# Identity and Preservation of Traditional Culture in the Context of Urbanization in China

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## Abstract

China's rapid urbanization and societal advancement have resulted in the gradual neglect of traditional culture, despite the nation's profound sense of pride in its economic, political, and scientific achievements. This paper explores the historical roots of these evolving attitudes by tracing them back to past migrations and the impact of minority rule during the Yuan and Qing dynasties. Drawing inspiration from Japan's gradual transition and France's experiences with urban renewal, this paper underscores the pivotal role of government policies and the imperative for public engagement in preserving traditional culture. Furthermore, the paper introduces a fresh perspective on preserving traditional architecture within the context of urbanization. It highlights the potential of 5G technology to rekindle interest in traditional culture while alleviating urban pressures. This underscores the importance of adapting traditional architecture to harmonize with urban environments and utilizing technology to ignite enthusiasm for traditional culture.

**Keywords:** traditional culture preservation, urbanization, historical influences

## 1. Introduction

As urbanization relentlessly progresses in China, the swift pace of societal development, dynamic environmental transformations, and shifting lifestyles have led individuals to gradually overlook the intrinsic facets of their traditional culture. Present-day Chinese society is characterized by a robust sense of national pride, primarily stemming from noteworthy achievements in the fields of economics, politics, and scientific research. Paradoxically, this pride appears somewhat subdued when it comes to embracing and celebrating traditional culture. Frequently, fervent declarations are made in unconventional contexts, such as proclaiming that "China's Four Great Inventions pioneered the way!" or asserting that "Chinese culture boasts an extensive history spanning five millennia!" or even laying claim to "Dragon Boat Festival as an integral part of Chinese heritage, not Korea's!" While these declarations undoubtedly affirm well-established historical facts, they also signify a yearning for external validation, alluding to an underlying lack of self-assurance.

For instance, in contemporary society, Hanfu, the traditional attire of the Han Chinese, is often regarded as exotic and unfamiliar, and

traditional theatrical arts struggle to capture the attention they once commanded. Additionally, traditional ethical norms seem to be gradually receding into the background. This paper endeavors to delve deeply into the multifaceted evolution of public perceptions regarding culture, tracing its trajectory up to the present day. Furthermore, it aims to explore strategies for addressing this complex situation, emphasizing the critical roles of education and cultural dissemination. It is firmly believed that through these channels, the preservation and promotion of traditional culture can be facilitated, nurturing a renewed sense of confidence and reverence among the populace for their own cultural heritage. This, in turn, will contribute to the continued vibrancy and development of this rich tapestry of cultural legacy.

## 2. Historical Underpinnings of Public Attitudes

Throughout history, the Han Chinese population experienced four significant migrations. These migrations not only influenced the size and culture of the Han people but also had a profound impact on their collective psyche. Despite the glorious eras of Han and Tang dynasties, the Han population faced devastation at the hands of minority ethnic groups, leaving a lasting and subtle imprint on their collective consciousness.

China witnessed two periods when minority ethnic groups held complete dominion: the Yuan and Qing dynasties. These epochs had a profound and lasting impact on Han culture and their status. During the Yuan dynasty, policies of ethnic oppression were enforced against Han individuals, classifying them into four hierarchical categories. Those ruled by the Khitans, Jurchens, and Jingu (referred to as the Northern people) constituted the third category, while the Han population formerly under the Southern Song dynasty (referred to as the Southern people) formed the fourth category. This divisive approach aimed to fragment the Han ethnicity and weaken their collective resistance, simultaneously suppressing Han individuals in areas such as government appointments, taxation, and legal matters.

In the Qing dynasty, in an effort to solidify their rule and prevent Han uprisings against their regime, the Manchu Qing government mandated that Han individuals adopt the Manchu-style haircut and dress (a deeply profound blow to Han culture and spirit). They also established strict censorship, known as the "literary inquisition," to prevent the spread of dissenting ideologies. The psychological, cultural, and physical ramifications of these two periods of torment upon the Han population were not confined to their eras but continue to influence contemporary perspectives.

By the end of the Qing dynasty, the nation had deteriorated considerably, characterized by extreme centralization of imperial power and unwarranted self-confidence in the nation's capabilities, leading to a tumultuous transition in Chinese society. Despite attempts to "learn from the West" and modernize, the Qing dynasty ultimately maintained its precarious grip on power while perpetuating the status of the Celestial Empire. However, the era's inexorable progression called for change, culminating in the 1911 Revolution. This upheaval, distinct from a peaceful transition, represented a decisive rejection of the past and the old culture. The violent overthrow of the old world signified a denial of the previous culture, and from this point onward, people continuously sought to absorb advanced knowledge from the West to reshape society.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the nation underwent substantial societal transformations, with urban development becoming a paramount objective. During this period, the government prioritized economic advancement, with urban planning and development at the forefront, leading to a significant disregard for traditional culture and architecture.

In the early years of the nation's founding, China faced the daunting task of reconstruction. Every aspect of urban infrastructure, housing, and industry required urgent development and improvement. Consequently, government policies were centered on economic development and the pursuit of industrialization and modernization. The prioritization of urban development resulted in less attention being given to traditional culture and architecture. Urban planning and construction processes often emphasized speed and efficiency, marginalizing traditional cultural elements.

As cities rose to prominence, traditional architecture was gradually supplanted by

modern structures. Extensive urban expansion led to the demolition of many traditional buildings to make way for new urban development projects. Simultaneously, traditional culture faced challenges amid the urbanization process, as urban residents' lifestyles, values, and cultural identities underwent transformation. The preservation and promotion of traditional cultural elements became increasingly challenging in the urban context.

This historical overview illuminates the complex factors that have contributed to the evolving attitudes towards traditional culture and architecture in China. Understanding these historical underpinnings is crucial in addressing contemporary challenges and promoting cultural heritage in the context of rapid urbanization.

## 3. Lessons from Traditional Culture Preservation

Japan: The historical ties between Chinese and Japanese cultures run deep. Prior to the Sui and Tang dynasties, China experienced three major conflicts — the Qin unification, the Three Kingdoms period, and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period — during which Chinese culture disseminated to Japan. Following the Sui and Tang dynasties, Japan dispatched envoys to China to study its advanced political, economic, and cultural systems. Unlike China, which had practiced a centralized system since the Qin-Han period, transitioning into a county-based system and ultimately evolving into the county system, Japan adopted aspects of the county system but not entirely. In Japan, a political system reminiscent of the Zhou dynasty, featuring feudal lords and the Emperor, was maintained. Additionally, Japanese family culture was less elaborate and extensive compared to China, with a relatively simpler structure and only six or seven ancestral tablets for recently deceased relatives on their ancestral altars. Thus, Japan relied more on a hierarchical system, with four hereditary classes below the imperial and aristocratic ranks: samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants, with an additional class of outcasts. In this respect, Japan shares similarities with European nations, albeit with differences. Japan's class system displayed flexibility, allowing merchants to ascend to the warrior class through traditional means, in stark contrast to the European class system, which lacked social mobility and eventually led to conflicts between the first and second classes and the third class. In Japan's political framework, the Emperor was revered as a sacred figure, maintaining an untouchable status. The Tokugawa shogunate, which began ruling Japan in the 16th century, marked the end of the era of shared governance between the Japanese Emperor and military generals. However, during the Tokugawa era, despite class mobility to ensure regime stability, economic development still left each class indebted to merchants, resulting in extreme poverty among farmers and financial strain on the shogunate. At this juncture, Japan's approach differed significantly from other nations. Instead of demanding radical change in societal systems, Japan sought a "return to ancient governance" (known as "Oseifukko"), hoping to reinstate imperial authority. The populace merely sought changes in development methods, rather than alterations to the societal structure. The Meiji government effectively implemented these changes, initiating comprehensive reforms that swiftly elevated Japan to a position of international prominence. It is evident that Japan's transition from feudalism to modernity was gradual, consequently mitigating the impact on cultural heritage preservation. The presence of the Emperor, as the pillar of Japanese national spirit, persists, enabling contemporary Japanese individuals to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity.

France: France has also grappled with cultural destruction throughout its history. In the 18th century during the French Revolution, efforts to eradicate remnants of the old regime resulted in the destruction of cultural artifacts. Additionally, both World Wars in the 20th century inflicted significant damage on French cities, with statistics indicating that 20% of buildings were destroyed. However, after several decades of development, France continues to exude a rich cultural atmosphere.

Similar to contemporary China, France in the late 1950s experienced urban renewal efforts. Old city districts were perceived as overcrowded, unsanitary, and lacking proper ventilation and comfort, leading to extensive demolition and reconstruction initiatives. Over 120,000 housing units were demolished, and 190,000 new units were constructed within four years. However, it became apparent that this approach led to the loss of the unique urban character of cities. It was soon realized that the

essence of Paris and Lyon did not solely reside in their suburban landscapes; rather, it was rooted in the historic city centers that had evolved through different eras. Subsequently, a series of legal and regulatory frameworks were established, along with heritage preservation movements that transitioned from the centralized protection of specific objects to regional preservation initiatives. In the 21st century, heritage preservation evolved from being a "national policy" to a "public policy," shifting the focus from the "elite" to the "masses."

From the development experiences of Japan and France, it becomes evident that government policies significantly influence the preservation of traditional culture. However, regardless of how lofty policies may be, the ultimate responsibility falls upon the people. It is the people who must safeguard traditional culture for it to thrive sustainably.

## 4. A New Perspective on Traditional Architecture Preservation

China's ancient and complex social structure places great importance on the family unit. However, in modern society, the definition of "home" has become increasingly narrow, often reduced to mere property ownership. With the commodification of real estate, the cultural and emotional ties to the concept of "home" have gradually waned.

To address this issue, one can approach it from the perspective of urban pressures. By enhancing the adaptability of traditional architecture within urban environments, interest in traditional culture can be rekindled. The widespread adoption of 5G technology presents an opportunity in this regard, as it signifies not only faster internet speeds but also a comprehensive transformation of societal production and lifestyles.

5G networks offer high data transmission speeds, low latency, low energy consumption, cost-effectiveness, and high capacity. This enables individuals to more easily break free from material constraints and leverage the convenience of information to acquire greater knowledge. For example, employees can collaborate in the cloud, and families can engage in online education. This may encourage people to build residences outside of urban areas, alleviating urban traffic congestion, reducing housing prices, and increasing the appreciation

of traditional culture. Relieving urban pressures and redirecting people's attention from cities to rural areas can rekindle their love for traditional culture through the forces of nature.

Furthermore, with the development of 5G networks, Chinese traditional architectural culture can be vividly promoted, thereby piquing the interest and understanding of more people. This integrated approach holds the potential to promote the inheritance and propagation of traditional culture and achieve balanced development between urban and rural areas.

## 5. Conclusion

In this research, the primary focus has been on the attitudes of contemporary Chinese towards traditional culture and the historical factors that have contributed to these attitudes. Through cross-comparisons, an attempt has been made to identify an entry point that allows individuals to more easily enhance their identification and understanding of traditional Chinese culture through the accumulation of daily life experiences. It has been found that the "home" unit serves as the fundamental platform for people to experience traditional culture in their daily lives. Therefore, the aspiration is to restore the essence of "home," followed by some proposed ideas based on the current development situation.

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