

Cultural Heritage and the Curse of History

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Introduction

Around the globe, traditional languages, old ways of building structures, ancient traditions and customs, and ways of living are being lost as cultures adapt to or adopt fully Western lifestyles. Why is this happening? Is the conservation of these traditional ways important? In this paper, we argue that such preservation is vital, first of all because it offers a way of living in greater harmony with our environment. But even more critically, a return to these older ways will resolve what I call here a “psychological dissonance”, a profound problem afflicting societies around the globe. The preservation — really, resuscitation — of cultural heritage is vital to creating a healthy, functioning society.

In this study, I will use the example of Chinese cultural heritage in Taiwan, but the model presented can be considered applicable almost universally. I have chosen the Taiwan example because of my several year’s experience there as a professor of design and as a designer involved in the preservation of traditional Chinese craft traditions. Taiwan, along with Hong Kong and Singapore — and now, of course, Shanghai and other Mainland cities — is one of the most urbanized and industrialized Chinese societies.

Seeking Other Cultures

A visitor from a technologically advanced Western culture travels to a distant Asian land seeking something that is missing in his own culture. Perhaps he feels it is an entirely new culture that he is seeking, something exotic, or simply an escape from the rigid, mechanized reality of his Western existence.

This is a very old quest, in fact. Some two millennia ago, the Roman writer Pliny the Younger wrote with fondness of country living (his ancestral home was the rural area of Lake Como, Italy), far away from what he saw as the artificial duties and politics of the city of Rome. In a letter to a friend, he stated:

Are you reading, fishing, or hunting or doing all three? You can do all together on the shores of Como... I can't say I begrudge you your pleasures; I am only vexed at being denied them myself, for I hanker after them as a sick man does for wine, baths, and cool springs. I wonder if I shall ever be able to shake off these constricting fetters if I am not allowed to undo them, and I doubt if I ever shall. New business piles up on the old before the old is finished, and, as more and more links are added to the chain, I see my work stretching out farther and farther every day (Radice 1963, p.65).

Even in ancient times, there was the desire to escape, to return to an existence more in harmony with a traditional way of living, a kind of “natural culture”. In China, many early Taoist adepts sought escape in the distant mountains, where they could reflect with a purity of spirit not possible in the company of others.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, young British writers and painters in Britain were in the habit of going and spend time in Italy, where they believed that in walking amidst the ruins of the ancient Roman empire, some kind of connection to an old and valued culture could be found. For Westerners, traveling and living abroad meant a return to the roots of human existence and experience, unadulterated by formal modern rules and Western urbanism and technology.

Westerner travelers, then, have long sought a certain kind of cultural experience through life in a foreign place. That experience is a quest for the “authentic”, the emotional quality that Westerners feel is missing in their own society, which they see as devoid of a genuine cultural heritage. They view their own society as detached from nature, as overly developed and lonely. Western travelers seek the *real*: real food, real buildings, real people. They desire a connection with a cultural heritage that they believe their own society has lost in its rush to modernity. The scholar and social critic George Steiner notes how societies become detached from their history, their heritage, and by extension, from the authentic:

At some point in more or less remote times things were better, almost golden. A deep concordance lay between man and the natural setting... Somewhere a wrong turn was taken in that “dark and sacred wood,” after which man has had to labor, socially, psychologically, against the natural grain of being (Steiner 1971, p.4).

Steiner argues that in modern societies this detachment results in a “moral obtuseness”, and violence (Steiner 1971, p.4). He comments that modern people in Western societies live in what he labels a “post-culture” — a society without the authentic, without cultural heritage of any kind. In discussing Western Europe, Steiner says that in modern times one

witnesses “the mechanized, often antiseptic landscape of contemporary Europe... new facades... a curious emptiness” (Steiner 1971, 59). Much the same could be said of contemporary Chinese locales such as Taiwan and Singapore. They are very new, very modern, and lack much that would define them as distinctly “Chinese” in a profound cultural and historical sense for an outside visitor.

But in earlier times, in seeking out some kind of genuineness, eighteenth and nineteenth-century Western Europeans and Americans were entranced by Far Eastern cultures. They brought back tea, Chinese food, and Chinese aesthetics in the form of *chinoiserie*. In going to the East, these Westerners believed that the Chinese cultural heritage was still strong, and held important traditional values and ideas disappearing the industrialized parts of the world back home.

The Suicide of Chinese Culture

But even as this was happening, within Asia itself, there were moves away from its own cultural heritage. In Japan, the nineteenth-century saw the rapid adoption of Western technologies and ways of living. Initially, Japan had been forced to open up to Westerners — Dutch, Portuguese, British, and Americans — but later, the country embraced what it saw as the tools to empower itself. After World War II, the Japanese further embraced Westernization, believing that their traditional culture had contributed to their defeat. In doing so, Japan once again abandoned many of its traditional ways, and a visitor to Japan nowadays encounters a country even more industrialized than many of its Western counterparts.

For the Chinese, the process has been more complex. China never suffered a complete defeat at the hand of Western powers, but it did indeed suffer terribly at the hands of the British and other colonial and neo-colonial intruders. Similarly to Japan, such intrusions led to a questioning of the validity and appropriateness of its own culture and way of life on the part of the government and the people. The basic question could be formulated as: “If our culture heritage is so strong, and our civilization of such profundity, how was it that the foreign barbarian so easily humiliated us?” Again, the answer was, in part, to adopt the ways of the enemy.

The historian Charlotte Furth discusses in her study of the Western-trained Chinese scientist Ting Wen-chiang the role of the “new culture movement” in China, which flourished between 1915 and 1923 (Furth 1970, p.5). This movement promoted the adoption of Western ideas of liberalism and science. Furth notes that this movement had been preceded, in fact, by a “belief that fundamental cultural change was a prerequisite for successful modernization and that the models should come from the West” (Furth 1970, p.5). Thus, this embrace of something alien to Chinese cultural heritage was

considered quite consciously and openly. And the move to discard many aspects of traditional Chinese culture was promoted by the Chinese themselves.

Those making the arguments were part of a minority, small groups of intellectuals and modernists. Moreover, some might argue that even nowadays Chinese culture is still very strong. But what has actually happened is a kind of “suicide” of many traditional Chinese ways. At various periods in recent history, and in various places, there has been a “killing off” of cultural icons and ways of life. In a place like Hong Kong, virtually all the traditional dwellings have been replaced by modern structures — structures indistinguishable from the towers in cities elsewhere in the world. A citizen of Hong Kong might say that is the result of years of British colonization. But in Taiwan, we see the same phenomenon, and Taiwan was never colonized by a Western power (although it was occupied by the Japanese, who did build modern railways and other infrastructure). In the post-war era, Taiwan went through an enormous, self-inflicted “erasure” of its traditional buildings and ways of life. Traditional houses were torn down to build modern skyscrapers. Old-style Chinese stores were replaced by the ubiquitous “7-11” convenience stores. The old fortress-style gates around the city of Taipei were almost all demolished to make way for elevated highways and other structures.

Architectural Heritage and Internal Heritage

Naturally, one could argue that those changes are external, mere reconfigurations of the architecture. Moreover, it might be said that such changes were necessary, to provide people with better living conditions. That latter issue will be addressed later in this paper. As for the reconfiguration of architecture, what that really means is a complete reshaping of the way people live and work — fundamentals of cultural heritage in its truest sense. The traditional Chinese house in Taiwan followed the old U-shaped model, with a central living area, two “wings” on either side, and a front courtyard. This kind of house was designed for an extended family, a key component of traditional Confucian living. Modern living in Taiwan means apartment buildings, with small isolated quarters, the kitchen no longer central to the family space, and an overall design for much smaller, one-generation families. Of course, some Taiwanese have their elders living nearby, but by and large, the new model is the Western one of the young couple and their children living in an isolated urban space.

Urbanization in both Taiwan and the Mainland has meant the erosion of cultural heritage, both architecturally and in terms of traditions and customs. Large areas in the neighborhoods of Tien Mu and Shih Lin in Taipei were bulldozed to build not only apartment blocks, but also Western fast-food chains, contemporary clothing outlets, and other trappings of “modern living”. In the downtown, one can sometimes sneak a peak at an old temple, but traditional houses are almost impossible to find. In fact, they have

become museums — literally. Two old-style houses in Taipei — the Lin Gardens in Panchiao and the Lin Antai homestead— are now tourist attractions, not actual homes (Hu 1994a, p.8). In fact, the Lin Antai homestead is not even in its original location; it was moved, brick by brick, when its old location became the target of a major road expansion project some decades back.

Because Taiwan was spared the Cultural Revolution, in some ways it retained some traditions and customs that the Mainland lost. But in fact, some Chinese in Taiwan have viewed the Mainland as a place where at least some aspects of Chinese culture survives in a purer form. Some years ago, a Taiwan soap opera featured a very slick modern Taiwanese businessman torn between his love for a sophisticated woman from Taipei and a lovely country girl from the Mainland. Viewers were asked to vote for how the story would go in subsequent episodes. Overwhelmingly, people wanted the man to end up with the nice Mainland girl.

Attempts at Rediscovering Culture Heritage

Taiwan presents an interesting case, as it manifests the psychological dissonance between a grounding in traditional culture and the reaching towards modernism. The television audience cited above reflects that dissonance, but the problem manifests itself in other ways as well. The dissonance is found in the recent embrace of the past in Taiwan, the attempt to regain some of the cultural heritage and cultural identity that has been lost or was suppressed. For example, the Taiwan language is now widely taught, and many television and radio programs —even commercials — are produced in the Taiwanese dialect. Traditional Chinese clothing has also made a comeback, with *qi pao* dresses (and contemporary adaptations) available at various boutiques in Taipei and other cities:

Fashion designers today in... Taiwan are finding new ways to freely combine modern fashion aesthetics and trends with traditional Chinese [styles]... In modern Taiwan society, men are frequently seen at social occasions wearing the dignified and refined traditional Chinese long gown. Women often wear the *ch'i-p'ao*, a modified form of traditional Ch'ing Dynasty fashion... [Chinese] can enjoy beautiful fashions with traditional features and modern chic (Hu 1994b, pp.8-9).

Clothing is much more than a simple covering of the body. And if one stops and thinks about it, it is rather remarkable that so many Chinese people have for so long worn Western-style clothing. Over a hundred years ago, the Chinese suffered at the hands of the Western powers, particularly the British. But in what might be seen as an acknowledgement of defeat, the Chinese quickly adopted Western styles and fashions. An entire culture rejecting the clothing it had worn for hundreds — even thousands — of

years. If that still does not seem strange, then imagine the reverse: an America taken over by the Chinese, and Western people adopting traditional Chinese forms of dress, abandoning their coats, ties, short skirts, and pants suits.

In re-discovering traditional clothing, the people in Taiwan are trying to reconnect with their cultural heritage. But in this case the clothing may indeed be nothing more than a covering of the body. The *context* in which this clothing was worn has been lost. Even on the television shows in Taiwan that are supposed to be set in the Ming or Qing Dynasty, the costumers often mistakenly garb the actors in styles of the wrong period. The knowledge component of cultural heritage, the vital link to the past, is in danger.

In Taiwan, there are also attempts to at least record the rapidly disappearing architectural heritage. In the early 1990's, a series of books with the English title *Taiwan Rediscovered* was published in Chinese in Taipei. Each volume, filled with detailed illustrations and photographs, records traditional buildings that are still standing in Taipei and its environs (Lai, et al. 1990). But these books have come very late in Taiwan's history, and most of the traditional Chinese architecture on the island was replaced by modern buildings and highways decades ago. The books record the bits and pieces of cultural heritage that are left. In fact, the very appearance of these books, while laudable from a historical and cultural point of view, indicates that traditional ways of building are already receding in popular memory.

In Taiwan, and places like Hong Kong, there have also been attempted syntheses of the traditional and modern, but usually with bizarre or at least unsatisfactory results. In Hong Kong, even some of the most modern skyscrapers are sometimes built in accordance with ancient *feng shui* principles. But an ancient *feng shui* master would most likely be appalled at the very existence of these buildings, with their residents living in complete isolation from the natural environment. The new, monstrous skyscraper known as "Taipei 101" was designed to reflect traditional Chinese iconography and motifs, but on this giant building they seem completely out of scale and out of context.

Chinese literature, art, and music survive, but they fight a constant battle against Western styles and influences. Contemporary Chinese pop is really almost purely Western-style music — just with Chinese lyrics. And it is a defensive battle; it's not as if Western musicians are fighting an onslaught of Chinese music in their own markets.

Culture as a Curse of History

But we are left with the question as to why all this has happened. Why the rejection of traditional cultural heritage? A partial answer has already been provided: when Chinese culture at the end of the Ming Dynasty was overwhelmed by Western nations, the

Chinese viewed their own traditions as having been their fatal weakness. Modernism was embraced. A leadership that was turned to the West is also part of the answer — many of the key figures in the modernization of China were Western in training and orientation: Sun Yat Sen was heavily influenced by Christian thinking; Chiang Kai Shek as a young man studied modern military theory in Japan, and later was a close ally of the U.S. Even Mao Zedong embraced modern methods of warfare, wanted China to industrialize, and compelled the nation to discard many traditional ideas and practices.

Yet, there is a more subtle reason as well. Because in Western countries, too — especially the U.S. — there has been a marked disregard for history, for tradition, for cultural heritage. Many historic districts in American cities were torn down in the 1960's to make room for new downtowns and new highways, just as China is doing now. This urbanization and homogenization is happening all over the globe. Shanghai, Nairobi, and Main Street, U.S.A. are looking more and more alike, a phenomenon that has alarmed some social critics (Rothkopf 2000). The same chain stores and fast food outlets are found in Philadelphia and Beijing, L.A. and Taipei. A traveler must jet to increasingly remote locales to find the “exotic” places whose cultural heritage is still untouched by Western models of industrialization, urbanization, and isolation.

But why is it critical to find an “authentic” experience grounded in a society’s cultural heritage? Indeed, some Chinese argue that Westerners simply want their old “Orientalism” back: an exotic, backward East that can be explored and exploited all over again. Chinese ask, “Why do Westerners want us to be quaint — and weak — again?” At this point, it is less critical what Westerners want or don’t want; it is more important to ask why the Chinese seem to have abandoned the cultural heritage so quickly.

The rush to modernity has resulted in casualties for Chinese culture. An in-depth medical study published by some years ago, entitled *The Psychology of the Chinese People*, speaks of “trends of Chinese personality change” wrought by the “impact of modernization” (Bond 1986, p.152). Key components of Chinese tradition, such as communal and cooperative thinking, are disappearing:

[U]nder the impact of modernization, the Chinese in Taiwan tend to change from social orientation to individual orientation... The change means also means that the process of modernization makes the Chinese become gradually more like people in a modern industrialized society such as the United States, where the individual-orientated type... prevails (Bond 1986, p.153).

A psychological study in Taiwan indicated that those who “lacked a firm identification with traditional values showed heightened rates of stress reaction” (Bond 1986, p.191). A

later study showed higher rates of neurosis for those living in crowded, urban residential areas, as well as increased alcoholism in Chinese cultures where there has been “the adoption of a Western lifestyle and the breakdown of traditional social organization...” (Bond 1986, pp.151 and 192).

Without heritage and tradition, a society loses all meaning, and human experience becomes simply the pragmatic pursuit of financial gain and material possessions. The human mind needs something more than that, and the Chinese culture has historically provided a great deal of the most profound in abstract thought, from ancient Taoist worldviews to Confucian ideals. For an outsider, these aspects of cultural heritage, along with the noble buildings and vistas of old, reflect something genuine, something grounded in the very idea of being human. The Chinese are in the position to be standard-bearers, in a sense.

But the Chinese have preserved their cultural heritage in increasingly superficial forms, if at all. The French social theorist, Jean Baudrillard, dissected this problem and its repercussions in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard describes how societies that pursue a modern, technological identity gradually discard the original elements of their cultural heritage, including their history, systems of belief, and so forth. In place of these authentic aspects of cultural heritage, these societies create representations or copies, much as the Mainland Chinese have build reconstructions of some of their ancient architectural wonders. Baudrillard describes this process as one where a society moves from the *real* (i.e., its genuine culture, traditions, and modes of living), to a *simulation of the real* (i.e., a kind of copy). That copy might be something like the case of the old-style clothes in Taiwan; they are copies of original designs, but they still have some value because at least some people know that they are “references” to ancient traditional styles.

But Baudrillard adds a third stage, coming after the real, and the simulation of the real. That last stage is that of the *simulacrum*. The simulacrum is a copy with no original, no referent. Baudrillard describes the process of moving away from the real. He speaks of a copy, an “it”, and notes step-by-step what happens to “it” in a culture losing cultural identity:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality to whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.
(Baudrillard, 1994, p.6)

Baudrillard would see the Chinese as living in a world of multiple simulacra, where the original — i.e., their own cultural heritage — is disappearing, and being replaced by copies. The danger, as he warns in his book, is when those copies, the reconstructions of old palaces and the refabrications of old clothes are taken as *the real*. And this is precisely what will happen among future generations of Chinese who have no contact with original cultural heritage. Some day, the only bits of cultural heritage a Chinese person will be able to experience will be in a museum. As for traditional buildings, well, like those in Taipei, they will be museums, too, not real residences lived in by people in a traditional way. Only copies and simulations will remain, and then only simulacra.

The Chinese, embracing a certain kind of pragmatism that does indeed seem to be part of their cultural heritage, may say, “Fine, let the past be forgotten.” They may say, too, “We *want* to be modern, we want to embrace the new, for our cultural heritage, noble as it is, allowed defeat, and represented much that was ignoble and oppressive.” But there is an answer to this: yes, be modern, but be *yourself*; otherwise you will repeat all the mistakes of the Western cultures, and their fragmentation, loss of identity, and decadence.

Why not a “Chinese modernism”? China for centuries was ahead of the West, and enjoyed a sophisticated, technologically advanced way of life. Imagine if that had been allowed to develop! Instead, China has adopted the Western model, cutting itself off even from its own indigenous form of modernism. This new Sino-Western model actually is actually the worst of both worlds: all the elements of Western materialism, industrial over-development, and urbanization, along with archaic Chinese styles of governance. Different aspects of this dreadful synthesis have been discussed at great length by the Chinese social critic Bo Yang (Guo Yidong). He points out that there might be a way for the Chinese to emulate the West without “being a slave of things Western” (Yang 1992, p.90).

The Chinese have an important cultural heritage, one that is rapidly disappearing. If Chinese society seeks to modernize even more than it already has, that may be understandable, but it must be done with care. As the historian Furth notes, “China’s modern revolution” might be said to have at its heart a complete “restructuring of the Chinese consciousness, down to the root of moral and social attitudes” (Furth 1970, p.5). This restructuring will surely lead to the complete loss of identity suggested by Baudrillard. Cultural heritage must be preserved for a society to have any kind of genuine identity. If that same society wishes, though, to become modern, it must find a way of doing so by building on its own traditions and strengths.

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