Third pole culture: possibilities as theory and practice

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Third Pole Culture is a tentative theoretical idea on the development of contemporary Chinese culture. It was first proposed by Professor Huang Huilin and her husband Shao Wu from Beijing Normal University at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Arts in 2009, and was published in 2010. In more than ten years, this idea has experienced slow yet sound development in terms of both theory and practice, and has been discussed a lot by the academia. In the context of strengthening socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, as a theory advocating the cultural strategy of boosting confidence in national culture, Third Pole Culture reflects a specific academic exploration for the development of Chinese cultural theory. How has it evolved and changed in more than a decade? What are the implications for the development of contemporary Chinese culture? These are worthy of in-depth consideration, and are also the core issues that this article intends to discuss.

Third pole culture: theoretical idea and development

In 2010, Professor Huang and others pointed out in the article Tentative Ideas and Discussions on Third Pole Culture published in Arts Criticism that Third Pole Culture is primarily a strategic development idea proposed according to the current world cultural pattern. She believes that the current world cultural pattern can be roughly divided into the three poles of European, American and Chinese cultures, and acknowledges that there is an imbalance in the development of world culture, and that there are aggressive and passive cultures. The use of “Third Pole” to refer
to “Chinese culture” is not a plain ranking of numbers, nor a representation of hierarchical difference. It comes from the “South Pole,” “North Pole” and “Third Pole” in the science of physical geography. Third Pole refers to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the highest pole of the world. It represents all irreplaceable and unique cultural types in the multicultural world. At the same time, Chinese culture has become an important pole in this multicultural landscape because of its independence, longevity and strong vitality, and could become another cultural force with extensive global influence besides European culture and American culture. Professor Huang Huilin believes that China’s 5000-year-old civilization, its long and striving history of modern revolution, and the ever-developing process of the PRC’s transformation constitute the basis for the establishment of Third Pole Culture. Huang also put forward the initial facets of Third Pole Culture from the three perspectives of cultural soft power, fine traditional culture and film culture.

Afterwards, Professor Huang continued to enrich and improve the idea of Third Pole Culture through several articles. For example, in terms of the basis and necessity of the establishment of Third Pole Culture, Huang believes that Third Pole Culture represents an academic endeavor in the reflection on Eastern and Western cultures, the development of Chinese culture in the transition period, and the pursuit of cultural awareness and cultural confidence. In a background of economic globalization, Chinese culture, which has a long history of 5000 years and rich cultural heritage, has encountered a strong impact from foreign cultures. The dissemination of Chinese culture is extremely incommensurate with the development of China’s economy. The export of Chinese culture is relatively falling behind, and the spread of Chinese and foreign cultures is very unbalanced, causing the contemporary Chinese to have a weak spirit. Therefore, China needs to maintain its cultural focus, stick to a clear national awareness, strengthen cultural confidence, and strive for a say in cultural exchanges so that Chinese culture is recognized and respected around the world. Professor Huang mentioned that there have been three man-made changes in world history. The first is the industrial revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the main solution to problems was war. This is the “era of fist.” The second is the information revolution of the twentieth century, an era marked by rapid development of knowledge and continuous globalization. This is the “era of intelligence.” The third is the cultural revolution since the twenty-first century, in which mankind needs to gather all their wisdom to deal with common crises. This is the “era of mind.” Huang believes that these historical changes are also an important background for proposing the Third Pole Culture. In the current common crises brought to mankind by the global pandemic, the foresight of this theoretical judgment has been verified to a certain extent.

Professor Huang has made continuous efforts to enrich, deepen and refine the basic facets of Third Pole Culture on the basis of the three facets in the early stage. She believes that Third Pole Culture is rooted in China’s thousands of years of civilization and tradition, and that it is also a culture that keeps pace with the times. The concept advocates cultural diversity, and puts special emphasis on practicing creation with the concept of “harmony” in mind. She points out that the Third Pole Culture has two basic meanings. The first is to further sort out, summarize, inherit
and develop the most prominent, characteristic and representative content within the Chinese culture itself. The second is to put the Chinese culture in the context of global cultures on that basis, so that the Chinese culture can interact with and learn from other cultures to form a diverse cultural landscape. Professor Huang attaches great importance to traditional Chinese culture. She has summarized the core values and national spirit contained in traditional Chinese culture. For example, traditional Chinese culture respects and safeguards the value of man, and considers man to be the most precious; it holds that righteousness is the noblest character in a gentleman, which deals with man’s moral feelings and awareness; it emphasizes that individuals are morally obligated to serve the society, the country and the nation; it advocates harmony-oriented perspectives on the world, life and the universe. She continuously draws nourishment from traditional culture, advocates that “an educated gentleman must be resolute and broad-minded, for he has taken on a long and arduous task,” and clarifies that Third Pole Culture aims to rebuild cultural confidence and pursues cultural transcending by understanding and learning from other cultures. The significance of these explanations is that they underline that Third Pole Culture adopts a dialectical attitude of “sublation” and inheritance towards traditional culture, and that it expresses the almost intuitive idea of subjectivity on the communication between Chinese and foreign cultures, which is clearer in the later development of ideas.

When working in film and television education and conducting academic research, Professor Huang has always valued the unity of knowledge and action, as well as the combination of theory and practice. It can be said that at the very core of her educational ideas is that knowledge must be used to benefit the governance of a country in a practical way. This is also a highlight in her academic ideas. Therefore, while enriching the theory, Professor Huang has also had many discussions about the ways to realize Third Pole Culture. For example, as early as 2010, she proposed a basic approach consisting of four steps: first, further clarify Third Pole Culture regarding its facets, its theoretical and practical significance through academic research; second, generate artistic works that fully reflect the characteristics of Third Pole Culture through a large amount of original artistic creation; third, make full use of various means to create cultural symbols and actively carry out culture-related dissemination; fourth, integrate different resources and mobilize all sectors of society to get involved. Professor Huang does not limit her research to theorizing in articles, she also tries out different methods in practice, and has achieved excellent dissemination effects and promotion experiences in many respects. For example, in terms of resource integration, on November 19, 2010, Beijing Normal University and the International Data Group (IDG) jointly established the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture, which focuses closely on Third Pole Culture-related theoretical research, talents training, film and television creation, international exchanges and other respects. In terms of culture dissemination, the “Looking Beijing Summer DV Project 2011” was launched. In terms of academic research, the questionnaire survey on the “International Influence of Chinese Films,” the publication of the Silver Book: The Annual Report on the International Communication of Chinese Films, international forums, etc. have been organized. These
annual events mark the most distinctive feature of Third Pole Culture: it has integrated knowledge and action from the very beginning, and has always adhered to the idea that theoretical research and practical activities should promote and complement each other.

The past ten years have witnessed the deeper-level development of Third Pole Culture, as reflected in a range of research on, for example, the core value and contemporary significance of traditional Chinese culture, the role of Chinese culture in the world in a new era, Third Pole Culture and Marxism, cultural diversity and the community with a shared future for mankind, the subjectivity of Chinese culture in world civilization, and research around “The Generation of International Influence of Contemporary Chinese Culture,” a major project of the National Social Science Fund of China. At the same time, there is also a horizontal expansion of the research scope. According to the essence of the theory, a series of extended research has been carried out in the areas of film, art, animation, aesthetics, etc. Among them, the “Third Pole Film Culture” is one of the initial facets of Third Pole Culture and also an area where Third Pole Culture-related theoretical research and practice are relatively well-developed.

The theory of third pole film culture and the practice of looking china project

As one of the important founders of contemporary Chinese film studies, Professor Huang has been advocating that Chinese film and television production incorporate national culture since the 1990s. This theoretical idea is closely integrated with the Third Pole Culture proposed since the twenty-first century, and has been well explored in terms of both theory and practice. In particular, the Looking China Youth Film Project, as a way of practicing the Third Pole Film Culture, has many innovations in the context of the whole world. Its practical value has begun to boost the development of theory. The Project has become a classic example of building Chinese cultural confidence, telling Chinese stories, and establishing a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics.

Third Pole Film Culture is a strategic academic idea that was put forward according to the development pattern of world films. It is an inevitable requirement on Chinese films for the all-round revival of Chinese culture in the new century. Since its initiation, Third Pole Film Culture has received comments from scholars. Regarding the Third Pole Film Culture, Professor Huang states in the article Tentative Ideas and Discussions on Third Pole Culture that there were roughly three periods in the development of Chinese films in the past century. In the Shanghai period, Chinese films mostly learned from American films and Hollywood productions; in the period of the founding of the PRC, Chinese films learned from Soviet films; in the period of reform and opening-up, Chinese films learned from European and American films. Now, Chinese films have entered the fourth period, and a fundamental characteristic is that Chinese films learn from the advanced experiences of other countries on the basis of Chinese culture, history and reality, so that Chinese films can have a place in
the world. Based on the development of Chinese films, Professor Huang has another article that focuses on discussing the idea on the development of Third Pole Film Culture, and believes that this theoretical idea itself needs to be further enriched and improved. The realization of this goal will ultimately rely on a large number of third pole film productions, which will be a long and arduous task. In order to better implement this theoretical idea, Huang has conducted academic discussions on “Third Pole Film Culture” based on the data from the annual questionnaire survey on the international communication of Chinese films, shared the conclusions of the questionnaire survey, emphasized that the “Chinese Dream” for Chinese films is to preserve and carry forward their own national culture, expressed firm confidence that Chinese films will establish their own cultural identity, and summed up the characteristics of Third Pole Film Culture to be national, international and modern. These articles and survey reports that combine Third Pole Culture with film studies, a strong suit of the author, as well as the Looking China Youth Film Project that was implemented simultaneously, constitute the theoretical and practical paths of Third Pole Film Culture.

In 2011, Professor Huang established the Looking China Youth Film Project, which is still being implemented to this day. Every year, the Project invites 100 foreign college students studying film and television production, and pairs them up with Chinese college students so that they will complete shooting a ten-minute documentary on culture in various provinces and cities in China within about 17 days. Up to 2019, the Project had organized 610 young foreign filmmakers from nearly 70 countries, completed 609 short films, and won more than 100 international and domestic awards. It had cooperated with a total of 73 foreign colleges and 27 domestic colleges and universities, and covered hundreds of industries in 24 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions in China.

The Looking China Project, for the first time in the world, created a successful model for international collaborative education in film and television disciplines. It aims to build the disciplines in China into world-class ones, and to break the boundaries that exist between disciplines, schools and countries in traditional film and television education. It should be the only existing practice-based project in film and television teaching in the world that is led by the film and television studies team of a Chinese university and is open to international participants, continuously implemented, highly professional and highly influential. The Project aims at the coordinated development of “world film and television disciplines,” and strives to creatively integrate professional education, practice & creation, training of talents, social services, and international exchanges in a bid to help foreign college students actively tell Chinese stories and enhance Chinese college students’ sense of identification with their own country. This Project has explored the training of talents that integrates both international and Chinese perspectives, and combines knowledge and action. It can be said that the Project creates a “cross-border and professional” model of teaching and education. While focusing on talents training and production of films in the area of film and television, the Looking China Project also serves to provide social services and facilitate international cultural exchanges. It is a talents training model that is developed by Beijing Normal University on its way to becoming a world-class university with world-class disciplines. The Project
has gone beyond the traditional educational framework with its foresight and experimental nature. It is the first training model in the world that has Chinese characteristics in the area of film and television. It has accumulated deep-going and sustainable development experiences in professional disciplines development, national cultural development, and international cultural exchanges.

Third Pole Film Culture is a concrete research and implementation of the entire Third Pole Culture theory in the area of films. Such a research model that closely combines theory and practice can also serve as a very good example for the development of contemporary Chinese academics and the effective expansion of the say in international academic exchanges. Zhou Zuoyu, Vice President of Beijing Normal University, says that Professor Huang is the founder and implementer of Third Pole Culture. The *Looking China* Youth Film Project founded by Huang was highly praised by Chinese President Xi Jinping and highly appreciated by the participants. Professor Huang has transformed the advantages in film and television studies she has gained over the years into an important force to promote the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

**Final thoughts: third pole culture and the development of culture amid the COVID-19 pandemic**

The year 2020 is the tenth year since the launch of the *Looking China* Youth Film Project, the tenth year since the establishment of the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture, and the tenth year since the publication of the theory of “Third Pole Culture.” Due to the impact of the pandemic, the *Looking China* Project this year mobilized the resources we have gained over the years in terms of young foreign film directors and materials. It was carried out through an international long-distance filming program and a domestically-based filming program, which are more flexible. Around the theme of “rural people, rural affairs, and rural households,” the Project was implemented through several methods such as one-on-one pairing and grouping of project participants, volunteer services, and long-distance communication. At the same time, a documentary film celebrating the tenth anniversary of the *Looking China* Project was also completed. The film includes nine young filmmakers from nine countries and languages telling the story about the spring of China in 2020 from their own perspectives. The film is now in the final editing and revision stage, and includes many scenes that truly record the Chinese people's state of life and their hard-working spirit amid the pandemic. In a world torn apart by the pandemic, this film could be a good example for the understanding and dialogue among civilizations worldwide.

The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic directly exposed the fragile side of the contemporary international system. The pandemic has torn apart many of the concepts of modern civilization that we thought were strong and commonly practiced, created a huge obstacle to economic globalization, and exacerbated disagreements and conflicts in various international relations, including China-US relations. It also accelerated and magnified the competition that has been happening among countries in a full range of areas including military, economy, institutional systems,
values, public opinions, etc. When we incorporate the Third Pole Culture into such a background and observe and think, we can still feel a force of cooperation that is based on the common emotions, reason, and desire of mankind from the theoretical and practical experiences in the past decade. We can see that in a post-pandemic era, the ultimate rule for handling country-to-country relations is finding out civilization-based solutions. Although the pandemic has increased the uncertainty of world development, and the risk of the clash of civilizations seems to be surging, the global disaster has also given us an opportunity to re-examine the existing civilizations and their order. Against a post-pandemic backdrop, we can adopt a civilization-based perspective and think about how modern civilizations may cope with their own challenges in national governance, and also the possibility for them to have global-level discussions and set out the fundamental and common rules for international cooperation and communication. These are the important topics and issues that the Third Pole Culture is paying attention to, and also the new possibilities that need to be further developed in theory and practice in the future.

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