

# *Transition from Core Socialist Values to Culturalism*

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**Abstract:** These years China has specifically emphasized on its own culture, building up the BRI and applying the culture to foreign policies. Different from core socialist values which seems to be universal values, culturalism promoted in China is a more domestic and centralized ruling tool. Core socialist values seems to emphasize on democracy, but in China, it does not correspond to the Document No.9. Therefore, there is a transition from core socialist values to culturalism which may not officially notified by the government but can be shown on various aspects. This paper analyzes China's domestic policies that support the transition.

**Keywords:** Culturalism, Core Socialist Values with Chinese Characteristics, Confucianism, Ideological control.

## **1. Introduction**

In 2017, Xi Jinping pointed out at the 19th National Congress that the main contradiction in Chinese society has been transformed into the contradiction between the people's growing needs for a better life and the unbalanced and inadequate development, rather than the contradiction between material and cultural needs and backward production. It can be seen that Xi has worked hard to get Chinese people to pay attention to the needs of spiritual culture by mentioning "the growing needs for a better life," intensifying the control of people's ideology to achieve a "better life." Through the investigation, which will explain in the article, although the CCP is reluctant to admit that core socialist values have not been so successful in brainwashing the masses in Chinese society, it has transformed the policy of controlling ideology into culturalism. This paper discusses how China's domestic policy supports the transition to culturalism from three aspects: education, literature and art, and tourism.

## **2. Shift on the Central Direction**

In November 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China demonstrated that the Scientific Outlook on Development was the latest achievement of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics [1]. It was necessary to vigorously promote the construction of ecological civilization, reverse the deterioration of the ecological environment, deepen the reform of the economic system, promote the strategic adjustment of the economic structure, and comprehensively improve the level of open economy [1]. At that time, China put more emphasis on upholding socialist core values and connecting with the world, paying attention to ecological issues. However, ever since 2015, China's policy began to shift towards culture, emphasizing cultural soft power.

The 13th Five-Year Plan clearly pointed out that in cultural construction from 2016 to 2020, under the premise of the core socialist values and the Chinese dream, people should carry forward the traditional Chinese virtues, strengthen the protection of intangible cultural heritage, revitalize traditional crafts, and develop national folk culture [2]. In October 2017, Xi Jinping proposed the slogan of “never forgetting the original intention and remembering the mission (不忘初心, 牢记使命)” at the 19th National Congress [3]. Xi Jinping’s thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) was written into the Party constitution as well as the “four confidences (四个自信),” the Chinese Dream (中国梦), the Belt Road Initiative (一带一路), “four consciousnesses(四个意识),” the political principle of “the party leads everything (党领导一切),” etc. [3].

In 2021, the party launched the 14th Five-Year Plan and the Outline of Vision 2035. It is worth noting that CCP emphasized the necessity to centralize and unify the leadership of the party Central Committee, which means “the party leads everything.” At the same time, it emphasized the protection of cultural heritage and the promotion of traditional culture as well [4].

The shift in China's strategy, although not explicitly expressed in documents, can be seen in the shift of focus on domestic policies. China's official documents do not deny the drawbacks of core socialist values in propaganda, but through interviews with college students, middle school teachers, and some cadres, it is found that both in terms of understanding and implementation, culturalism is more suitable for China.

### 3. What’s Wrong with Core Socialist Values?

Xi Jinping is afraid of peaceful evolution. Socialist core values advocate democracy and freedom, but in China, the premise is authoritarian. Any democracy and freedom are in line with party values. China’s democracy follows the mass line, which is under the direction of the party and only represents the democracy among relevant people in the party. It is different from democracy under the universal value that embraces the voices from everyone in the society. However, through informal interviews with teachers from some top private middle schools, they believe that before 2015, students preferred western democracies and did not understand socialist democracy. These teachers are also more inclined towards democratic and liberal ideas of universal value.

Therefore, Xi is finding and emphasizing a Chinese value that could connect the whole nation together. In interviews with some cadres engaged in education, they believed that after Xi Jinping came to power, the deviation of cognition of socialist values was solved by propaganda of nationalism: students can distinguish that the democracy of the core socialist values and the democracy of the west are two different systems. Under a series of brainwashing policies, more and more public school students began to recognize China's democratic system, as they have a sense of national identity and believe that this system is a national characteristic, who will never allow anyone to deny their nation.

### 4. Shift in Domestic Policies to Support the Transition

#### 4.1. Education

Students are always the easiest to be influenced and mobilized through well-designed education by the party. Therefore, the Ministry of Education plays an important role in the rising consciousness of culture. In 2013, the Ministry of Education made it clear that it would strengthen policy interpretation and pay attention to social issues [5]. Beginning in 2015, the requirements of the Ministry of Education began to gravitate more towards local Chinese culture and achievements rather than world issues. In 2015, the Ministry of Education requested that education need to be reformed in accordance with the 13th Five-Year Plan, and made it clear that it would set off a wave of learning, publicizing

and implementing the spirit of a series of Xi's speeches [6]. In 2016, the Ministry of Education called for the implementation of the 13th Five-Year Plan, which emphasized the Chinese dream and nationalism [7]. In 2018, the Ministry of Education requested to implement Xi Jinping's thoughts on socialism with Chinese characteristics into school education [8]. At the same time, the government held the National College Students' Learning and Achievement Exhibition and Exchange Conference on Xi Jinping's new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which was to organize and carry out the "patriotism and struggle" spiritual education. In 2019, the Ministry of Education further implemented the study of Chinese culture, such as strengthening the integration of teaching materials for morality and the rule of law in primary and secondary schools, teaching materials for ideological and political theory courses in universities, and strengthening the traditional virtue education—cultivating hardworking and strengthening family education [9]. Through a series of policies of the Ministry of Education, it is not difficult to see that 2015 was a watershed. Since then, the country has boldly started to promote the study of Xi Jinping's thought and enhance the concept of nationality and culture.

The Ministry of Education's shift in focus is reflected in the college entrance examination. Through the analysis of the college entrance examination in the past 10 years, it can be found that the first volume of national college entrance examination of Chinese (高考全国一卷语文) has changed from emphasizing universal values to traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism.

In 2012, the whole exam emphasized on the universal values: peace, encouragement, and good personal characteristics. In 2013, the reading part was more diverse, educating students the way to make a good decision and to follow a friendly relationship in the world issues. In 2014, the goal of the exam was to teach students to distinguish between good and evil, to work together, and to develop their worldview. As shown in Figure 1, from 2012 to 2014, in the test with a full score of 150, the proportion of traditional culture is not high, and the only scores were basic poetry comprehension and dictation. In the articles of these exams, there were many stories about scientists and authors from all over the world.

2015 could be a watershed year, which was the first time in this decade that the examination emphasized the superiority of Chinese traditional culture and institutions. This exam introduced the advanced credit system of the Song Dynasty with 9 points, and 25 points was used for honesty and trustworthiness as traditional virtues and encouraged students to have national spirit. Although there was no significant change in the scores of classical Chinese (文言文), more emphasis was placed on comprehension rather than recitation, which made students to spend more time understanding the culture while studying for the exam. In the 60-point essay, the topic required students to write an essay with the traditional virtues of honesty, trustworthiness and filial piety.

In the next few years, the examinations included the filial piety and family relations that Confucianism emphasized, the core of various schools of thought, the achievements of socialism, cultural heritage, Lu Xun and national spirit, and Chinese characteristic culture. The pattern was basically the same as in 2015: the reading part introduced traditional Chinese festivals or culture, and the writing part required students to write about Chinese specialties and emphasized on Confucianism.

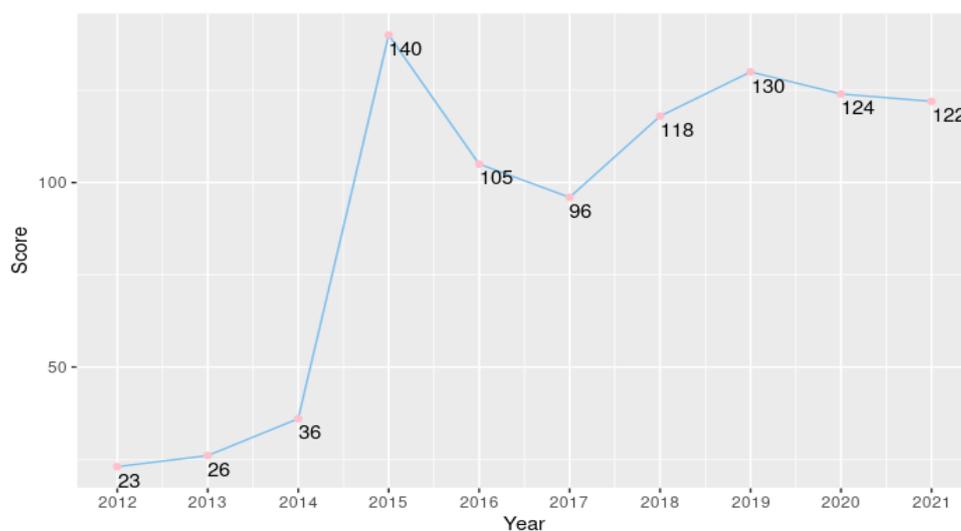


Figure 1. 2012-2021 College Entrance Examination (Chinese) Scores Distribution of Culture

The college entrance examination is a summary of what has been learned, so these topics will often appear in students' daily learning. While the core of the exam each year changes slightly following Xi's instructions, the emphasis on the exam shows that Xi and his government are doing two things. First, by emphasizing traditional festivals, ancient Chinese civilization and technology, and the party's resistance to Japan in WWII, CCP stimulates students' national sentiment. For example, the title of the essay in 2017 is "Chinese Keywords," which requires students to learn symbols that can represent China in their daily accumulation. Citing scriptures is the most popular form of college entrance examination composition, so it is the best solution to introduce ancient culture and national spirit, which means that students should have a lot of cultural reserves in their previous studies. Second, Xi Jinping emphasized Confucianism. Filial piety, kindness to others, honesty and trustworthiness, industriousness, etc., which are all advocated by Confucianism. In general, the policy of the Ministry of Education has shifted from the universal value emphasized by the socialist core values to the Confucian culture with Chinese characteristics, which is reflected in the college entrance examination.

#### 4.2. Forum of Literature and Art Under Xi Jinping

Like the Yan'an Forum of Literature and Art held by Mao Zedong in 1942, Xi Jinping's Forum of Literature and Art in 2014 also pointed out that literature and art serve politics. The core of this forum was that the following literary and art works need to focus on Chinese culture [10]. The coming change is that films involving Confucian values and praising the CCP and nationalism are heavily promoted, but at the same time, many films are also labeled as insulting to China.

A decade ago, the most popular films in the Chinese film market tended to be science-fictions, action, and comedy from worldwide countries. In 2012, domestic films accounted for only 48.5% of the annual movie market [11]. In the following years, the boom in Marvel and Disney films accounted for almost half of the Chinese film market. Democracy, liberty, and kindness are the core values of those movies. The western universal values seem to be the same as the core socialist values advocated by the party, whereas they are different from nature. CCP wants a more centralized and obedient society and is afraid of the "peaceful revolution" from the west. After the 2014 forum, along with the conferences mentioned earlier in the paper that focus on developing traditional culture, the Chinese movie market is full of nationalism. The two *Wolf Warrior* (战狼) movies in 2015 and 2017, *Ne Zha* (哪吒) in 2019, *The Sacrifice* (金刚川) in 2020, and *Mulan* in 2021, are full of strong Confucianism

and brainwashing patriotic education. The *Wolf Warrior* I and II promotes being loyal to the country and always having the courage to fight for the country, which is always popularized by the party's media. Confucian value “*zhiqiang buxi* (自强不息)” and the debating of “shan (善)” versus “e (恶)” among Confucian studies are illustrated in *Ne Zha*. The emergence of films full of Confucian elements and the state's vigorous promotion of them can be seen that CCP hopes that the Chinese film market can be dominated by these elements.

Nevertheless, many of these highly advertised films are not enjoyed by the audiences, such as *The Sacrifice* and *Mulan*. There are also many foreign films that have been labeled as insulting by the CCP because their promotion of Chinese culture does not conform to the values of the CCP. *The Sacrifice* seems to violate western values. The whole film uses five different chapters to tell only one scene: the PLA needed to build up a bridge and fought heroically to die, and the US army was touched by Chinese nationalism and committed suicide. On Weibo (Chinese Twitter), the critics about the film are basically wiped out by the party. The Chinese film channel CCTV6 actively popularize *The Sacrifice*, as it evokes nationalism and is in line with the values of the CCP. This film invites some of China's most popular actors who always act in nationalist film and TV works. Although many Chinese private media do not think the film is good, the official media's advertising of it has occupied Weibo hot trends for many days.

Comparing *Mulan* and *Shang-Chi*, CCP's attitude towards the two films is interesting. *Mulan* is adapted from traditional Chinese folk tales, while *Shang-Chi* is a “westernized” fiction. CCP's official media's publicity for *Mulan* includes buying Weibo's hot trending searches, promoting starring roles and movies through CCTV6, and asking the official media to write articles pushing for *Mulan*'s culture. As for *Shang-Chi*, it is boycotted by the CCP and its netizens just because of a fictional negative image that does not exist. The reason for the boycott is simple, as the characters created by *Shang-Chi* seem to be the western stereotypes. However, the same reason can also be applied to *Mulan*, making the actor look squinting. There are many scenes with Chinese elements in *Shang-Chi*, which is more sophisticated than *Mulan*'s production. Ironically, *Shang-Chi* was banned while *Mulan* was popularized. *Shang-Chi* may not be what CCP thinks of a hero, but it's an innocuous piece of work. In China ten years ago, *Shang-Chi* might have been an excellent superhero movie that fulfills Chinese cultural elements. However, in the current situation, just because *Shang-Chi* touched the Manchu background that CCP does not want to mention, the party and its media completely rejected the whole movie.

Therefore, It is obvious that if the films advocate the traditional culture and eulogize the party leadership, the official media will advertise these movies, whether it is welcomed by the audience or not. In the past, China's film market was much more diverse, so were the values of propaganda. But in recent years, cinema and politics have been closely connected together. Foreign films are often given a political stance by the party. Promoting Confucian culture recognized by the CCP, such as benevolence (仁), filial piety (孝), propriety (礼), and righteousness (义), will be recognized in Chinese market, while propaganda of universal values or considered as peaceful evolution will be resisted. In all, the advertising has switched from diverse movies that emphasize universal values to Confucianism with Chinese values under the party.

### 4.3. Cultural Tourism

Tourism is an opportunity to promote culture and let people know about it. In 2018, the first session of the 13th National People's Congress passed the “Decision on the Institutional Reform Plan of the State Council (关于国务院机构改革方案的决定)” at the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress, and approved the “Institutional Reform Plan of the State Council.” The plan stipulates, “The Ministry of Culture and Tourism (文化和旅游部)” will be established as a whole department.

The responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture and the National Tourism Administration will be integrated, and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism will be established as a component of the State Council. The Ministry of Culture and the National Tourism Administration will no longer be retained. Official documents of this new department stipulate that it is responsible for discovering, guiding, promoting, and supervising the development and construction of cultural and tourism industries; it is also responsible for promoting the protection, promotion and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage [12].

The combination of the Culture and Tourism departments is one of the best evidences to demonstrate that the party is turning its focus from red tourism to construct the party by following core socialist values to cultural tourism to evoke people's recognition of culture and nationalism. As CCP emphasizes culture at various conferences, each province has begun to have special advertising for local unique culture tourism. In the report of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, it specifically points out that the promotion of culture can stimulate tourism, making cultural tourism to be a consciousness for all the Chinese civilians [13]. Each province is encouraged to have a slogan for their culture tourism, for example, Shandong as "hao ke shandong huan ying nin (好客山东欢迎您)," Henan as "zhuangmei zhongyuan, laojia Henan (壮美中原, 老家河南)," "jiaoxiang silu, ruyi gansu (交响丝路, 如意甘肃)," etc.

Henan's tourism industry has also developed considerably due to cultural propaganda. As a province full of history that has witnessed the evolution of Chinese culture, Henan has gone through the change of eight dynasties, and has always been neglected by the state before. In recent years, Henan has been praised and promoted by the central government many times for its cultural propaganda. Henan has promoted its culture through a series of activities such as collecting cultural propaganda slogans and holding culturally distinctive festival galas which have repeatedly topped the Weibo trending. For example, when *Tanggong Yeyan* (唐宫夜宴) hit the top trending on Weibo, the media intensely pushed out articles that introduced Henan's culture, focusing on Luoyang where was the origin of *Tanggong Yeyan*.

Luoyang was a prosperous city in ancient China with splendid art and architectural works. However, it used to be a poor city in the PRC and the ancient works were not well protected. Ten years ago, when Xi Jinping first came to power, he promoted party building. Henan Hongqi Canal has been vigorously developed as a red tourist attraction. However, the local infrastructure is weak and cannot receive many guests; and because it has no features, it cannot attract people other than party members who must study to travel. As national policies began to emphasize cultural tourism in 2015, Henan began to develop its own cultural characteristics. As the ancient capital of thirteen dynasties, Luoyang has famous attractions such as Longmen Grottoes, White Horse Temple, and Xuanzang's hometown, and is regarded as a key city for cultural tourism. These ancient buildings have also been renovated. Although there is no official data on the annual passenger flow of the Longmen Grottoes, through the reports from social media such as TikTok, and interviews with local residents, it demonstrates that more and more people visit the Longmen Grottoes every year. In addition, Luoyang's special food and water seats have also launched special packages for out-of-town tourists with the increase in passenger flow.

As Henan focused more on cultural tourism, one of the most apparent influences is the increase in GDP. In 2020, Henan received 551 million tourists with tourism receipts of RMB 481.3 billion [14]. Illustrated in Figure 2&3, the increasing portion of the tertiary industry of Henan GDP and the tourism expenditure per capita, especially after 2015, can bring many economic benefits. In the Spring Festival of 2021, the total tourism revenue of Henan will be 14.759 billion and the total number of people will be 34.0068 million, ranking fourth in the country [15]. Even during the pandemic, the tourism industry in Henan showed a trend of high growth, which illustrated the indispensable role of propaganda on traditional culture [15]. It is also predicted that During the 14th Five-Year Plan period,

through the implementation of the strategy of integrating culture, tourism, culture and innovation, the comprehensive income of tourism in Henan will exceed 1 trillion yuan, the comprehensive contribution of tourism will account for more than 12% of GDP, and the added value of cultural industries will account for more than 5% of GDP, and cultural tourism and innovation will become the province's strategic industries [16]. Therefore, when the same strategy can be applied to the national economy, it can boost China's economic development.

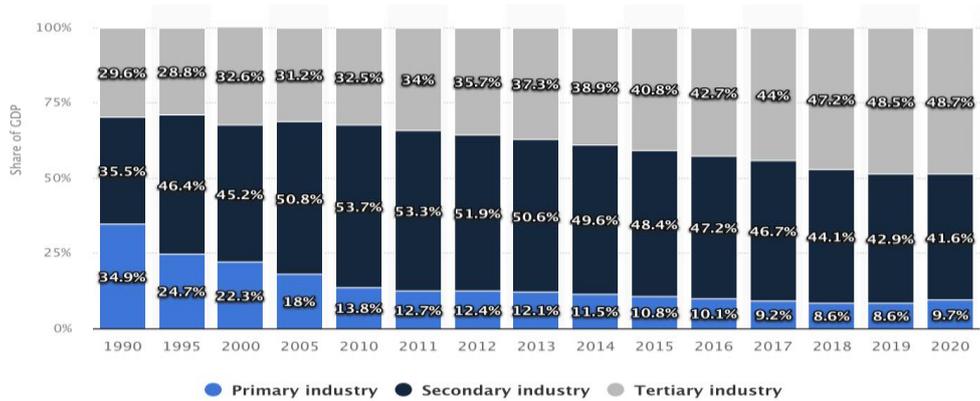


Figure 2. Distribution of the gross domestic product (GDP) across economic sectors in Henan province in China 1990-2020 [17].

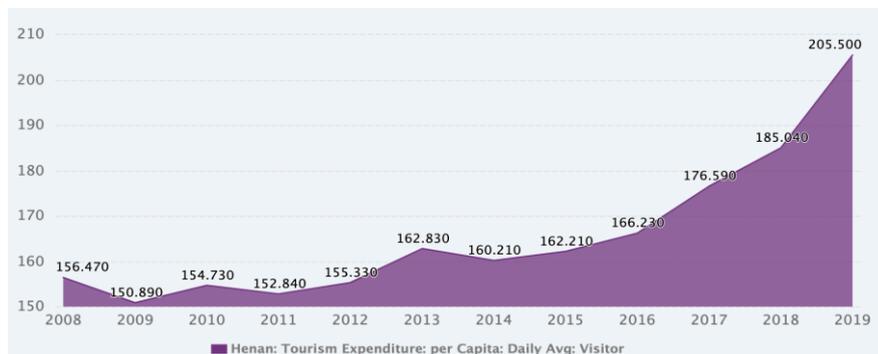


Figure 3. China's Henan: Tourism Expenditure: per Capita: Daily Avg: Visitor from 1999 to 2019 [18].

Therefore, following the guidance from the central government and the forum of literature and art, the shift from red core socialist values to culturalism is a great success in Henan, evidenced by its propaganda on traditional culture and the economic benefits from cultural tourism.

## 5. Conclusion

Culturalism helps China in the following ways. First, it brings huge economic benefits. Just like Henan's promotion of culture brings huge tourism revenue, China's promotion of culture not only drives domestic population tourism, but also attracts foreigners to travel or more overseas Chinese to explore their own culture, which contributes to China's GDP and economic growth. Second, CCP can better control ideology through culturalism. Emphasizing that a culture with more traditional Chinese characteristics can stimulate the cultural identity of the masses, and corresponding policies, especially education policies, have cultivated a group of potential, or directly cultivated, nationalists. The masses are taught obedience and patience, but not the rationality of the self-conscious resistance of Legalism (法家). People are brainwashed into thinking that the CCP revives traditional culture in modern times,

but they forget that in addition to obedience, Confucianism and other Chinese ideas inherently emphasize kindness and self-worth.

The democratic, liberty, and legalized society promoted by core socialist values are fundamentally different from universal values. The CCP needs a seemingly democratic society that can express free speech praising the party, and a law-based society that follows the party laws. The peaceful evolution of universal values makes Xi Jinping worry about the crisis, and he passionately endorses China's unique historical and cultural values. Confucianism has been deeply rooted in China as an orthodox thought promoted by various dynasties for thousands of years, so Xi promotes Confucianism as a key point, arousing nationalism among the masses.

In conclusion, through educational policy, propaganda of literature and art works, and cultural tourism, CCP has successfully transferred China's society into culturalism, along with economic benefits. Nevertheless, China should be cautious about staying too far away from "being in line with the world (与世界接轨)." An overemphasis on culturalism may reduce Xi's fears of peaceful evolution, but it drives China away from universal values. CCP emphasizes that the purpose of culturalism is not to revive culture, but to help CCP legitimize itself; and the transformation of society from core socialist values to culturalism is the result of CCP's legitimization as well.

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