

**Preface J:  
Capturing the essence of culture through its “carriers”**

This preface envisions a book that would avoid big ideas and sweeping generalizations. Instead it would try to capture the essence of Chinese culture through describing and analyzing its “material carriers”: everyday activities (such as dancing *damas*) and physical objects. It would seek to provide a balanced and objective view, and avoid making moral judgments. It would be illustrated (i.e. include pictures).

What is “culture” in 2019?

It has been a long time since Lin Yutang wrote the book *My Country and My People* in 1935, which introduces Chinese society and culture. Though it remains a classic today, the dramatically-changed era calls upon Chinese to write a new book, “My Country and My People, 2019 edition”-a contemporary introduction to Chinese culture for outsiders to know more about this country, which is exactly the book held in your hands now.

Our intended audience would be people outside of China who are interested in learning about our country through a relatively free voice insusceptible to politics. The audience does not necessarily need to be scholars since our book would be pretty interesting and thoughtful at the same time. It could just be curious mundane people.

In order to enable readers to better understand what we are talking about in this book, I will clarify the definition of culture in this preface.

There have been a variety of definitions of culture. According to what I have known so far, it is most useful to define culture in the statement - “Culture is the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguish one group of people from another and culture is transmitted through language, material objects, rituals, institutions, and art from one generation to the next.” (Hirsch et al. 1988). I think it is the most useful one because the definition is all-round. To be more specific,

it not only includes spiritual things like attitudes, customs, and beliefs, but also claims that culture is transmitted by other material carriers. Some other scholars put spiritual things and carriers at the same level, which is not suitable. In fact, those mental things are intangible and blurry. They can only be carried by activities such as rituals or material objects like artifacts. People can look through those carriers and find culture deep inside.

In my opinion, Chinese culture is the spiritual essence of various carriers such as material objects, social activities, languages and so on, which is shared by Chinese people across generations.

There are some similarities and differences between my definition and other scholars' definitions. First, my definition of culture has something in common with those definitions that I have seen: culture is shared among a group of people, it is mainly about mind and is distinctive. As for the difference, my definition in "My Country and My People, 2019 edition" puts emphasis on various carriers rather than those spiritual essence.

It would be meaningful and interesting to focus on various carriers because carriers are able to present culture in a colorful and plump way. This does not mean we would totally rule out the existence of spiritual essence in our book. Understanding those spiritual essence, like perceptions, attitudes, values, belief systems are as dry as swallowing matcha powder without water. Adding water and mixing them with a tea whisk, matcha will be smooth enough for drinking and smells refreshing. It would be hard for readers, especially outsiders who have difficulty understanding specific and traditional philosophy in China, to keep struggling knowing more about those ideas. However, when culture is presented and carried by interesting activities and tangible objects, the reading process would be much easier for outsiders, namely, the readers.

This edition of *My Country and My People* will analyze Chinese culture by depicting various carriers. For instance, in the following chapters in the book, we will introduce some special activities such as square dances about Chinese Dama, which is actually a quite famous social phenomenon around the nation. With photos attached beside paragraphs, we are going to analyze mental states of these people in their fifties or older in China. Those women are enjoying a fairly well-off and happy life without worrying about serious healthy or economic problems. In other words, they know how to count their blessings, a typical attitude in Chinese traditional culture. Moreover, the social background behind it is worth digging. People who lived through a certain time in the last century have an obsession with collective activities, which reflects a kind of collective consciousness. The fixation on collectiveness is an appearance of human's psychology for being in a group as well. Quoting words said by representative elderly women, we will view the cultural carrier combining views of first person and third person. It helps readers to get hold of the idea of Chinese culture gradually and easily by organizing the chapters in the way that to describe the carrier first and then to analyze the spiritual essence behind it.

Presenting the carrier as what it is and analyze the culture in an objective and logical way, we would not go further: add exceeding comments on culture or make moral judgments about culture, because one's judgements have a lot to do with his own culture and worldviews. It is unfair to praise or criticize a culture. Consequently, judgments about culture would not be included in this book.

We hope you all can have fun in adventuring in this familiar while unfamiliar journey reading this book.

## References

Hirsch, E. D. et al. (1988). *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Houghton Mifflin.