

The Conception of Culture in Hu Shih's Writings: A Study Centered on Collected Works of Hu Shih

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ABSTRACT

The conception of culture articulated in Hu Shih's writings constitutes the foundational vessel of his intellectual edifice and cultural propositions. It functioned not merely as a theoretical apparatus for critiquing traditional culture and championing its modern counterpart, but also as a pragmatic framework for bridging Chinese and Western civilizations while charting a course for China's cultural modernization. Although his advocacy for "full globalization" provoked sustained contention both contemporaneously and in subsequent discourse, it must be acknowledged that his pioneering groundwork for the vernacular language movement, his forceful advocacy for introducing scientific methods into the reorganization of the national heritage, his profound defense of the spiritual core of Western civilization, and his penetrating insight into the law of cultural inertia, all exerted an enduring impact on the transformation of modern Chinese culture.

KEYWORDS

Conceptual history; Hu Shih; Culture

1 Introduction

Hu Shih (1891–1962), Chinese philosopher, essayist and diplomat. Hu is widely recognized today as a key contributor to Chinese liberalism and language reform in his advocacy for the use of written vernacular Chinese. He was influential in the May Fourth Movement, one of the leaders of China's New Culture Movement, and former President of Peking University. He had a wide range of interests such as literature, history, textual criticism, and pedagogy. Given the semantic richness inherent in the term "culture", this study centers on the four-volume Collected Works of Hu Shih to examine his intellectual appropriation and adaptation of the concept. Through this focused inquiry, a discrete facet of Hu Shih's Sino-Western cultural perspective comes discernibly into view.

2 Conceptual propagation and Hu Shih's intellectual engagement with "culture"

Culture constitutes an inherently polysemous multidimensional construct. In its broadest acceptation, it denotes "the aggregate totality of material and spiritual productive capacities acquired through human social praxis, alongside the corresponding material and spiritual wealth thereby generated".^[1] The term may operate as a synecdoche for spiritual patrimony or function as an archaeological taxon (e.g. Banpo Culture, Hemudu Culture, Hongshan Culture). Etymologically grounded in the Latin *colere*, the Western conception of "culture" encompasses a semantic spectrum spanning cultivation, habitation, praxis, refinement, *paideia*, and civility. It can thus be inferred that the spiritual denotations emerged as semantic extensions of materially anchored signifiers, indicating culture's conceptual evolution from denoting physical transformative processes toward signifying the cultivation of human intellect.

Within the Chinese intellectual tradition, the earliest conceptualization of culture originates from the Book of Changes: "The interpenetration of hardness and softness constitutes celestial patterns. Where civility finds its terminus, human patterns emerge. Observing celestial patterns reveals seasonal transformations. Observing human patterns transforms all under heaven through cultivation." Here, the last sentence denotes civilizational pedagogy—the primordial signification of culture. When the Confucian exegete Liu Xiang of the Western Han dynasty asserted in Garden of Persuasions: "Martial force is activated solely against the insubordinate. Where cultural transformation fails to effect reform, enforcement then categorically ensues." This marked the term's first lexical crystallization as a binome. Though demonstrating incipient tendencies toward conceptual abstraction, this usage remained fundamentally distinct from modern conceptions of culture, revealing a semantic chasm across temporal horizons.

Hu Shih's earliest employment of the term "culture" appeared in his essay *The Concept of Literary Evolution and Drama Reform* in 1917. He proposed that "what a nation's culture most abhors is 'senescence'; 'senescence' represents declining vitality".^[2] His cultural perspectives were significantly shaped by his overseas academic experience in the United States and the intellectual guidance of his mentors, John Dewey and Thomas Huxley. This influence manifested as a consistent commitment to learning from Western civilization throughout his writings, a tendency that intensified progressively over time. Hu Shih's domestic reception and conceptualization of culture were subject to multifaceted influences upon his return to China in 1917. The intellectual climate of that period remained permeated by the residual effects of Japan's

"civilization and enlightenment" ideology following the Meiji Restoration. Simultaneously, the New Culture Movement was experiencing vigorous development. These contextual factors, combined with the continuous intellectual exchanges among Chinese scholars who had pursued education in Japan and the United States, collectively shaped Hu Shih's understanding and interpretation of the concept of "culture".

Beyond examining the historical context in which Hu Shih encountered the concept of "culture", it is essential to analyze the typological dimensions of this term as employed in his writings. According to the 2003 edition of *The Complete Works of Hu Shih* published by Anhui Education Press, focusing primarily on the four-volume "Collected Essays of Hu Shih", and identified seventeen articles that contain references to the concept of "culture". Hu Shih developed a distinctive understanding of this term, which becomes evident through his examination of the relationship between "civilization" and "culture".

He conceptualized civilization as "the aggregate achievement of a people in responding to their environment", while defining culture as "the way of life formed by a particular civilization". According to his theoretical framework, the formation of any civilization necessarily involves two fundamental components: the material factor, encompassing various natural forces and resources, and the spiritual factor, comprising a nation's intelligence, talent, emotions, and ideals. Hu Shih maintained that "all civilizations represent the products of human intellect and wisdom applied to the utilization of natural materials and forces, no civilization is purely spiritual, nor is any civilization exclusively material."^{[2]P105} This articulation represents his distinctive interpretation of the concept of "civilization" and establishes the theoretical foundation for his broader cultural philosophy.

3 Conceptual vectors in hu shih's deployment of culture

The ideological orientation underlying Hu Shih's utilization of the concept of "culture" encompasses four primary dimensions: the advocacy for vernacular Chinese literature, the scholarly investigation of Chinese cultural history, the assertion that modern Western civilization represents a form of spiritual civilization, and the promotion of "full globalization".

3.1 Hu Shih's perspective on traditional Chinese culture

3.1.1 The advocacy for vernacular literary expression

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new poetic movement emerged in British and American literary circles, known as Imagism. The genesis of Imagism represented a reaction against the prevailing poetic tendencies of the time, which were characterized by affected sentimentality, excessive emotionalism, and didactic moralization. The movement's fundamental principle required poets to employ highly concentrated language to depict objects and express emotions, resulting in notably concise poetic compositions. The period of Imagism's greatest influence in America coincided with Hu Shih's academic sojourn in the United States, and many of the movement's perspectives on poetry aligned remarkably with Hu Shih's own literary philosophy. Hu Shih's vigorous advocacy for vernacular Chinese literature can be attributed, in significant measure, to the inspiration he derived from the Imagist movement.

Hu Shih maintained that each historical epoch possesses its distinctive literary expression, a principle he regarded as an axiom of civilizational evolution. During the Tang Dynasty, for instance, poetry reached its zenith with works such as Du Fu's "The Stone Moat Official" and "Qiang Village", and Bai Juyi's "New Music Bureau Poems". Subsequently, the lyrical forms of *ci* and *qu* gained prominence, with the Song Dynasty producing distinguished practitioners including Su Shi, Liu Yong, and Xin Qiji, marking a distinctly different literary period. Consequently, literary development should conform to temporal progression and the natural laws of civilizational evolution. Just as Tang poets did not imitate the poetic forms of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and Song writers did not replicate Han Dynasty rhymed prose, contemporary writers should not artificially emulate ancient literary models. Modern practitioners should cultivate contemporary literature, and the most effective means of advancing modern literary expression lies in promoting vernacular Chinese literature.

Hu Shih articulated that "the most important rationale for our advocacy of vernacular language lies in these ten crucial characters: literature in the national language, national language in literature."^[3] He provided a detailed explanation of this statement in his essay *Response to Mr. Huang Juesheng's A Moderate Theory of Literary Reform*. Literature in the national language refers to literary works such as poetry and fiction written in vernacular Chinese. Although some schools had established national language courses at that time, they lacked appropriate textbooks, significantly compromising instructional effectiveness and resulting in suboptimal student learning outcomes. Hu Shih emphasized the critical importance of vernacular literary works, arguing that their creation was essential to provide schools with suitable teaching materials for national language instruction. Enhanced pedagogical effectiveness would subsequently increase the number of individuals capable of literary creation in vernacular Chinese, gradually establishing vernacular literature as the dominant literary medium. Consequently, "literature in the national language" and "national language in literature"

represent two sequential and interconnected processes, wherein the former must precede and enable the latter.

3.1.2 Hu Shih's research on Chinese cultural history

Regarding the investigation of Chinese cultural history, Hu Shih advocated for a comprehensive approach to content that employed historical perspective to systematically organize all aspects of past culture, encompassing the entirety of historical cultural phenomena within the research scope of Chinese cultural history. In terms of research framework, he developed preliminary conceptual structures proposing that Chinese cultural history research should minimally incorporate ten systematic components: ethnic history, linguistic and textual history, economic history, political history, international relations history, intellectual and academic history, religious history, literary and artistic history, customs history, and institutional history. The organization and analysis of materials constituted a crucial element in research methodology. Hu Shih proposed a systematic approach involving several sequential steps. Initially, collected materials should be classified thematically according to categories such as economics, literature, philosophy, mathematics, and religion. Subsequently, more refined subcategorization should be implemented within these broad themes. Economic materials could be organized chronologically or geographically, while literature and philosophy could be classified by historical period, school of thought, or individual scholars. Hu Shih placed considerable emphasis on subcategory research, asserting that "subcategory investigation represents the sole source for revising specialized histories and the exclusive foundation for correcting general histories".^[2]

His proposal for Chinese cultural history research emerged in January 1923, during a period when his intellectual position had not yet assumed the radical character of his later development. His formative experiences in traditional Chinese private schools and his subsequent academic sojourn in the United States exerted equally profound influences on his thinking. During this phase, Hu Shih maintained a fundamentally integrative perspective on Chinese and Western cultures, pursuing "the objective of facilitating cultural exchange between China and the West through two pathways: the importation of scholarly theories and the systematic organization of national heritage, ultimately achieving cultural synthesis and the reconstruction of Chinese civilization".^[4]

In his methodological approach to Chinese cultural history, Hu Shih similarly advocated for the convergence of Chinese and Western cultural perspectives, emphasizing the necessity of maintaining an open-minded approach to comparative research. First, he recommended consulting and comparing research methodologies employed by European and American scholars, noting that Japanese scholars had already implemented such practices and that Chinese academics should therefore adopt these scientific methods to enhance the systematic nature of their research. Second, he advocated for the examination and comparison of materials utilized by European, American, and Japanese academic communities, incorporating beneficial elements into Chinese scholarly investigations.

3.2 Hu Shih's stance regarding western civilization

3.2.1 Modern western civilization represents spiritual civilization

Since the modern era, the perspective that Western civilization represents materialism while Eastern civilization embodies spiritualism has persistently existed. Given that materialism was associated with physical and corporeal gratification, while idealism corresponded to mental and spiritual pursuits, the Confucian value system naturally favored idealism over materialism. Consequently, Hu Shih perceived this viewpoint as diminishing Western civilization while aggrandizing Eastern civilization, and he maintained a negative stance toward this perspective.

Following the First World War, certain European and American scholars experienced either confusion regarding Western civilization and its future trajectory or developed feelings of disillusionment toward it. Academic circles in Europe and America gradually began expressing reverence for Eastern civilization, leading to broader acceptance of the notion that "Western civilization constitutes material civilization". This development concerned Hu Shih, prompting him to address this issue specifically through dedicated analysis.

Hu Shih argued that Western civilization was not material but rather spiritual in nature, capable of fulfilling humanity's spiritual aspirations. He approached this analysis from two dimensions: intellectual and moral-religious perspectives. From the intellectual standpoint, he contended that Western civilization employs scientific methodology to pursue truth relentlessly, progressively deepening human understanding of the natural world. Regarding moral and religious aspects, he argued that Western civilization had transcended periods of ignorance, dismantled obsolete religious and moral systems, and established new religious and ethical frameworks.

The first characteristic of this new religion is its intellectualization. Previously, when individuals faced desperate circumstances beyond their control, they sought spiritual solace through belief in ghosts and deities. However, scientific advancement enhanced human analytical capabilities, and the scientific spirit—characterized by an evidence-based approach—applied rational evaluation to traditional religious practices, gradually eliminating superstitious elements from

older religious systems.

The second characteristic of the new religion is its humanization. Since the modern era, rapid scientific and technological development has enabled countless innovations, significantly enhancing humanity's capacity to transform nature. This expanded capability strengthened human self-confidence, gradually replacing attitudes of resigned acceptance of fate with self-reliance and personal agency.

The third characteristic of the new religion is its socialization. Material progress has not only improved humanity's ability to transform nature but has also provided additional capacity to address others' suffering. This enhancement in empathetic ability manifests externally as a commitment not only to pursuing personal freedom but also to securing freedom for the vast majority of people. It involves not only seeking individual happiness but also striving for the welfare of the broader population.

In contrast to Western civilization, Hu Shih characterized Eastern civilization as spiritual rather than material in nature. However, he viewed Eastern peoples as excessively complacent, arguing that they "remain content with rudimentary living conditions and therefore do not seek improvement in material enjoyment, they accept ignorance and embrace a state of 'unknowing', consequently showing little interest in the discovery of truth or the invention of technical implements and machinery. They acquiesce to existing environmental circumstances and destiny, thus showing no inclination to conquer nature but rather seeking to maintain optimistic resignation to fate, displaying no desire to reform institutional systems but merely pursuing compliance with established order, avoiding revolution and remaining as obedient subjects".^[5]

According to Hu Shih's analysis, acceptance of existing material conditions and occasional subjugation to environmental constraints, combined with failure to fully utilize human intelligence and ingenuity to transform circumstances for personal benefit, characterizes a civilization that lacks sufficient progressive spirit. Such a civilization represents true materialism precisely because it fails to provide adequate material satisfaction for its people and cannot fulfill humanity's spiritual requirements. This perspective challenges conventional categorizations by suggesting that apparent spiritual contentment actually masks a fundamentally materialistic approach to existence, one that accepts limitations rather than transcending them through intellectual and material advancement.

3.2.2 "Full globalization"

Hu Shih's proposal of "full globalization" emerged within a distinctive historical context. Following the Xinhai Revolution, Chinese society witnessed a reactionary current advocating Confucian reverence and restoration, characterized primarily by the promotion of Confucian veneration and classical study, the establishment of Confucianism as the national religion, the assertion that "while the political system has changed, fundamental social principles remain unchanged", and the belief that feudal traditional morality was rooted in human nature. Hu Shih mounted vigorous literary attacks against this trend, arguing that contemporary individuals should abandon the defense of feudal hierarchical ethics and instead actively embrace Western democracy and science, particularly Western scientific technology. This position clearly demonstrates his profound admiration for modern Western scientific and technological civilization, a sentiment also evident in his essay *Thoughts from Wandering*.

In this work, he articulated that "the civilization represented by rickshaws is one that treats humans as beasts of burden. The civilization represented by motorcars is one that employs human intellect and wisdom to create machinery that replaces human labor. Treating people as beasts of burden, regardless of circumstances, cannot qualify as spiritual civilization. Using human intelligence to create machinery that reduces human suffering, facilitates human transportation, and increases human happiness—this type of civilization contains considerable idealism and substantial potential for spiritual civilization".^[5] The "civilization represented by rickshaws" clearly refers to Eastern civilization, while the "civilization represented by motorcars" denotes Western civilization. Hu Shih further observed that motorcars enable people to travel great distances, thereby expanding their enterprises and broadening their perspectives. He identified the greatest benefit of motorcar civilization as its contribution to human sensory training, noting that both pedestrians crossing streets and drivers must maintain comprehensive awareness of their surroundings to avoid danger.

Although Hu Shih's characterization of Western civilization contains elements of exaggeration, his profound admiration for modern Western scientific and technological civilization is unmistakable. This admiration constituted a significant factor underlying his advocacy for the active acceptance of Western democracy and science.

Hu Shih's proposition of "full globalization" possessed an additional, more profound rationale: his conviction that cultural inertia exists within every culture. Hu Shih maintained that every nation's culture exhibits inherent exclusivity and conservatism, resisting foreign cultural intrusion and often demonstrating outright hostility toward external cultural influences. This phenomenon is readily comprehensible, as national survival requires stable cultural continuity to maintain collective identity. Consequently, when confronting cultural inertia, successful cultural transformation demands considerably greater effort. He articulated that "only through complete Westernization and 'desperately pursuing extremes' can one achieve overcorrection, ultimately realizing compromise and accommodation with foreign culture

through the operation of cultural inertia".^[6]

Hu Shih identified several advantages in using the term "full". First, the word "wholesale" appeared excessively radical, and failure to achieve complete implementation could easily generate controversy, whereas "full" circumvented this difficulty. Second, using the word "full globalization" enabled the inclusion of scholars who were not particularly radical regarding Westernization within the same intellectual coalition. As Hu Shih observed, "under the principle of 'full globalization', scholars such as Wu Jingchao, Pan Guangdan, Zhang Foquan, Liang Shiqiu, and Shen Changye naturally become our allies rather than intellectual opponents".^[7]

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, the conceptualization of "culture" in Hu Shih's writings represents far more than mere terminological usage; it constitutes the central vehicle for his comprehensive intellectual system and cultural propositions. This concept functioned simultaneously as a theoretical instrument for critiquing traditional culture and advocating new cultural forms, and as a practical framework for bridging East and West while seeking pathways toward Chinese cultural modernization. Although his advocacy of "complete internationalization" generated considerable controversy both during his lifetime and in subsequent periods, his foundational promotion of vernacular literature, his advocacy for introducing scientific methodology into the organization of national heritage, his vigorous defense of the spiritual dimensions of Western civilization, and his profound insights into the principles of cultural inertia all exerted indelible influence on China's modern cultural transformation. Through focused examination of the concept of "culture" within *Collected Essays of Hu Shih*, we gain clearer insight into the complex and profound perspectives on Chinese and Western culture held by Hu Shih as a leader of the New Culture Movement. This analysis enhances our understanding of his distinctive contributions and historical significance within the processes of China's modern intellectual enlightenment and cultural reconstruction. His theoretical framework and cultural vision continue to inform contemporary discussions regarding the relationship between tradition and modernity, cultural identity and globalization, and the dynamics of cross-cultural intellectual exchange in the modern era.

About the Author

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