, Fukuyama from the perspective of historical philosophy and Huntington from that of culture and civilization. If their conclusions hold true, the central task of non-Western cultures and civilizations is to focus on their relationships with Western cultures, and in particular with American culture. However, the reality is far more complicated than this suggests.

So, how should we define the “new cultural map” in economic globalization? One interesting phenomenon is in the process of economic globalization, different cultures and civilizations have not only not merged with one another, but instead have retained their own individual characteristics. There is no single predominant feature of global cultural interaction and communication in the world today, as shown by the fact that the dichotomy of Western vs. non-Western no longer dominates international relations. Instead, different cultures have begun to examine, express and redefine themselves, and even compete over spheres of influence. Facing the challenges posed by globalization, Western cultures have a tendency to disintegrate: European cultures have become introverted, suspicious of change and have resorted to self-protectionism; the Anglo-Saxon countries represented by Britain, Australia and the United States are attempting to change this by promoting multiculturalism; Japanese culture is in a state of flux; meanwhile, Latin America is adopting an open-minded and liberal perspective to reflect upon its diverse, extroverted, ethnic and cosmopolitan culture. More remarkable still are: Indian culture, which brims with confidence; Islamic culture, which guards its traditions closely, but also seeks change; and Russian culture, which is once again trying to mark out a space between Western and non-Western cultures. They are all

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trying to find their own strategies and paths to meet the challenges of globalization, and for the most part, are looking to their own cultural traditions and social capital for inspiration.

It is worth noting that most of these lively and independent non-Western cultures are on China's doorstep, and in this age of globalization, these are the countries with which China will conduct many of its cultural exchanges. Therefore, in addition to addressing problems left over from the country's early stages of modernization and continuing its dialogue on values with Western cultures, China must face new issues that have arisen in this globalizing era and prepare for dialogue and exchange with the rising cultures of today.

## II

WHILE ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION is in full swing on the material level, it has triggered various problems on the spiritual level. A rich material life is a symbol of historical progress. The idea of "putting material well-being first," which dates back to the Enlightenment of the 18th century, has become a reality in this age of globalization. In this era of materialism, our values have lost their foundation, leading to the belief that all "values" must be "visible" and "tangible." This has led to the relentless pursuit of efficiency and success, and turned wealth into the main measure of achievement. This materialistic attitude and cultural weightlessness is seriously destabilizing human life.

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One significant indication of the cultural weightlessness in today's society is the fact that we are having trouble with self-identity. Questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" are raised time and again, indicating that self-identity is a problem affecting both individuals and social groups. It is worth considering that these questions also exist in capitalist societies and even in their core intellectual circles, meaning that this can no longer be viewed as a trivial problem. In 2004,

Samuel Huntington, a Harvard University professor, warned in his book, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, that Americans need to hold on to the Anglo-Protestant culture that makes them Americans; otherwise America will no longer be America. Due to the broad reach of the English language and the influence of the U.S.-dominated media, his argument was widely publicized, yet was also greatly disputed and criticized. In 2006, Amartya Sen, an Indian economist, Nobel laureate and Harvard professor, asked "Who am I?" in his book, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. He proposed a new spiritual perspective, arguing that everyone has multiple identities, and that we should notice manifold selves and multiple cultures. This would help us to seek common ground among individuals and groups, thus promoting mutual understanding and respect. It is hard to predict where these soul-searching discussions in core Western intellectual circles might lead, but it is nevertheless important to look into the background of these discussions, as well as that of those involved. To some extent, this can reveal the impact of economic globalization on people's ways of thinking, as well as the intensity and depth of this impact.

"Who are we?" is also a question that has prompted self-reflection in Russia. At the International Forum on World Civilization held in Beijing in 2010, Russian scholar Igor Joseph delivered a speech entitled "Thoughts on Russian Civilization," in which he pointed out that, in this ever-changing world, it is necessary to solve Russia's problems of self-identity and update frameworks in which this is reflected upon.

During the process of globalization, regionalization and integration in the economic field have not brought about corresponding changes in the cultural field. On the contrary, due to the unprecedented increase in cultural exchanges and interactions, the desire to pursue one's own identity has only grown stronger. "Who am I?" is not only a question asked in developed countries, but also in developing countries. In the regions where economic and social development lags behind, people are not only puzzled by the question "Who am I?", but also confused by many other questions, such as "Who should I believe in?" and "Who should I rely on?"

III

ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION internationalizes the production and consumption of all countries. This globalization may also extend to

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many other aspects, beyond those that we can conceive of at present. However, one noteworthy global phenomenon is that the “top-down” values system is being challenged by a “bottom-up” system in which cultural position is sought.

This “bottom-up” approach can be observed in almost all areas of life. Take the traditional international political and economic pattern as an example. Both sides of the Atlantic

used to be the core of international politics and economy, with their cultures and civilizations exerting immeasurable influence upon the world for several centuries. However, this has been changed by economic globalization. Today, the global wealth distribution is still far from fair, yet is no longer a system that serves only to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Unless rich countries make the necessary adjustments before it is too late, they will lose the opportunity to increase their wealth. The spread of the European debt crisis is a case in point. At the other end of the spectrum, developing countries that respond quickly and cope well with the changing global situation will be the beneficiaries of this wealth redistribution. Moreover, countries blessed with rich resources are now part of the global production chain and are sharing the fruits of prosperity. It is precisely this new economic basis and the growth opportunities it has brought about that have boosted the confidence and cultural consciousness of countries and cultures that used to be passive and at the bottom of the global pecking order.

Development, confidence and cultural consciousness have given rise to the emergence of several new regional cultural hubs

in the era of globalization: the Czech Republic in Central and Eastern Europe, Qatar in the Gulf Area, the Republic of Korea in Northeast Asia and Singapore in Southeast Asia are only some of the many examples. Though lacking cultural originality in the traditional sense, they have demonstrated outstanding ability in cultural communication and in exerting their influence in their local regions. The cultural ideas that they exemplify are different from both those of American culture and of their surrounding traditional civilizations.

The new “bottom-up” approach has meant that cultural issues now have greater social implications. For instance, in today’s business world executives often use the terms “enterprise culture” and “corporate culture.” At the same time, employees are also increasingly demanding a working environment in which “fair treatment” is a priority.

It is by no means easy to establish a corporate culture that both individual groups and the whole society accept, but it is precisely the challenging nature of this task that offers infinite untapped potential to all leaders.

This “bottom-up” approach also promotes a boom in popular culture. Economic globalization brings about technological breakthroughs, which helps to create a global cultural space accessible even to people at the bottom of society. In such a space, communication among people is transient, mutual and equal, with the form of communication taking precedence over its logic, and its speed taking precedence over its depth. In the meantime, capital and markets are also expanding in this huge space. Technology, capital and markets are the powerful forces driving the boom in bottom up popular culture.

Across the world, various cultural dialogues and exchanges are taking place at multiple levels and through multiple channels. The increasing diversity in the identities of the participants is expanding the scope of these discussions, which include intercultural communication, religious dialogue, adolescent education, health and happiness, mankind and nature, women’s issues, etc.

## CONCLUSION

WITH REGARD to the new cultural landscape in international relations, we must consider which issue is the most pressing. The kind of global environment that Chinese culture is confronted with on its road to development, the international cultural environment in particular, remains the most pressing issue today. China has been facing this issue since the May 4th Movement of 1919 when great efforts were taken to understand more about the global environment. In fact, we can trace this issue back further to the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period when the Chinese were awakened and began to take interest in the world beyond China's borders. Thus, we are still facing the same problem that our predecessors were unable to solve 100 years ago. Our understanding will always lag behind changes in the world. Before old problems can be solved, new challenges present themselves. What then is the old problem in the new challenge? How can we define the new challenge? How can we respond to the old problem? In today's new global environment, how can China strike a balance between adhering to its cultural heritage and opening up to the world? Can the new cultural landscape in international relations provide new references for China in both its cultural development and cultural exchanges with other nations?

Since the reform and opening-up policies of the late 1970s and the rapid economic development that they brought about, contemporary China's "cultural consciousness" has entered a new phase. The tolerance, moderation and composure that are in the genes of Chinese culture are being revitalized in this new era. This "cultural consciousness" is being awakened both from the top down and from the bottom up. In the wake of economic development, goals are being put forward to create "provinces rich in culture" and "cities rich in culture" across the country. Attempts to rediscover our cultural roots have become commonplace. Instead of proposing the philosophical question "Who are we?" like Samuel Huntington, we are searching for the answer directly through practical actions, including worshipping our ancestors, studying



ancient Chinese civilization, promoting folk cultures, and so on. In some cities and key academic institutions, various platforms for cultural dialogue and international cultural exchange have been set up. Artists and scholars are now using a variety of modern ways of expression to tell many vivid stories about China. These stories are rich in content, revealing the spirit, essence and character of Chinese culture, as well as Chinese people's psyche, attitudes to life, desires, concepts of beauty and so on.

Many practical steps are being taken to resolve this issue. Reflection upon an issue and steps toward its resolution go hand in hand. The ability to reflect is an indication of vitality. Thus, Chinese people must broaden their global vision and in doing so, reach new spiritual heights in order to successfully resolve this century-old problem.