

## On Culture and Cultural Values

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**ABSTRACT:** Culture is not merely a simple concept; it is a complex entity encompassing the creative products and activities of humanity. It is the result of continuous labor and innovation, passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the core values of truth, goodness, and beauty. Culture embodies both the spiritual and material expressions that humans have created and continue to create, ranging from works of art, architecture, language, and customs to systems of values, ideologies, and beliefs. In today's context, as the world undergoes profound transformations in economics, politics, and technology, the role of culture has become more crucial than ever. Culture serves as a bridge that fosters understanding and respect among nations and civilizations, while also acting as a powerful tool to address global challenges and conflicts. The sustainable development of a nation cannot solely rely on economic or military strength but must also include cultural development. A prosperous society is one that values and nurtures its cultural heritage. This article will delve into the analysis of cultural values and its indispensable role in modern social life. We will explore how culture impacts various aspects of life, from social relations and education to individual and community development. Additionally, the article will discuss the challenges that culture faces in the digital and globalized era and how we can preserve and promote cultural values amidst the ever-changing landscape of the world.

**KEYWORDS:** Culture, values, development, today

### INTRODUCTION

Culture holds a significant role in the development of individuals as well as society as a whole. It is the spiritual foundation of society and, at the same time, a fundamental goal of development. Ultimately, all development is driven by human decision-making, and culture embodies the increasingly advanced and comprehensive cultivation of individuals and society. This progression leads to continuous growth and improvement, moving people and society away from a primitive, unenlightened state towards a life of prosperity, freedom, happiness, and civilization. In this journey, the humanistic and humane essence of each individual and the community is nurtured and elevated, becoming noble values and admirable standards for the entire society. This objective aligns with humanity's long-standing aspirations and represents the goals of sustainable and progressive development for nations and peoples. Exploring and understanding the essence of culture and cultural values to enhance the role of culture in the social life of each nation and humanity is a matter of both scientific and practical significance.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### The Concept of Culture

The development of culture is closely intertwined with the long history of human society. Culture began to take shape as soon as humans appeared and asserted themselves. However, the term "culture" itself appeared much later in historical records. It has been found in ancient writings for thousands of years but only emerged as a scientific term in modern times. Culture is a multi-layered, multi-meaning concept with a broad scope and rich content. Each approach to studying culture sheds light on its different aspects. From a systematic-structural approach, the functional approach of culture, the diachronic perspective that views culture as a criterion for distinguishing stages of social progress, to the synchronic perspective that sees culture as one of the standards for comparing the development levels of nations, culture remains a complex concept when evaluated holistically. At the theoretical level, culture encompasses all material and spiritual values created by humanity (both individuals and communities) to support the existence and development of society. The essence of culture is creativity, striving towards truth, goodness, and beauty, reaching for humanistic values, and bringing happiness to people. Culture serves as the secondary social environment created by humans for their own benefit. At the practical level, culture is reflected in all human activities, from material production to spiritual endeavors, showcasing the unique and creative choices of individuals and communities.

In Eastern history, the terms for "culture" emerged long ago. In Chinese texts from the Zhou Dynasty (11th to 8th century BC), the characters for "文" (wen) and "化" (hua) began to appear. The Zhou Yi (I Ching) states: "Observing the celestial patterns reveals

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the changes of the seasons; observing human conduct teaches how to govern the world." During the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC - AD 25), the scholar Liu Xiang wrote: "A sage rules the world first through cultural virtue and only later through military force. Military power is used against those who do not comply; cultural enlightenment is applied to those who do not change through education, and punishment follows if they remain obstinate" (Gian Thi Huyen, 2011, p. 56). In ancient Chinese language, "文" (wen) referred to what is externally manifested, the outer appearance. "化" (hua) meant education, teaching, or transforming. Thus, "文化" (wenhua), or culture, was understood as the method of education and civil governance, as opposed to milit In Western history, the term "culture" (from the Latin "cultura") originally appeared before the Common Era, meaning to cultivate or prepare land. It later evolved into "cultura," meaning to grow, cultivate, or care for. Initially associated with agriculture, as society progressed, "cultura" came to represent the cultivation of the mind and spirit, including education.

In 1871, the English anthropologist Edward Tylor introduced a definition of culture in his work "Primitive Culture." He described culture as: "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (E. Tylor, 2000, p. 13). Tylor's definition viewed culture as a comprehensive collection of human achievements, encompassing both spiritual heritage and social customs. Although this definition emphasized the spiritual aspect of culture and included various dimensions and levels, it was essentially descriptive and did not fully capture the essence of culture. Nonetheless, it highlighted three key ideas: culture is multifaceted, created by humans, and inherently social. This has been considered a classic, albeit not entirely complete, definition of culture.

Following Tylor's work, the study of the concept of culture expanded in many directions, leading to numerous definitions from different perspectives. According to American cultural scholars Kroeber and Kluckhohn in their book "Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions," by 1952, there were approximately 150 different definitions of culture. By 1994, the researcher Phan Ngoc noted that over 400 definitions of culture had been proposed worldwide. At the international conference held in Mexico by UNESCO from July 26 to August 6, 1982, delegates and cultural experts proposed around 200 different definitions of culture. Ultimately, a unified concept of culture was agreed upon in the joint declaration: "In its broadest sense, culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes the arts and literature, ways of life, the fundamental rights of human beings, value systems, traditions, and beliefs" (Hoang Vinh, 1999, p. 33).

This definition views culture as encompassing all spiritual values and particularly emphasizes culture's ability to define and characterize a society or community. This highlights the necessity of respecting, preserving, and promoting these distinctive features in social relations and development. During the World Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997), UNESCO's Director-General Federico Mayor defined culture as: "Culture is the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and it includes not only the arts and literature, but also modes of life, fundamental rights of human beings, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. Through centuries of creative activity, this has shaped a system of values, traditions, and tastes - elements that define the unique identity of each nation" (Giang Thi Huyen, 2011, p. 14).

The classical Marxist-Leninist thinkers paid significant attention to the issue of culture. In the thought of Karl Marx, cultural issues are encapsulated and expressed through the dialectical materialist perspectives on humanity and society. In Marxist-Leninist philosophy, the essence of culture is intricately connected to the essence of humanity and society. When it came to Vladimir Lenin, the focus on culture and its role became even more pronounced. Lenin understood the profound importance and position of culture. He argued that stagnation and weaknesses in economic organization and social management were fundamentally rooted in the low cultural level of the officials and the populace.

In Vietnamese, the term "culture" is commonly used to refer to knowledge (cultural level), lifestyle (cultural ways of living), or the level of civilization at a particular stage (Dong Son culture), among others. The Vietnamese Communist Party's 1943 "Outline on Vietnamese Culture" placed culture alongside economy and politics, viewing it as encompassing thought, scholarship (science, education), and the arts. Hence, culture is not only tied to nature and society but also to the development of human beings themselves; it encompasses the fundamental activities and institutions of social life. To some, culture includes only the masterpieces in the realms of thought and creativity. However, to others, culture encompasses everything that differentiates one nation from another, from sophisticated modern products to beliefs, customs, habits, lifestyles, and work. This understanding was also accepted by the international community at the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies held in Venice in 1970. In Vietnam, various researchers, through different approaches, have proposed diverse notions of culture. President Ho Chi Minh established a system of scientific and revolutionary theoretical perspectives on culture and the construction of Vietnamese culture. This system distilled, synthesized, and crystallized the cultural values of both East and West, tradition and modernity, national and international, with the core being the integration of Marxism-Leninism with the essence and identity of the Vietnamese nation.

Throughout his life, President Ho Chi Minh consistently valued the importance of culture. He made significant contributions to the global struggle for national liberation and to the realms of thought, ethics, humanism, and culture. Ho Chi Minh's conception of culture was closely aligned with everyday human activities and living conditions. He understood culture in both broad and narrow senses. In the broad sense, he stated that culture encompasses all material and spiritual values created by humanity. In the

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narrow sense, it refers only to spiritual values. Furthermore, he believed that cultural creation is a conscious and purposeful human activity. In the final pages of his "Prison Diary" manuscript, he wrote: "Due to the necessity of survival and the goals of life, humanity has created and invented language, writing, ethics, laws, science, religion, literature, art, tools for daily living in clothing, food, shelter, and methods of use. All these creations and inventions constitute culture. Culture is the synthesis of all modes of human activity and their expressions, produced to meet the needs of life and the requirements of existence" (Ho Chi Minh, 2002, Volume 3, p.431).

Emphasizing culture from the perspective of national vitality, qualities, and resilience, former Prime Minister Pham Van Dong wrote: "Culture is the red thread running through the entire history of the nation, it creates the vibrant vitality that has enabled the Vietnamese community to overcome numerous seemingly insurmountable challenges, continuously growing and writing extraordinary chapters of resilience in adversity, and heroic spirit in building and defending the nation... The core of this vitality is culture in its most comprehensive and noble sense, including a system of values: thoughts and emotions, ethics and qualities, intelligence and talent, the sensitivity to embrace new influences from outside, the consciousness to protect the integrity and identity of the national community, and the capacity for resistance and struggle to defend itself and continually grow stronger" (Pham Van Dong, 1994, p.16).

In the Resolution of the 5th Central Committee Meeting of the 8th Tenure in 1998, the Communist Party of Vietnam approached the concept of culture as encompassing the entirety of spiritual values, forming the spiritual foundation of society, and identified eight fundamental areas, emphasizing thought, ethics, lifestyle, and cultural life as critical fields requiring special attention in building and developing an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity.

Researcher Tran Ngoc Them described culture as: "Culture is an organic system of material and spiritual values created and accumulated by humans through practical activities, in interaction with the natural and social environment" (Tran Ngoc Them, 1999, p.10). This definition highlights that culture comprises human creations that bring value to humanity, including both material and spiritual values derived from practical life as humans interact with their natural and social environments. Not everything created by humans qualifies as culture; only those elements that crystallize into values constitute the essence of culture. From the aforementioned perspectives, it can be broadly understood that culture is commonly interpreted in both wide and narrow senses. In the broad sense, culture includes all material and spiritual values created by humanity. In the narrow sense, culture encompasses only spiritual values. Culture is a multi-faceted, multi-layered concept, and each researcher, from their specialized perspectives or due to different cognitive purposes, may have different conceptions or definitions of culture. It can be said that culture is an abstract concept with indeterminate content, making it challenging to provide a clear, comprehensive, and precise definition. Therefore, definitions of culture, no matter how extensive and detailed, typically highlight only one or a few aspects of culture. Despite the many different views on culture, there is a general consensus that culture possesses the following characteristics:

Firstly, culture encompasses all creative activities of humans in their interaction with the natural and social environment. In other words, culture is the creative value of humans, belonging to humans. What is not created by humans does not fall under the concept of culture. Therefore, culture is a fundamental characteristic that distinguishes humans from animals, and it is also a basic criterion that distinguishes artificial products from natural ones. Culture arises from humans' proactive and conscious adaptation to nature and society, thus culture is also the result of that adaptation.

Secondly, this adaptation is conscious and proactive, not mechanical adaptation, but creative adaptation, aligned with the values of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Thirdly, culture is an organic system of material and spiritual values formed over long historical periods, not just spiritual values alone.

Fourthly, culture is the foundation, the core that constitutes the vitality and distinctive characteristics of each nation.

### **The perception of cultural values**

The concept of cultural values is studied across various scientific disciplines such as mathematics, sociology, philosophy, art, cultural studies, and more. Within each discipline, this concept carries different meanings. From a cultural perspective, values encompass customs, standards, knowledge, and are products of human intellectual and creative processes—fundamental elements of culture. Values are a form of consciousness, reflecting and crystallizing the values of both material and spiritual aspects of human life. Therefore, if cultural understanding or values are seen merely as reflections of spiritual life, it may not fully capture or satisfy their essence.

In 1951, Cluc Khohn introduced the notion that values are covert or overt beliefs regarding individual or group aspirations, governing the selection of methods, means, and goals (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010, p.21). Modern American sociologist Fitcher provided a precise definition: "We may describe values as everything that is beneficial, worthy of desire, or deserving of respect for individuals or groups" (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010, p.22). Rosenthal and Judin defined values as "specific social affirmations about the objects of the surrounding world, expressing positive or negative meanings of these objects for individuals and society (happiness, good and evil, beauty and ugliness), manifested in social or natural phenomena" (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010, p.23). In the

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work "Conservation, Enrichment, and Development of Traditional Cultural Values of Vietnam in Innovation and Integration," Professor Ngo Duc Thinh provided a specific definition of values: Values are a system of subjective evaluations by humans of any natural, social phenomenon and mental activities in terms of what is necessary, good, excellent, and beautiful, according to the Western philosophers of a time, they are things that are fundamental to the individual's sense of self. Once these value perceptions are formed and shaped, they influence human thought, beliefs, behavior, and emotions

To form the values of a community, they must undergo a long historical process, thus values often possess stability and durability. However, this does not mean values are immutable; instead, they vary with societal changes. Values are classified in various ways, with a comprehensive division into material values (satisfying human material needs like travel, food, clothing, housing) and spiritual values (fulfilling spiritual needs such as cognitive, spiritual, and ethical values).

In summary, in agreement with Professor Ngo Duc Thinh's perspective, values are not merely descriptive terms but carry evaluative implications. Values represent subjective evaluations by humans of any natural, social phenomenon, and mental activities in terms of what is necessary, good, excellent, and beautiful. Values are what we deem worthwhile, important, and correct, guiding our actions and influencing our thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and emotions.

### Cultural values

Culture, in any form it exists, inherently contains two fundamental elements or attributes: values and symbols. Both of these elements have derivative forms: standards correspond to values, while language corresponds to symbols. Thus, it can be said that the four factors values, standards, symbols, and language are fundamental components that constitute the structure of culture. Among these, values are the most basic element, forming the core nucleus of culture.

Cultural value is the core factor of culture, created and crystallized through the historical process of each community, corresponding to specific natural and social environments. Cultural values aim to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the community regarding what is good and beautiful (true, good, and beautiful), thereby nurturing and enhancing the essence of humanity. Cultural values are always embedded within the cultural essence, cultural heritage, symbols, and cultural standards. Thus, culture, through its value system, contributes to regulating the development of society (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010, p.24).

Cultural values are relative and specific. Therefore, to assess whether something holds value or not, whether it is high or low in value, it must be considered under specific conditions of space, time, and the cultural subject. Without considering these conditions, it is difficult to evaluate the value or worthlessness of the culture of any ethnic group. Cultural value is a form of consciousness, of spiritual life, but it reflects and crystallizes the values of both material and spiritual aspects of human life. Thus, cultural values are what is considered valuable, worthy of respect, crystallized from the values of both material and spiritual aspects of human life. In other words, cultural values are cultural creations in both material and spiritual dimensions, and these cultural creations carry positive, noble, beneficial meanings that guide humans towards the true, good, and beautiful.

Cultural values are categorized into various levels: cultural values of ethnic groups, national-cultural values, regional cultural values, and universal cultural values. Despite their differences, these levels share similarities while also possessing distinct characteristics. The cultural values of each ethnic community always create a system comprising many individual values, where these values arise and exist in organic interaction with each other. Cultural values, along with concepts such as essence, heritage, symbols, and standards, constitute a system of interrelated concepts, each with its own internal content but interconnected and interpenetrating. Therefore, studying cultural values necessitates addressing these related concepts.

Cultural essence is understood as the totality of cultural characteristics, formed, existing, and developing throughout the long history of a nation. These cultural characteristics are sustainable, abstract, and latent. In other words, cultural essence is the entirety of the characteristics, traits, lines, and colors of a nation's culture, developed and sustained throughout its historical process, helping maintain the uniqueness and unity of the nation's culture, distinguishing it from other cultures (Vi Hong Nhan, 2004, p.230). Therefore, to recognize cultural essence, one must consider countless cultural nuances as manifestations of that essence. While cultural essence is abstract, latent, and sustainable, its manifestations are relatively specific, explicit, and variable. Within each cultural essence lie certain values. Thus, cultural essence is sometimes considered value, and conversely, value is considered essence. Although essence and value are distinct concepts, they share commonalities. Essence is understood as the identity, the uniqueness of each community, distinguishing it from others; while value emphasizes the utility, the responsiveness of cultural essence to the needs of individuals, society, and the community. Therefore, cultural essence contains certain values, or in other words, values form the core of essence.

Symbols play a dual role as both expression and constituent parts of culture. UNESCO views culture as a system of symbols created by the community throughout history, symbolizing and influencing human thoughts and behaviors, thereby distinguishing the culture of this community from others. Culture is not just everything humans create but what has crystallized into symbols. Each symbol contains certain values; only what contains values can become a cultural symbol. Symbols serve to display and conceal, and within their concealment lies hidden values (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010, p.29). Every society and community establishes standards to interact with the natural and social environment, creating stability, discipline, and order within that community. Cultural values guide human behavior, but they are not compulsory. However, what is considered a standard is recognized by



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society or recorded in customs and laws, which becomes obligatory. Deviating from or surpassing these standards can lead to social condemnation or punishment to varying degrees.

### Fostering cultural values in the current circumsta

Today, amidst the integration into a world where science and technology are advancing rapidly, and market economies are exerting increasingly global influence, nations and ethnic groups are not only confronting severe economic challenges but also urgently addressing cultural issues. Faced with these risks and challenges, many nations and peoples have found immense potential strength in their traditional cultural heritage and the cultural essence of humanity to effectively serve the socio-economic development endeavors. In addressing these pressing and complex issues, culture once again demonstrates its significant role as both the objective and the driving force of socio-economic development. Within a market economy, culturally guided by the principles of righteousness, goodness, and beauty, culture directs and motivates workers to continuously innovate, improve techniques, and enhance the quality and quantity of goods to meet the ever-increasing societal demands. On the other hand, culture utilizes the power of traditional values and ethics to mitigate the worship of material goods and money, thereby restraining the negative aspects of market mechanisms. These cultural limitations can only be effectively addressed through cultural means.

Culture is the spiritual life of society, part of the superstructure. Ho Chi Minh placed culture on par with economics, politics, and society, forming the four main aspects of life, all closely interconnected and equally important. According to him, only when politics and society are liberated can culture be truly liberated, as political liberation paves the way for cultural development. Therefore, he believed that revolutionary political change, specifically national liberation, must precede cultural liberation to pave the way for cultural development.

Similarly, culture plays a crucial role in political and social life, serving as a driving force for societal development. Ho Chi Minh emphasized the intimate connection between culture and politics, viewing culture as an integral part of the revolutionary cause with a close relationship to politics and the duty to serve the nation and people. Culture cannot stand apart but must actively participate in political tasks, serving and advancing the revolution, resistance wars, and the construction of socialism. Culture, in its proactive and positive nature, acts as a significant force driving political development. In broader terms, Ho Chi Minh highlighted the role of culture in guiding the nation: "Culture must illuminate the path for the people".

## CONCLUSION

Culture holds immense value for social development. It is through culture that humanity distinguishes itself fundamentally from countless other species. Culture allows each ethnic community to understand itself, shaping its unique identity and enabling it to differentiate itself from other ethnic communities. Culture embodies the soul and essence of a nation. Preserving the cultural values of ethnic groups is crucial for strengthening national unity and contributing to the stability of political and social life. Recognizing the pivotal position and significant role of culture in social development, considering culture as a field that contributes significantly to nation-building efforts, and realizing the goals of prosperity, strength, democratic and equitable society, and civilization are correct orientations for nations in the current context.

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