

**Roots and Echoes of a Civilization:
The Historical Origins, Spiritual Essence,
and Contemporary Value of Kunlun Culture**

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Introduction

Above the earth, across the blue, the majestic Kunlun.

Stretching across western China for over 2,500 kilometers with an average elevation exceeding 5,000 meters, the towering Kunlun Mountains have long been revered as "the ancestor of all mountains and the source of all waters."

"Kunlun" is a mountain, yet far more than a mountain. It shines with the incandescent radiance from the dawn of Chinese civilization, crystallizing the ancient philosophical reflections of the Chinese nation on "Heaven, Earth, and Humanity." It forms the vigorous and unyielding backbone across China's vast expanse of over 9.6 million square kilometers, and, more importantly, it serves as the spiritual homeland where the Chinese nation has sought its origins for more than five millennia.

Kunlun culture is an indispensable component in the study tracing the origins of the unity in diversity of Chinese civilization. It is a vital spiritual emblem of Chinese civilization and a shared spiritual home for all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation. For millennia, its vivid historical imprints have borne witness to the grand evolution of Chinese civilization, playing an essential role in uniting the people, connecting ethnic groups, and integrating cultural lineages. It possesses prominent cultural characteristics, robust vitality, and a deep-seated foundation among the people.

To trace the source is to keep the flow alive; to draw from the ancient is to renew the present. Since the advent of the new era, under the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Culture, research and dissemination of the roots of Chinese civilization have received unprecedented attention across society, allowing Kunlun culture to radiate new vitality of the times. China is deeply committed to the creative transformation and innovative development of fine traditional Chinese culture. Through vivid practice, it is forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, injecting powerful cultural momentum into building a great modern socialist country.

To understand where we come from is to know where we are going. Kunlun culture carries the memory of the nation, gathers the strength of the nation, and illuminates the future of the nation. This enduring cultural radiance will not only continue to light the path toward the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but will also offer profound Eastern wisdom to all countries as they work together to address global risks and challenges, bridge divides among civilizations, and build consensus for cooperation.

Chapter 1:

An Important Origin of the Unity in Diversity of Chinese civilization

Grounded in the archaeological evidence and textual research of the project to trace the origins of Chinese civilization, "Kunlun" carries the historical memory of a shared root and origin among all Chinese people across three interrelated dimensions: cosmic cognition, spiritual homeland, and territorial symbol. Through these dimensions, Kunlun became a foundational source of the unity in diversity of Chinese civilization.

1.1 Cosmic Cognition of Early Chinese People

"Kunlun" embodies the primordial and intuitive cosmic cognition of the early Chinese people. In the minds of the ancestors, Kunlun bore multiple connotations, functioning as a symbol of the "West," a "sacred mountain," and a "path to Heaven."

The term "Kunlun" appears numerous times in pre-Qin classics. For instance, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan Hai Jing*) notes repeatedly that to the south of the Western Sea there is a great mountain named Mount Kunlun,^① and that the Kunlun Realm is in the northwest.^② The *Tribute of Yu* (*Yu Gong*) also records Kunlun among the Western Rong tribes.^③ Whether understood as a mountain name or a tribal name, Kunlun was universally considered to be situated in the west. For this reason, Gu Jiegang argued that "the geography and figures of the Kunlun region were transmitted from the northwest."^④

Ancient texts also went to great lengths to depict the majestic and imposing physical magnitude of Mount Kunlun. The *Annals of Yu* (*Yu Ben Ji*) posits that when the sun and moon pass by Kunlun, their light is obscured.^⑤ The *Erya* explains that "a hill with

① "To the south of the Western Sea... lies a great mountain named the Mound of Kunlun", see Yuan Ke, *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu* (Collation and Annotations of the Classic of Mountains and Seas), Chengdu: Bashu Publishing House, 1993, p. 466.

② "Within the seas, the Kunlun Realm is located in the northwest", see Yuan Ke, *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu* (Collation and Annotations of the Classic of Mountains and Seas), Chengdu: Bashu Publishing House, 1993, p. 344.

③ "With the hide-clad people of Kunlun, Xizhi, and Qusou, all the Western Rong tribes were brought into order", see Wang Shishun and Wang Cuiye, trans. and annot., *Shang Shu* (The Book of Documents), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012, p. 75.

④ Gu Jiegang, Gu Shi Bian Zi Xu: *Kunlun Chuan Shuo He Qiang Rong Wen Hua* (Preface to the Discriminations of Ancient History: The Kunlun Legend and the Qiang-Rong Culture), Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2011, p. 835.

⑤ "Kunlun is over 2,500 li in height. As the sun and moon alternately hide behind and emerge from it, light and darkness come into being", see Sima Qian (Han Dynasty), *Shi Ji: Da Yuan Lie Zhuan* (Records of the Grand Historian: The Account of Dayuan), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014, p. 3858.

three tiers is the Kunlun Mound."^① The Classic of Mountains and Seas states that Kunlun is not only towering and massive, but also serves as the lower capital of the Supreme Deity—the earthly capital of the Heavenly Emperor—and a crucial hub connecting Heaven and Earth.^②

Because the terrain of China is generally high in the west and low in the east, forming a stepped distribution, and because the dramatic uplift of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in ancient times caused rivers to flow eastward, Kunlun—as a towering mountain—naturally occupied a western geographical position in the minds of the early ancestors, and was believed to connect with Heaven. This shaped the early Chinese cosmic cognitive framework.

The belief that high mountains were closest to Heaven further enriched the connotation of Kunlun as a place that "connects with Heaven." The *Huainanzi* posits that ascending Kunlun leads to the upper reaches of Heaven,^③ while the Commentary on the Water Classic divides Kunlun into three tiers, with the highest tier being the "Heavenly Court."^④ Over time, Kunlun gradually acquired the core meaning of "Heaven," becoming "the image of Heaven"^⑤—a complete and unblemished celestial dome that encompasses the entire Earth.

In addition, many scholars suggest that the term "Kunlun" is a phonetic transliteration from the languages of ancient western ethnic minority groups, meaning "snow-capped mountain," "azure heaven," or "great mountain."^⑥ Concurrently, many northern tribes in China practiced the worship of "Tengri" and held the concept of the *qionglu* (the yurt-like celestial vault). "Tengri" was used to refer to both the supreme deity and the sky, which is fundamentally identical to the supreme will embodied by "Heav-

① "A hill with three tiers is called a Kunlun Mound", see Shao Jinhan (Qing Dynasty), *Er Ya Zheng Yi* (Rectified Interpretation of the Erya), Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2017, p. 638.

② "Kunlun Realm measures eight hundred li in circumference and ten thousand ren in height, and serves as the "lower capital of the Supreme Deity", see Yuan Ke, *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu* (Collation and Annotations of Mountains and Seas), Chengdu: Bashu Publishing House, 1993, p. 344.

③ Chen Guangzhong, trans. and annot., *Huainanzi: Dixing Xun* (The Huainanzi: Treatise on Terrestrial Forms), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012, p. 204.

④ Li Daoyuan (Northern Dynasties), *Shui Jing Zhu* (Commentary on the Water Classic), trans. and annot. Chen Qiaoyi et al., Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2020, p. 1.

⑤ Yang Xiong (Western Han Dynasty), *Tai Xuan Ji Zhu* (Collected Annotations on the Supreme Mystery), with annotations by Sima Guang (Song Dynasty), ed. Liu Shaojun, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, p. 5.

⑥ For instance, the Japanese scholar Ishida Mikinosuke argued that Kunlun corresponds to the Tibetan word for "snow mountain." Cen Zhongmian contended that Kunlun derives from the Khotanese term for "south," referring to the southern remnants of the Pamir Mountains. Ding Shan proposed that Kunlun might be a phonetic rendering of Ruanyu, Xiyu, or Xianyu, which are phonetic equivalents of Sumeru, referring to "volcano" in the language of a certain northwestern ethnic group. Tang Huisheng suggested that terms such as "Kunlun," "Qilian," "Helan," "Qionglong," "Kulong," and "Hundun" are all ancient phonetic renderings of the Xiongnu word for "heaven."

en" (Tian) in Chinese texts, while the shape of the qionglu mirrors that of Kunlun.^① This demonstrates that "Kunlun" was not confined to a specific geographic locale, but was rather a shared conceptual construct among the early ancestors of the Chinese nation.

These ideas reflect the ancients' imagination regarding the geographical layout of the world and the order of Heaven and Earth. They embody cognitive concepts such as "Heaven is round and Earth is square," "Heaven cannot be divided," and "Heaven, Earth, and Humanity form an interconnected continuum." Through these notions, early Chinese people expressed their fundamental understanding of the structure of the cosmos and the operation of the world. This worldview permeated the origins and development of Chinese civilization, exerting a profound influence on subsequent philosophical thought and modes of reasoning.

1.2 The Spiritual Homeland of the Chinese Nation

With the evolution of history, the connotation of Kunlun as a "sacred mountain connecting to Heaven" became further enriched. It became "the abode of a hundred deities," thereby giving rise to the creation myth of the Chinese nation—Kunlun mythology. Centered on the worship of the cosmic center and composed of legends surrounding Kunlun Mountain and its associated deities, figures, and natural wonders, the Kunlun mythology preserves elements of ancient historical memory, embodying the early Chinese understanding of the cosmos, values, and ecology. It distills the shared spiritual qualities of the Chinese nation and has become a precious cultural heritage common to all Chinese people.^②

In these myths, Mount Kunlun is a lofty celestial peak. It is not only the abode of the Queen Mother of the West and numerous immortals, but also the dwelling place of the cultural progenitor of the Chinese nation—the Yellow Emperor. Acting on Heaven's mandate, the Yellow Emperor built palaces on Kunlun, instituted rites and music, and thereby inaugurated China's civilization of ritual and music. His wife, Leizu, raised silkworms, planted mulberry trees, and wove silk and cloth. She assisted the Yellow Emperor in harmonizing the various clans, unifying the Central Plains, and promoting regulated marriage rituals. Kunlun, as the setting for these ancient historical realities and mythic narratives, has thus become the spiritual homeland sought and venerated by generations of Chinese people.

Sharing the same ancestry and origins has become the collective memory of all ethnic groups in China. In ancient times, the Han people believed that the Yellow Emperor

① Wu Xinhua, "Kunlun Culture: The Life Symbol and Civilizational Manifestation of Chinese Traditional Culture," *Journal of Qinghai Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, no. 3 (2025), p. 33.

② Zhao Zongfu, "The Nature of Kunlun Culture and the Construction of the Kunlun National Cultural Park: A Case Study of Kunlun Culture in Qinghai," *Qinghai Social Sciences*, no. 2 (2024), p. 26.

and the Yan Emperor were brothers^① and the common ancestors of the Huaxia people, while ancestral sage kings such as Zhuanxu, Diku, Yao, Shun, and Yu were all considered descendants of the Yellow Emperor. Many ethnic groups and tribes—including the Xiongnu, Xianbei, Di, Rouran, Khitan, Tangut, Jurchen, and various southwestern peoples—voluntarily identified with the Chinese ancestral origins, regarding themselves as descendants of the Yellow Emperor.^② Together, they established a historical narrative of "shared origins and common ancestry."

As ancient texts record, "The Yellow Emperor grew up by the Ji River, and the Yan Emperor by the Jiang River."^③ The Jiang River basin^④ was the birthplace of the ancient Qiang people. Revering the Yan and Yellow Emperors as their ancestors, the ancient Qiang people migrated, multiplied, and developed, eventually becoming one of the ancestral sources for numerous modern ethnic groups, including the Han, Tibetan, and Yi peoples. At least nearly 20 ethnic groups, such as the Qiang, Yi, Jingpo, and Pumi, all believe their ancestors originated at the foot of the Kunlun Mountains on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.^⑤ The Yi people's ancient creation epic, the Song of the Bronze Drum, opens with the line: "The ancestors of the Yi family resided in Kunlun." The Qiang folktale *The Great War of Qiang and Ge* contains a similar account: "In ancient times, the ancestors of the Qiang people lived a prosperous life, following the abundant water and lush grass at the foot of the Kunlun Mountains."^⑥

Since modern times, in order to invigorate the national spirit, countless patriots and people of vision have eulogized Kunlun. Poetic lines such as "The Yellow Emperor rose from the Kunlun Realm,"^⑦ "Recalling our ancestor named Xuanyuan, whose origins

① "Long ago, Shao Dian married a woman from the Youjiao clan, and gave birth to the Yellow Emperor and the Yan Emperor", see Chen Tongsheng, trans. and annot., *Guo Yu: Jin Yu 4* (Discourses of the States: Discourses of Jin 4), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, p. 392.

② The Murong clan of the Xianbei claimed to be "descendants of the Youxiong clan (the Yellow Emperor)", see Fang Xuanling et al. (Tang Dynasty), *Jin Shu: Murong Hui Zai Ji* (Book of Jin: Biography of Murong Hui), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2803; The Di people identified themselves as "descendants of the Youyu clan (descendants of the Yellow Emperor and sons of Emperor Shun)", see Cui Hong (Northern Wei Dynasty), *Shi Liu Guo Chun Qiu Ji Bu* (Collected Supplements to the Spring and Autumn Annals of the Sixteen Kingdoms), vol. 31, Qian Qin Lu: Fu Hong (Records of the Former Qin: Fu Hong), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2020, p. 381.

③ *Guo Yu: Zhou Yu* (Discourses of the States: Discourses of Zhou), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, p. 392.

④ The Jiangshui River Basin primarily refers to the area of the Qingjiang River Basin in Baoji, Shaanxi Province.

⑤ E Chongrong and Bi Yanjun, "Reflections on the Inheritance and Reconstruction of Kunlun Culture in the New Era," *Journal of Qinghai Nationalities University*, no. 4 (2023), p. 42.

⑥ E Chongrong and Bi Yanjun, "Reflections on the Inheritance and Reconstruction of Kunlun Culture in the New Era," *Journal of Qinghai Nationalities University*, no. 4 (2023), p. 42.

⑦ Liang Qichao, *Yinbingshi Heji* (Collected Works from the Ice-Drinker's Studio), vol. 1, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989, *Yinbingshi Wenji* (Collected Essays from the Ice-Drinker's Studio), vol. 6, p. 6.

were rooted in Kunlun,"^① and "Looking back toward Kunlun, I gaze upon my homeland,"^② are prominent examples. Eminent figures such as Liang Qichao, Qiu Jin, and Wang Guowei expressed their patriotic sentiments and devotion to the nation through Kunlun, inspiring the resolve to rise up and forging national consensus. Kunlun thus became a spiritual sanctuary and the spiritual homeland in times of national peril.

1.3 The Territorial Symbol of Ancient China

In the minds of the early Chinese people, Kunlun stood at the center of Heaven and Earth. It was also regarded as the source of the mother river, the Yellow River, alongside other ancient great rivers such as the Chi, Yang, Hei, Ruo, and Qing rivers. Kunlun thus emerged as a defining geographical and cultural emblem in antiquity, bearing multiple meanings of "centrality."

In the late Neolithic period, the Chinese ancestors erected a gnomon to measure the sun's shadow at Taosi,^③ believing that the place where they lived was the center of Heaven and Earth. During the Shang dynasty, the Chinese ancestors believed their capital to be majestic and easily accessible, serving as the center of the four quarters of tianxia (all-under-Heaven).^④ In the Zhou dynasty, people believed that the "center of Heaven and Earth" was the place where wind and rain, yin and yang intersected—a place that was prosperous, stable, and ideal for establishing the national capital.^⑤ Literature from the Warring States period posited that the "Kunlun realm" was synonymous with "Chixian Shenzhou" (the Divine Land of the Red Counties),^⑥ which meant "China." By this time, Kunlun had already acquired a territorial symbolic meaning.

As early as the Qin unification of China, the Central Plains dynasty had already conducted on-the-ground explorations of Kunlun, leaving cliff inscriptions at "Baihai"^⑦ that recorded the mission to "gather medicinal herbs at Kunlun," which greatly expand-

① Qiu Jin, "Song of the Precious Sword," quoted in Han Ziyong, "Kunlun Culture and Its Contemporary Value," *Qinghai Social Sciences*, no. 1 (2025).

② Wang Guowei, *Complete Works of Wang Guowei*, vol. 14, Hangzhou: Zhejiang Education Publishing House; Guangzhou: Guangdong Education Publishing House, 2010, p. 617.

③ Today's Xiangfen County, Linfen City, Shanxi Province.

④ "Magnificent is the Shang capital, the center of the four quarters", see Cheng Junying and Jiang Jianyuan, *Shi Jing Zhu Xi* (Annotation and Analysis of the Book of Songs), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2017, p. 787.

⑤ "To rectify the sun's shadow, in order to seek the central point of the earth... It is where heaven and earth converge, where the four seasons intersect, where winds and rains meet, and where yin and yang harmonize. When these conditions prevail, all things flourish in security, and it is upon such a site that the capital of the kingdom is established", see Sun Yirang (Qing Dynasty), *Zhou Li Zheng Yi* (Rectified Interpretation of the Rites of Zhou), vol. 18, ed. Wang Shaohua, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2015, pp. 864– 872.

⑥ Wang Jipei (Qing Dynasty), comp., and Wei Daifu, annot., *Shi Zi Shu Zheng* (Annotated Commentary on the Shizi), Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing House, 2018, p. 88.

⑦ Baihai refers to the present-day area of Ngoring Lake and Gyaring Lake in Qinghai Province.

ed the borders of geographical space perception.^① By the Western Han Dynasty, following Zhang Qian's pioneering mission to the Western Regions, Emperor Wu of Han officially designated the southern mountains of Yutian (Khotan) as Mount Kunlun based on records from ancient texts such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the *Erya*, and the *Annals of Yu*,^{②③④} and also located the source of the Yellow River there—matters explicitly recorded in the *Records of the Grand Historian* and the *Book of Han*.^{⑤⑥}

The political and cultural significance of "designating Kunlun" was exceedingly profound. On the one hand, it highlighted the Central Plains dynasty's high regard for the Western Regions as "where Kunlun resides, fine jade is produced, the river originates, and the ancestor of all mountains lies." On the other hand, this marked the first time in ancient Chinese history that Kunlun was anchored to a specific mountain in the name of the state, directly forging a connection between Kunlun and national territory and sovereignty, thereby establishing it as an important symbol and signifier of Great Unity.

"A state must rely on its mountains and rivers."^⑦ Ancient people believed that the Yellow River originated in Kunlun, which led to the derivative belief that the Yangtze River also had one of its sources there.^⑧ The Kunlun mountain system, together with the water systems of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers, extends and radiates across the Divine Land. Together, they constituted the primary geographical space for the survival and multiplication of the Chinese nation, as well as the formation and development of

① Tong Tao, "A Study of the Qin Dynasty Stone Inscription 'Cai Yao Kunlun' (Gathering Herbs on Kunlun)," *Historical Research*, no. 9 (2025), pp. 4–25.

② Yuan Ke, *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu* (Collation and Annotations of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*), Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1993, p. 220.

③ Guo Pu (Jin Dynasty), annot., and Xing Bing (Song Dynasty), subcomment., *Er Ya Zhu Shu* (Commentary and Subcommentary on the *Erya*), Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999, p. 226.

④ See Sima Qian (Han Dynasty), *Shi Ji: Da Yuan Lie Zhuan* (Records of the Grand Historian: The Account of Dayuan), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014, p. 3858.

⑤ "Han envoys traced the Yellow River to its source. The source of the river was found to be in Yutian (Khotan), where the mountains produced abundant jade and stones, which were collected and brought back. The Son of Heaven, after consulting ancient maps and records, named the mountain from which the river originated as Kunlun." See Sima Qian (Han Dynasty), *Shi Ji: Da Yuan Lie Zhuan* (Records of the Grand Historian, vol. 123: The Account of Dayuan), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 3164.

⑥ "The river has two sources: one originates from the Congling (Pamir Mountains), and the other originates from Yutian (Khotan)", see Ban Gu (Han Dynasty), *Han Shu: Xi Yu Zhuan* (Book of Han: Treatise on the Western Regions), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 3871.

⑦ Guo Yu: *Zhou Yu* (Discourses of the States: Discourses of Zhou), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, p. 28.

⑧ For example, after exploring the source of the Yangtze River, Xu Xiake wrote *Jiang Yuan Kao* (A Study of the Source of the Yangtze River), stating: "Tracing their origins, the Yellow River originates north of Kunlun, and the Yangtze River also originates south of Kunlun." Qing Shi Gao (Draft History of the Qing Dynasty), vol. 8, also holds that "the source of the Yangtze River also comes from Kunlun, and only when it reaches the Min Mountains does it cease to flow underground." Modern scientific surveys have also confirmed that one of the three recognized sources of the Yangtze River—the Chumar River in Yushu, Qinghai—indeed originates in the Kunlun Mountains.

Chinese civilization, shaping the earliest concept of "China."

Across millennia, the imagery of Kunlun has never been a fixed geographical coordinate. Interweaving Heaven and Earth, the tangible and the virtual, its multifaceted connotations have deepened layer by layer, achieving a civilizational transformation from cosmological imagination and spiritual belonging to physical territory. This trajectory is a vivid testament to the gradual formation and continuous development of the unity in diversity of Chinese civilization, surging with the endless and majestic strength of the Chinese nation.

Chapter 2:

The Value Foundation of the Shared Spiritual Homeland of the Chinese Nation

As a spiritual identifier running through the millennia-long cultural lineage of China, Kunlun culture has undergone thousands of years of development, accumulation, and multi-ethnic integration and inheritance. It has distilled a core value system encompassing "the Unity of Heaven and Humanity," "Great Unity," "Vigorous Self-Improvement," "Cherishing Life and Caring for the People," and "All-under-Heaven as One Family." Together, these values converge into the unique source of inspiration of Chinese civilization, shaping the Chinese nation's mode of thinking, spiritual temperament, and value pursuits. They constitute the profound value foundation of the shared spiritual homeland of the Chinese nation.

2.1 The Unity of Heaven and Humanity: The Formation of the Cosmological View of Chinese Civilization

Chinese civilization has always revered the unity of Heaven and Humanity, as well as following the Dao of Nature, pursuing the harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.^① This concept had its origins in the ancient Kunlun culture. According to the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the deity Luwu of Mount Kunlun governed the nine domains of Heaven and the seasonal cycles of all things in the heavenly gardens,^② thereby maintaining the balance of the natural ecosystem. Fuxi, the legendary human ancestor, observed the celestial phenomena above and examined the geographic patterns below at Kunlun,^③ and created the Eight Trigrams, revealing the laws governing the movement of Heaven and Earth and the birth and death of all things. This served to guide the ancient people in their productive practices, enabling them to adapt to nature and thrive.

The idea of the Unity of Heaven and Humanity was inherited and developed by sages and thinkers through successive dynasties. Laozi (老子) proposed that "Humanity follows Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows nature," treating nature as the ultimate standard for human conduct. Zhuangzi advocated

① Xi Jinping, *Selected Works on Ecological Civilization*, vol. 1, Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, July 2025, p. 225.

② "Govern the nine domains of Heaven and the Celestial Emperor's gardens", see Yuan Ke, *Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu* (Collation and Annotations of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*), Chengdu: Bashu Publishing House, 1993, p. 56.

③ "observed the celestial phenomena above and examined the geographic patterns below", see Yang Tiancai and Zhang Shanwen, trans. and annot., *Zhou Yi* (The Book of Changes), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011, p. 607.

"communing with the spiritual essence of Heaven and Earth," pursuing an ideal realm where humanity and nature integrate into one, with no distinction between subject and object. Mencius proposed avoiding violations of agricultural seasons and ensuring that fishing, hunting, and logging adhered strictly to seasonal timings, explicitly advocating conformity with natural rhythms and the moderate utilization of natural resources. Scholars of the Northern Song dynasty, such as Zhang Zai, also maintained that the people are our compatriots and all things are our kind, emphasizing the unity of all things and the benevolent treatment of life.

The philosophy of the unity of Heaven and Humanity was integrated into state governance institutions from very early times. During the Qin and Han dynasties, specialized officials were appointed to manage and protect mountains, forests, waters, and soils. The Han dynasty promulgated the Imperial Edict on Monthly Ordinances for the Four Seasons, emphasizing "prohibiting exploitation out of season and combining utilization with nurturing" to protect forests, animals, and soil and water resources through legal means. The ink-inscribed text on the mud walls at the Xuanquanzhi site in Dunhuang serves as direct evidence of this edict. The Water Law of Tang Dynasty explicitly stipulated the protection of rivers and lakes and the rational utilization of water resources. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, local governments appointed specialized officials such as assistant prefects for water conservancy to oversee regional river management, flood prevention, agricultural irrigation, and navigation engineering.

In the continuous evolution and development of Chinese civilization, this ecological wisdom has served as the historical foundation for contemporary China's ecological civilization construction. Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization shares a consistent lineage with this tradition, representing both an inheritance and an innovation of fine traditional Chinese ecological culture.

2.2 Great Unity: The Foundation of the State View of Chinese Civilization

"The great unity of all ethnic groups into one nation is an invaluable treasure bestowed by our ancestors, and one of our country's great strengths."^① For thousands of years, the Chinese nation has regarded the Great Unity as a self-evident principle across the ages.^② Kunlun culture serves as a major ideological source for the concept of Great Unity, and "Kunlun" is an important symbol that demonstrates and consolidates the pattern of Great Unity for a multi-ethnic state.

The historical records in ancient texts stating that "the Yellow River originates from

^①Xi Jinping: *The Governance of China*, vol. 2, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017, p. 299.

^②"The Great Unity advocated in the Spring and Autumn Annals is the constant principle of Heaven and Earth and the universal righteousness of past and present", see Ban Gu (Han Dynasty), *Han Shu: Dong Zhongshu Zhuan* (Book of Han: Biography of Dong Zhongshu), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 2523.

Kunlun" embodied the early Chinese ancestors' rudimentary understanding of natural mountains and rivers, while further nurturing the political concept that "the nine provinces are unified." Following the Western Han dynasty's "designation of Kunlun," the inherent concepts of "Heaven," "tianxia," and "the source of the rivers" previously associated with Kunlun were further clarified and extended, forming a relatively complete cognitive system of "tianxia," "the state," and "the rivers and mountains." It articulated and embodied shared values such as "All-under-Heaven as One Family," "Mountains and Rivers as an Integral Whole," and "Uniform Customs throughout the Six Cardinal Points, and the Unification of the Nine Provinces." It carried the conviction that territory must not be divided, the state must not fall into disorder, the people must not be scattered, and civilization must not be severed. This conviction transcends time and space, running from antiquity to the present. It stands as a vital foundation for longing for unity during periods of division and maintaining unity during periods of unification in "political China," serving as an essential source nurturing the shared spiritual homeland of the Chinese nation.

Exploring the source of the Yellow River at Kunlun was a political act by successive dynasties to demonstrate national unification. During the Tang dynasty, General Li Daozong led an army all the way to Xingxiuchuan (today's Xingxiuhai) and Baihai, specifically halting there to inspect the river source.^① During the Yuan dynasty, building upon the unification of the four seas and the submission of all border tribes, Kublai Khan, Emperor Shizu of Yuan, dispatched Du Shi to explore the Kunlun source of the Yellow River. Du Shi thoroughly investigated and precisely recorded the geography, hydrology, folk customs, and local administrative institutions of the upper reaches of the Yellow River, noting that "there is a great snow mountain northeast of Dokham,"^② thereby identifying the Anyemaqen Mountains as Kunlun. During the Kangxi and Qianlong reigns of the Qing dynasty, large-scale geographical surveys were organized, and envoys were twice sent to Qinghai to explore Kunlun. They compiled the Map of the Yellow River Source and subsequently the comprehensive maps of the Qing territory. These maps incorporated every mountain and river of the Kunlun mountains into official atlases, emphasizing that even though the western frontier was distant, it was still an integral part of the state's territory.

Because Kunlun possesses profound political and cultural significance linked to national sovereignty and state image, subsequent dynasties developed the conviction that not an inch of territory in the western Kunlun region could be abandoned. Emperor Yang Guang of the Sui dynasty personally inspected Qinghai and established the River-Source Commandery for garrison and cultivation; Köden of the Yuan dynasty con-

① "Looking northward at Mount Jishi, they observed the source of the Yellow River", see Liu Xu (Later Jin Dynasty), *Jiu Tang Shu: Hou Junji Zhuan* (Old Book of Tang: Biography of Hou Junji), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975, p. 2510.

② Song Lian (Ming Dynasty), *Yuan Shi* (History of Yuan Dynasty), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1976, p. 1563.

vened the "Liangzhou Conference" to unify the Tibetan Plateau; and Emperor Taizu Zhu Yuanzhang of the Ming dynasty dispatched Deng Yu and Mu Ying to "advance west into Sichuan and Xizang, displaying military might at Kunlun." All these events reflect how Kunlun has consistently remained a symbol of Great Unity.

Unification has become the mainstream of Chinese history, and the Great Unity has evolved into the common political ideal and social pursuit of the Chinese nation. This is the underlying secret to the enduring continuity of Chinese civilization. As a spiritual symbol bearing the concept of the Great Unity, Kunlun culture mirrors the development process of the unification of tianxia in Chinese civilization, demonstrating a magnificent pattern of diversity converging into unity.

2.3 Vigorous Self-Improvement: The Rooting of the Ethos of Great Resolve and Perseverance in Chinese Civilization

President Xi Jinping has repeatedly cited the saying, "A scholar must be broad-minded and resolute, for his burden is heavy and his journey is long," emphasizing the importance of a sense of responsibility, a spirit of endeavor, and the need to "be vigorous and unyielding, constantly striving to become stronger."^① The ethos of great resolve and perseverance is a fundamental spirit of Chinese civilization, shaping the life attitude of the Chinese nation characterized by ceaseless self-improvement, nurturing all things with great virtue, daring to struggle, and pioneering innovation. Kunlun culture was born from the practice of the Chinese ancestors seeking survival and development, and it is precisely the cultural root of this ethos of great resolve and perseverance of Chinese civilization.

The heroic figures in Kunlun myths dared to defy fate, dared to create, and dared to triumph. They refused to submit to the manipulation of fate, brimming with a strong fighting spirit of vigorous self-improvement. Kuafu tirelessly chased the sun until he finally fell, his walking staff transforming into a peach grove; Yu the Great combated the floods for thirteen years, and with the perseverance of "carving metal and stone through unrelenting effort," endowed the Chinese people with an indomitable vitality in extreme environments. These mythic narratives reflect the intense desire of the early ancestors to explore and transform the world through arduous pioneering and their unyielding, tenacious will to realize their dreams.

This spiritual lineage has been passed down through generations. Qu Yuan dreamed of "ascending Mound Kunlun to gaze all around, with his heart soaring vast and free," and asked "Where is the hanging garden on Kunlun?" He searched high and low and cared deeply for the people, practicing the ambition of perseverance through an unswerving commitment to his state and family. Wang Anshi wrote the majestic lines

^①Xi Jinping, "Cultivating Socialist Builders and Successors Who Are Well-Developed Morally, Intellectually, Physically, Aesthetically, and Labor-wise," *Qiushi*, no. 17 (2024).

"The five-colored stream flows from Kunlun" and "Who has cut through the 10,000-li Kunlun?" Facing the storms of reform, he stood firm with tenacity and courage to shoulder great responsibility.

Since modern times, when the Chinese nation faced an unprecedented crisis of national subjugation and extinction, countless people with lofty ideals used Kunlun as a metaphor for national integrity. They risked their lives to save the nation, transforming the perseverance rooted in Kunlun into a spiritual force that awakened national consciousness. Tan Sitong wrote, "I laugh toward the heavens with my sword in hand, leaving behind my courage as vast as Kunlun," sacrificing himself to awaken and admonish the people. Sun Bingwen, an outstanding early revolutionary of the Communist Party of China, wrote, "I wish to ascend Kunlun to gaze at the distant sea—how can any bandit obstruct me?" The imagery of "ascending Kunlun" in his poem expresses his contempt for reactionary forces and his determination to fight for the "four hundred million compatriots sharing the same hatred."

This unbroken Kunlun character gained new vitality in the century-long struggle of the Communist Party of China. Deeply forged into the inspiring principles of Chinese Communists, it nourishes the soul of the Party, the nation, and the Chinese people with the profound heritage of Chinese civilization. It has enabled the century-old Party to forge ahead through storms, leading the people of all ethnic groups across the country to face hardships without fear, advance with courage, and move from victory to new victory.

2.4 Cherishing Life and Caring for the People: The Establishment of the People-Centered View in Chinese Civilization

"The people are the foundation of a country, and are also what the rule of a country is for."^① Kunlun culture is an important source of the people-centered philosophy of Chinese civilization, laying the spiritual foundation for caring for the people, benefiting the people, and bringing peace to the people. It became a core principle of governance for successive dynasties, containing the cultural genes of cherishing life and caring for the people.

Love the people with sincere loyalty, benefit the people with genuine generosity. Compassion for the common people and concern for their well-being are distinct spiritual traits of the figures in Kunlun myths. The cultural progenitors and ancient heroes recorded in Kunlun culture either opened up Heaven and Earth and created all things, or rescued the people from calamity and sustained the life of ethnic groups. With broad and magnanimous hearts, they consistently cared for the survival, well-being, and long-term peace of the common folk, painting the most fundamental spiritual back-

^①Records of Governance in the New Era, Vol. 1, Xinhua Publishing House, February 2026, p. 382.

drop of the Chinese cultural lineage.

Ancient texts such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and the *Huainanzi* recount that when Gonggong and Zhuanxu fought for the imperial throne, Gonggong angrily smashed Mount Buzhou, causing floods to spread everywhere and rendering the people homeless and displaced. Nüwa then melted five-colored stones to mend the sky, restoring stability to Heaven and Earth so that the people could live in peace. Later, when ten suns appeared simultaneously in the sky, the vegetation and crops across the earth withered and died, leaving the people with no grain to stave off hunger. Houyi stepped forward to shoot down nine suns, restoring the regular alternation of sun and moon and enabling the people to live in peace.

These ancient myths arose from early ancestors' real insights gained through long-term survival and labor. They embody shared values and gave rise to a spiritual core of revering Heaven and protecting the people, and of placing the people at the center. Through generations of accumulation, it gradually developed into a systematically complete ideology of state governance.

The *Book of Documents: Songs of the Five Sons* states, "The people are the foundation of the state; when the foundation is firm, the state is at peace." The *Book of Documents: Great Declaration* emphasizes, "Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear." *Guanzi: On Shepherding the People* points out, "Governance flourishes by complying with the people's will, and collapses by defying it." The *Analects: Xian Wen* advocates "cultivating oneself to bring peace to the common people." Mencius: *Jin Xin II* further establishes the core premise: "The people are of supreme importance, the altars of soil and grain come next, and the ruler is the least important." Enlightened rulers and virtuous ministers of later generations inherited this value orientation, taking the peace, prosperity, and care of the people as the foundation of governance, implementing measures to benefit the populace and stabilize the state, thereby securing the bedrocks of long-term stability and peace across the realm.

Rooted in the enduring heritage of a millennium-old people-centered philosophy, the Communist Party of China has established a people-centered development philosophy, firmly grasping the profound connotation that "the country is the people, and the people are the country." Through practical action to enhance the people's well-being, it has gathered the mighty strength of hundreds of millions of people and remained committed to advancing common prosperity, striving to write the grand chapter of Chinese modernization.

2.5 All-under-Heaven as One Family: The Nurturing of the Tianxia Worldview in Chinese Civilization

President Xi Jinping has emphasized that the Chinese nation has traditionally advocated the ideals of "Great Unity under Heaven" and "all-under-Heaven as one family."

"^① China's ancient tianxia system was a political paradigm instituted by sage-kings and worthies under unique historical conditions. It represented a framework of coexistence that treated the world as an integrated political entity^②—a cultural construct of immense scope and vision forged by the ancestors of the Chinese nation. Revered as the "grandest of celestial phenomena," the Kunlun Mountains symbolized the indivisible vault of Heaven, thereby consolidating the civilizational mindset of "all-under-Heaven as one family."

Ancient scholars postulated that "Kunlun lies in the northwest," while simultaneously asserting that "Kunlun is the center of tianxia." This duality demonstrates that, from the very beginning, the Chinese people imagined and conceptualized Kunlun through the lens of tianxia, reflecting a sweeping geographical perspective and an inclusive global outlook.^③ The Kunlun culture spawned core tenets such as "Heaven sheltering all nations," "harmonizing all states," and "cultivating virtue to embrace those from afar." These concepts mirror a profound commitment to unity and harmony, the pursuit of Great Unity, the enduring sentiment of all-under-Heaven as one family, and the defining ethos of the Chinese nation.

During Yu the Great's legendary flood-control campaigns, early inhabitants from diverse regions united to overcome natural adversity. Subsequently, Yu convened an assembly at Tushan, where more than ten thousand lords came bearing jade and silk.^④ This monumental gathering coalesced the internally diverse "myriad states under Heaven" into a cohesive whole, charting a historical trajectory from "shared hardship" to "shared governance," and ultimately to "a shared tianxia."

The tianxia worldview served as the bedrock of state formation in ancient China, conceptualizing a macro-community that transcended conventional notions of family, polity, and state. Confucianism championed principles such as "in the practice of ritual, harmony is paramount," "all-under-Heaven as one family," and "within the four seas, all are brothers." It systematically charted a blueprint for a society of Great Unity where "tianxia is held in common," which became the archetype of an ideal society for subsequent generations. Daoism emphasized "viewing the world through the lens of tianxia," adopting a holistic and egalitarian perspective. Mohism advocated "exalting unity," upholding a spirit of self-sacrifice for the universal benefit, with the ultimate objective of realizing Great Unity and securing the people's livelihood. Successive dynasties strove to establish a political order centered on a "common sovereign for all under

^①Selected Discourses of Xi Jinping on Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics, Central Literature Press, 2020, p. 278.

^②Zhao Tingyang, "The TianxiaWorldview and the New Tianxia System," *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism*, no. 2(2019).

^③Zhao Zongfu, "The Kunlun Culture from the Northwestern Perspective and the Construction of the Chinese National Community's Shared Spiritual Homeland," *Regiment Daily*, March 10, 2025.

^④"He gathered the lords at Tushan; those bearing gifts of jade and silk numbered 10,000 states", Zuo Zhuan: *Ai Gong Qi Nian* (Year of Duke Ai, Seventh Year), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012, p. 2270.

Heaven," emphasizing the cultivation of cultural virtue to attract those from afar. Consequently, sharing Chinese civilization and voluntarily integrating into this realm became the shared aspiration of surrounding peoples.

Throughout the history of Chinese civilization, "all-under-Heaven as one family" has been an unbroken social ideal and political consensus, with all ethnic groups bonding like brothers, standing together through thick and thin, and living in harmonious integration—coalescing into a single community with a shared future. In the new era, the concept of "all-under-Heaven as one family," rooted in the matrix of Kunlun culture, provides profound cultural nourishment for forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, driving the Chinese nation to build a community with a shared future featuring higher identification and stronger cohesion.

Chapter 3:

Contemporary Practices in the Inheritance and Innovation of Chinese Civilization

Kunlun culture is a crucial spiritual symbol of Chinese civilization. Across the country—particularly in provinces and autonomous regions such as Qinghai, Xinjiang, Xizang, and Gansu—efforts have been made to promote its creative transformation and innovative development by delving deep into the spiritual core it embodies.

In promoting the national spirit, strengthening ethnic unity, building an ecological civilization, and activating cultural dynamism, Kunlun culture has continuously released its contemporary vitality. It has provided solid support and practical experience for consolidating the foundation of cultural confidence and building a shared spiritual homeland for the Chinese nation.

3.1 Carrying Forward the National Spirit Through Cultural Inheritance

The vigorous and resolute character rooted in the Kunlun Mountains has served as an inexhaustible source for nurturing the national spirit and rallying the strength to forge ahead throughout the century-long struggle of the Communist Party of China. This ethos has been forged into invaluable spiritual assets, characterized by a deep-rooted presence in the western regions and an unwavering commitment to serving the nation.

During the New Democratic Revolution, the imagery of Kunlun embodied a steadfast conviction and an indomitable resolve in national salvation. In 1935, as the Red Army traversed the Minshan mountain range—a spur of Kunlun—Mao Zedong penned the poem *Nian Nu Jiao: Kunlun*. The work expressed a revolutionary heroism that defies hardship, dares to struggle, encompasses the globe, and seeks the betterment of all under Heaven. During the War of Liberation, while fighting across northern Shaanxi, the CPC Central Committee used "Kunlun Column" as its code name, invoking the mountain's name to demonstrate its indomitable tenacity and resolute confidence in overcoming difficulties and seizing victory.

During the period of socialist revolution and construction, generations of builders anchored themselves on the plateau, building the "sky road" with their own sweat and blood. In doing so, they forged the "Two-Road Spirit," defined by "fearing neither hardship nor death, fighting tenaciously, serving willingly as paving stones, and forging civil-military and ethnic unity." In 1950, a vanguard company comprising multi-ethnic officers and soldiers set out from Xinjiang, crossed the Kunlun Mountains, and advanced deep into Ngari. Overcoming severe illness and injury inflicted

by extreme natural conditions, they successfully marched into the northern Tibetan plateau, making outstanding contributions to the peaceful liberation of Xizang. Their sacrifices, intertwined with the enduring endeavors of subsequent troops and generations of cadres and civilians stationed in the region, coalesced into the invaluable "Old Xizang Spirit."^①

In the new historical period of reform, opening up, and socialist modernization, successive generations of military personnel have garrisoned "life-forbidden zones" at altitudes above 5,000 meters to safeguard the national borders, practicing the Karakoram-Kunlun spirit of "loving border defense, enduring hard struggle, selflessly dedication, and tenacious combat." Simultaneously, countless scientists have carried forward the spirit of "Two Bombs, One Satellite."^② Stationed in the Gobi Desert near Kunlun, they worked in anonymity to surmount formidable challenges, sustaining their original aspiration of upholding self-reliance to forge a strategic shield for the nation. Through these efforts, they have continuously extended the revolutionary legacy of serving the nation from the snow-covered plateau.

Entering the new era, scientific expedition teams rooted on the plateau and committed to national service have vividly illustrated the contemporary essence of the national spirit. For years, the comprehensive scientific expedition team has ventured deep into the West Kunlun Mountains, earning the moniker of the "glacier daredevil team." Braving life-and-death trials, including extreme high-altitude hypoxia, violent blizzards, and treacherous crevasses, team members successfully extracted a 308.45-meter ice core down to the bedrock from the Guliya ice cap at an elevation above 6,700 meters. This achievement set a world record for high-altitude ice-core drilling, successfully decoding the plateau's climate evolution.

3.2 Forging Shared Memory Through Ethnic Unity

Kunlun culture carries a multi-ethnic historical memory that spans regions and bridges the past and present. It not only preserves the simple cosmological reflections of ancient forebears, but also cements the emotional bonds of shared origins and symbiosis among ethnic groups, serving as a vital cultural vehicle for strengthening the consciousness of the Chinese national community in the new era.

Since modern times, the Kunlun Mountains have progressively evolved into a spiritual bond of mutual assistance, integration, and symbiosis among all ethnic groups. In the early days of the People's Republic of China, the Kunlun region witnessed magnificent endeavors of multi-ethnic solidarity in safeguarding the nation. To secure logistical supplies for troops stationed in Qinghai, advancing toward Xinjiang, and entering Xi-

① "The Old Xizang Spirit" is the spirit of "being particularly hard-working, particularly combat-ready, particularly enduring, particularly united, and particularly dedicated."

② The Spirit of the "Two Bombs, One Satellite" is the spirit of "loving the motherland and selfless dedicating, relying on one's own efforts and working hard, coordinating closely and daring to scale new heights."

zang, local communities comprising Han, Tibetan, Hui, and Salar peoples organized camel transport teams in Qinghai. Utilizing the Kunlun Mountains and the Qaidam Basin as transit corridors, they hauled grain and military equipment over vast distances, establishing a vital supply lifeline across the Kunlun region.^①

In recent years, the nine provinces and autonomous regions along the Yellow River have earnestly implemented the Construction and Protection Plan for the Yellow River National Cultural Park. Localities have systematically advanced rescue-oriented cultural heritage preservation and the construction of ecological corridors for Yellow River cultural heritage, encompassing key sites such as the Garitang Qin dynasty stone inscription, the Zongri site, and the Lajia site.

The Garitang Qin stone inscription represents the only extant Qin-era stone inscription preserved in situ and at the highest altitude in China. Located on the northern shore of Gyaring Lake in Maduo County, within the source area of the Yellow River in Qinghai Province, the inscription consists of 37 characters in Qin seal script.^② This historical record documents an official Central Plains expedition trekking long distances into the frigid, high-altitude source region of the Yellow River. It proves that as early as the Qin dynasty, Central Plains civilization had penetrated deep into the hinterland of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, and that Central Plains inhabitants and indigenous plateau populations engaged in exploration and exchanges centered around the Yellow River source and the Kunlun Mountains. This pushes back the timeline of inter-ethnic exchanges along the later Tang-Tibetan ancient roads by centuries, vividly attesting to the long and deep-rooted history of Chinese civilization's diverse yet united pattern. The Kunlun cultural identity embedded in the inscription transcends regional and ethnic boundaries, furnishing robust archaeological backing for the proposition that all ethnic groups share Kunlun roots and belong collectively to Chinese civilization.

This shared cultural memory of Kunlun distills a value consensus of national unity and shared destiny, forming the spiritual bedrock for safeguarding border stability and fostering ethnic solidarity. In recent years, Qinghai and Xinjiang have institutionalized regular Kunlun-themed folkloric festivals. Multi-ethnic artists—including Han, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Kazakh performers—take the stage together to present Kunlun-themed music and dance, while intangible cultural heritage art forms such as Tibetan opera, Hua'er folk songs, and the Muqam have integrated Kunlun mythic motifs, creating dynamic platforms for inter-ethnic cultural exchange and sharing.

Qinghai Province has exhibited large-scale Kunlun-themed murals and published comprehensive research series on Kunlun culture, such as *Research on the Historical Inheritance and Contemporary Reconstruction of Kunlun Culture* and the Kunlun

① Shi Weiyan and Xie Tongqiang, "Hearing Again the Leisurely Camel Bells on the Sky Road," *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, December 28, 2024, p. 7.

② "New Perspectives on Culture: How to Verify? How to Protect? The Story Behind the Authentication of the Highest Altitude Qin Dynasty Stone Inscription," *Xinhua News Agency*, September 16, 2025.

Atlas. These initiatives systematically map out Kunlun culture, driving its creative transformation and innovative development to establish it as a public cultural resource shared by all citizens. Meanwhile, Shache County in Xinjiang has leveraged paired-assistance resources to launch the "Kunlun Music Capital: Beautiful Shache" cultural and tourism lantern festival, transforming mythic beasts of Kunlun from the Classic of Mountains and Seas into intangible-heritage lanterns. People of all ethnic groups gather to admire the lanterns and celebrate together, deepening their recognition of a shared origin and common destiny through interactive folk celebrations.

Across various localities in Qinghai and Xinjiang, primary and secondary schools consistently organize study-tour programs focused on Kunlun geology and mythology, alongside long-term popular science courses on Kunlun culture. These initiatives weave the historical memory of "shared origins and common ancestry" into the fabric of youth education.

3.3 Practicing Harmony of Heaven and Humanity in Ecological Stewardship

Kunlun culture embodies the ancient wisdom of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, reverence for the natural world, and the protection of mountains and rivers. This seamlessly aligns with the paradigm of ecological civilization in the new era. Underpinned by the rule of law, the development of national parks, and public participation in ecological stewardship, the traditional philosophy of the unity of Heaven and Humanity is being continuously translated into tangible outcomes in plateau ecological governance.

In the new era, China has persistently advanced ecological conservation to fortify its ecological security barriers. Leveraging the geographical positioning and ecological functions of the Kunlun Mountains, regions including Qinghai, Xinjiang, and Xizang have assumed their respective responsibilities while enhancing synergistic coordination. Together, they have constructed a multi-dimensional ecological protection system spanning the Kunlun range and encompassing the headwaters of the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, charting a path for ecological governance that integrates Chinese characteristics with the unique attributes of high-altitude, frigid regions.

Situated at the eastern foothills of the Kunlun Mountains, Qinghai Province serves as both the core water conservation zone of the Kunlun region and the headwaters for the Yangtze, Yellow, and Lancang rivers. It shoulders the dual mission of safeguarding the "Water Tower of China" and coordinating ecological governance across upstream and downstream areas. As one of China's first-established national parks, and the largest and highest-altitude among them, the Sanjiangyuan National Park has steadily enhanced its regional water conservation capacity through years of pilot exploration and development. Today, the park's annual water conservation volume has surged to 40.895

billion cubic meters, supplying 60 to 90 billion cubic meters of pristine source water to downstream provinces each year.^① This sustains over 600 million people^② within the river basins and solidifies the ecological bedrock of these vital river sources.

In the Hotan Prefecture, located at the northern foothills of the Kunlun Mountains in Xinjiang, a specialized ecological monitoring network has been deployed. Grassland ecosystem observation stations now track hydrology, soil, and atmospheric conditions, routinely gathering data on high-alpine vegetation growth, glacial ablation, and wildlife migration. Furthermore, ongoing upgrade and transformation initiatives at the Niya National Wetland Park in Minfeng County, Hotan, have optimized the regional ecological spatial layout, effectively curbing the spread of local desertification.

The Xizang Autonomous Region has demarcated over 600,000 square kilometers—more than 50% of its total landmass—within ecological protection redlines, and established 47 nature reserves that cover 412,200 square kilometers. Consequently, the biological chains within the Kunlun region are becoming increasingly robust, and capacities for water conservation and soil retention have steadily improved.^③ To ensure that ecological conservation and livelihood improvements advance in tandem, regions such as Qinghai and Xizang have recruited substantial numbers of local farmers and herders to serve as ecological rangers. This has fostered a virtuous cycle wherein "ecological protection boosts local incomes, while public stewardship reinforces ecological governance," offering a replicable and scalable Chinese paradigm for ecological governance in similar high-altitude, frigid plateau regions globally.

3.4 Activating Cultural Momentum Through Industrial Transformation

Amidst a rising wave of interest in ancestral roots culture, the Kunlun culture—distinguished by its profound heritage, high recognizability, and complete intellectual property system—has increasingly become the focus of market-oriented development across various regions. Leveraging shared ancestral narratives, such as Fuxi the progenitor, the sacred Kunlun Mountains, and Yu the Great's flood control, localities have utilized these cultural motifs as spiritual bonds. They are actively transforming cultural assets into industrial strengths across sectors including stage performances, digital content, the jade industry, and culture-tourism integration. This synergy successfully aligns cultural heritage preservation and industrial development with the overarching goal of enriching

① "Beautiful China Tour | Sanjiangyuan: Protecting Thousands of Miles of Clear Flows, Guarding China's Water Tower," Xinhua News Agency, June 23, 2025.

② "From Sending Clean Water and Sending Green Electricity to Sending Green Computing: Qinghai's Practice of Green Development in China," Xinhua News Agency, December 1, 2025.

③ "Transcending Sixty Years, Dreaming for the Future: A Review of the Development Achievements of the Xizang Autonomous Region on Its 60th Anniversary," Xinhua News Agency, August 19, 2025.

local communities.

In the realm of stage performances, localities have developed Kunlun-themed cultural products spanning both theatrical and live-action outdoor productions. Qinghai has launched the "Kunlun Plan" to produce premium literary and artistic works, notably staging the dance drama *The Quest of Kunlun*, which interweaves the endeavors of plateau builders with the Kunlun cultural lineage. Similarly, the Urumqi Culture and Tourism Bureau, Xinjiang, produced *The Promise of Kunlun*, a grand live-action musical. Drawing upon classical texts such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and *The Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven*, the production vividly dramatizes the legendary Western tour of the Zhou Dynasty sovereign and his arduous journey to Kunlun to meet and forge a pact with the Queen Mother of the West.

In the digital content sector, a myriad of innovative works featuring Kunlun elements are cultivating new consumer markets among younger audiences. Blockbuster films—such as *Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*, *Nezha 2*, and *Jiang Ziya: Legend of Deification*—have woven their core narratives around the Kunlun Jade Void Palace, the Queen Mother of the West, and ancient Chinese creation myths. Web series like *Parallel World* feature the Kunlun Mountains and the mythological relics of the Queen Mother as central plot settings. Furthermore, online games such as *Fantasy Kunlun* employ digital technologies to recreate the Kunlun fairyland and the Jade Pool. In Qinghai and Xinjiang, immersive virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) offline exhibitions centered on Kunlun culture have been introduced, while AI-generated Kunlun-themed artwork, music, and short videos have resonated deeply with the public—especially younger audiences—driving the broad-based popularization of Kunlun culture.

Regarding the distinctive jade industry, China has historically utilized jade as a metaphor for moral virtue and a vessel for ritual practice; this jade ritual culture is deeply ingrained in the spiritual ethos of the Chinese nation. Classical idioms and legends—such as "jade originating from Mound Kunlun," "the Queen Mother offering jade," "the Jade of He," and "the Imperial Jade Seal"—are inextricably linked to this heritage. Building a complete industrial chain around Kunlun jade has enabled the mutual empowerment of cultural preservation and industrial expansion. Kunlun jade was selected for the iconic "gold-inlaid-jade" medals of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, forging a unique, national-level cultural emblem. That same year, jade carving techniques were inscribed on the national intangible cultural heritage list, ensuring the living transmission of Kunlun culture. Qinghai hosts the China (Golmud) Kunlun Mountain Hotan Jade Raw Material Trading Fair, establishing an end-to-end industry chain that spans raw material bidding, cultural-creative processing, and tourism consumption. Similarly, Hotan Prefecture in Xinjiang has meticulously developed specialized trading markets and a "Hotan Jade Capital," institutionalizing flagship events such as the Jade Culture and Tourism Festival. In 2025, the annual transaction volume of the Hotan jade public auc-

tion surpassed 130 million yuan,^① providing a sustained engine for local cultural tourism revenue and job creation.

In the realm of cultural tourism, localities have drawn upon Kunlun roots culture to curate specialized thematic itineraries, including ancestry-seeking tours, ancestral worship ceremonies, and intangible cultural heritage showcases. By utilizing diverse business models to string together geographically scattered ancient Kunlun cultural resources, they are continuously enriching the region's cultural endowment and activating new momentum for the tourism industry. Qinghai is developing the "Jade Pool" at Qinghai Lake and the "Kunlun Pillar of Heaven" at the lakeside Nianqin Xiageri Mountain. Leveraging assets such as the Kunlun Mountain UNESCO Global Geopark and the Jade Pool of Queen Mother of the West, it is developing specialized routes for study tours and plateau ecological sightseeing. Meanwhile, provinces such as Gansu, Henan, and Sichuan are capitalizing on cultural resources within the Kunlun system—such as Fuxi temples and Yu the Great cultural parks—to cultivate new growth drivers for their local cultural tourism economies.

① "2025 Annual Transaction Volume of Hotan Jade Public Auction Exceeds 130 Million Yuan," Chinanews.com, December 28, 2025. Full text at <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cj/2025/12-28/10541736.shtml>.

Chapter 4:

Oriental Wisdom for the Development of Human Civilization

Civilization is the shared spiritual homeland of humanity. From ancient times to the present, humanity has nurtured diverse forms of civilization through its long-term practices of transforming nature and sustaining development. The profound spiritual heritage has always been the fundamental support for the continuity of all civilizations. Chinese civilization is the only ancient civilization in the world that has continued in an uninterrupted national form for over five thousand years. As a source-marking cultural emblem of Chinese civilization, Kunlun culture embodies the unique spiritual reflections of the ancient Chinese people as they observed Heaven and Earth and sought harmony among all nations.

At present, global challenges such as civilizational estrangement, ecological imbalance, and ethnic fragmentation are becoming increasingly prominent. Kunlun culture, which embodies the profound heritage of Chinese civilization, is an important cultural source for promoting the building of a community with a shared future for humanity. The profound connotations it bears—the equality of diverse civilizations, exchange and mutual learning among civilizations, and the harmonious coexistence of civilizations—have become the Eastern wisdom to answer the global proposition of civilizational development. The civilizational core carried by Kunlun is not merely a localized cultural resource that nourishes the Chinese nation, but also possesses universal value that transcends region and ethnicity. Exploring the wisdom embedded in Kunlun culture can provide a temperate yet profound Chinese approach to dissolving antagonism among civilizations and resolving development dilemmas.

4.1 Breaking "Civilization Centrism" and Establishing a Historical View of the Equality of Diverse Civilizations

Since modern times, Western-dominated knowledge systems have long shaped the narrative of "civilization centrism," judging the developmental paths of world civilizations by a single yardstick, preaching that civilizations can be divided into superior and inferior, strong and weak, and regarding their own modernization model as the only standard answer for human development. This narrative deliberately obscures the objective historical facts of the pluralistic origins and parallel evolution of human civilizations, causing many non-Western civilizations to fall into the predicament of cultural aphasia and the marginalization of their cultural traditions, making it difficult to guard their own cultural subjectivity. The Kunlun myth and the ancient Greek narrative of

Mount Olympus gaze at each other from East and West, each taking shape independently, providing a highly persuasive comparative sample to refute the theory of the superiority of a single civilization.

From the perspective of civilizational carriers, both Eastern and Western ancient civilizations used towering sacred mountains as the spatial axis of their divine order, yet they derived civilizational cores with different emphases. Kunlun was defined by the early Chinese ancestors as the pivot of Heaven and Earth and the abode of a hundred deities—a sacred origin point that connects Heaven and Earth and nurtures all things. Mount Olympus, as the dwelling place of the gods in ancient Greece, similarly stood as the symbol of the ancient Western cosmic order. Although the two share superficial similarities in narrative structure, their spiritual orientations differ. The Olympus myths lean toward the quests of individual heroes and the power struggles among the gods, highlighting the assertion of individual value. In the Kunlun cultural system, figures such as Nüwa, Kuafu, the Yellow Emperor, Yu the Great, and the Queen Mother of the West embody the core pursuits of mending the sky, saving the world, and harmonizing all things. Running through these narratives is a world-saving sentiment that cares deeply for the common people and a harmonizing mindset that integrates all things. Both sets of narratives are rooted in the survival conditions and developmental contexts of their respective civilizations, each possessing its own value orientation.

The historical fact that these two great mountain-based civilizations evolved independently and developed in parallel fully proves that there is no single source or universal yardstick for human civilization. Every indigenous civilization possesses its exclusive cosmic cognition, value lineage, and historical accumulation, and all enjoy the equal right to survive and develop. Every nation in the world has its own unique creation narrative and spiritual sanctuary. This is precisely the foundation upon which civilizational diversity relies to survive.

From the logic of civilizational origins, the Kunlun image emerged from the ancient Chinese practice of observing celestial phenomena to determine the seasons and following natural rhythms. In the ancient cognition, Kunlun was a unified whole covering the four seas, with no divided boundaries in the sky and no absolute separations on earth. This gave rise to the simple concept of "all-under-Heaven without outside," which naturally rejects single-centered, opposing, and exclusive modes of thinking. In contrast, the inherent logic of civilization centralism habitually uses its own civilization as the standard to rank others, artificially creating barriers and gaps.

Abandoning the arrogance and prejudice inherent in civilization centralism, recognizing the differences in the developmental paths of various civilizations, and engaging in cross-civilizational dialogue with an equal and inclusive posture are essential for global civilizational exchanges. The indigenous thinking of "unity in diversity" carried by Kunlun culture provides enduring and profound cultural support for constructing an equal and inclusive global historical view of civilizations.

4.2 Validating the "Theory of Mutual Learning Among Civilizations" and Elucidating the Internal Laws Governing the Prosperity of Civilizations

Civilizations cannot survive long in isolation and seclusion; exchange and mutual learning are the internal laws that keep civilizations vibrant and prosperous. In today's world, unilateralism and protectionism continue to rise. Certain countries are building small yards with high fences, pushing for decoupling and severing supply chains, setting up layers of trade barriers, imposing unreasonable restrictions on the goods, industries, and technologies of other nations, and artificially blocking the circulation of materials, technologies, and ideas. Concurrently, they draw ideological lines, deliberately magnify differences among civilizations, and concoct rhetoric of a "clash of civilizations," severing normal civilizational interactions at the source and running counter to the overarching trend of civilizational evolution.

The Global Civilization Initiative advocates for equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness among civilizations, promoting the idea that we should let cultural exchanges transcend estrangement, mutual learning transcend clashes, and inclusiveness transcend feelings of superiority. This provides a fundamental guideline for breaking down artificial barriers and facilitating the unimpeded flow of exchanges among civilizations. Kunlun culture, transmitted and transformed over thousands of years, is a vivid and substantial historical testament to this law.

The Kunlun Mountains, stretching across the hinterland of the Eurasian continent, have never been a geographical barrier isolating civilizations, but rather a natural hub connecting East and West. A millennium before the Silk Road took shape, the Jade Road, formed through the circulation of Kunlun jade, facilitated both internal cultural integration within China and early civilizational exchange across Eurasia.

Domestically, Kunlun Hotan jade was continuously transported eastward into the Central Plains, gradually becoming a core carrier of the ritual and music systems in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The spiritual connotations of "offering blue jade to Heaven" and "jade bearing moral virtue" in texts such as the Rites of Zhou and the Guanzi were rooted in the cosmological and moral meanings carried by Kunlun jade, completing the deep integration of western mountain civilization and Central Plains ritual and music civilization.

Externally, material civilization achievements such as bronze smelting, chariot and horse designs, and decorative patterns were introduced into the Central Plains via the Kunlun routes of the Western Regions. They were absorbed and adapted by Chinese civilization, enriching native craftsmanship and aesthetic systems.

This great exchange and integration fully prove that whether it is interactions among different regional groups within a single country or mutual communication between civilizations of different nations, remaining closed and isolated will only stagnate develop-

ment. Equal exchange and learning from each other's strengths to make up for weaknesses represent the trend of civilizational development.

During the medieval period, Kunlun culture continued to integrate and coexist with foreign ideas. After the spread of Buddhism to the East, the ancient Indian cosmic view, which positioned Mount Sumeru as the center of the universe, deeply integrated with the indigenous cognition of Kunlun as the "center of Heaven and Earth." This gave rise to an inclusive, composite mythological system that enriched the connotations of Chinese mountain worship. Relying on the Silk Road, Kunlun myths and sacred mountain worship continuously spread westward and northward, harmonizing and coexisting with the Heaven and Earth beliefs of Central Asian and steppe tribes. Eastward, along with the radiation of the Chinese character cultural sphere, it spread to the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Notably, literature from Japan's Nara and Heian periods contains many records related to Kunlun, complementing the narratives of native sacred mountains like Mount Fuji and Mount Hiei. Southward, through maritime trade and the spread of Buddhism, it integrated into Southeast Asian mountain sacrifice traditions, becoming a cultural symbol shared by the peoples of East and Southeast Asia.

Since modern times, the cross-regional dissemination of Kunlun culture has never ceased. Overseas Chinese have passed down the Kunlun root narrative for generations, making Kunlun culture a shared identity marker for all sons and daughters of the Chinese nation. Contemporary international mythology academic forums and overseas Eastern culture exhibitions continuously promote the Kunlun cultural system. Themed literature, dance dramas, and documentaries have gone abroad, conveying Eastern concepts of harmony to overseas audiences.

The millennia-long transmission of Kunlun culture clearly demonstrates that flow and interaction are the lifeblood of civilization, while isolation and self-seclusion leads only to rigidity and stagnation. A model of mutual learning based on equality, reciprocity, and inclusiveness provides a viable path for the enduring survival of civilizations and fully proves that artificial isolation and exclusion only stifle the vitality of civilizational development.

4.3 Illustrating the "Symbiosis of Civilizations" to Overcome Global Development Challenges

Climate deterioration, ethnic division, and geopolitical confrontation have become prominent global development deficits. The world urgently needs a set of values capable of harmonizing relations among civilizations. The ancient philosophical ideas of the unity of Heaven and Humanity, Unity in Diversity, and All-under-Heaven as One Family embedded in Kunlun culture offer a unique Eastern perspective for resolving global challenges and developing a new model for human progress.

Harnessing the wisdom of "the unity of Heaven and Humanity" to build a community of life for humanity and nature. The deep-seated cause of the global ecological cri-

sis lies in anthropocentrism, which has long reduced nature to a reservoir of resources for unlimited extraction and severed humanity's intrinsic connection with the natural world. The Kunlun-nurtured ideal of the unity of Heaven and humanity offers a different logic for understanding the relationship between humans and nature. Inspired by the vast sweep of the Kunlun ranges and the great rivers that originate there and flow for thousands of miles, the ancient Chinese developed a simple yet profound insight into the interdependence and co-existence of all things. They believed that humans, plants, and all living creatures belong to the integral whole of Heaven and Earth. Human development must follow natural rhythms and abide by principles of moderate utilization and allowing ecosystems to rest and recover. This ecological philosophy, spanning millennia, reveals that humans are not the masters of nature but merely members of the ecological community, and development must not come at the cost of exhausting nature or destroying species. Contrasted with the path of early Western industrialization—"pollute first, clean up later"—the sustainable development thinking embedded in Kunlun culture can provide long-term cultural references for environmental pollution control and ecological protection and restoration, promoting all countries to join hands in building a community of life for humanity and nature.

Applying the paradigm of "unity in diversity" to resolve global ethnic fragmentation and identity conflicts. At present, many multi-ethnic countries are mired in governance dilemmas. They either rely on forceful assimilation to erase ethnic characteristics, or allow identity differences to intensify social divisions, struggling to find a viable path that balances unity and plurality. The developmental paradigm of "unity in diversity" in Kunlun culture offers a solution based on "harmony without uniformity, coexisting from the same root." For thousands of years, the many ethnic groups of China have shared the cultural roots of Kunlun. Under shared spiritual identifiers, they have retained their respective languages and living traditions, successfully balancing collective identity with cultural diversity. This Eastern governance logic breaks out of the binary opposition between "assimilation" and "division." It relies on cultural consensus to consolidate a sense of belonging to the community rather than eradicating ethnic differences, providing a practical paradigm that global multi-ethnic states can reference to reconcile identity conflicts and heal social rifts.

Advocating the vision of "All-under-Heaven as One Family" to defuse bloc confrontation and civilizational estrangement. Geopolitical rivalry, zero-sum thinking, and prejudices of civilizational hierarchies are prominent challenges facing the current global order. Certain countries cling to an either-or logic of confrontation, pursue unilateral hegemony through bloc division, and place their short-term national interests above the long-term, common interests of humanity. Kunlun culture inherently carries the rudimentary worldview of "All-under-Heaven as One Family," from which the value pursuits of uniting the four seas and harmonizing all nations are derived. Passed down and developed through successive generations, this traditional ideological resource has been distilled and elevated in the new era into the concept of a community with a shared fu-

ture for humanity. Based on the reality that humanity shares a single Earthly home and that the destinies of all countries are closely linked, it advocates abandoning hegemonism and zero-sum games. It asserts that all countries in the world, regardless of strength or size, enjoy the legitimate right to mutually beneficial and equal development. Drawing upon the basic concept of harmony embedded in ancient Chinese culture can guide the international community to break free from outdated narratives of civilization superiority and bloc confrontation, prioritize overall and long-term interests, and forge a path of sustainable development through joint efforts.

The philosophy of civilizational symbiosis inherent in Kunlun culture is deeply aligned and consistent with the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind. Together, they constitute the Eastern wisdom system for overcoming global challenges. The vision of a community with a shared future for mankind is rooted in the fertile soil of Kunlun culture and other excellent traditional Chinese cultures, while simultaneously elevating the concept of symbiosis of civilizations from a cultural ideal into a guiding principle for global governance.

A review of the history of human civilization reveals that a single-center, confrontational narrative of civilizations cannot lead humanity to lasting peace. Kunlun culture, with its millennia-long, continuous cultural lineage, reinterprets how humanity should interact with the world and with each other — a civilizational paradigm of mutual learning in equality and coexistence in diversity. Coexistence with nature is the path to sustainability; solidarity with all ethnic groups is the path to development; and shared prosperity with all nations is the path to peace. This wisdom of harmony, rooted in the East, is not only the spiritual foundation of the Chinese nation for thousands of years but also offers invaluable cultural insight for the long-term development and enduring prosperity of human civilization.

Conclusion

For five millennia, Kunlun has stood in silence.

It watched the early ancestors erect gnomons to measure the sun's shadow and observe celestial phenomena to determine the seasons; it watched the envoys of Qin gather herbs at the source of the river, Zhang Qian undertake his pioneering mission to the Western Regions, and Emperor Wu of Han officially designate Kunlun; it listened to the camel bells of the Silk Road echoing at its feet for thousands of years; and it witnessed countless patriots and people of vision project their profound love for the country and its people onto it in times of national peril.

Where is Kunlun today?

Looking back from the summer of 2026, Kunlun stands as majestic as ever. A primary-school pupil in Xinjiang paints a Kunlun mythical beast in art class; a herdsman in Qinghai records the tracks of a snow leopard in his patrol log; an overseas Chinese tells the Kunlun stories from the Classic of Mountains and Seas to their children in a foreign land. Kunlun lives in these very moments, and in the hearts of those who harbor deep affection for these mountains and rivers.

What defines Kunlun?

How did a single mountain become the spiritual emblem of Chinese civilization? The early Chinese ancestors looked up to it and saw Heaven. Successive dynasties defined it and thereby fixed territorial bounds. The sons and daughters of all ethnic groups reminisce about it and identify their roots. Patriots and people of vision eulogized it, showing the backbone of the nation. Kunlun is not an ordinary mountain, but a coordinate system for the Chinese nation to understand Heaven and Earth, secure the nation and the homeland, forge shared identity, and engage with the world. Kunlun is a mountain in ancient classics, a realm in mythology, and a spiritual peak in the heart of every son and daughter of the Chinese nation, upon which they may find grounding and purpose.

Whither Kunlun?

Kunlun culture has flowed for millennia. Today, in a world fraught with changes and turbulence and continuous conflicts, it is not merely the spiritual patrimony of the Chinese nation, but also a civilizational resource that can guide contemporary humanity out of shared predicaments.

When some sow ethnic division and exaggerate identity antagonisms, Kunlun answers with five thousand years of practice of "unity in diversity": differences can coexist.

When some advocate the conquest of nature and unrestrained, infinite extraction, Kunlun answers with the ancient wisdom of "the unity of Heaven and Humanity": humans and nature are inherently one.

When some erect "small yards with high fences" and preach decoupling and severing supply chains, Kunlun answers with the broad-mindedness that "all-under-Heaven as one family": humanity shares a common destiny and no one can thrive in isolation.

Kunlun is the answer.

This living water of culture, flowing from the primeval high mountains, nourishes the perpetual vitality of a nation. Ultimately, carrying the Oriental wisdom of harmony and coexistence, it will merge into the vast ocean currents of human civilization.

Notes on Compilation

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