

A Republic We Inherit, or a Republic We Keep?

Youth, Civil Discourse, and the Crisis of Civic Participation

When I first read today's topic, I kept coming back to one word: inherit.

We usually think of inheritance as something we receive.

A family name.

A culture.

A business.

A set of values.

Something existed before us, and eventually, it becomes our responsibility.

But I have learned that inheritance is not passive.

Because sooner or later, we have to answer a question:

What are we going to do with what we inherited?

I learned this in a very personal way when I was eighteen.

My father had built a business around traditional Chinese medicine.

For years, it operated in a very different environment. My father believed strongly in traditional ways of building relationships and promoting the business.

But the environment around the business changed.

The old way of doing things became increasingly difficult.

By the time I became involved, the factory was struggling badly.

It was barely profitable, and at one point, it was close to failing.

My relatives had largely stepped away.

And I was eighteen.

I could have looked at what I inherited and simply tried to preserve it exactly as it was.

But I realized that preserving something and keeping it alive are not necessarily the same thing.

So we changed the way we reached people.

We moved toward online promotion, influencers, and livestream commerce.

The product itself was not suddenly a different product.

But the way we connected it to the world changed.

And eventually, a business that had been struggling became profitable again.

At its strongest period, it was generating roughly two million RMB a month.

What stayed with me was not the number.

It was the lesson:

Sometimes, keeping something alive requires changing it.

That experience changed the way I understand the word “keep.”

We often think that respecting what we inherit means protecting it exactly as it was.

But sometimes, refusing to change is actually a way of losing something.

A tradition can disappear because it refuses to adapt.

A business can disappear because it refuses to listen.

And perhaps communities can become weaker for the same reason.

If the world changes but we refuse to change with it, what we inherited may not survive long enough to be inherited by anyone else.

Later, I saw another side of this question through my cousin.

My cousin has SMA and uses a wheelchair.

He spent part of his childhood in Guangzhou.

For him, things that most of us barely notice could become barriers.

A staircase is just a staircase to most students.

But if you use a wheelchair, a staircase can decide whether you can enter a classroom independently.

Later, he attended a Hong Kong Jockey Club-supported school designed specifically for students with different needs.

There were elevators and accessible facilities.

There were professionals who understood the needs of students like him.

There was rehabilitation and physical support as part of his school environment.

And his classmates also had different challenges.

He didn't have to constantly explain why he was different.

He was simply one of the students.

And I watched him become more confident.

That experience made me think about inheritance in a completely different way.

My father left me a business.

But my cousin inherited something else: a society.

And what a child inherits from society is not only a passport or a school.

They inherit the physical environment around them.

They inherit the expectations people have of them.

They inherit the way other people respond to difference.

They inherit opportunities—and sometimes, barriers.

And that made me ask:

What does a society owe the young people who will inherit it?

We often ask why young people don't participate enough.

Why don't they volunteer?

Why don't they engage in public issues?

Why don't they have difficult conversations?

But perhaps we sometimes ask the question in the wrong order.

Before asking young people to participate, we should ask:

Have we built a society in which they feel that they belong?

Because participation begins with belonging.

If a person feels that society has no place for them, participation can feel like someone else's responsibility.

But if a person feels: "This is my community, too,"

then responsibility begins to become personal.

And that is where civic participation starts.

This also changes how I understand civil discourse.

Civil discourse is not simply being polite.

It means recognizing that other people may experience the same society differently from us.

What I consider normal may be someone else's daily obstacle.

What I consider a small inconvenience may determine whether someone else can participate at all.

So before we ask: "Why don't they participate?"

perhaps we should sometimes ask: "What have they experienced that makes participation difficult?"

That question requires humility.

It requires listening.

And it requires accepting that our own experience is not the only experience that matters.

I think this is especially important for my generation.

We are often told that young people are the future.

But that can make responsibility sound very distant.

We are not only the future.

We are already making choices that shape what the future will inherit.

Every time we decide whether to listen or dismiss.

Every time we decide whether to include someone or leave them outside.

Every time we decide whether to preserve something exactly as it is or change it so that it can continue.

These are civic choices.

They may not look like politics.

But they shape the society in which politics happens.

So when I return to today's question—A Republic We Inherit, or a Republic We Keep?

—I don't think it is an either-or question.

We inherit institutions.

We inherit rights.

We inherit traditions.

We inherit communities.

But keeping them requires participation.

And participation sometimes requires change.

My father's business taught me that directly:

You cannot always preserve something by leaving it unchanged.

My cousin taught me something else:

A society is not truly inclusive simply because everyone is told they are welcome. We have to make participation possible.

And these two experiences lead me to the same question:

What will my generation do with what it has inherited?

Will we simply protect what already exists?

Or will we listen carefully enough to recognize what needs to change?

Will we speak only with people who already agree with us?

Or will we learn how to disagree without turning one another into enemies?

Will we ask only what rights we inherited?

Or will we ask what kind of world those rights actually create for the people who come after us?

I don't think keeping a republic means keeping everything exactly the way we received it.

I think it means taking responsibility for its future.

Sometimes that means preserving.

Sometimes it means changing.

Sometimes it means making room.

Sometimes it means listening to a voice that previous generations overlooked.

And sometimes it simply means deciding that something which was not accessible to everyone before should become accessible to more people now.

Because one day, our generation will become the previous generation.

And someone younger will look at the world we leave behind and ask: What did they inherit from us?

I hope the answer will not simply be: “We gave them what we were given.”

I hope we can say: “We gave them what we inherited—and then we made it better.”

Thank you.