

Cultural Identity and the Preservation of Cultural Heritage in the Contemporary Era of Globalization

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the identification of cultural identity through the perspectives of major thinkers, from Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Martin Heidegger to Marxist–Leninist philosophers, with the aim of elucidating their approaches to culture. It argues that culture must be understood in relation to human beings as they exist and live in the world, for only then can the distinctive and particular characteristics that differentiate one culture from others be properly recognized. In the face of contemporary global transformations, the failure to identify the distinctive features that shape human beings and cultural identity will make cultural preservation increasingly difficult. Accordingly, the study proposes several measures to promote cultural values in the current era of the nation's rise.

Keywords: cultural identity; cultural heritage preservation; cultural values; the nation's era of rise.

INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing recognition of the significant role that culture plays in all aspects of social life. Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, UNESCO emphasizes that culture lies at the core of most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indeed, *"if the SDGs are grouped around the economic, social and environmental dimensions as the three pillars of sustainable development, culture and creativity contribute transversally to each of these pillars."* In the contemporary context, as Vietnam enters its era of national ascendance while implementing a market-oriented economy and expanding international engagement, the task of building and developing an advanced culture imbued with national identity has become increasingly important and necessary. In this process, cultural identity constitutes a crucial element, preserving the most distinctive and essential characteristics that define a nation. It ensures that, despite the transformations brought about by time and changing historical circumstances, the nation's cultural spirit and defining features endure, enabling it to remain resilient and to affirm its unique identity even as certain cultural elements inevitably undergo adaptation. In this sense, culture safeguards and affirms a nation's identity, preventing it from dissolving into the broader currents of globalization. At the same time, culture inspires individuals to continually pursue truth, goodness, and beauty, fostering the progressive development of both individuals and communities. It enhances the quality of human life through the harmonious integration of material and spiritual well-being, promoting not only a higher standard of living but also a noble way of life that is both secure and sustainable.

Research methods

To investigate this topic, we employ an interdisciplinary methodological approach rooted in the social sciences and humanities, together with textual analysis. To interpret and elucidate the meanings embedded in the texts, we further integrate the hermeneutic method, which is applied to clarify the historical context in which the texts were produced, the conceptual layers of meaning, and the philosophical presuppositions underlying the works of the philosophers, thereby illuminating their respective understandings of identity. Through close reading and direct engagement with the texts, this method enables the explication of meanings that are only implicitly presupposed, thereby avoiding reductive interpretations or readings detached from their philosophical and intellectual-historical contexts. In addition, we combine analytical and synthetic methods to

examine the issues in greater depth and to identify the interrelationships among the principal themes of this study. These methods also contribute to clarifying the implementation of cultural heritage preservation in practical cases, thereby providing a basis for identifying general and effective approaches to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage

Content

The Content of Cultural Identity

German Classical Philosophers

The philosopher **Immanuel Kant**, one of the greatest philosophers in human history, did not discuss the concept of culture directly. However, in his renowned work *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he addressed culture in several key passages, particularly in relation to teleology and human development. From these discussions, the nature of cultural identity can be discerned. Kant states:

"Now, if this final end is to be sought in the human being himself, as a being whose end is promoted through his connection with nature, then this end belongs to one of two kinds.... The former end of nature may be called the happiness of the human being; the latter, the cultivation of culture (*Kultur*)." (Kant, 2006, p. 465.)

Accordingly, Kant's perspective allows culture to be understood as the process through which human beings develop their capacities, including intellectual, technical, and social capacities. From this standpoint, the essence of culture lies in the cultivation of the human will. It enables individuals to transcend the domination of natural instincts, such as desires and the pursuit of pleasure, thereby acquiring the capacity to determine their own ends. Kant thus constructs a conception of disciplinary culture, in which culture liberates the will from servitude to desires and prepares the ground for obedience to the moral law.

Unlike the modern usage of the term *Kultur* (culture), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel did not employ this concept in its contemporary sense. Instead, he used the concept of *Bildung*, understood as the process of cultivation or formation. In Hegel's broad conception, *Bildung* encompasses political, economic, social, and intellectual cultivation, among other dimensions, through which he elucidates the essence and identity of culture. He writes: "*Thus, it is only through cultivation (Bildung) that the individual attains validity and actuality.*" (Hegel, 2006, p. 999).

Accordingly, for Hegel, culture constitutes the process of human emancipation. Human beings are born in a natural state, yet culture requires them to transcend their immediate desires in order to conform to social norms and rational thought. This process represents the overcoming of humanity's natural, "animal" condition and its transformation into a free spiritual being.

From the perspectives of these two eminent philosophers, it is evident that culture serves to liberate human beings from the constraints of their physical nature. Culture directs individuals toward higher and nobler ends, while enabling them to attain the freedom to create and to affirm their own value.

The Marxist–Leninist Perspective

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the founders of Marxism, drawing upon the achievements of the history of human thought, also developed a conception of culture distinguished by its emphasis on creativity and the human aspiration for freedom. This perspective is clearly articulated in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where Marx writes:

"The practical creation of an objective world, the transformation of inorganic nature, is the self-affirmation of man as a conscious species-being, that is, as a being who treats the species as his own essential being, or treats himself as a species-being. ... Such production is man's active species-life. Through it, nature appears as his work and his reality." (Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 39, pp. 136–137).

As humanity's "second nature," culture is understood by Marx as identical with the distinctive mode of human existence and activity. It is the mode through which human beings employ creative labor and material production to transform and reshape nature, construct their objective reality, and "reproduce the whole of nature" for themselves "according to the laws of beauty" (see Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 42, p. 137).

Accordingly, Marx regarded culture as the expression of the distinctive character of human activity. Culture emerges only when human beings possess a conscious awareness of social life and engage in creative labor and material production to transform and reshape nature for their own existence and development. Culture reflects humanity's self-awareness of its independent role, as well as its capacity and creative potential to transform and reconstruct the natural world. From this perspective, Marx's conception of culture is intended to capture the unique character of human activity and the distinctive mode of human existence in the world. Ultimately, the distinction that Marx draws between human activity and animal activity demonstrates that human beings are capable of creating a cultural world precisely because they act consciously and creatively. Therefore, when we speak of culture, we are referring to both human creative activity and the outcomes of that activity. However, it should be recognized that not every form of human creative labor can be regarded as culture or considered a source of culture. Rather, such activities qualify as culture only when they are constructive in nature, accurately reflect objective reality, and conform to the "laws of beauty" that govern human creative activity.

Building upon Marx's perspective, Friedrich Engels argued that the origins of culture must be understood within the context of the formation of humankind. Engels' account of human origins, which contrasts human creative labor with the subsistence practices of apes, is presented in *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, a chapter in *Dialectics of Nature*. He writes:

"The ape herd simply consumes all the available food within the area assigned to it by geographical conditions or by the resistance of neighboring ape herds." (Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, p. 647).

Engels characterizes the subsistence mode of apes as a form of "predatory economy." In contrast, creative labor constitutes the process through which the ape was transformed into the human being. It is this creative labor that represents both the origin and the essential nature of culture.

Thus, although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels did not devote any single work exclusively to a systematic exposition of their views on culture, their reflections on this subject are profoundly embedded throughout their dialectical materialist conception of human beings and society.

Building upon and advancing the Marxist conception of culture and its role in the construction of a new society, and drawing on the practical experience of socialist construction in Russia, Vladimir I. Lenin further developed and systematized the theory of socialist culture. According to Lenin, immediately after the seizure of political power, priority should be given to simultaneously building a new economy and fostering a new culture through the proactive and sustained advancement of education, continuously raising the educational attainment, cultural level, and civilizational development of the working masses. With the replacement of the *War Communism* policy by the *New Economic Policy* (NEP), and in the context of what Lenin described as the necessity of recognizing that "our entire view of socialism has undergone a fundamental change," he emphasized in *On Cooperation* that:

"This fundamental change lies in the following: formerly, we placed—and could not but place—the emphasis of our work on the political struggle, on the revolution, on the seizure of power... Today, that emphasis has shifted to the peaceful work of cultural organization" (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 45, pp. 432–433).

Overall, from the perspective of Marxism–Leninism, culture constitutes the mode through which the essential capacities of human beings are expressed and realized in the course of their life activities. It is inseparable from human existence itself, for culture cannot exist apart from the lived reality of concrete human beings. It is precisely this intrinsic rootedness in human life that enables individuals to become more fully developed, more humane, and more distinctive.

Ho Chi Minh's Perspective

Even before the August Revolution, Ho Chi Minh offered a profound definition of culture:

“For the sake of survival as well as the purposes of life, human beings create and invent language, writing, morality, law, science, religion, art, literature ... as well as tools for daily life such as clothing, food, housing, and the means and methods of their use. The totality of these creations constitutes culture. Culture is the synthesis of all modes of life and their manifestations that humanity has produced in order to adapt to the demands of life and the requirements of survival” (Ho Chi Minh, Collected Works, Vol. 3, p. 431).

Thus, despite differences in emphasis and formulation, these definitions share a common denominator: they all underscore the central role of culture in social life, in both material and spiritual creativity, and in shaping the distinctiveness and unique identity of a nation.

It can be argued that culture encompasses the totality of the material and spiritual values created by human beings through their historical practical activities. Ho Chi Minh regarded culture as the soul and identity of a nation. The system of spiritual values embodied by a people constitutes its national identity. In essence, culture is what distinguishes one nation from another. He maintained that national identity must be preserved and promoted, that the cultural heritage of the past should enrich the culture of the present, and that the nation's traditional legacy should therefore be revitalized. He emphasized that “our people must know our history, so as to understand the origins of the Vietnamese nation” and that “our people have long lived together in a spirit of mutual affection and solidarity.” In the task of national development, the four domains of culture, economy, politics, and society must be given equal attention. Only when culture is integrated into economic development and the economy is imbued with cultural values can the people's quality of life be improved, which, in essence, constitutes the fundamental objective of culture.

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that philosophers and social thinkers, despite their different approaches, converge on a common understanding of the essence of culture: it is inseparably bound to human life and existence. Human beings live, reflect, and create within culture; their pursuit of moral excellence and the affirmation of their humanity are necessarily situated within a concrete cultural milieu. It is through this lived context that the distinctive values and characteristics of a culture become manifest. By observing the ways of life and patterns of thought of the people within a given society, we come to understand its culture; conversely, by examining the distinctive features of that culture, we gain insight into the worldview and lived experience of its people. These approaches make clear that cultural identity is inseparable from the concrete conditions of human life. In other words, each individual, each community, and each locality interprets the meanings of objects and phenomena in its own distinctive way. It is precisely this plurality of interpretations that constitutes the richness and uniqueness of different cultures. Through a phenomenological analysis, one can discern the essential identity of a given culture and preserve its fundamental characteristics, thereby preventing its identity from being diluted or dissolved through cultural homogenization. In this regard, Heidegger's approach, as articulated in his celebrated work *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1960), is particularly illuminating. In §46, he writes:

“From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsomeness of the worker's tread stares forth. In the stiffly solid heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field, swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain, and its unexplained refusal of itself in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending birth, and the shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging, the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.” (Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 2021 ed., p. 120).

Heidegger's phenomenological analysis suggests that understanding the value of a culture requires human beings to dwell within its lived world. Only by living within a particular form of life can individuals think, act,

and attain an authentic understanding of the culture to which it belongs. In this sense, culture cannot be fully comprehended from an external standpoint; rather, it must be experienced as a mode of existence. Accordingly, at the 1982 World Conference on Cultural Policies organized by UNESCO in Mexico City, attended by more than 1,000 delegates, the following definition of culture was adopted:

“...Culture encompasses, in addition to the arts and literature, ways of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings endowed with a critical judgment and a sense of moral commitment. Through culture, we discern values and make choices. Through culture, human beings express themselves, become conscious of themselves, engage in an unending search for new meanings, and create works that transcend themselves.” (quoted in Hà Xuân Trường, 1994, pp. 5–6).

Fundamental Approaches to the Preservation of Cultural Heritage

The Relationship Between Cultural Heritage Preservation and Cultural Development

According to the definition proposed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (1991), “Conservation is the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.” By extension, conservation encompasses all forms of intervention intended to protect and enhance the significance of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The conservation of tangible cultural heritage is most clearly manifested in the preservation of architectural works and historic structures, including houses, streetscapes, temples, markets, churches, and assembly halls. The preservation of intangible cultural heritage is reflected in efforts to encourage the safeguarding of traditional ways of life, religious beliefs, folk culture, and various forms of community cultural practices. In its broadest sense, cultural preservation refers to the safeguarding and transmission of cultural values. Given the breadth and complexity of culture as a domain, preservation must be understood as inseparable from the lived experiences of the people within a particular community. It is precisely this connection to everyday life that highlights the significance of preserving those distinctive cultural characteristics that shape the identity of a people, as well as the cultural traditions, historical legacy, and intellectual heritage of a given locality.

The preservation of cultural heritage entails safeguarding the distinctive features that constitute the identity and character of a community. When a particular cultural heritage is recognized, others are able to readily associate it with a specific place and cultural context. Such heritage becomes a legacy for future generations, providing the foundation upon which cultural values can be sustained and further developed. In this sense, preservation contributes directly to cultural development by fostering both a profound sense of pride among local communities and the sustainable benefits derived from their own cultural heritage.

Cultural preservation and cultural development should therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing processes. The preservation of cultural heritage provides the essential foundation for cultural development, while cultural development, in turn, enhances public awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage as an expression of collective identity. Precisely because of the significance of cultural preservation, the process of cultural development necessarily involves evaluating and establishing the place of emerging cultural forms on the basis of the cultural values that have already been preserved.

One of the most pressing contemporary issues is fostering a sound understanding of how to address the relationship between the preservation and promotion of traditional culture in the context of the country's accelerating industrialization, modernization, and increasingly deep international integration. Preservation and promotion constitute a natural dialectical relationship. Preservation involves safeguarding the valuable cultural heritage of the past, whereas promotion seeks to generate new cultural values that will, in turn, become the objects of preservation for future generations. In essence, cultural preservation rests on the principle that every new cultural achievement emerges upon the foundation of what has come before; the old provides the conditions for the emergence and development of the new. Without tradition, there can be neither the present nor the future. Tradition serves as the bridge that connects the past, the present, and the future. Accordingly, in

the course of cultural construction and development, all nations seek to preserve and promote their traditional cultural values and transmit them to future generations. As Marx observed:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and with this borrowed language.” (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8, p. 145).

As the bridge linking the past, the present, and the future, the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values constitute an essential and urgent task in the process of cultural construction and development, ensuring that these values are transmitted to succeeding generations.

Most importantly, this relationship requires the preservation and effective utilization of folk cultural values as resources for tourism development and for generating sustainable livelihoods for the communities that inhabit these cultural settings. Cultural preservation cannot rely solely on aspiration or goodwill; it must also be supported by adequate material resources. Without such resources, it is impossible to establish museums for the conservation and exhibition of cultural artifacts, restore historical monuments and cultural landscapes, or effectively safeguard either tangible or intangible cultural heritage. Likewise, without sufficient investment, it is difficult to realize the full potential of cultural heritage as a resource for socio-economic development. The ultimate objective of development is human well-being, just as the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage are fundamentally undertaken for the benefit of humanity. Accordingly, the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage values cannot be separated from socio-economic development; rather, the two should be mutually reinforcing. Such an integrated approach ensures that cultural heritage is effectively safeguarded and promoted while fostering sustainable economic development, with the shared objective of continuously improving the material and spiritual well-being of the people.

Fundamental Approaches to Cultural Heritage Preservation in the Contemporary Period

First, financial investment should be strengthened to support the development and consolidation of conservation activities and museum systems, thereby preserving, restoring, and promoting the values of cultural heritage, historical monuments, and local cultural identity through the following five measures: 1. Increase financial investment for the research, restoration, and conservation of key heritage sites in accordance with the *Law on Cultural Heritage* and other relevant legal provisions.; 2. Strengthen coordinated action among specialized agencies, provincial departments, and local authorities responsible for heritage sites to ensure the effective preservation, restoration, and comprehensive promotion of cultural heritage values; 3. Develop a highly qualified workforce equipped with professional expertise and a thorough understanding of the Government's policies, guidelines, and legal framework governing cultural heritage conservation.; 4. Promote the socialization of heritage conservation, encouraging broader participation from communities, organizations, and the private sector in preserving, restoring, and enhancing the multifaceted values of cultural heritage, thereby contributing to socio-economic development and the enrichment of the people's spiritual life; 5. Enhance public education and awareness by expanding educational and communication initiatives that emphasize the significance of cultural heritage in general, and of key historical and cultural sites in particular, thereby fostering greater public responsibility for their preservation and promotion.

Second, it is essential to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of today's multimedia cultural environment and the realities of an increasingly open and interconnected world. In this context, the foremost priority is to identify and preserve the distinctive characteristics that constitute a nation's unique cultural identity. Culture is a product of history, created through the activities of individuals and communities. Consequently, while culture is influenced by economic conditions, it is also shaped by many other dimensions of social life. Nevertheless, economic activity can be regarded as the most powerful force affecting cultural development. From the perspective of its origin and essence, culture and the economy are organically

interconnected, each serving as both the objective and the driving force of the other. At the same time, the effective functioning of a market economy requires appropriate government regulation to maximize its positive contributions while mitigating its adverse effects. In this regard, valuable lessons may be drawn from countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, which have successfully embraced the finest achievements of global civilization while enriching and preserving the distinctive cultural values of their own nations.

Third, the State should strengthen its governance in preserving and promoting national cultural identity. A healthy cultural environment must be fostered through the active participation of the public in cultural life and through an atmosphere that encourages the creative endeavors of artists, writers, and cultural practitioners. The State should encourage local communities to take an active role in the restoration and preservation of historical monuments within their own localities, while supporting initiatives to safeguard and promote traditional cultural values. Such a systematic and well-coordinated investment not only reflects the aspirations of the people but also mobilizes their collective strength, ensuring that cultural creation remains deeply rooted in the spirit and lived experience of the community.

Fourth, greater emphasis should be placed on honoring traditional folk festivals that embody both enduring cultural traditions and contemporary vitality. Relevant public authorities should provide guidance and institutional support to local communities in organizing, sustaining, and developing these festivals so that their traditional character and the distinctive cultural identity of each locality are preserved. At the same time, the State should accelerate the reform of Vietnam's mass media and popular cultural industries in ways that engage audiences more effectively while fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the nation's cultural heritage. Such efforts are essential to ensuring that domestic cultural values are not overshadowed by the overwhelming influence of foreign mass culture on public cultural consumption.

In parallel, cultural exchanges with other countries should be expanded and strengthened, accompanied by the development of a professional institutional framework for cultural diplomacy. The State should also provide adequate investment to support the importation and dissemination of cultural products that are consistent with national cultural objectives, while effectively preventing the circulation of low-quality cultural products through unregulated private distribution channels and illicit trade.

In particular, local cultural heritage should be developed in close integration with the cultural heritage of neighboring regions to create interconnected heritage value chains. Such an approach enables each locality to capitalize on its comparative cultural strengths while contributing to the formation of a diverse and cohesive cultural region capable of attracting visitors seeking rich and multifaceted cultural experiences.

CONCLUSION

The identification of the cultural values that require preservation must place particular emphasis on those distinctive characteristics that define the unique identity of a culture, as embodied in the lives, thoughts, and actions of the people who sustain it while orienting themselves toward a sustainable future. Through sustained efforts to preserve and promote cultural identity—implemented by means of the strategic and comprehensive measures outlined above—the conservation of cultural heritage can provide a strong foundation for future generations and contribute to resilient cultural development in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world.

Among these measures, the preservation and promotion of the nation's valuable cultural traditions remain of fundamental importance. One of the most significant expressions of these traditions is the continued practice of traditional festivals. By institutionalizing such activities as regular annual events, communities not only safeguard their cultural heritage but also reinforce the enduring significance of traditional cultural values. Moreover, these festivals serve as an important means of cultivating in younger generations a sense of responsibility for protecting their cultural heritage, while fostering pride in the cultural values and historical achievements of the nation.

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