Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

"Deepening Traditional Foundations": On the Innovative Development of the Theory of Cultural Leadership under the "Second Integration"

Hao Luo

School of Marxism, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China
luohao@nenu.edu.cn

Abstract. Cultural leadership is crucial to the future and destiny of the Party and the nation, as well as to the realization of the goal of building a culturally strong country. It is a key component of Xi Jinping's cultural thought. The "Second Integration" has opened a new chapter in the development of Xi Jinping's cultural thought by fostering an innovative theoretical construction of cultural leadership through deeply rooting its traditional foundations. This theory, inheriting the traditional ideas of cultural leadership, endows cultural leadership with the dual features of ideological dominance and the cultural tradition's underlying tone. It enriches three forms of power: the power of theoretical construction, the power of value guidance, and the power of work management. It innovates a people-centered, practical path for implementation and comprehensively enhances both the domestic governance effectiveness and the international discourse influence of cultural leadership. Under the impetus of the "Second Integration," the theory of cultural leadership has realized a faithful yet innovative development of Marxist leadership theory in its theoretical contributions; strengthened the ideological cohesion in the practical dimension for building a culturally strong country; and contributed Chinese wisdom to global cultural development by asserting the subjectivity of Chinese culture on the world stage.

Keywords: Cultural leadership, Second Integration, Xi Jinping's cultural thought

1. Introduction

Upholding the Party's cultural leadership is a rigid principle essential for safeguarding national ideological security, maintaining political stability, and promoting cultural prosperity and development. In June 2023, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the Symposium on Cultural Inheritance and Development that "to remain faithful to principles is to uphold the fundamental system of Marxism's guiding position in the ideological domain, to uphold the fundamental requirement of the 'Two Integrations,' and to uphold the Chinese Communist Party's cultural leadership and the cultural subjectivity of the Chinese nation" [1]. These "Three Faithful Adherences" are closely linked and mutually reinforcing, anchoring a clear direction for cultural construction. The fundamental system of Marxism's ideological guidance serves as the foundation for cultural construction. The fundamental requirement of the "Two Integrations" offers crucial

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

methodological guidance. Upholding the Party's cultural leadership and the cultural subjectivity of the Chinese nation indicates the goal of cultural construction. The Party's cultural leadership and the "Two Integrations" are mutually conditional and interact dynamically. On the one hand, only by upholding the Party's cultural leadership and establishing its authoritative leadership can the "Two Integrations" be advanced in the correct direction; on the other hand, the "Two Integrations," characterized by "integration opening up space for innovation" [1], provide new ideas and methods to consolidate cultural leadership. The key significance of the "Second Integration" lies in its unique innovative value. As "another ideological emancipation," it enables us "to fully utilize the precious resources of China's outstanding traditional culture within a broader cultural space and explore theoretical and institutional innovations oriented toward the future" [1]. Cultural leadership has always been rooted in the practice of governing the country and consolidating ideology. When the theoretical innovation of the "Second Integration" deeply aligns with the contemporary needs of ideological construction, it inevitably leads to a pioneering theoretical construction of cultural leadership. Based on the fertile soil of traditional culture, this paper asks: How exactly does the "Second Integration" promote a paradigmatic breakthrough in the theory of cultural leadership? What profound impacts will this theoretical innovation bring? This study attempts to construct an analytical framework of "classic paradigm — theoretical innovation — value connotation" to systematically elaborate on the innovative development of the Party's cultural leadership theory from the perspective of the "Second Integration" and its significance in the current era.

2. Evolution of the theory of cultural leadership

From a macro perspective on the development of cultural leadership theory, Marx and Engels provided a historical materialist explanation of the emergence of cultural leadership, laying the foundational premise for the theory. Lenin's doctrines of indoctrination and cultural revolution further catalyzed the transformation of cultural leadership from theoretical discussion to practical application. Gramsci explored the methods by which Western European countries competed for cultural leadership, broadening the scope and approaches of research on the topic. The Chinese Communist Party, adhering to historical initiative, has continually endowed cultural leadership with new connotations according to the primary tasks of different historical periods.

2.1. Classic foundation: Marx and Engels' historical materialist explanation of cultural leadership

Although Marx and Engels did not explicitly define cultural leadership, their cultural theory contained rich ideas related to it, thus laying a solid theoretical foundation. Employing historical materialism, they explained the formation of cultural leadership. The theory of ideological production in The German Ideology reveals the core mechanism behind the emergence of cultural leadership. First, cultural leadership belongs to the ideological realm, and the production of ideological material depends on the production of material goods. The emergence of cultural leadership is not an arbitrary notion of a particular class but is determined by the level of productive forces. Second, regarding ownership of leadership, the economically dominant class controls cultural leadership. "The ruling ideas of each age are those of the ruling class; that is, a class that is the ruling material force of society is simultaneously the ruling intellectual force" [2]. Regarding the development direction of cultural leadership, Marx and Engels criticized the falseness of bourgeois ideology and implicitly assigned the proletariat the mission to establish advanced cultural leadership. "Ideology is a contradictory unity of universal and particular interests" [3]. The

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

bourgeoisie "imposes its own ideas as universal, portraying them as the only rational and universally valid ideas" [2]. Meanwhile, the collapse of bourgeois false ideology is foreseen: "Once it is no longer necessary to represent particular interests as universal, or 'universal' things as dominant, the entire illusion that the rule of a given class is merely the rule of certain ideas will naturally disappear" [2]. The proletariat is precisely such a class that, having no special interests of its own, does not need to cloak its class ideas with universality. Therefore, only the proletariat can undertake the historic mission of building advanced cultural leadership. Furthermore, Marx and Engels emphasized the dual importance of "ideological weapons" and "material weapons" in seizing cultural leadership. "The weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons" [2]. The primary way for the proletariat to seize cultural leadership is to master material weapons, seize political power, and abolish private ownership. "Once theory is grasped by the masses, it becomes a material force" [2]. Only by deeply engaging with and gaining the recognition of the masses can power be effectively exercised, thereby possessing the great strength to change the world.

2.2. Practical transformation: Lenin's deepening of cultural leadership theory

In confronting and opposing various erroneous ideologies, Lenin profoundly revealed the importance of the Party's control over cultural leadership, advocating the use of "indoctrination" and "cultural revolution" to seize and maintain cultural leadership, with the core aim of strengthening Party leadership. During his struggle against these erroneous trends, Lenin defended the orthodox status of Marxism in the ideological realm and developed the idea of cultural leadership. He firmly criticized economism and reformist tendencies that neglected political struggle, emphasizing that the proletarian party must use the theory of scientific socialism for indoctrination to overcome the limitations of trade unionism. Against the "absolute autonomy" advocated by the proletarian cultural faction, Lenin exposed the dangers of divorcing cultural construction from political leadership, clearly stating that cultural construction must be placed under Party leadership. Meanwhile, he criticized the absurd rejection of all cultural heritage by the proletarian cultural faction, noting that Marxism "absorbs and transforms all valuable elements from over two thousand years of human thought and cultural development" [4], advocating for the "sublation" and absorption of beneficial achievements from capitalist cultural heritage. Lenin promoted the transition of cultural leadership from theory to practice through "indoctrination" and "cultural revolution." First, indoctrination raises the ideological and theoretical level of the masses. Socialist consciousness does not spontaneously arise in workers' minds; relaxing socialist ideological indoctrination among workers is tantamount to conceding to the bourgeois ideological system. Second, through the "cultural revolution," the backwardness of Russian culture was overcome, allowing widespread dissemination of communist ideas. Russia, as a typical agrarian country, not only had low national cultural quality but also "the Communist Party members in management lacked culture" [4]. The "cultural revolution" was an important means to improve national cultural quality, mobilize the political enthusiasm of the people, and realize cultural leadership. Regarding the core of cultural leadership, Lenin emphasized that strengthening Party leadership is the fundamental guarantee for consolidating cultural leadership. Lenin highly valued the Party's organizational discipline; a tightly organized and strictly disciplined "elite" party was a key experience that contributed to the success of the Russian revolution and provided a strong guarantee for cultural prosperity. After Lenin's death, Soviet cultural leadership experienced a process from excessive rigidity and lack of vitality to voluntary abandonment and relinquishment. "From a conceptual standpoint, the disintegration of a given ideology can bring about the demise of an entire era" [5]. The evolution of Soviet cultural leadership offers important warnings for today's construction of cultural leadership in China.

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2.3. Theoretical reference: Gramsci's "war of position" theory and the contest for cultural hegemony

Gramsci explored the mechanisms by which the proletariat in Western European countries contests cultural leadership, proposing the strategy of a cultural "war of position" to seize cultural hegemony and dismantle the "trenches and fortresses" of capitalist society. Based on the differences between Eastern and Western societies, Gramsci systematically developed the theory of cultural leadership. Eastern countries, exemplified by Russia, lack an independent civil society and represent the traditional state of class domination and oppression revealed by historical materialism, characterized essentially by violence and authoritarianism. Western societies, by contrast, have developed civil society alongside political society; the state's rule is maintained not only through prisons and the military but also through the ruling class's culture. In Prison Notebooks, Gramsci stated: "The force of any historical bloc, any established order, lies not only in the ruling class's violence and the coercive capacity of the state apparatus but in the consent of the governed to the ruling class's inherent worldview."[6] Regarding the subjects contesting cultural leadership, Gramsci further proposed that organic intellectuals serve as the combat fortresses in this cultural struggle. Unlike traditional intellectuals, organic intellectuals emerge from their own class and enable that class to develop a clear self-consciousness. They play a crucial role in mediating social contradictions and forging consensus. Regarding strategies to seize cultural leadership, Gramsci advocated a "molecular invasion" war of position. In bourgeois states with a well-developed civil society and pervasive bourgeois cultural infiltration, the proletariat must persistently encircle bourgeois cultural institutions from the periphery and subvert the civil society's mechanisms of consent to overthrow bourgeois rule. Gramsci's emphasis on the ideological nature inherent in culture enriched Marxist theories of cultural leadership. However, his theory's overemphasis on the superstructure's influence over the economic base may risk sliding into utopianism.

2.4. Chinese practice: the communist party of China's proactive construction of cultural leadership

Since its founding, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has respected cultural development laws and seized historical initiative, consistently prioritizing the seizure and consolidation of cultural leadership throughout revolutionary, construction, and reform periods. In the face of national humiliation, popular suffering, and cultural obscurity since modern times, the Chinese people experienced a long phase of cultural and ideological disorientation. Against this backdrop, during the New Democratic Revolution, the CPC actively undertook the historic mission of reestablishing cultural subjectivity and seizing cultural leadership. Mao Zedong stated in On New Democracy that "since the current Chinese revolution cannot be separated from the leadership of the Chinese proletariat, the present new Chinese culture cannot be separated from the leadership of the Chinese proletarian cultural thought, that is, cannot be separated from the leadership of communist thought."[7] This affirms the significance of guiding cultural development with communist ideology —Marxism forms an integral part of cultural leadership and serves as the scientific criterion for selecting traditional and bourgeois culture. During the socialist revolution and construction period, the CPC actively constructed the cultural superstructure through policies like the "Double Hundred Policy" and the "Two-Use Method," further strengthening cultural leadership. The "Double Hundred Policy" not only enhanced the new regime's mobilizing power but also stimulated socialist cultural creativity. The "Two-Use Method" reflected the CPC's characteristic of critical absorption and inclusive openness in building cultural leadership. In the new era of reform, opening-up, and

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

socialist modernization, the Party proposed to "grasp both hands firmly," fully reflecting its initiative and creativity in consolidating cultural leadership. Domestically, the CPC's construction of cultural leadership began with ideological unification, reasserting the thought line of "emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts." Internationally, it has strengthened cultural exchanges while resolutely resisting Western cultural infiltration.

Since the new era, confronted with complex ideological field situations, the Party has actively strengthened its "leadership" and "management" in expanding ideological and public opinion positions and promoting cultural prosperity. "Ideology determines the direction and path of cultural progress and development."[8] The key to controlling the leadership of propaganda, ideological, and cultural work lies in grasping the fundamental leadership over ideological work. "Ideological work is an extremely important task of the Party."[8] "The leadership, management, and discourse power of ideological work must be firmly grasped at all times, lest irreversible historic mistakes be made."[8] At the 2023 Symposium on Cultural Heritage and Development, General Secretary Xi Jinping explicitly put forward the concept of "cultural leadership." In the important guidelines of the "Seven Efforts," "Fourteen Emphases," and "Nine Adherences," he prominently placed "upholding and strengthening the Party's overall leadership over propaganda, ideological, and cultural work" at the forefront, providing fundamental guidance for the Party's cultural ideological work in the new era and marking a new stage in the Party's construction of cultural leadership. Overall, the CPC's practice of proactively constructing and consolidating cultural leadership, united with and leading the Chinese people, demonstrates its profound cultural mission awareness and conscious innovation in both theory and practice.

3. The "second combination" and the innovative development of cultural leadership

The Communist Party of China's theoretical innovation consistently balances summarizing historical experience with forward-looking anticipation of future development. This process both reflects a retrospective refinement of practical laws and demonstrates a proactive, anticipatory grasp of historical initiative. Regarding the interactive relationship between the "Second Combination" and the theory of cultural leadership, their evolution follows a trajectory of "practice-led — theoretical consciousness — innovation-driven." Even before these concepts were formally articulated, the Party had spontaneously practiced the integration of Marxism with China's outstanding traditional culture in its cultural leadership efforts, accumulating rich experience in exercising cultural leadership. The practical foundation provides a concrete basis for theoretical innovation, while systematic theoretical construction, in turn, reactivates and promotes both theoretical and practical innovation. The formal introduction of the "Second Combination" and cultural leadership theories has driven the theory of cultural leadership beyond classical paradigms, further elevating it within the CPC's practice, achieving a systematic transformation from a static characterization and form of power to a dynamic functioning and optimized innovation of power.

3.1. Endowing a dual character: the organic synthesis of ideology and traditional culture

Ideology is the fundamental attribute of cultural leadership. Theories of cultural leadership by Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, and the Communist Party of China all emphasize the paramount importance of ideology. Due to historical constraints and differences in ideological construction tasks, although they laid the foundation for cultural leadership theory, none developed a systematic analytical framework regarding the relationship between ideology and their own traditional culture.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

General Secretary Xi Jinping, summarizing the Party's historical experience and grounded in the great practice of the new era, creatively proposed the theoretical proposition of the "Two Combinations." Under the influence of the "Two Combinations," cultural leadership thought both inherits the core essence of Marxist ideological theory and transcends the historical limitations of classical theory. As Xi Jinping emphasized at the Symposium on Cultural Heritage and Development, "Combination itself is innovation, and it opens broad spaces for theoretical and practical innovation."[1] The "Second Combination" is far more than the contextual backdrop for the emergence of cultural leadership theory; it substantively influences cultural leadership by creatively endowing it with a dual character that combines ideological leadership and the underpinning tone of cultural tradition.

This dual character is not a mere simple superposition but a bidirectional, organic synthesis. On one hand, Marxist ideology critically reconstructs traditional culture, excavating those parts compatible with cultural governance, promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture to serve the consolidation of the modern mainstream ideology. On the other hand, traditional culture localizes and adapts ideology, enhancing Marxism's practical character and enriching its theoretical expression through China's excellent traditional culture. The emotional identification mechanisms of traditional culture complement the rational persuasive functions of ideology, thus enabling cultural leadership to form the advantageous fusion of "reason and sentiment."

The organic synthesis of this dual character further strengthens the subjectivity of cultural leadership. The Party's cultural leadership epitomizes cultural confidence and cultural subjectivity. Ideology gains historical depth through traditional culture, while traditional culture achieves epochal transformation via ideology. This synthesis responds to the historical and cultural debates of ancient and modern, East and West, clarifying the critical question of what kind of culture should be built to lead the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and accomplishing a legitimacy reconstruction of cultural leadership. For the first time, cultural leadership is endowed with such a dual character, inaugurating a new frontier in the development of cultural leadership theory.

3.2. Enriching the three forms: theoretical construction, value guidance, and the restructuring of the management dimension

Cultural leadership manifests as a holistic, comprehensive, and integrated system, which does not exist in abstraction but is realized and operated through specific forms of power. Specifically, cultural leadership primarily comprises three forms: the power of theoretical construction, the power of value guidance, and the power of work management. Under the empowerment of the "Second Combination," these three forms have been enriched. In the dimension of theoretical construction, this is embodied by confidence in civilizational dialogue and consciousness in cultural inheritance; in the dimension of value guidance, the connotation of values has been expanded, and the effectiveness of value leadership enhanced, with the theoretical core of the "Second Combination" providing new ideas for the value guidance model; in the dimension of work management, a dual transformation has occurred in both the field and methods of work management.

First, cultural leadership is expressed as the power of theoretical construction, namely the Party's guiding authority to systematically construct a cultural theoretical system and lead the development direction of cultural thought. As a key component of cultural leadership, its core lies in strengthening the ideological foundation of cultural development through theoretical innovation. According to Marx's theory of spiritual production, the ruling class is the producer of theory, and as the vanguard of the proletariat, the Communist Party of China holds the power of theoretical

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

construction. Theory, as a core element of culture, plays a leading role in cultural development. Whether a party can construct theories worthy of the people and the times is a test of its political capability. From the perspective of the "Second Combination," the power of theoretical construction is manifested as theoretical confidence in horizontal civilizational dialogue and theoretical consciousness in vertical cultural inheritance.

Horizontally, it is expressed as theoretical confidence. The legitimacy of theoretical construction does not arise from self-referential discourse but requires recognition from the domestic populace and must be examined within the global knowledge production system. For a long time, Western countries have attempted to suppress China's theories and discourse by smearing and distorting China's image—such as stigmatizing China as lacking philosophy or rational thinking. The "Second Combination," as a highly distinctive theoretical achievement, has demonstrated China's original theoretical capacity. Under the influence of the "Second Combination," "cultural leadership" further displays the theoretical insight and creativity of Chinese Communists. Not only are culture and theory independent from the West, but the leadership and construction of culture and theory also do not depend on the West. Chinese people hold the original rights to concept generation and interpretative systems, demonstrating high cultural and theoretical confidence.

Vertically, it is embodied in the conscious generative construction of theory. Theoretical construction is not a mere conversion of discourse but a critical inheritance and transformation of traditional theoretical resources. In the practice of Chinese-style modernization, the "Second Combination" continually stimulates the vitality of theoretical innovation. This generative theoretical construction guarantees the continuity of Chinese culture, embodies the dialectical unity of "tradition, modernity, and the future," activates theoretical genes through critical inheritance, refines theoretical paradigms through practical examination, and expands theoretical boundaries oriented toward the future.

Second, cultural leadership is expressed as the power of value guidance, namely the Party's authoritative leadership in establishing mainstream value orientations and consolidating social value consensus. As the core support of cultural leadership, its fundamental essence lies in shaping the spiritual core of cultural development through the socialist core values. Under the perspective of the "Second Combination," the innovative development of the power of value guidance presents three major breakthroughs. First, China's outstanding traditional culture expands the connotative boundaries of values. Traditional culture is an important source nourishing the socialist core values and contains abundant ideological and moral resources.[8] Concepts such as "the people are the foundation of the state," "harmony between humanity and nature," and "benevolence and love" are deeply rooted in the Chinese people's blood and have formed values that are practiced unconsciously in daily life. The Communist Party of China must apply Marxist methods to interpret traditional values in a modern context and guide the people to consciously practice them. Second, the integration of traditional culture enhances the practical effectiveness of value guidance. Power is not the ultimate goal of the Communist Party of China; rather, using power to resonate with values and build a common ideological foundation is the Party's pursuit. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: "For a value to truly take effect, it must be integrated into social life so that people can perceive and understand it in practice."[9] China's outstanding traditional culture has long been embedded in the Chinese people's blood. Using it to nurture the socialist core values can effectively improve people's understanding and recognition of these values, promoting their internalization and externalization in behavior. Third, the "Second Combination" itself, as a significant theoretical innovation, transmits a spiritual core of "innovation, openness, confidence, and integration." This not only enriches the theoretical foundation of value guidance but also provides new ideas for its

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

practical implementation. The specific content of value guidance must remain constant, but the modes of guidance should be diverse and innovative, embodying the attitudes of innovation, openness, confidence, and integration.

Third, cultural leadership is expressed as the power of cultural work management, namely the Party's authoritative coordination through establishing and improving the cultural governance system and integrating cultural development practices. As the implementation guarantee of cultural leadership, its fundamental purpose is to promote steady and long-term cultural development through diversified management. The "Second Combination" has not only triggered transformations in specific practical fields of work management but also driven optimization in management methods.

Firstly, in specific practical fields, the power of cultural work management can be divided into cultural resource management and cultural creation management. In terms of cultural resource management, China's outstanding traditional culture, as a treasure trove accumulated over five thousand years of civilization, contains both cultural genes awaiting activation and feudal dross requiring critical deconstruction. The "Second Combination" broadens the path for cultural construction and raises the requirements for managing cultural resources. It encourages the use of more advanced technologies, improved systems, and greater efforts to explore, identify, and transform traditional culture. Regarding cultural creation management, Marxism is employed to activate the excellent elements within China's outstanding traditional culture. General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out: "Marxism brought advanced ideological theory to China, activating the genes of Chinese civilization with the light of truth."[1] On one hand, Marxist methods are used to screen and transform traditional culture, endowing it with new contemporary connotations; on the other hand, ideological front management is strengthened to ensure that cultural creation firmly adheres to the socialist direction.

Secondly, cultural work management must rely on institutional constraints while also emphasizing flexible management methods. Traditional cultural ideas such as "harmony and integration," "people-centeredness," and "unity of righteousness and benefit" contain rich wisdom on flexible management. The idea of "harmony and integration" emphasizes promoting mutual communication and common development among different things on the basis of recognizing their differences, providing methodological guidance for cultural work management. Management should respect cultural diversity, promote communication and fusion among different cultures, and form a symbiotic pattern of "unity in diversity." The "people-centered" philosophy offers fundamental principles for cultural work management. In his article Cultural Nurturing of Harmony, written during his tenure in Zhejiang, Xi Jinping stated: "Human beings are essentially cultural beings, not 'reified' beings; they are active and holistic, not rigid and 'one-dimensional.'"[10] Cultural work management should not merely transmit policies from top to bottom but should serve the free and comprehensive development of people, enhancing the cultural sense of gain among the populace. The concept of "valuing righteousness over profit, and unifying righteousness and profit" provides a value orientation for cultural work management. Ancients esteemed morality and restrained selfish interests—not by ignoring profit but by emphasizing the harmony of righteousness and profit, prioritizing righteousness before profit. Guided by this traditional concept of "righteousness and profit," cultural work management correctly handles the relationship between economic and social benefits, promoting the healthy development of cultural undertakings and cultural industries. The transformation brought by traditional culture's nurturing enriches the penetrating power of cultural work management.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

3.3. Innovative path of exercise: people-centered, life-oriented practice

Cultural leadership power exists not only in various forms of authority but also must be realized through the lived practices of the people. Consolidating a "shared ideological foundation" across society and mobilizing the greatest possible voluntary, unified action by the populace is the core pursuit of cultural leadership.[11] Under the influence of the "Second Combination," traditional culture, with its strong cohesion and appeal, activates the initiative of social subjects and unites social consensus by responding to the needs of the people, thereby enabling the descent and expansion of cultural leadership power beyond traditional boundaries.

First, through the permeation of traditional culture, cultural leadership power better serves the people by "promoting the unity of satisfying people's cultural needs and enhancing their spiritual strength."[8] Cultural identity and faith pursuits are important components of the people's spiritual and cultural needs. The "contest between ancient and modern, East and West" exists not only in academic theory but also in popular cognition. Phenomena such as "disbelief" or "pseudo-belief" in Marxism and a widespread lack of confidence in traditional culture remain prevalent. The absence of cultural identity is the greatest obstacle to the effective exercise of cultural leadership. The mainstream ideology, combined with the popularization of outstanding traditional culture in everyday life, permeates people's daily experiences. For example, the success of the film Nezha 2 is not only due to its selection of familiar traditional cultural elements but also because the film aligns with Marxist values such as justice, the spirit of struggle, and the relationship between humanity and nature. Excellent works of art fill the spiritual void of the people and satisfy their strong desire for spiritual and cultural belonging. At the same time, Chinese outstanding traditional culture combined with Marxism carries both the guiding role of ideology and the nobility of moral values, raising the people's cultural and ideological quality, strengthening their spiritual power, and elevating their spiritual realm.

Second, the "Second Combination" breaks the one-way transmission model of traditional cultural leadership power and promotes two-way interaction between Party leadership and people's participation. Cultural leadership requires not only the helm of the proletarian Party but also the recognition of the people, and this recognition is not passive acceptance but active creation. The people are both the "playwrights" and "actors" of history.[8] The full respect for the people's subjectivity and the full stimulation of their creative spirit are the sources of cultural innovation vitality and the test of the exercise of cultural leadership power. The government provides top-level design to guide direction, while the people consciously explore new modes of expression. As traditional culture is innovatively transformed, the authority and guidance of cultural leadership power are realized on the ground. Finally, the "Second Combination" promotes the exercise of cultural leadership power from "passive defense" to "anticipatory preparedness," enhancing its pioneering role. This is reflected not only in the Party's resoluteness and decisiveness in resisting erroneous thoughts but also in its capacity for planning and strategic composure in mobilizing historical subjectivity. The Party unites the people around itself, leads them in common struggle, and ultimately forms a historic synergy of the Party leading the people to jointly advance the construction of a culturally strong nation.

3.4. Promoting power optimization: enhancing the domestic governance effectiveness and international discursive influence of cultural leadership

Cultural leadership power must not only be "activated" but also "strengthened." The "Second Combination" has expanded the application scenarios of cultural leadership and further promoted its

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

optimization and enhancement. Through the structural reshaping of power operation logic, it has improved both national governance effectiveness and international discourse influence.

At the level of domestic governance, the optimization of cultural leadership is reflected in the elevation of Chinese excellent traditional culture from a cultural resource to a core component of governance. This involves transforming traditional culture into an integral part of institutional design. For instance, the "mediation culture" in Zhejiang's "Fengqiao Experience" translates the traditional judicial philosophy of "valuing harmony and settling disputes outside of court" into a grassroots conflict resolution mechanism, allowing the public to feel a cultural affinity with modern policy. Cultural leadership thus transcends the mere transmission of policies; through the deep integration of traditional culture and modern governance, people move from passive compliance to active identification with governance. Secondly, traditional culture can be used to interpret contemporary policies and strengthen emotional resonance. The term xiaokang (moderate prosperity), for example, is used to describe a key stage of China's modernization strategy, aligning with the people's aspirations for a better life. In this process, traditional culture becomes a bridge linking policy discourse with public sentiment, laying a deeper cultural foundation for enhancing governance effectiveness.

At the level of international discourse power, the optimization of cultural leadership points toward enhancing civilizational appeal. Socialist culture with Chinese characteristics transcends capitalist culture by advocating cultural leadership rather than cultural control.[12] Western cultural hegemony, deeply rooted in capitalist logic, seeks to transform cultural influence into control over other nations' cultures, thereby extracting political and economic gains through cultural exports and interventions. In contrast, the "Second Combination" optimizes cultural leadership not by binding others ideologically or coercing through interests, but by achieving discursive elevation through resonance in values. First, it taps into shared values of humanity embedded in traditional culture. Influenced by traditional ethical concepts such as "harmony between man and nature" and the "righteousness vs. profit" debate, China promotes the ecological concept that "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" as a response to global climate change. This calls for the protection of the common home of humanity and evokes cross-civilizational resonance. Second, traditional culture is employed to reclaim interpretive power over modern global issues. The reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Beijing exemplifies this shift, where China replaced the Western narrative of "democratic alliances" with the traditional notion of "valuing harmony," resolving interstate conflicts through dialogue and consultation. This peace-oriented approach to global governance is more likely to gain acceptance from other nations. Under the influence of the "Second Combination," the optimization of cultural leadership does not rely on external validation but instead grows from within. In essence, this represents the development of a higher-dimensional form of cultural leadership power.

4. The value significance of the "second combination" in empowering cultural leadership

Elucidating the value of the "Second Combination" in empowering cultural leadership not only explores the operational mechanisms of cultural leadership but also reflects on how the Communist Party of China (CPC) grasps the laws of cultural development. Theoretically, it promotes the innovation of Marxist cultural leadership theory while staying true to its foundational principles; in practice, it injects ideological cohesion into the construction of a culturally strong nation; on the global stage, it offers Chinese wisdom to the cultural development of other nations through the subjectivity of Chinese culture.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

4.1. Theoretical contribution: the innovation of marxist cultural leadership theory with fidelity to its core

The fusion of the "Second Combination" and "cultural leadership" represents an innovative continuation of Marxist cultural leadership theory. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasizes: "Only by upholding fundamental principles can we avoid losing direction or making subversive mistakes; only through innovation can we keep pace with the times and lead the times."[13] "Upholding fundamental principles" means safeguarding the soul of Marxism—namely, upholding the guiding status of Marxist ideology in the CPC's construction of cultural leadership. "Innovation" lies in how the "Second Combination" injects cultural leadership theory with deep civilizational roots. Marxist classics have always explored cultural leadership in terms of the class attributes of ideology. On this basis, the CPC has creatively integrated cultural leadership into China's fine traditional culture, thereby endowing the theory of cultural leadership with renewed vitality and enduring influence. Looking back at Soviet history, under Stalin, the "cultural" nature of cultural leadership was gradually supplanted by a focus on "power." Later, Gorbachev's "new thinking" directly abandoned the socialist path altogether. This binary dilemma—either rigidification or Westernization—reveals that when cultural leadership lacks the nourishment of a culturally subjective foundation, even with the outer shell of power, it is liable to deviate toward the perilous road of ideological subversion. The construction of cultural leadership is also a journey toward the awakening of cultural subjectivity. Only by upholding the guiding role of Marxism and activating the excellent genes of traditional culture can cultural leadership truly take root in the soil of modern Chinese civilization and provide a lasting spiritual driving force for national rejuvenation.

4.2. Practical value: strengthening ideological cohesion in building a culturally strong nation

The core aim of constructing cultural leadership is to build "a socialist ideology with strong cohesion and leadership"[13]. Under the influence of the "Second Combination," a closed-loop dynamic has emerged in which cultural genes empower ideological construction, thereby driving the building of a culturally strong nation. Cultural innovation gives rise to ideological innovation, and the "Second Combination" significantly enhances the ideological cohesion of cultural leadership. By integrating the cohesive power of fine traditional Chinese culture into the ideological authority of cultural leadership, the "Second Combination" revitalizes ideological development and generates stronger social leadership. Meanwhile, cultural leadership serves as a crucial vehicle for realizing the Party's overall leadership and offers essential political safeguards for cultural nation-building. The creative integration of traditional culture and cultural leadership is not a spontaneous process; rather, it relies on the CPC's active guidance and promotion. In practice, the CPC has reaffirmed its dual role: "both a firm believer and practitioner of Marxism, and a faithful inheritor and promoter of fine traditional Chinese culture."[1] This unique identity provides irreplaceable leadership assurance for the construction of a culturally strong nation.

4.3. Global significance: contributing chinese wisdom to the world through cultural subjectivity

The CPC's cultural leadership is rooted in the subjectivity of Chinese culture. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointedly stated: "For any culture to stand firm and endure, to have appeal, cohesion, influence, and reach, it must possess its own subjectivity."[1] Precisely because it upholds cultural subjectivity, the CPC's construction of cultural leadership has maintained spiritual independence

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.HT24384

while contributing Chinese strength to global development. The distinct concepts it puts forward—such as the "Two Combinations" and "cultural leadership"—serve as powerful rebuttals to Western discursive hegemony. At the same time, China has consistently sought universal human values while expanding its cultural influence, never imposing its own values on others. This has led to the development of a uniquely Chinese model of public opinion guidance. Such efforts provide a reference for many developing countries striving for modernization while preserving cultural independence. These countries may draw from China's experience to "construct a form of cultural leadership aligned with the trajectory of human civilization development."[14] First, cultural leadership must remain immune to interference from other countries and firmly in the hands of the nation itself. Once ceded to external forces, it risks triggering subversive historical errors. Second, cultural construction must be rooted in the unique cultural genes of each nation, fostering conscious and autonomous development. Third, it is essential to balance inheritance and innovation—strengthening the foundation of traditional culture while advancing its modernization. Fourth, cultural development must carefully navigate the relationship between domestic orientation and international engagement. It should neither be confined behind closed doors nor blindly embrace foreign models. Historical experience shows that uncritically replicating Western culture while abandoning one's cultural roots not only reduces cultural leadership to a mere tool of foreign cultural hegemony but also fundamentally undermines the legitimacy of national governance.

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