

The Historical Evolution and Contemporary Value of Shanghai-Style Culture: On the Essence of Shanghai's Urban Spirit

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Abstract

For a long time, Shanghai and its people have received polarized evaluations: some regard them as exclusive, shrewd, and petty; others praise them as inclusive, rule-abiding, and measured. In recent years, Shanghai has vigorously promoted Haipai culture, yet its definition remains much debated. This paper clarifies the historical origins and evolution of Haipai culture, confronting the concession era's past, examining hard entrepreneurship after 1949, reviewing rapid development since re-form and opening-up, and looking toward the mission in the new era. The study shows that Haipai culture is neither colonial culture nor comprador culture, nor simply immigrant culture. Rather, it is a unique urban cultural form rooted in Wu-Yue culture, nurtured in the convergence of Chinese and Western civilizations, grown during socialist construction, sublimated through reform and opening-up, and blossoming in the new era.

Keywords

Shanghai-Style Culture; Urban Spirit; Colonial History; Comprador Culture; Immigrant Culture; Reform and Opening-Up

Introduction

Shanghai, the oriental metropolis at the mouth of the Yangtze River, has carried much attention since its opening as a treaty port. Some call it "exclusive," saying Shanghainese are shrewd and petty; others praise it as "inclusive of all rivers," noting they follow rules and possess a sense of propriety. Such polarized evaluations persist, reflecting cognitive biases toward this city and its residents [1].

In recent years, Shanghai has promoted Haipai culture as a banner for urban identity. Yet its definition remains debated: some regard it as colonial culture, others as comprador culture, still others as immigrant culture [2]. This paper clarifies Haipai culture's origins and evolution from a historical perspective, confronting the concession era, examining post-1949 entrepreneurship, reviewing

reform-era development, and looking toward the new era's mission.

Historical Origins

The Deep Roots of Wu-Yue Culture

When discussing Haipai culture, most focus on the post-1843 period, as if Shanghai's history spans only a century. This is a misunderstanding. Before opening as a treaty port, Shanghai was a county under Songjiang Prefecture, at the heart of the Wu-Yue cultural region [3]. Wu-Yue culture is renowned for gentleness, restraint, and refinement—distinct from the generosity of Yan-Zhao or the boldness of Chuan-Yu. Xu Guangqi's "introduction of Western learning to the East" in the Ming Dynasty revealed this region's openness. Huang Daopo's introduction of cotton textile technology from Yazhou also demonstrated its pragmatism and innovation [4]. These show Haipai culture is rooted in Wu-Yue soil, not without foundation.

Deconstructing the "Colonial Original Sin"

In 1843, Shanghai opened as a treaty port, and foreign powers established concessions. Since then, "colonial" has become an inescapable label. Many view Shanghai's modern history as colonial history and Haipai culture as its product [5]. This view seems plausible but is biased.

While concessions were established through military coercion, equating them with Shanghai's urban culture overlooks complexity. Within concessions, there was both foreign luxury and Chinese struggle; both colonial extortion and national industrial salvation. The concessions objectively provided stable political environment and open economic space, enabling Shanghai to pioneer industrialization [6]. Hegel argued that what is actual is rational in historical necessity [7]. Equating Haipai culture with colonial culture ignores its positive spiritual core and the role of national self-strengthening [8].

Comprador Culture or National Capital ?

The "comprador culture" thesis cites the rise of Shanghai's comprador class as evidence. This requires examination. Compradors were intermediaries for foreign merchants; many depended on foreign capital. However, as historian Ding Richu documented, "Compradors were the earliest new-style merchants in modern China" [9]. Many accumulated capital and invested in national industries.

Tang Tingshu managed the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company in 1873, pioneering modern shipping; Xu Run invested in textiles and mining; Zheng Guanying's "Words of Warning" proposed "commercial warfare." These show compradors were not monolithic—many became pioneers of national capitalism [10].

The Truth of Immigrant Culture

Haipai culture's immigrant dimension is often cited. Shanghai's population grew from 200,000 in 1843 to 5 million by 1949, with immigrants from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and beyond [11]. This diversity nourished Haipai culture.

However, immigration alone does not produce new culture. What enabled Shanghai's unique character was its open institutional environment and innovative commercial spirit [5]. The interplay between diverse immigrant groups and the city's commercial institutions created conditions for cultural synthesis that distinguished Shanghai from other port cities.[12]

Hard Entrepreneurship After 1949

On May 27, 1949, Shanghai was liberated. The newly founded People's Republic of China assigned it a new mission: transforming from a "consumer city" to a "production city." Facing imperialist blockades, economic devastation, and unemployment, Shanghai's working class began an arduous entrepreneurial journey under the Party's leadership [13].

The textile industry underwent socialist transformation first. State-owned enterprises like "Guomian No. 17 Factory" became benchmarks. Workers produced numerous model workers and technical innovators [14]. The spirit of treating factories as homes and practicing thrift became embedded in Shanghai's industrial culture.

More importantly, Shanghai developed a unique industrial culture centered on collectivism, driven by technical innovation. During the "Third Front Construction," thousands of technicians and workers relocated inland, spreading technology nationwide. Though affecting Shanghai's own development, this contributed to balanced national industrialization.

Rapid Development Since Reform and Opening-Up

The Miracle of Pudong Development

On April 18, 1990, the Central Committee announced Pudong's development. At that time, Pudong was rural with scattered farmhouses. The saying "I'd rather have a bed in Puxi than a room in Pudong" captured local disdain. Yet within decades, Pudong achieved miraculous transformation [6].

The Oriental Pearl Tower, Jin Mao Tower, and Shanghai Tower rose successively, transforming Lujiazui into an international financial center. The "Pudong Spirit"—striving for excellence, selfless dedication, and inclusiveness—represents Haipai culture's concentrated expression in the reform era.

Building the "Five Centers"

In 2009, Shanghai proposed building international financial and shipping centers. Subsequently, trade, economic, and scientific innovation centers were added, forming the "Five Centers." By 2024, financial market transactions exceeded 3,000

trillion yuan, and Shanghai Port's container throughput ranked first globally for over a decade [15].

Notably, Shanghai did not copy Western models but combined realities to forge urban development with Chinese characteristics. This "pragmatic innovation and openness" represents Haipai culture's contemporary continuation [16].

Mission in the New Era

A Socialist Modern International Metropolis

In 2018, the integrated Yangtze River Delta development became a national strategy. Shanghai, as the dragon head, assumed greater historical mission. Building a socialist modern international metropolis requires adhering to Party leadership and common prosperity while possessing global resource allocation capabilities [16]. Shanghai's practice demonstrates that socialist modernization and international metropolis status can be unified. Its explorations in business environment and urban governance reflect both socialist superiority and international standards [15].

The Dragon Head of Yangtze River Delta Integration

Shanghai actively promotes regional collaboration through industrial synergy, transportation connectivity, and ecological governance. It decentralizes functions to surrounding cities, promoting "R&D in Shanghai, transformation in the periphery" and achieving win-win development.

Dispelling Misunderstandings

"Exclusive" or "Rule-Abiding" ?

Outsiders often feel "excluded" in Shanghai. This stems not from deliberate rejection but from emphasis on "rules." The so-called "coldness" is respect for personal space; "calculating" is adherence to contract spirit [5].

Due to concession history, Shanghai early formed contract-based social relations. The prevailing social norm emphasizes mutual respect for boundaries rather than exclusion based on origin. This "rule-abiding" connects with traditional Chinese "li" (ritual)—emphasizing both individual rights and social harmony.

"Shrewd" or "Pragmatic" ?

"Shrewd" implies scheming and speculation; "pragmatic" means intelligence and capability. The latter better characterizes Shanghainese. Rooted in commercial tradition, they developed careful planning habits [4]. Such habits may seem "petty" from an agricultural perspective but are valuable in modern market economy.

More importantly, this pragmatism was elevated to urban governance philosophy. Shanghai's refinement in planning and public services is exemplary. "Making a dojo in a snail shell" captures their ability to create infinite possibilities in limited space.

"Petty" or "Sense of Propriety" ?

Shanghainese "pettiness" appears in daily details: going Dutch, careful shopping, aversion to waste. This reflects not pettiness but a "sense of propriety"—respect for boundaries, cherishing public resources, and considering social costs.

Tocqueville analyzed American "individualism" as potentially leading to atomization yet becoming freedom's cornerstone [17]. The Shanghainese "sense of propriety" similarly protects personal space while providing public life rules. In pluralistic modern society, this trait's value grows ever more prominent.

Conclusion

This paper traces Haipai culture from its Wu-Yue roots through the concession era, socialist construction, and reform period to the present day. Several insights emerge from this historical examination. Haipai culture is neither colonial nor comprador culture, nor simple immigrant superposition. It is a unique urban cultural form rooted in Wu-Yue culture, nurtured in Chinese-Western convergence, grown during socialist construction, sublimated through reform, and blossoming in the new era [18].

Shanghai's modern history contains both humiliating colonial chapters and national self-strengthening struggles. Simplifying Haipai culture into colonial culture ignores its positive spiritual core. Post-1949 Shanghai transformed from consumer to industrial city, contributing tremendously to national industrialization. Since reform and opening-up, Shanghai achieved economic takeoff through Pudong development, and the "Five Centers" achievements gave it global city functions.

The misunderstandings about Shanghainese—"exclusive," "shrewd," "petty"—are misreadings of urban cultural traits. They are rule-abiding, pragmatic, and have a sense of propriety. Looking ahead, Shanghai moves toward becoming a socialist modern international metropolis with global influence. Haipai culture—Shanghai's "national soul"—will continue playing its unique role. May we approach it with objective, rational, and inclusive attitudes, allowing it to shine more brilliantly in the new era [19].

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