

# On Characteristics of Chinese Civilization

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## Abstract

Chinese civilization is the only ancient human civilization existing in the world, with a history of more than five thousand years. Over its long history of evolution, Chinese civilization has developed into a distinct civilization. This article briefly discusses eight main characteristics of the Chinese civilization, including the pluralistic and integrated Chinese nation, the wide use of the time-honored Chinese character, and the philosophy of being people-oriented and seeking harmony between man and nature, etc.. Moreover, it is pointed out that Chinese civilization is the fundamental intrinsic driving force for the rapid rise of China in recent decades and the Chinese national rejuvenation, and China is destined to take its own path of development due to its unique civilization.

**Keywords:** Chinese civilization, characteristics, intrinsic driving force, the Chinese road

## 1. Introduction

Civilizations in the world are varied and colorful, and each of them has its own characteristics. They are jointly contributing to the advancement and development of human society by exchanges and mutual learning. Chinese civilization, as an important member of the grand garden of world civilizations, is closely linked to the destiny of the Chinese nation. Over its long history of more than 5,000 years, the resilient and vigorous Chinese civilization continuously evolves, providing a powerful intrinsic spiritual driving force for the ever-lasting development of the Chinese nation. Especially for the rise of China today, Chinese civilization, as the source of strength for the confidence of the Chinese nation, is playing a crucial role in pushing the Chinese people to the center of the world stage and on the journey of the national rejuvenation. As the only ancient civilization found in the world, the Chinese civilization has its distinctive features and unique charm in comparison with other civilizations.

## 2. Eight Main Characteristics of Chinese Civilization

### 2.1 The Pluralistic and Integrated Chinese Nation

The Chinese nation is an integrated ethnic community composed of 56 ethnic groups, of which the Han people accounts for 91.11 percent of China's population of more than 1.4 billion, while the other ethnic minorities such as Tibetan, Uyghur and Hmong nationalities make up for 8.89 percent (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021). Through national fusion and development in history, the 56 ethnic groups have joined together like the seeds of a pomegranate, forming the great Chinese nation with diversity and unity. In fact, the history of ethnic fusion at least can be dated back to 770 BC during the Spring and Autumn Period, when the Han Chinese in the central plain of China and the four groups of ethnic minorities (known in Chinese as "Siyi (四夷)") in the surrounding area, namely, *Dongyi* (东夷), *Xirong* (西戎), *Nanman* (南蛮) and *Beidi* (北狄), began to interact with each other, which constitutes the rudiment of the Chinese nation, historically known as "*Huaxia* (华夏)" (Fei, 1989). After thousands of years of ethnic integration and historical evolution, all Chinese ethnic groups have finally forged the strong sense of a community with a shared future for the Chinese nation on the basis of historical and cultural identity.

The pattern of multi-ethnic integration in the Chinese civilization stands in stark contrast to that of some other countries, such as the United States. Although the U.S. is the world's largest country of immigration, which means the American nation and culture also have a great diversity, but the ethnic problems like racial discrimination in the American society still remain unsolved for a long time, triggering public protests or demonstrations from time to time, such as "White Supremacy", "Black Lives Matter", "Asian Hate Crime" and so on, drawing a worldwide concern over it. It can be seen that the harmonious ethnic relationship is a result of both historical precipitation and the identification of cultural tradition.

## *2.2 Nationwide Use of Time-Honored Chinese Character*

The Chinese character is one of the oldest writing symbols in the world, with a history of more than 6,000 years, and it is still in use today (Jin, 2006). Chinese characters are the language medium created and used by Chinese people to record and spread information. It originated from pictographs and reflects the Chinese worldview of "harmony between man and nature". Since Cang Jie invented Chinese characters by observing and imitating physical objects in the world in ancient times, Chinese characters have become the spiritual link to inherit the Chinese culture. Especially after the Qin Dynasty unified the Chinese characters in 221 BC, the cultural cohesion of Chinese characters has been further strengthened. China has a vast territory and numerous dialects, and speakers of different local languages have difficulty in conversation, so the wide use and inheritance of Chinese characters always has a great influence on promoting people-to-people connectivity and cultural identity. Chinese characters and the Chinese culture they carry have become the common spiritual homeland of all Chinese ethnic groups.

Nowadays, more and more people all over the world are learning Chinese characters and Chinese culture. The latest statistics show, that by 2020 there are more than 180 countries or regions in the world to carry out Chinese education program, of which more than 70 countries have incorporated Chinese education into their national education system, and about 200 million people abroad are learning Chinese (Wang & Wen, 2021).

## *2.3 Sticking to the People-oriented Doctrine and Integrating Man with Nature*

Putting people first is the most fundamental humanistic spirit of Chinese civilization. The human-centered humanistic spirit refers to the idea that human beings are not dominated by gods or enslaved by external things when dealing with the relationship among individuals, all things in the world and gods, instead, they coordinate the relationship among human beings, gods and things by virtue of human moral self-consciousness and self-discipline, emphasizing human subjectivity, independence and initiative. The belief of "putting people first" is a profound insight into Chinese history. Thousands of years of historical experience in China has proved that "putting people first" is the primary cause that determines the rise and fall of a country. For example, King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC) was cruel and inhumane. He believed in the mandate of Heaven, using people as sacrifices and burying people alive with the dead, and did not treat people as human. As a result, the Shang Dynasty was overthrown by the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BC). Another example is the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC), which lasted for only 14 years due to its tyranny. After the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty unified China, the rulers of the Qin Dynasty extorted excessive taxes and levies from the people and enslaved them to build large-scale construction works, including the Great Wall, the Mausoleum of Emperor Qinshihuang and the Epang Palace. What's more, the First Emperor of Qin restrained people's thoughts by burning books and burying Confucian scholars alive. In contrast, those dynasties or regimes that put people first and practiced benevolent governance in history often lasted longer, such as the powerful Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) and the prosperous Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). Therefore, the rise and fall of the country ultimately depends on whether the ruler is people-oriented and rules by virtue or not.

In Chinese civilization, the ideas of "being people-oriented" and "seeking harmony between man and nature" are compatible. Although the Chinese humanistic spirit emphasizes the subjectivity of man, it does not sever the ties between "man" and "nature" or "heaven". It is another salient feature of Chinese civilization that nature and man are actually one (Lou, 2016). This philosophical view holds that harmony between man and nature should be upheld, as man is an integral part of nature, and man and nature are both independent and interdependent. To seek harmony between man and nature is actually a kind of life wisdom of ancient Chinese people who follow the laws of nature. In ancient China, people's life depended mainly on agricultural production, so natural environment and weather conditions were the decisive factors affecting agricultural output. Therefore, people would have to learn and grasp the natural laws of agricultural production, adapt to the weather and environment changes, and make the best use of the circumstances, rather than try to conquer the natural environment or violate the laws of nature. Western civilization, however, advocates the separation of man and nature, emphasizes the adversarial relationship between man and nature. People in the West believe that man can conquer nature and the law of jungle "survival of the fittest" should be observed (Gu, 2007). The different ideas and understandings of eastern and Western civilizations have been permeated in their respective cultures and passed down from generation to generation.

## *2.4 Pursuing Harmony and Peace*

Harmony and peace are a core value in traditional Chinese culture as well as important cultural genes of Chinese civilization. For thousands of years, the idea of pursuing harmony and peace has been deeply ingrained in Chinese people's hearts. Chinese people are expected to establish a harmonious and peaceful relationship in all respects, including individuals, family, society, nation and country. In the course of thousands of years of civilization evolution, the Chinese culture has developed the cultural value of seeking harmony and peace by embracing all different ideas. In spite of social and historical vicissitudes, peace and unity of China have always been upheld as the mainstream of the

historical development of Chinese civilization since the realization of national unification in the Qin Dynasty.

In history, China has never invaded or occupied any country. Especially when it was strong, China remained a peace-loving country that kept on good terms with all its neighboring countries by the tributary system, one of the main patterns reflecting the sino-foreign relations in ancient China. For example, between 1405 and 1433 in the Ming Dynasty, when China was already the world leader in shipbuilding industry and nautical technology, the Ming government sent navigator Zheng He to sail seven times to the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans and his expeditions visited more than 30 Asian and African countries and regions. Except promoting trade and cultural exchanges between China and these countries and regions, not a single Chinese soldier has occupied an inch of land of these countries (Kissinger, 2011). About 200 years later, however, when some Western countries like Spain emerged as maritime powers, they exercised maritime hegemony everywhere and carried out their colonial expansion worldwide.

### *2.5 Seeking Common Ground While Reserving Differences*

Seeking common ground while respecting differences is the most prominent cultural proposition of Confucianism in Chinese civilization. According to Confucianism, the idea of seeking common ground while reserving differences refers to finding something in common and keeping the differences between two parties in ideological exchanges and cultural engagement (Chen, 2006). Simply put, we should not only seek the commonalities of the two sides to achieve harmony and unity, but also maintain each other's individuality and show the diversity. Only in this way can we promote exchanges, mutual learning and common development among different civilizations. As Chinese President Xi Jinping said, "There are over 200 countries and regions in the world, over 2,500 ethnic groups and multiple religions. If there is only one way of life, only one language, only one music, only one dress, it is inconceivable (Qi, 2019)." In its interactions with other civilizations, the Chinese civilization has followed the principles of seeking common ground while reserving differences and co-existing in harmony. It has developed and enriched itself with an open mind and inclusiveness, which made the time-honored Chinese culture become extensive and profound. Both Buddhism introduced from India in the Eastern Han Dynasty and Marxism introduced from Europe in modern times have become an integral part of Chinese civilization. Today, the Chinese wisdom of seeking common ground while respecting differences has evolved into one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China's basic foreign policy, which is widely recognized by the international community.

### *2.6 Putting Virtue First*

No man can stand without virtue, and no country can prosper without virtue. The rule of virtue is a major characteristic of Chinese civilization. Every individual in Chinese society is expected to have a virtue, which is a realization of the people-oriented doctrine they believe in. The rule of virtue has always been a fine tradition in state governance in China. Chinese society is governed by the social elites, who are the spokesmen of the people selected by the government through the imperial examination system. The selection of talents is based on both virtue and capability, of which virtue comes first in selecting talents in Chinese society since ancient times. The Chinese believe that only a man of high virtue can win the trust and support of the public, so that a man of high virtue can achieve good governance, while a man of no virtue will suffer from the bad governance. The tradition of putting virtue first began in the Western Zhou Dynasty, when the statesman Duke of Zhou made the system of rituals and music, the earliest political system in China. Since then, the rule of virtue coexisted with various religions in Chinese society, but religion never dominated the society and became the way of governing the state. China has long been a secular society (Lou, 2016). When it comes to self-cultivation and governance, the Chinese believe in the role of virtue and attach more importance to self-cultivation and self-discipline rather than count on the blessing of the gods. Today, China, as a land of ceremony and propriety, still adopts a governance model of combining rule by law with rule by virtue.

### *2.7 Embracing Kindness and Benevolence*

The Chinese civilization has endowed the Chinese nation with precious qualities such as treating others with kindness and benevolence. The cradle of Chinese civilization gave birth to many great philosophical ideas and prominent thinkers. Among them, Confucianism, represented by Confucius (551–479 BC), has become the mainstream of traditional Chinese culture and exerted a huge influence on Chinese society for thousands of years. In particular, the Confucius' idea that one should "not do to others what you do not want done to yourself" was widely accepted and became the dominant norm for maintaining interpersonal relationships in Chinese society. Confucianism advocates the five virtues, namely, "benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and trust", of which "benevolence" enjoys the first priority (Chen, 2006). According to the Confucian view, the benevolent loves others, in other words, a kind-hearted person will always put himself in the shoes of others, and he will not impose what he does not want on others. This kind of kindness and benevolence is altruism in nature, and is the kindest human love. The concept of kindness and benevolence is also available in Western civilization. The Bible says, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you", which reflects the Christian idea of loving others as yourself. However, there are fundamental differences

between Chinese civilization and Western civilization in that the kindness and benevolence of Chinese civilization emphasizes altruism, while that of Western civilization focuses on egoism.

### 2.8 Isomorphism Between Home and Country`

For the Chinese, the connection between home and country is inalienable. A home is the smallest country, and a country is the largest home. The concept of "country" in China refers not only to a specific region representing a political unit, but also to a community with a shared future that is closely linked with the home and the country. This special interpretation of the concept of "country" stands for the Chinese people's unique psychological perception of the correlation between "country" and "home" (Ge, 2020). In traditional Chinese culture, the country is organized in the way of a family or a clan, and the family and the country have the same organizational structure, which is highlighted by the patriarchal system. The patriarchal system based on the kinship of the patriarchal clan is a social system that adapts to the traditional agricultural Chinese society with low productivity. The further expansion of the family patriarchal system to the national level has formed the structural correspondence between home and country, so home and country are bonded with each other in Chinese culture. Chinese people's profound affection for their country is also related to the great misfortunes and historical sufferings that the Chinese nation went through. Particularly, the humiliations that the Chinese people have suffered from in modern times and their collective memory of the country's disintegration made them more deeply aware of the importance of the relationship between home and country, and more clearly conscious of the fundamental truth that one has no home without country (Zhang, 2017).

The Concept of "home and country as one" in Chinese civilization is often expressed as "When a disaster strikes in one location, help comes from all quarters". In 2008, the 7.8-magnitude Wenchuan earthquake claimed 80,000 lives, leaving tens of thousands of people homeless, and causing extremely heavy losses. However, with the great help from all over the country, the disaster area was quickly restored and rebuilt in just three years. In the same vein, in early 2020, when unexpected COVID-19 epidemic broke out in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province in Central China, infection cases and the death toll increased sharply every day and the situation was rather severe. To save people's lives, led by the CPC Central Committee, the whole country quickly responded to the critical situation, sending the best medical rescue teams to Hubei. Through the great efforts of thousands of brave health workers, who risked their lives to fight the virus, eventually the people of Wuhan weathered through the difficult times and the epidemic has been put under control in China.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

The eight characteristics of Chinese civilization mentioned above are not just reflected in the traditional Chinese culture and society, but also inform China's modern social life and all aspects of the state governance, such as "a people-centered philosophy of development", "Xi Jinping ecological civilization thought", "the new development philosophy", "the initiative of building a human community with a shared future", to name only a few. All these Chinese wisdoms, which are rooted in the unique Chinese civilization, are actually the underlying cause that China rises up rapidly in recent decades. What's more, based on its heritage, Chinese civilization always keeps open and inclusive to take in all other civilizations' advanced achievements and advance with the times (Wang, 2019), so it can remain resilient and vibrant forever, and provides a great driving force for the sustainable development of the Chinese nation. Different civilizations are the foundation for the social development of different countries and nations, which means that every country in the world is destined to follow a different path of development. The inherent characteristics of the Chinese civilization also determine that China will follow the Chinese road, a path of development suited to the Chinese national conditions.

In brief, China has made great contributions to the development and progress of human society in history, such as papermaking, gunpowder, printing, compass, as well as Chinese astronomical knowledge, calendar, philosophy and so on. Today, a rising China is working hard to promote world peace and development. So we have every reason to believe that China will continue to contribute more to a better world tomorrow.

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