

The Relevance of “Red Culture” in Contemporary China

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Abstract

This paper investigates “red culture” in three ways—its sources, representations, and relevance in the present era. It looks into the contexts for the emergence and evolution of “red culture” in the journey of democratic revolution, socialist revolution and development, and reform and opening-up in China. “Red culture” consists of “red legacies” and “red spirit” that have developed over the course of China’s revolution, construction, and reform under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to achieve national independence, economic growth, cultural prosperity, and national rejuvenation. It is represented by historical sites and a constellation of spirit that is the CPC’s source of strength. “Red culture” helps the Chinese people raise awareness of protection and promotion of fine traditional Chinese culture while guarding against cultural imperialism in a globalized world. It also gives momentum for building a stronger cultural confidence and developing a rich, prosperous socialist culture with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords

“Red Culture”, Socialist Culture, Cultural Confidence, Fine Traditional Chinese Culture

1. Introduction

With a history of more than 5000 years, China has developed extensive and profound fine traditional culture. This culture is integral and essential to the survival and revival of the Chinese nation. It also plays a key role in enhancing national confidence, cultural confidence, and cultural soft power. “Red culture” refers to sinified Marxism-oriented “red legacies” and “red spirit” that have developed over the course of the China’s revolution, construction, and reform under the Communist Party of China’s leadership to achieve national independence, eco-

conomic development and prosperity. It also represents China's revolutionary spirit and socialist value system that are derived from fine traditional Chinese culture. "Red culture" boasts cultural richness and diversity.

"Red culture" has united and mobilized Chinese people in the journey of China's revolution, construction, and reform. It is national, revolutionary, and people-oriented. The Communist Party of China (CPC) draws on China's fine traditional culture, keeps it alive and strong while adapting its norms, vision and values to changing historical context. The founding of the CPC and the People's Republic of China prompted big transformations in modern times, offering political and social basis for the emergence of "red culture". "Red culture" has physical and spiritual dimensions. Physical dimension concerns red sites of historical significance to the CPC which witness contributions by Chinese communists to China's revolution, construction, and reform. Spiritual dimension deals with all the struggles, sacrifices and efforts made by the CPC and by the Chinese people under the Party's leadership. It also involves the principle of seeking truth from facts, and the Party's fundamental purpose of wholeheartedly serving the people.

This paper examines the relationship between "red culture" and fine traditional Chinese culture, and how the former promotes the latter's evolution and growth in new and creative ways. The spiritual bondness and motivation provided by "red culture" is inspiring the Chinese people to push ahead the cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era.

2. Major Elements of "Red Culture"

"Red culture" has been widely studied. Some researchers explore the significance of "red culture" in the present era (Li et al., 2008; Peng & Jiang, 2021), while others focus on how "red culture" helps to foster core socialist values (Yang, 2010; He et al., 2013). This paper contributes to the existing literature by not merely recognizing that "red culture" plays a vital role in promoting core socialist values, but also by finding that "red culture" as part of a national spirit has inspired generations of Chinese people in the journey of revolution, construction, and reform, and is still motivating them to forge ahead on the path of building socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era.

2.1. Red as a Political Symbol

Red signifies happiness, prosperity, and good luck in China. It also represents a political symbol. Political connotations of red are detailed in *Cihai*, a semi-encyclopedia dictionary. Red symbolizes revolution, communism, and firm belief. It is related to left politics, the CPC, and the period of the new democratic revolution (Cihai Compilation Committee, 1979: p. 1686). Clearly, red is used as a political symbol. It represents revolution and left wing in politics. Red was associated with communism when Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky organized and led the red army during the Russian Revolution in 1917. After that, as communism spread to other parts of the world, red was widely used as a symbol

of red regime and/or red revolutionary base. The Russian Revolution of 1917, which replaced the Russian Empire with the Soviet Union, brought Marxism-Leninism to China. The Chinese people and the Chinese nation then were undergoing a great awakening. Meanwhile, Marxism-Leninism was becoming closely integrated with the Chinese workers' movement, giving birth to the CPC in 1921. The Chinese Soviet Republic founded by the CPC was called red regime. The CPC-led revolutionary army was called the Red Army and revolutionary base area was called the red Soviet Area. At that time, revolutionary areas by the CPC were called red areas while anti-revolutionary areas ruled by Chiang Kai-Shek were seen as white regions. The colors red and white signaled opposition between the CPC and the Kuomintang.

Red has long been associated with the CPC and China. The red color of China's national flag symbolizes revolution. The red flag and red star have been known as the iconic communist and socialist symbols. Red appeared in the title of literature about China's revolution. *The Red Crag* (Hongyan) focused on how the CPC led national united front against Japanese aggression. Edgar Snow, an American journalist, first introduced red China to the world with a bestseller titled *Red Star over China*. He shared with the world stories about the CPC, the Red Army, and China's war against Japanese aggression. Red was given political connotation and revolutionary meaning.

2.2. Physical Dimension of "Red Culture"

"Red culture" lies in historical sites with a revolutionary legacy. These historical places are linked to the revolution, construction and reform led by the CPC, memorial hall of revolutionary martyrs, revolutionary memorial museum, and revolutionary base area, to name just a few. Those revolutionary heritages witness armed struggles and major events in the history of modern China, which trigger the collective memory of the revolution, construction, and reform.

Historical sites that saw revolutionary wars and other events encourage people to march forward on the road to socialism with Chinese characteristics. Some places witnessed, for example, Autumn Harvest Uprising, Sanwan Reorganization, and the Great Victory at Pingxingguan. Others hosted important meetings by the CPC over issues of party building, army administration, the War of Liberation, and the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. The site of the first CPC National Congress is among the most significant historical places, because the first National Congress of the CPC proclaimed the founding of the CPC in Shanghai while adopting the Party's name and guiding principles. The pioneering communists in China established the CPC and developed the great founding spirit of the CPC, for example, fighting bravely without fear of sacrifice, and remaining loyal to the Party and faithful to the people.

Equally important is the site of the Zunyi Meeting, as this conference corrected in 1935 during the long march the left-leaning errors in military and organizational affairs and established Comrade Mao Zedong as the leader of the

CPC Central Committee and the Red Army. President Xi Jinping rightly noted that “The Party, the Red Army and China’s revolution were saved at the most perilous moment” (Xinhua, 2021). Zunyi Meeting’s distinct features still have significant implications today.

Other two major meetings played a vital role in the history of the CPC. The site of 87 Conference is of historical importance, because the CPC Central Committee held on August 7, 1927 an emergency meeting in Hankou, Hubei province, making the new policy of agrarian revolution and mass uprisings against the Kuomintang. In December of 1929, Mao Zedong held the Ninth Party Congress of the 4th Corps of the Red Army at Gutian. Resolutions adopted at this meeting played a key role in the development of the CPC and the Red Army. Gutian Meeting is significant in that it highlighted the Party’s ideological work and the political loyalty of the army. The Spirit of Gutian Meeting should be carried out in the new era by maintaining the political integrity and loyalty of the people’s army.

Revolutionary spirit should be promoted in the new era. The Founding Spirit of the CPC, the Spirit of the Zunyi Meeting and Gutian Meeting are major components of “red culture” during the revolutionary struggle led by the CPC.

Former residences of late leaders of the CPC also make good red legacies. The former residences of late Chinese leaders Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping, for example, offer a picture of how they are deeply committed to communism and well-being of the Chinese people.

Museums in memory of China’s revolution are an integral part of “red culture”. There is a long list of those museums, such as September 18 Incident History Museum, Liaoshen Battle Memorial Hall, the Museum of the War of Chinese People’s Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Memorial Hall of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea, and the Military Museum of Chinese People’s Revolution.

These museums have a large collection of documents and revolutionary relics, which remind us of the hardships revolutionaries have overcome and the strong leadership of the CPC. These resources demonstrate the high ideal and firm belief in communism shared by the pioneering members of the CPC and other Chinese people.

2.3. Spiritual Dimension of “Red Culture”

Generations of the CPC members have formed a constellation of spirit that is a major ingredient of “red culture”. They, inspired by “red culture”, have the indomitable spirit of dedication, sacrifice, and self-reliance. They also uphold the principle of seeking truth from facts and striving for the well-being of the people.

The principle of seeking truth from facts represents the tenet of Marxism. It is among the most significant spirit of the CPC, and the basic way of thinking for the CPC. Members as well as cadres of the CPC have insisted on seeking truth from facts and worked hard for the interests of the Chinese people. Mao Zedong

first wrote down the principle of seeking truth from facts in Yan'an in the late 1930s (Li, 2015). Chairman Mao referred to this principle as seeking-truth-from-facts work style. He commended the work style of CPC cadres: hard work and plain living, honesty and righteousness in words and deeds, seeking truth from facts through close contact with the masses (Li, 2015). As Mao (1941: p. 361) put it, "seeking truth from facts and closely combining theory with practice is the basic attitude of a Party member with a strong Party spirit". This spirit of the CPC has a lasting influence on CPC members.

The principle of seeking truth from facts was elaborated in a key speech by Deng Xiaoping (1978), chief architect of China's reform and opening-up. The reform and opening-up initiated by Deng Xiaoping applied the principle of seeking truth from facts by integrating the universal truth of Marxism with China's reality. The 1970s saw truth-from-facts principle elevated from CPC cadre's work style to the principle of the reform and opening-up as well as the Chinese spirit. In fact, truth-from-facts has become a basic tenet of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Deng Xiaoping adapted Marxism to changing conditions or new facts. He launched reform and opening-up, one major landmark in China's modern history. Great achievements have been made by this policy. China has made big strides on its march to growing rich and strong. It has developed socialist democracy and raised cultural soft power. Poverty has been eliminated and people's well-being has been enhanced. History proves that truth-from-facts should be upheld and applied to new context.

President Xi Jinping (2019) also stressed the significance of seeking truth from facts. The principle of seeking truth from facts is a tenet for the CPC, enabling the Party to lead the Chinese people in building China into a strong and prosperous country. Truth-from-facts ensures the success of reform and opening-up. The new era calls for deeper-level reform and higher-level opening-up. The centrality of truth from facts means conducting thorough research, engaging with the masses, and making informed decision.

Truth-from-facts is an inspiring principle for Chinese Communists, cadres in particular. President Xi Jinping upheld this principle by visiting villages, going deep into towns, and reaching into counties and cities. He embraced the work style and Party spirit of seeking truth from facts by going into the front lines and obtaining first-hand details (China Radio International, 2019). His footsteps reach communities, enterprises, villages, and institutions across China. This spirit of seeking truth from facts can help the rejuvenation of the CPC and the Chinese nation.

One abiding mission of the CPC is to serve the people wholeheartedly. The CPC has always put the people first. The Chinese government is of the people, by the people, for the people. Over the past hundred years, the CPC has always served the people wholeheartedly. It has spared no effort in fulfilling this commitment in good times or bad.

When COVID-19 surged, the CPC and the Chinese government put people's lives before all else by organizing massive testing and inoculation, making every

effort to save lives of those infected with Covid. The CPC and the people work hard together with solidarity and unity. They are bonded by deep devotion of the CPC in the arduous struggle for independence and prosperity. Thanks to the CPC's commitment, the people enhance faith in the Party's leadership.

The integrity and hardworking spirit of model CPC members should be highlighted in the new era. Jiao Yulu, an icon of hard work, plain living, and moral integrity, devoted his life to local development. He is always the first to bear hardships and the last to enjoy comforts. Jiao Yulu is a role model of integrity for CPC members and the Chinese people. His exemplary dedication has inspired generations of CPC members and the Chinese people.

“Red culture” consists of physical and spiritual dimensions. Physically, it is represented by revolutionary heritages, such as historic sites and memorial parks. Spiritually, it is concerned with spiritual legacy of the CPC members and other Chinese people—unity, solidarity, and industriousness. This national spirit works as a strong force from past to present.

3. Sources of “Red Culture”

“Red culture” draws from fine traditional Chinese culture and sinified Marxism. It is integrated with traditional Chinese culture. It also derives from Mao Zedong Thought and the system of theories of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Fine traditional Chinese culture gives rise to “red culture”, while sinified Marxism offers a new context for “red culture” to develop.

“Red culture” preserves and promotes fine traditional Chinese culture. Deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, “red culture” is created and promoted by the CPC in the long process of revolution, development and reform.

The CPC's fundamental purpose of wholeheartedly serving the people originated from traditional Chinese culture. “People-oriented” thought is a basic idea in the long history of Chinese culture. According to *Shangshu* (the Book of History), “People are the cornerstone of a country and ensure its peace and stability” (Zeng, 2012: p. 20). People are the foundation of a country, guaranteeing its peace and stability. “People-oriented” thought is a key component of excellent Chinese political culture. It views people as the orientation in Chinese political tradition. It has much in common with socialist democracy in China. The CPC prioritizes people's interest and public opinion. Socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics innovatively integrates basic tenets of Marxism with traditional Chinese “people-oriented” thought.

Such thought is promulgated by great ancient Chinese philosophers. As Laozi, a philosopher best known for Taoism, put it, “the Sage has no fixed mind: he takes the people's mind as his mind” (Laozi, n.d./2008: p. 103). Confucius argued that ruler should be “frugal in expenditures and sparing of others”, and that they should “employ the common people only at proper times” (Confucius, n.d./2007: p. 16). Confucius said the gentleman trains himself in order to give ease to others, and to all men and women (Confucius, n.d./2007: p. 103). He advocated giving benefits to people and “going by what benefits the people” (Confucius,

n.d./2007: p. 141). His idea was echoed by Mencius, who stressed the importance of the people. Mencius said, “The people are of greatest importance, the altars of the soil and grain are next, and the ruler is of least importance” (Mencius, n.d./2009: p. 159). Xunzi, too, valued the significance of the people. He said, “The lord is the boat. The common people are the water. The water can support the boat. The water can also overturn the boat” (Xunzi, n.d./2014: p. 70). These influential ancient Chinese philosophers highlighted the importance of the people, which is part of China’s traditional political culture.

The CPC has raised “people-oriented” thought to people-oriented development philosophy by safeguarding the people’s rights and improving the well-being of the people. The people-centered approach ensures people’s support for the CPC in China’s revolution and reform.

In addition to fine traditional Chinese culture, “red culture” also develops from sinified Marxism. Karl Marx recognized the exploitation of the working class by the capitalists in Western Europe and argued that communist party would lead revolutionary struggle in cities. He believed that capitalism would destroy itself as it generated conditions in which the working class would revolt against capitalists (Baraka, 1983). Vladimir Lenin applied Marxism to the era of imperialism in tsarist Russia. He overthrew the old regime and established the Soviet Union by staging proletarian revolution. The victory of the October Revolution in 1917 proved the vitality and adaptability of Marxism. At that time, China and Russia shared many commonalities, economic backwardness for example. Early members of the CPC advocated Marxism and learned from Russian revolution, promoting the emergence of “red culture”.

Marxism was taken as dominant ideology during the new democratic revolution, when the Chinese nation opposed feudalism, imperialism, and bureaucrat-capitalism, and sought national independence and the people’s liberation. The Opium War of 1840 plunged China into a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society, because Western powers invaded China and corrupt feudal rulers did not fight back. All heroic struggles failed to save the Chinese nation. Russia’s October Revolution of 1917 brought to China Marxism-Leninism. The May 4th Movement of 1919 spurred the spread of Marxism throughout the country. Early Chinese Marxists—most of them core CPC members later—boosted the integration of Marxism-Leninism with Chinese workers’ movement, giving rise to the birth of the CPC. Mao Zedong noted that the Chinese people began active struggle after they accept Marxism as the guiding conviction (Mao, 1942/1991: p. 1205). The CPC actively adapted Marxist theory to China’s changing reality. This practice led to the emergence and rise of “red culture”.

4. Key Role of “Red Culture” in Contemporary China

“Red culture” is still highly valued in contemporary China. It helps the Chinese people raise awareness of protection and promotion of fine traditional Chinese culture while guarding against cultural imperialism in a globalized world. “Red culture” helps Chinese people raise their intellectual, political, and moral stan-

dards, while boosting their appreciation of fine traditional culture. It highlights the guiding role of patriotism, collectivism, and socialism. Fine Chinese culture includes family virtues, personal integrity, and sense of dedication and responsibility. These virtues should be strengthened in contemporary China.

“Red culture” is, by nature, socialist culture with Chinese characteristics. It is derived from China’s fine traditional culture with a history of over 5000 years. “Red culture”, closely linked with the CPC, has developed from the revolutionary and advanced socialist culture that was nurtured over the course of the CPC-led revolution, construction, and reform. It is people-oriented, conducive to modernization and national rejuvenation. This culture aims to serve the people and socialism with Chinese characteristics.

“Red culture” is a major source of core socialist values. It contributes to contemporary Chinese spirit and the shared values of the Chinese people. That culture serves as a bridge connecting fine traditional culture and socialist culture with Chinese characteristics for a new era. It evolves with the times while maintaining its appeal. As president [Xi Jinping \(2017\)](#) noted, “Since its founding, the Communist Party of China has actively guided and promoted China’s advanced culture while keeping China’s fine traditional culture alive and strong.” Fine traditional culture should be promoted in response to the call of the present era.

The increasing globalization, spurred by neo-liberalism, led to world division of labor. China, as workshop of the world, is a key outsourced producer and has contributed much of the value of goods and services in world market. That country, however, shares little of the added value and sits at lower link of the global value chains. This new trend of globalization of the capital-labor relation signifies the exploitation of laborers in the developing world by capitalists in developed countries like US and Japan. This form of exploitation divides the world into oppressed and oppressor nations, which, Lenin noted, is the essence of imperialism ([Lenin, 1934](#)). Besides economic aspect of globalization, more attention should be given to cultural domain.

Globalization has brought from the West to China various kinds of intellectual currents and cultural products. Some of these imports are beneficial to China while others pose a big threat to fine traditional Chinese culture and the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Some traditional Chinese cultural values are being undermined if not replaced by Western cultural values. For example, increasing materialism and consumerism from Western consumer culture eroded the principle of hard work and plain living as ingredient of “red culture”.

The West-led globalization may lead to cultural imperialism. The U.S., for instance, has been seeking to incorporate other nations into America-led global capitalism to ensure its global dominance. Imperialism is characterized by expansionism. U.S. cultural imperialism, for instance, is demonstrated in American products, such as Hollywood movies, Disney comics, large publishing houses, and world famous brands like Apple and Microsoft. These goods threaten or even destroy local, traditional cultures. Excessive consumerism, possessive individualism, and American way of life have found their way into contemporary

China. Schiller argued that the U.S. has established a technological empire helpful to U.S. economic and political dominance in the world. In terms of culture and ideology, the U.S. media transmitted “the beliefs and perspectives that create and reinforce their audiences’ attachments to the way things are in the system overall” (Schiller, 1976: p. 30). Cultural imperialism, as Said defined, involved cultural domination of one country over another, and cultural expansion of one country into cultural development of another country (Said, 1993). It is demonstrated in symbols, consumer preferences, and value systems, among others. What the U.S. did and is doing represents one type of cultural imperialism.

Socialist culture, represented by “red culture”, is the lifeblood of the Chinese nation. It shields China from the aggression of eurocentric cultural imperialism. Socialist culture should be promoted to enhance China’s cultural soft power, as it plays a guiding role in boosting development and educating the people. We must have full confidence in our culture, and develop a rich, prosperous socialist culture with Chinese characteristics. A strong and thriving socialist culture is indispensable to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

China’s socialist culture is guided by Marxism rather than liberalism. It builds on traditional Chinese culture and integrates basic principles of Marxism with the realities and conditions of China in the present era.

“Red culture” evolves with the times in response to the calls of the present era. It originated in anti-imperialism, and developed in socialist revolution, construction, and reform under the leadership of the CPC. National independence and liberation of China came after years of fighting brutal Japanese aggression and occupation and Kuomintang reactionaries. Cadres of the CPC embrace “red culture”, raise their intellectual and moral standards, and see themselves as servants of the people. “Red culture” helps the people uphold right values and moral integrity. Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, China has witnessed profound improvements in social, cultural, economic, and political change. Aggression of Western cultures threatens socialist culture in China. We must resist the corrosive influence of eurocentric culture, Western notion of liberal democracy, for example.

The West-led globalization is seeking to universalize western form of democracy. China has long adopted socialist democracy, which is largely different from its western counterpart. China’s socialist democracy is a whole-process people’s democracy, the most effective and most genuine, with full participation and practices. It protects the fundamental interests and rights of the people. President Xi Jinping said that “the very purpose of developing socialist democracy is to give full expression of the will of the people, ... provide systemic and institutional guarantees to ensure the people run the country” (Xi, 2017). China’s socialist democracy is people-centered. It is rooted in China’s history and culture, and grows out of the “red legacy” of the CPC’s democratic practices since its founding in 1921.

“Red culture” ensures the nature of the CPC and helps the Party to fulfill its

ultimate purpose. China's socialist democracy is produced by the integration of history, theory, and practice in China. Western-style democracy has been used by capitalists and imperialists to push their neoliberal agenda. It is not suited to China's national conditions and cultural tradition. Each country can have its own path of development, as there is no one-size-fits-all democratic model. President [Xi Jinping \(2017\)](#) pointed out that "no one political system should be regarded as the only choice; and we should not just mechanically copy the political systems of other countries." The political systems of other countries are widely believed to be veiled references to Western-style democracy. Western political system will never be copied in China.

In an increasingly globalized world, "red culture" shields fine traditional Chinese culture from Western cultural imperialism. It has developed and transformed traditional Chinese culture, building stronger confidence in socialist culture. "Red culture" has enabled past achievements, and is a rich spiritual source of strength for China's lasting development.

5. Conclusion

"Red culture" gives strong spiritual power to the Chinese nation and the Chinese people in the strife of revolution, construction, and reform under the leadership of the CPC. It helps the Chinese people to develop an accurate understanding of China's history and culture. "Red culture" consolidates the unity of fine traditional Chinese culture and socialist culture with Chinese characteristics. This culture plays a guiding role in boosting cultural confidence, enhancing national identification, and defeating historical nihilism. "Red culture" gives us inexhaustible resources in the fight against cultural imperialism disguised as globalization. It is embraced and developed by China's top leaders—from Chairman Mao Zedong to President Xi Jinping—who have contributed to the evolution of "red culture". In the present era, "red culture" is still a powerful force, enabling the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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