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**РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЕ ВЛИЯНИЕ  
НА КУЛЬТУРНУЮ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ  
КИТАЙСКОЙ МОЛОДЕЖИ:  
СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ****REGIONAL INFLUENCES  
ON CULTURAL IDENTITY  
AMONG CHINESE YOUTH:  
A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

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Рассматривается роль региональных и образовательных различий в формировании культурной идентичности китайской молодежи с акцентом на различия между экономически развитыми восточными и менее развитыми западными регионами. Используя теорию культурного капитала и теорию социальной идентичности, исследование анализирует, как различия в региональных ресурсах и доступе к образованию влияют на культурные ценности и практики молодежи. На основе данных Национального бюро статистики Китая, Министерства образования и качественных исследований результаты показывают, что молодежь на Востоке проявляет более активный интерес как к традиционной, так и глобальной культуре, в то время как молодежь на Западе в большей степени опирается на местные традиции. Делается вывод, что политические инициативы, направленные на инвестиции в образование и культуру в малообеспеченных регионах, необходимы для укрепления единой культурной идентичности среди различных молодежных групп Китая.

*Ключевые слова:* китайская молодежь, культурная идентичность, региональные различия, влияние образования, теория культурного капитала.

This study examines the role of regional and educational disparities in shaping cultural identity among Chinese youth, focusing on distinctions between the economically advanced East and less-developed West. Employing Cultural Capital Theory and Social Identity Theory, the research analyzes how variations in regional resources and educational access influence youth cultural values and practices. Using data from the National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Education, and qualitative studies, the findings reveal that youth in the East exhibit stronger engagement with both traditional and global cultures, while Western youth demonstrate identities rooted more in local traditions. The study suggests that policy initiatives targeting educational and cultural investment in underserved regions are essential for fostering a cohesive cultural identity across diverse youth populations in China.

*Keywords:* Chinese Youth, Cultural Identity, Regional Disparities, Educational Influence, Cultural Capital Theory.

Cultural identity is a fundamental aspect of individual and collective identity, especially significant for youth who are actively developing their sense of self and place within society. In China, cultural identity is particularly complex due to the country's vast regional and educational disparities. These disparities are especially evident in the contrast between the economically developed East and the less-developed West, regions with distinct histories, economies, and access to resources. This study explores how these regional and educational disparities shape the cultural identities of Chinese youth, aiming to deepen our understanding of how social contexts influence identity formation.

Regional inequalities in China have persisted over decades, driven by economic, historical, and cultural factors. The Eastern regions,

marked by rapid economic growth and urbanization, provide youth with greater access to cultural resources, educational opportunities, and exposure to global influences. In contrast, the Western regions, with more limited economic and educational infrastructure, emphasize local cultural practices and traditional values. These regional differences create distinct cultural environments that shape the values, behaviors, and attitudes of youth, leading to varied expressions of cultural identity.

Educational disparities further compound these regional differences. Youth in Eastern regions benefit from comprehensive curricula that include both national and global perspectives, which fosters a broader, more inclusive cultural identity. Meanwhile, youth in the Western regions, who often have access only to basic educational resources, develop

cultural identities more closely tied to local traditions and values [1].

This study uses data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the Ministry of Education, and various Chinese academic studies to investigate these disparities. Through an analysis of cultural engagement, traditional and global cultural practices, and attitudes toward identity across the Eastern and Western regions, this study aims to contribute to policy discussions on reducing cultural and educational inequalities, ultimately fostering a more cohesive cultural identity among China's youth.

### Theoretical Foundations: Cultural Identity and Influences of Region

To understand the role of regional and educational disparities in shaping youth cultural identity, it is essential to examine the theoretical underpinnings that explain how individuals internalize cultural values and form a sense of belonging.

#### *Defining Cultural Identity*

Cultural identity is a complex, multi-layered construct that encompasses an individual's sense of belonging to a particular cultural group, which informs their values, behaviors, and worldview. At its core, cultural identity addresses the question, «Who are we?» As Samuel Huntington<sup>1</sup> posits, people often define themselves through what is most meaningful to them — such as their ancestors, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. These elements provide the foundation for cultural identity and are often represented by symbols such as flags, crosses, crescents, or other cultural markers. Huntington argues that «cultural identity is, for most people, the most meaningful aspect of their lives,» emphasizing the depth of connection individuals feel to their cultural group [2].

Cultural identity, then, can be understood as a collective feeling of cultural affiliation, shaped by a sense of belonging and continuity with shared values, traditions, and symbols. For youth in particular, cultural identity is not static but rather formed and continually reshaped through interactions with their social, educational, and regional environments. This study conceptualizes cultural identity as both an individual and collective phenomenon, highly sensitive to regional and educational contexts that vary significantly across China, particularly

in the contrasting environments of the Eastern and Western regions.

#### *Cultural Capital Theory (Pierre Bourdieu<sup>2</sup>)*

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory provides a foundation for understanding how disparities in educational resources influence identity formation. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital — non-economic assets such as education, skills, and cultural knowledge — enables social mobility and shapes individual identity [3]. In China, youth in the economically developed East often accumulate greater cultural capital due to enhanced educational opportunities and broader cultural exposure, fostering a more cosmopolitan identity. In contrast, youth in the West, with limited access to cultural resources, develop identities grounded more in regional traditions [4].

#### *Social Identity Theory (Henri Tajfel<sup>3</sup>)*

Social identity theory states that social behaviour will want a person to change their behaviour while in a group. It varies along a continuum between interpersonal behaviour and intergroup behaviour. Completely interpersonal behaviour would be behaviour determined solely by the individual characteristics and interpersonal relationships that exists between only two people [5]. Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive identity from group membership, forming a collective sense of self that reinforces regional affiliations. For Chinese youth, regional identity — whether rooted in Eastern or Western cultural contexts — provides a basis for personal identity. Eastern youth, exposed to a wide range of cultural perspectives, may identify more broadly, while Western youth often develop identities with stronger ties to local customs and values.

#### *Symbolic Interactionism (George Herbert Mead<sup>4</sup>)*

Mead's Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes the role of social interactions and shared symbols in identity formation. According to Mead, individuals interpret cultural symbols — such as festivals, language, and traditions — through social interactions in specific contexts. Schools, peer groups, and communities are essential sites for identity formation among

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington (1927–2008) was an American contemporary political thinker and international political theorist.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), a famous French sociologist.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Tajfel (1919–1982) was a Polish social psychologist, best known for his pioneering work on the cognitive aspects of prejudice and social identity theory.

<sup>4</sup> George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was an American philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist, primarily affiliated with the University of Chicago.

youth [6]. In resource-limited Western regions, youth may engage with fewer cultural symbols, reinforcing a local cultural identity. In contrast, youth in the East encounter a wider range of symbols and interactions, fostering a more hybridized or cosmopolitan identity.

In summary, Cultural Capital Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism collectively offer a robust framework for examining how regional and educational disparities shape cultural identity among Chinese youth.

Building on these theories, this study hypothesizes that regional and educational disparities significantly shape youth cultural identities in China. The advanced educational systems and cultural resources of Eastern regions cultivate a broader cultural identity, integrating both local and global perspectives. In the West, more limited educational infrastructure and economic resources often produce a localized identity rooted in regional traditions. These distinctions are reinforced by shared educational and regional affiliations, leading to diverse cultural identities across the youth population.

### **Economic and Social Disparities and Their Impact on Identity**

Economic and social resources play a critical role in shaping the cultural identity of youth by determining their access to education, cultural resources, and community engagement opportunities. In China, there is a marked disparity in economic development between the prosperous Eastern regions and the less-developed Western regions. This imbalance is reflected in key indicators such as GDP per capita, public infrastructure, cultural facilities, and educational funding, all of which have direct implications for youth cultural identity formation.

As of 2023, the per capita GDP of the eastern cities of Beijing and Shanghai is about 200,278 yuan and 190,321 yuan, while the per capita GDP of the western provinces of Gansu and Guizhou is only 47,867 yuan and 54,172 yuan [7]. The data in the National Statistical Bulletin on Cultural and Tourism Development also reflect this gap, with cultural and tourism expenses in the eastern region reaching 56.00 billion yuan, accounting for 43.7%. The expenses of cultural and tourism undertakings in the central region were 32.41 billion yuan, accounting for 25.3%. The expenses of cultural and tourism undertakings in the western regions were 36.74 billion yuan, accounting for 28.7% [8].

Similarly, education expenditures in the east are much higher. In 2022, Guangdong's general public budget education expenditures will exceed 380 billion yuan, accounting for more than 20% of general public budget expenditures, and the amount of funding is the highest in the country. The public budget education expenditures in Beijing and Shanghai also exceeded 100 billion yuan, which were 116.1 billion yuan and 109.3 billion yuan respectively. The public education funding in the western province of Gansu is only 69.843 billion yuan [9].

These economic disparities impact youth access to diverse cultural expressions and activities, which in turn shape their cultural identity.

The Eastern cities, particularly Shanghai and Beijing, are known for their dense concentration of cultural facilities and events, which are less accessible in Western regions. For example, Shanghai, as one of China's cultural hubs, boasts over 150 museums and nearly 100 art galleries, offering youth a wide variety of exhibitions and cultural experiences throughout the year. In addition to permanent cultural institutions, Eastern cities also host numerous international cultural events that broaden youth cultural perspectives. In 2023, Shanghai alone hosted over 70 international cultural festivals, including the Shanghai International Film Festival, the Shanghai Biennale, and the Jing'an World Coffee Culture Festival. These festivals provide platforms for cross-cultural engagement, allowing youth to interact with global art forms, music, and cinematic works. This rich cultural landscape fosters a more cosmopolitan identity among Eastern youth, who benefit from exposure to both local heritage and international influences [10].

In contrast, the availability of such cultural facilities and events is limited in Western regions. For example, the entire province of Gansu has approximately 30 museums, less than a quarter of those in Shanghai. Most of these museums focus on local history and cultural heritage, such as the Gansu Provincial Museum, which emphasizes Silk Road history and regional artifacts. Similarly, major international cultural events are rare in Western provinces; instead, local cultural activities are primarily centered on traditional festivals, such as the Gansu Folk Arts Festival, which emphasize regional customs over global cultural exposure. Consequently, youth in the West are more likely to develop a cultural identity deeply

rooted in local traditions, with fewer opportunities to engage with diverse cultural forms [11].

To further highlight these disparities, we can visually compare key cultural indicators across regions. Below is an example table summarizing differences in cultural facilities and event participation:

**Table 1 – Table of differences in participation in cultural facilities and activities in the East and West (take Shanghai and Gansu as an example)**

Indicator	Eastern Region (e.g., Shanghai)	Western Region (e.g., Gansu)
Per capita GDP	190,321 yuan	47,867 yuan
Education expenditure	109.3 billion yuan	69.843 billion yuan
Number of Museums	over 150 museums	over 30 museums

In conclusion, the economic and social resource disparities between China's Eastern and Western regions have a profound impact on the cultural identity formation of youth. The abundant cultural facilities and international events available in the East facilitate a multifaceted, globally aware identity among youth, while the limited resources in the West reinforce a more localized identity centered on regional traditions. This analysis of economic and social disparities underscores how regional contexts shape cultural identity, providing a foundation for the exploration of local traditions and migration in the following sections.

### Local Cultural Traditions and Youth Identity

Local cultural traditions are a cornerstone of cultural identity formation, providing youth with a sense of historical continuity and belonging to a larger community. In China, the diversity of cultural practices across regions means that youth in different areas grow up with distinct cultural traditions that significantly influence their identity.

Eastern regions are known for their integration of traditional Chinese culture with modern and international influences. These regions host festivals and practices that maintain traditional values while also reflecting the globalized nature of urban centers. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, Youth may participate in both traditional family gatherings and city-sponsored events like lantern displays or mooncake tastings at cultural venues. These public events are often designed to attract younger generations by incorporating modern

elements, such as interactive installations or social media promotions, which appeal to a digitally connected audience. This approach enables Eastern youth to maintain cultural ties while developing a more cosmopolitan sense of identity [12].

In contrast, Western regions such as Gansu, Guizhou, and Yunnan are characterized by more insular cultural practices that emphasize regional heritage and customs. These regions are home to unique festivals and local traditions that are less influenced by global culture, providing youth with a strong sense of regional identity. For example, the annual Gansu Folk Arts Festival celebrates traditional folk music, dance, and crafts specific to the region. Youth in Gansu who participate in such events are exposed to local customs and art forms that emphasize their cultural uniqueness and reinforce a strong sense of regional pride [13].

Dialect usage is another significant marker of cultural identity in Eastern cities. While Mandarin is the official language, many young people in Shanghai continue to speak Shanghaiese within their families, preserving local linguistic heritage. However, due to increased migration and cultural diversity, Shanghaiese youth often adopt a hybridized language, mixing Shanghaiese, Mandarin, and even English. This blending of languages reflects a hybrid cultural identity, where youth are influenced by both local traditions and broader cultural trends [14].

Western youth are more likely to speak local dialects in everyday interactions, as Mandarin usage is less prevalent in some rural areas compared to urban centers. In regions with distinct ethnic communities, cultural identity is further reinforced by traditional practices, clothing, and language that are unique to these groups. Unlike their Eastern counterparts, Western youth often experience a cultural identity grounded in their region's long-standing customs and historical continuity.

A comparison of these cultural traditions highlights the contrasting cultural landscapes of Eastern and Western China. In Eastern regions, the interaction between traditional and modern cultural elements creates a hybrid identity, where youth balance respect for heritage with an openness to global influences. Public festivals, modernized cultural venues, and dialect variation all contribute to a dynamic sense of identity among Eastern youth.

In Western regions, however, limited exposure to international culture and a strong

emphasis on local traditions foster a cultural identity that is deeply rooted in regional heritage. Folk festivals, local dialects, and ethnic customs contribute to a stable and cohesive cultural identity among Western youth. This identity is reinforced by a sense of cultural continuity, as many Western youth participate in customs passed down through generations, experiencing a strong connection to their region's historical and social fabric.

So, local cultural traditions play a critical role in shaping youth identities across China. While Eastern youth develop hybrid identities through the blend of traditional and modern cultural practices, Western youth form identities that are firmly rooted in regional customs.

### Conclusion

This study reveals that regional disparities in China — most notably the economic divide between the prosperous East and the resource-constrained West — play a decisive role in shaping distinct cultural identities among Chinese youth. In the East, where cities like Shanghai and Beijing flourish with educational facilities, cultural venues, and diverse public events, youth are afforded a unique cultural landscape that supports the development of hybrid identities. Here, young people navigate a complex cultural milieu that integrates both traditional Chinese heritage and international influences, cultivating a cosmopolitan sense of self that reflects the globally oriented character of their urban surroundings. The resources available to these youth offer a breadth of cultural experiences that blend both the local and the global, establishing an identity framework that is adaptive, multifaceted, and inherently dynamic.

In contrast, the Western regions, where economic and social resources remain limited, offer a markedly different environment that fosters identities deeply rooted in local traditions and regional heritage. Youth in the West encounter a cultural environment shaped primarily by longstanding practices, community-centered values, and a reliance on regional dialects and customs. These young people derive their sense of self not from a convergence of global influences but rather from an intergenerational connection to their local heritage. The continuity of folk traditions, local

festivals, and regional dialects not only provides these youth with a stable sense of belonging but also reinforces an identity framework centered on preservation and cultural pride. As such, Western youth often embody a cohesive cultural identity, anchored in the region's enduring customs and reinforced by the social structures of their communities.

The implications of these findings underscore the enduring influence of regional context on cultural identity formation in China. In the East, the engagement with international festivals, and cross-cultural exchanges reflects the interplay between modernity and tradition, shaping youth identities that are both globally aware and locally grounded. In the West, the focus on preserving regional heritage fosters a sense of cultural continuity that remains largely unmediated by global trends, producing identities that reflect the values and narratives intrinsic to these regions.

This regional differentiation in youth identity carries substantial implications for social cohesion and cultural inclusivity within China. For Eastern youth, educational and cultural initiatives that emphasize local heritage may strengthen connections to traditional values within a globalized setting, helping them to balance cosmopolitan experiences with a rooted sense of cultural identity. For Western youth, expanding access to cultural infrastructure and enhancing educational opportunities could provide new avenues for cultural engagement, allowing them to experience both the richness of their regional traditions and the diversity of national and global cultures. Addressing these regional disparities in cultural resources thus holds potential not only for fostering balanced identity development but also for promoting a more cohesive, inclusive society in which youth across all regions feel both culturally empowered and collectively integrated.

In essence, this study illuminates the profound role that regional context plays in shaping youth identities in China, suggesting that cultural identity is not merely an individual construct but a deeply embedded regional phenomenon. As China continues its rapid socioeconomic transformation, recognizing and addressing these regional dimensions of youth identity will be vital for fostering a culturally balanced and unified society.

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