

## Cultural Confidence of Chinese People: Reflection on *The Spirit of the Chinese People*

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### Abstract

*The Spirit of the Chinese People* was written in 1915, from historical view, China was undergoing great social changes in all aspects at that time. The book written by Ku Hung-Ming is considered to be the first work in modern China to introduce Chinese people to the westerners. He shows deep love, passion and pride of Chinese culture in this book, intending to change the prejudice towards Chinese people of the westerners. Cultural confidence of Ku Hung-Ming can also be sensed greatly in his great work, which is of great value nowadays. This paper mainly demonstrates cultural confidence of Chinese people conveyed in this book by Ku Hung-Ming, some personal reflections are also discussed in this paper to show the author’s understanding of Chinese cultural confidence.

**Key words:** Cultural confidence; Chinese people; Traditional culture

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### INTRODUCTION

In 1915, Ku Hung-Ming wrote a book named *the Spirit of the Chinese People*. He conveyed the cultural confidence

towards Chinese culture in his book. A century later, the cultural confidence of Chinese people should be emphasized again, especially when China has become the second largest economy in the world. Cultural confidence is a kind of soft power that is no less important than economic strength. The cultural confidence conveyed in this book can be used as a mirror today, the author’s understanding can motivate people today to reflect the proper attitude towards culture.

### 1. THE SETTING OF *THE SPIRIT OF THE CHINESE PEOPLE*

#### 1.1 Social Background of China at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In terms of politics, the Opium War in 1840 disrupted the stability of ancient China, initiating a period of painful history of this old nation. With blood and tears, the weak China was invaded by several capitalist countries. In 1895, China was defeated by Japan in Sino-Japanese War, which was a heavy blow for Chinese feudalism system. Besides the ceaseless invasions, those stronger western nations began their exploitation of China’s resources, making China the market for their products, which made China weaker and weaker. Chinese people were definitely looked down upon by westerners. In 1911, a group of capitalists intellectuals holding the belief of democracy, represented by Sun Yat-Sen, fell back on revolution violently, and overthrew Qing dynasty eventually. In 1912, the Republic of China was founded, starting the so-called democratic period of China. However, the democracy Constitution proved to be a dead letter, because the conventional feudalists came to power again, which pushed China to a much more turbulent period when the country was torn apart by warlords, each controlling a region.

Although China was experiencing failure in politics and backward in economy, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century was considered to be a prosperous time for different thoughts spreading in China, also a paradise for intellectuals. Last time, it was in Spring and Autumn Period (2500 years ago), when intellectuals representing different thoughts could express it freely. The influential Confucius ethics, along with other intellectuals' thoughts such as Mencius' and Lao-tzu's were developed then. After 2500 years, when there was another historical period of great changes, various thoughts came into China and spread here freely, such as evolutionism, reformism, and royalism, each one with its representatives. Intellectuals well versed in both Chinese and Western culture could express their opinions freely. Without the political restrictions, the intellectuals just followed their hearts. When China was invaded by western countries, most of the educated persons advocated seeking an anti-dote from European countries to rescue the weak ancient China. However, Ku Hung-Ming was an exception that remained being picky to the western culture, and never stopped advocating Chinese culture to the world. Controversial as he was, he was brave enough to do what he liked.

### 1.2 Introduction of the Author Ku Hung-Ming

Born in Malaysia as a hybrid of Chinese and Portuguese, Ku Hung-Ming was taken to Europe for education at the age of ten, by a friend of his father. A migrant as he was, his father was greatly influenced by Chinese culture. Before setting out, his father told Ku Hung-Ming seriously, "wherever you are, never forget you are Chinese". In Europe, Ku Hung-Ming got exposed to a bunch of subjects such as literature, philosophy, and theology. Ku Hung-Ming was a genius who had an endowment of learning language, so he had a good master of nine languages. After getting thirteen doctorates in Europe, he returned to China at the age of 24. To be honest, Ku Hung-Ming was a product of western education, but what surprised others was that he fell in love with the profound Chinese culture and devoted the rest of his life in it.

Being the first Chinese person who was good at both Chinese culture and Western Culture, Ku Hung-Ming spent most of his time on communicating these two cultures. He wrote lots of books introducing Chinese culture to the world, including *The Spirit of the Chinese People*. Most of his books were written in fluent English, which made the westerners easy to understand. Besides, he was famous for his translating work that covered many Chinese traditional classics, such as Confucianism and Taoism. Being proficient in the two languages, his translation was highly praised.

Apart from his great works in literature, Ku Hung-Ming had deep love and great passion towards Chinese culture, especially Confucianism. To some extent, he looked like a child who had travelled overseas for a long time. Once he got back to his motherland, the pure affection became irresistible. He constantly advocated

his thought by making speech, writing essays and having debate with intellectuals holding other beliefs. Sometimes he showed great contempt towards other ideas, so he was thought to be a little overconfident. Ku Hung-Ming was considered to be an exception in China at that age. When most intellectuals thought that learning from the western culture should be the best way of saving China, Ku Hung-Ming proposed the totally opposite opinions of restoring Chinese traditional cultures without hesitation, which showed his great Chinese cultural confidence. His words towards westerners were always full of irony and satire. In his mind, Chinese people and Chinese culture enjoy the absolute superiority over others, so there is no need for Chinese people to learn from them. On the contrary, it should be the westerners that learnt from Chinese.

### 1.3 Introduction of *The Spirit of the Chinese People*

Written in 1915, *The Spirit of the Chinese People* is actually a collection of seven essays dealing with the same topic of Chinese culture. These seven essays talked about the spirit of the Chinese people, that is, Chinese people's characters, Chinese women, Chinese language, and so on.

Using the method of comparison and deduction, Ku Hung-Ming made a good combination of rational thinking and emotional thinking. The compelling chain of logic and his brimming affection towards Chinese people is impressive. The author spoke out the shortcomings of western culture bravely. By comparison, he thought that Chinese people were the noblest in the world because of a series of good humanities. What's more, he deducted to find out the deep reasons of these good humanities. Step by step, he reached a conclusion of what the real spirit of the Chinese people was.

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## 2. KU HUNG-MING'S UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE SPIRIT OF THE CHINESE PEOPLE

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In the beginning, the author made a good comparison between Chinese people and people from other nations. He drew a conclusion that compared with the westerners, Chinese people were much more broad, simple, and profound.

As for the method used in maintaining social order, China differs a lot from western nations. Chinese people have a fundamental understanding that the nature of man is good, so Chinese people always resort to moral force, and the author called it the Religion of Good Citizenship. Chinese people believed that the right and justice are recognized by everybody, so they do not feel the need of using physical force to protect themselves. However, in Europe, where there were endless wars, people thought that the nature of a man is evil. Consequently, they at first tried to maintain civil order with the help of the priest,

but after some time, they found the priest cost too much expense and trouble. They turned to policemen and soldiers, but now they found that policemen and soldiers were much more troublesome. Facing this situation, Ku Hung-Ming suggested that they should find the solution to the problem of civilization in China. It's only through the power of goodness could a nation maintain its civil order effectively. He sought for the real humanity of Chinese people, that is, what is the real Chinaman (Ku, 2010, p.7).

### 2.1 The Unique Gentleness and Its Reasons

The word he used to describe Chinese type of humanity is “gentle”. In Chinese humanity, there is nothing wild, savage or ferocious, which is like the domesticated animals, rather than the wild animals like westerners. Chinese type of gentleness is not the docility of a broken-hearted, emasculated people, but the absence of harshness, roughness, or violence.

To illustrate the “gentleness” of the Chinese people, Ku Hung-Ming used a series of examples and logical arguments, leading readers to find out the roots of this unique Chinese humanity systematically. Chinese people are gentle and the gentleness was the product of a combination of two things, sympathy intelligence. The intelligence of the Chinese people is not the intelligence came from instinct, like a vulpine fox, but from sympathy, from a feeling of love and attachments. Chinese people have the sympathy, so it is easy for them to share the same feelings with others, which rendered them to be considerate. Ku Hung-Ming quoted a saying that “The longer a foreigner lives in Japan, the more he dislikes the Japanese, whereas the longer the foreigner lives in China, the more he likes the Chinese” (Ibid., p.3). Since no one is flawless, in spite of the defects of mind and character of Chinese, the “indescribable something”, that is, the gentleness, softens and mitigates made foreigners feel at home.

The Chinese people have the power of sympathy because that they live wholly a life of heart, of human affection and of the soul. Chinese people attached great importance to the friendship and affection between people. Ku Hung-Ming gave some illusions about this argument. One of them was about Mr. Liang Tun-yen, a government official, who said that the reason why he accepted the appointment of being the official of high rank was because he wanted to gladden his old mother, instead of the reason for himself. From this example, we can feel that Chinese people tended to care for the feeling of their beloved one, focusing on the happiness of their heart. This kind of life also influenced the Chinese language, Chinese people's good memory and politeness. The Chinese language is a language of the heart, so the young children and the uneducated people find it easy to learn. However, those who have been too educated by science and logic will find there is a great difficulty in mastering it, because

they have been cultivated to use their head rather than their heart. Chinese people have a good memory because they memorize things with the heart rather than the head. The function of the heart is just like a glue which can retain things better. As French beautifully expressed it *la politesse du coeur*; the politeness of the heart is what Chinese people possess. Chinese people's politeness is just like flower with a perfume like the aroma of a real precious ointment, which comes from the heart of each Chinese people. However, living a life of the heart also caused another characteristic of Chinese people, that is, want of exactness. The heart is a very delicate and sensitive balance. Chinese people living that kind of life made little or no progress in abstract science, such as physics, mathematics and logics. Chinese mind resembled the Chinese writing tool, the brush, which was difficult to write with it, but after mastering it you can write and draw with beauty and grace.

As a nation with long history, Chinese people live a life of the heart, a life of a child, but to some extent, they are quite different from the primitive people who also live a life of the heart. Chinese people have a power of mind and rationality while living a life of a child. As a conclusion, Ku Hung-Ming thought that the real Chinaman is a person with the head of a grown-up man and the heart of a child. That's the secret of national immortality.

### 2.2 Chinese Language: A Language of the Heart

Ku Hung-Ming held great confidence in Chinese language, and he satirized those foreigners who called themselves Chinese scholars. Having only published some dialogues in Chinese dialects or collected some Chinese proverbs, they had no idea of the essence of the real Chinese language. Ku Hung-Ming said that Chinese language was difficult to learn not because it is complex, Chinese language had a few rules, but because Chinese language needs both the heart and head, the soul and the intellect equally developed.

People who had received European education found Chinese a difficult language because their hearts are under developed. In another word, European education made people shallow and they could not understand Chinese language. Ku Hung-Ming gave some examples of Chinese poems, which shows that Chinese language is deep and simple.

示内  
莫道家贫卒岁难,  
北风曾过几番寒,  
明年桃李堂前树,  
还汝春光满眼看。

The English translation would be something like this:

TO MY WIFE

Fret not, —though poor we yet can pass the year,  
Let the north wind blow ne'er so chill and dearer;

Next year when peach and willow are in bloom,  
You'll yet see spring and sunlight in our home.

With definite cultural confidence, Ku Hung-Ming made a comparison between the two visions and made the remarks that Chinese language can express deep thoughts and deep feeling in simple words. Besides, he thought that the classics in Chinese literature had the function of transforming the fighting people in Europe into peaceful gentle and civil persons. Just like Matthew Arnold says of Homer's poetry, "refine the raw natural man; they can transmute him".

### 3. CULTURAL CONFIDENCE OF CHINESE PEOPLE

The key word of illustrating Ku Hung-Ming's attitude towards Chinese culture is confidence, which conveyed fully in this book. Recently, cultural confidence has become a hot topic, which arouses the interests from Chinese government to Chinese people. In history, Chinese nationality has experienced ups and downs in its cultural confidence with the nation's rise and fall. China has become the world's second largest economy now, and its cultural confidence should be enhanced so that China's soft power will be strengthened too.

#### 3.1 Chinese Cultural Confidence in History

With a long history of undisturbed, China is one of the four ancient civilizations, which have been in a leading position in human history. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China had been a country with strong economy, taking up 23% of the world's total economy. As a result of the booming economy, the culture of China enjoyed superiority for a long time. Confucianism was not only the prominent ideology of China, but also influenced the countries around, such as Japan and Korea, forming a Confucian cultural circle in Eastern Asia.

However, from the 16 to 18 centuries, Chinese cultural confidence became a kind of cultural conceit. When China reached its summit of feudalism society, Chinese culture advanced western culture in various aspects. Chinese people are still considered Confucianism as the best culture. In 1792, George Macartney, the envoy of the Britain, visited China, with an intention to promote the trading between the two countries. George brought lots of gifts from the Britain, ranging from the newly invented guns to astronomy instruments, which were all the products of the advanced technology. Yet Chinese people showed an indifferent attitude, and they stayed confined with the thought that China could produce the best things in the world. Finally the cultural conceit brought failure to the Qing dynasty.

Because of the cultural conceit of Chinese people, China got little progress after the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which

resulted in the invasion of the Britain, that is the Opium War in 1840. As what have been mentioned above, after a series of invasions from the western countries, China finally lost its cultural confidence. Most people thought that there was nothing valuable in Chinese culture, including the Confucianism that had been considered to be the highest ideology in China for thousands of years.

#### 3.2 Chinese Cultural Confidence Expressed by Ku Hung-Ming in *The Spirit of the Chinese People*

##### 3.2.1 Confidence Towards the Good Nature of Chinaman

In the introduction part, Ku Hung-Ming analyzed the causes of the different social situation in China and Europe. "Since the time of Confucius 2,500 years ago, we Chinese have had no militarism such as that we see in Europe today" (Ibid., p.5), and he thought the root cause is that Chinese culture believes that the nature of man is good, but in Europe, because of the Christianity, people believe that they are born with original sin. The good nature of Chinaman became the first source of Ku Hung-Ming's cultural confidence.

Thousands of years ago, Mencius first came up with the idea of "The goodness of human nature", which has influenced China until now. Because of the goodness of nature, it is believed that education is the best way of cultivating a person, so that he can live a reasonable life both beneficial to himself and society. Confucius ethics do not contend the use of punishment because it shows the disrespect of human. However, in western countries whose people believing in God, they think the first human made by God, Adam and Eve, committed the original sin when they ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The original sin stands for the endless desire of human. People with the original sin live in the world to make his confession, where they need priests and policemen to be the supervisor (Jin, 2016, p.56). Karl Marx once wrote in his famous work *Das Kapital* (*Capital* in English) that, "capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (Marx, 2004)". He also criticized the evil of the capitalist, which might give a proper interpretation of Ku Hung-Ming's contention.

Ku Hung-Ming treated the goodness of the Chinese people the noblest virtue ever, to which he attributes the peaceful society and a good civil order. Chinese people believe the righteousness and justice of himself, also the whole people, so they do not need a religion to restrict the behaviors. The education of good and kindness has been rooted in their mind regardless if there are supervisors. Because of the goodness in their mind, Chinese people follow the moral principles and do not do harm to others for his own benefits. When Europe was undergoing endless wars then, he fully believed that this feature of Chinaman was a remedy for westerners, since wars are the competition for materials and lands. Ku Hung-Ming

did not mean that there were no internal wars in China, but the good nature of Chinese people eliminated many of them.

### 3.2.2 Confidence Towards the Confucian Ethics

Although Ku Hung-Ming said that there was no need for Chinese people to have a religion, because of the good nature of them, he strongly advocated the Confucian ethics, which he thought has served as a religion in China for a long time. Ku Hung-Ming was proud of the Confucianism. “The greatness of Confucianism is that, without being a religion, it can take the place of religion; it can make men do without religion” (Ku, 2010, p.14). That is the remark of Confucianism from Ku Hung-Ming. In fact, he thought that Confucianism not only had the function of the religion in Europe, but also surpassed it in the depth. The mass people need a refuge in their spiritual life to offer them the sense of securities and permanence. The religion in the West can do so, so does the Confucianism. However, the difference lies in that the religion in Europe just focused on every individual, so it is called a personal religion or Church religion. The Confucianism gave Chinese people an idea of State. The religion in Europe teaches people to be a good man, while Confucianism reaches a high level of teaching people to be a good citizen. The State region is rooted in Chinese people’s mind for almost fifty generations.

The center idea of the Confucianism is the law of the gentlemen. Confucius thought the most important part of gentlemen is the sense of honor. Ku Hung-Ming put forward the example to show the importance of honor. Unless a merchant recognizes and feels the bound by the sense of honor to fulfill their contracts, all trading would become impossible. He said, “without the sense of honor in men, society can only be held together for a time by force”, “Force alone cannot hold society permanently together” (Ibid., p.22). These can be a proof of the mess of the European society, and also a proof of the advantage of Confucianism. With Confucianism, China can maintain social order easily, without the cost of numerous lives.

Ku Hung-Ming’s confidence towards Chinese people’s good nature, Confucianism, along with his confidence towards Chinese language, comprised his Chinese cultural Confidence.

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## 4. REFLECTION ON CULTURAL CONFIDENCE

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### 4.1 Cultural Confidence of Chinese People in Contemporary Era

We are now in an era when cultures from different countries are accessible. Due to the development of Internet, cultural exchange and communication take place easily, freely and fluently. Sometimes, the cultures from

various sources render people overwhelmed. In Chinese society, western culture seems to be more popular than the Chinese traditional culture. In the face of this situation, Ku Hung-Ming is a good example of the Chinese people living in modern society.

In the 1970s, China initiated its historic Reform and Opening, and since then, western culture began to spread in China massively. The movies, music, and literature from western countries were largely accepted by Chinese people. Hollywood movies attract lots of viewers in China whose number surpassed the audience of Chinese movies. The book *Harry Potter* has become one of the best sellers in China’s book market. What’s more, young people in China are celebrating Christmas and Valentine’s Day, although these festivals are not originated in Chinese culture. Furthermore, the western cultures spreading in China have brought its values here. Beliefs in democracy, freedom, independence, and individualism have gained great popularity in China. On the other hand, compared with the western culture, traditional Chinese culture seems to be faded. Children no longer learn the traditional classics but turn to western fairy tales. Few people know the origin of traditional festivals such as Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-autumn Festival, but everyone is familiar with the custom of sending rose and chocolate on Valentine’s Day. Even in Chinese education system, students put more efforts in learning English than Chinese.

To some extent, it is admitted that because of the strong economy, western culture seems to be stronger in its influence. However, when people experience a new time of great changes in China now, looking back to the traditional Chinese culture is of great value. It is high time to appreciate and value the essence of cherished traditional Chinese culture, which is the basis of cultural confidence of Chinese people.

### 4.2 Critical Thinking of the Cultural Confidence Conveyed in *The Spirit of the Chinese People*

In spite of Ku Hung-Ming’s sincere love for Chinese traditional culture, it is more appropriate to apply a critical eye to analyze this book. Since the book was written more than 100 years ago, some of his ideas and attitude towards different culture made him controversial. He said in his book that, “The Chinese feminine ideal is an ideal with broom in her hands to sweep and clean the room with (Ku, 2010, p.54), which means that a good Chinese woman is destined to do the housework for her families. It is compulsory for them to obey the so-called “Three Obedience and Four Virtues”, which can be regarded as the killer of Chinese women’s freedom and liberation for a long time. Ku Hung-Ming believed that Chinese feminine ideals had no self, and the chief end of a Chinese woman “is not live for herself, or for society, not to be a reformer or to be president” (Ibid., p.5), but to “live as a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother” (Ibid.). As a

result of a series of feminist movements, Chinese women in modern China are gaining more and more freedom to choose the life she wants, so Ku Hung-Ming's ideas towards Chinese women are not proper now. Secondly, contrast to the inferiority feeling other intellectuals had, Ku Hung-Ming held the belief that Chinese culture enjoys great superiority over other culture, but the fact is that, being so exclusive would not change China's situation at that time. Chinese people live a life of heart, which made them no good at those subjects requiring abstract thinking, such as physics and chemistry. However, those abstract sciences are vital to a country's economy and military. As a result of that, China fell victim to the attack of western countries and suffered a lot.

In an era of globalization, the earth is being thought to be flat, which means information can transfer from one place to another within a short time. Chinese people should have an open mind towards various kinds of cultures from all over the world. Since there are good aspects and bad aspects in every culture, it is supposed to select virtuous traditional Chinese culture and inherit them, and never let the modern Chinese culture lost its roots of the traditional one. Besides, being inclusive is also critically important. Weeding out the dross and selecting the best is the only way of keeping vitality.

Ku Hung-Ming was something of an idealist who put great passion in Chinese culture, digging into the great depth of Chinese culture. However, being a well-traveled and knowledgeable person, his opinions were never widely accepted by people at that time. He was not as popular as other scholars like Lu Xun and Hu Shi, and there are not many people reading his books now. In Ku Hung-Ming's era, Chinese people were undoubtedly considered to be weak and incompetent, it seemed that Chinese people were destined to fully abandon traditional Chinese culture, and resort to the western world for solution. Ku Hung-Ming was lonely in terms of thoughts and opinions, but he held his opinions and never changed them. His perseverance and deep love deserved to be respected greatly.

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## CONCLUSION

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The cultural confidence conveyed in this book demonstrates Ku Hung-Ming's deep love towards Chinese culture and Chinese people. Ku Hung-Ming talked about Chinese culture from several aspects, such as Chinaman's characters, Chinese language, and Chinese women. He used the method of comparison and logical deduction to persuade people that Chinese culture is peerless in the world and serves as the remedy of western civilization. His cultural confidence should be highly recommended. People in modern China can never forget the essence of traditional culture. However, Ku Hung-Ming's opinions went to an extreme, because he refused to learn anything from western countries. A really great nation is supposed to keep confident for what it has achieved, and to learn from the mistakes in the past. Besides, a really great nation should be like a young man, who is full of hope and energy, never stops absorbing the good parts of other nations. Only in this way can it make progress and strive to tap the endless potential it has. It applies not only to China, but to all the nations in the world.

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