



现代传播·国际传播 MODERN COMMUNICATION
丛书主编 王文科 何其亮

A Talk on Traditional Chinese Culture —The Language Perspective



英 释 中国传统文化

何其亮 张 晔 编著

This is a book about Chinese culture in English. What is culture and how to introduce Chinese culture to the world seems to be an interesting and worthwhile job to do. While many foreign friends show interests in learning Chinese language, this book intends to discuss Chinese culture by way of language perspective. Since China is a country with over 5,000 years of history, the book chooses to discuss the language and its cultural background, i.e. words with cultural meaning and "cultural words". In this way, the book wishes to open a new vista with the following subject areas: 1) Culture, Traditional Chinese Culture and the Characteristics of the Han Nationality; 2) Names and Culture of the Han Nationality; 3) Dress and Culture; 4) Chinese Cuisine, Chinese Tea and Wine Culture; 5) Animal Words and Culture; 6) Plants Words and Culture; 7) Solar and Heavenly Stems, Important Festivals; 8) Color and Culture; 9) Numbers and Culture; 10) Figurative Use of Words; 11) Traditional Chinese Medicine and Wushu (Martial Arts); and 12) Buddhism and Taoism in China. In addition, ten supplementary readings have been purposely chosen for a better and richer insight of Chinese culture.



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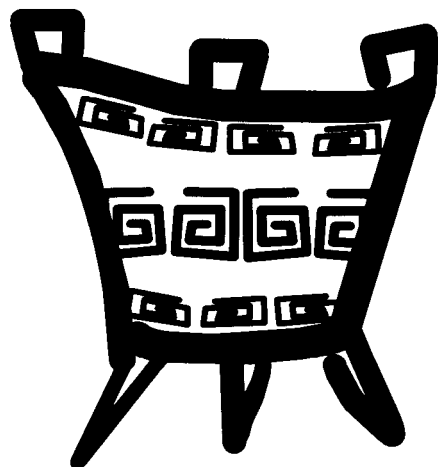
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作者的话

近些年和外国友人打交道比较多,发现他们对汉语言和汉文化有着浓厚的兴趣。他们对汉文化独有的情衷使我们觉得很有必要编辑一本传播中国文化的著作。用中文编写的介绍中国文化的书已有一些,但用英语撰写的还不太多。中国有几千年的悠久历史,怎么向外国读者介绍也值得认真地探究。基于这种考虑,本书主要从语言的角度切入,分十二个专题来介绍中国的传统文化。这样做的目的是考虑到语言与文化是密不可分的,对已有一些汉语基础的外籍人士来说,在学习汉语言的同时又能从中了解中国的文化,可谓是一举两得。另外,我们发现有些英语基础较好的中国学生能流利地用英语谈论英美的社会和文化,但却难以向国际友人传播中国的传统风俗和文化,本书为他们提供了基本的表达素材。

本书涉及的十二个专题是:1)文化和汉民族的性格特征;2)姓氏与文化;3)服饰与文化;4)饮食与文化;5)动物词语与文化;6)植物词语与文化;7)二十四节气、天干、地支与主要传统节日;8)数目词语与文化;9)颜色词语与文化;10)意象表达的词语;11)中国传统中药与武术;12)中国的佛教和道教。

在每一个章节的介绍中,先从汉语言入手,再从文化的角度进行阐述。如中国人为什么说“挂羊头,卖狗肉”而从不说“挂狗头,卖羊肉”呢?对于这一类语言学上无法解答的问题,本书从传统文化

的层面为此提供了较完整的答案。考虑到传播的现实性,本书在撰写和编译中偏重语言的口语表达特征。

本书已在相关院校的英语播音与主持艺术专业学生中试用,受到学生的一致好评,书中的许多内容已成为学生制作英语节目的重要素材。同时,本书也可以作为英语专业学生的口语教材,更适合作为对外汉语教学的读本。

本书在编写过程中参考了大量相关的文献资料。张晔老师负责了本书第四章和第十一章的编写。由于作者水平有限,时间仓促,书中定有不足之处,欢迎广大读者批评指正。

编 者

2006年5月于杭州



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Chapter 1 Culture, Traditional Chinese Culture and the Characteristics of Han Nationality

1. Culture

What is culture? There is a broad definition for this. During the ancient times, in China and other foreign countries, “culture” has constantly been brought about and discussed, and yet no unitary agreement has come out for its definition. Even in as early as Confucius’ time, culture was talked about as “文” (*wen*, learning) and “质” (*zhi*, nature, character), the opposing side, which was supposed to be “the moral behavior and the norms that the learned should have”. So today the collocated saying “文质彬彬” (*wenzhi binbin*) implies “the state or the desired world that gentlemen (men of learning, being cultured, together with his moral behavior)” are expected to reach. In China “文化” (*wenhua*, culture) was probably first used in West Han Dynasty (206 B. C. —24 A. D.), when “culture” was used then to mean “Civil Administration” (文治, *wenzhi*) as opposed to “Military Administration” (武治, *wuzhi*). In Jin Dynasty (265 A. D. —316 A. D.) in China, according to history, “culture” only means “the Civil Administration of the country”, which implies “a means of state apparatus”, and that obviously does not take the sense as it has in modern society.

However, when “天文” (*tianwen*, astronomy) was used in ancient China to refer to the natural phenomena and the related laws of nature, “人文” (*renwen*, the humane) was soon started to be used to refer to “the kinds of existing social phenomena” then, which is, to some extent, similar to the concepts of “culture” that people usually have in mind today for its broad sense.





But, “culture” is again difficult to define, because in different situations “culture” seems to have been defined in different ways. In social communication, for example, “culture” has been used for diversified purposes and taking more than 260 meanings. (See 沈锡伦, 1993). As far as education is concerned, for instance, people sometimes say “没有文化”, (... *meiyou wenhua*) which always suggests that “he/she is illiterate”; but “学文化” (*xue wenhua*) means “learning from the very beginning”, usually refers to the process of learning to read, to become literate from books. Then the saying “文化水平高” (*wenhua shuiping gao*) always tells that “someone has learned a lot from books” and implies, therefore, “he/she is more knowledgeable than others”. So, “culture” is often the symbol for book knowledge and education.

In another aspect, then, “culture” seems to have often been related with some departments (usually departments responsible for “the promotion of spiritual civilization”) of the modern social structure. These departments include: 1) musical performances, entertainment, publishing, cultural relics, etc. 2) work units undergoing such activities as theatrical company, theatre, concert hall, art museum, library, and cultural center (文化馆, *wenhua guan*), etc. Therefore such related terms come out today as “cultural activity” (文化活动, *wenhua huodong*), “cultural exchange” (文化交流, *wenhua jiaoliu*) and “cultural consumption” (文化消费, *wenhua xiaofei*).

But, as we can see, what has been mentioned above does not concern the real essence of culture. “Culture, rationally, is the manifestation of human social activities and thus, the product of human behavior” (常敬宇, 1998). In this case, culture has always been defined in the following aspects:

1) historically, culture is a process of social progress that represents the development of human civilization;

2) socially, culture reflects the social progress and coexists with human beings in the society;

3) spiritually, culture is the product of spiritual activities, which is the result of certain human communities;

4) culture is also a lifestyle, a symbol and the true reflection of human life, activities and behaviors of the time;





5) culture is a national phenomenon, reflecting the unique cultural forms of the nation, as each nation has its own individual cultural image that symbolizes the nationality.

2. Traditional Chinese Culture

In modern society, traditional culture is undoubtedly part of the heritage of history. Traditional Chinese culture, then, can be traced far back to the time before century. Though a complexity and pluralism, traditional Chinese culture seems to have already formed its core theory by developing and embracing gradually many cultural branches. Confucius' ideology, *Sayings from the Books of Changes* (易经, *Yijing*), Buddhism and Taoism have been so influential and powerful that they have unconsciously become the theoretical focus of the traditional Chinese culture.

The traditional Chinese culture is usually classified into four types:

(1) Material Culture

1) Archeology: unearthed artifacts (pots & pottery, stone artifact, bronze ware, etc.), bribe sites, emperor's or king's resting places or tombs.

2) Architecture, gardens and parks: tower, pavilion, veranda, stone tablet, bridge and city walls.

3) Food culture: ways of cooking, tea, wine, dinner-sets, chopsticks, and manners during meals, etc.

4) Handicraft art: embroidery, weaving & knitting, clay sculpture, carving, pottery & porcelain, etc.

5) Dressing.

(2) Spiritual Culture

1) Arts: literature, music, dance, drama, folk arts, fine arts, seal cutting, calligraphy, etc.

2) Concepts: aesthetic conceptions, social values, and taboos.

3) Moral principles: respect the elderly and take care of the young, be





filial to parents, help and support the poor, lay stress on etiquettes.

4) Religion: Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism.

(3) Social Culture

1) Folk culture: Festival Celebrations, Lantern Display in Parks, Customs about Marriage and Funeral, Sacrifices-offering to Gods and ancestors.

2) Entertainment culture: Dragon-Boat Race, Stilts-Walking, Swing Playing, Chinese Chess, Go, Mahjong, Drinker's Wager Game.

3) Sports culture: Wushu, Horseracing, Arrow Shooting, Mountain Climbing, Qi Gong, Acupuncture, Massage, etc.

(4) Language Culture

Chinese character and the culture.

3. The Characteristics of the Han Nationality

As can be seen, language and culture coexist with the human society, simply because language is an important part of culture and culture is symbolic of the nationalism. Like other nationalities, the Han nationality has some of its unique cultural features that are likewise clearly reflected in its language. Chinese, the language used by the Han nationality (though used also by the Hui nationality, 回族) has, of course, been imbedded with rich cultural implications. As part of the traditional culture, Chinese language culture is the true reflection of the deep-rooted psychological features of the nationality. When we are studying the Chinese culture, we naturally come to read the Chinese language used, to see also the psychological mechanism behind.

In the Chinese language culture, we find the following features typical:

- 1) The Moderation Principle; 2) Ostentation and Competitiveness Principle;
- 3) The Unification Principle; 4) The Closed Nature Principle; and 5) The Recognition Principle.





(1) The Moderation Principle

The Moderation Principle (中庸, *Zhongyong*) implies the moderate nature of Chinese in dealing with world matters. People's idea of “不敢为天下先” (*bugan wei tianxia xian*, Never venture to take the world lead) was recorded as early as in “老子” (*Lao Tzu*) and his book *Tao Te Ching* (道德经, *Daodejing*). Confucius (551 B. C.) also advocated “过犹不及” (*guoyou buji*, “to exceed is as bad as to fall short”) and “中庸为德也” (*zhongyong weide ye*, “the moral power of the Middle Use is transcendent”), which was the philosophy of life prevailing and dominant in his lifetime. Grown and developed in Confucius' time, the Moderation Principle has not only had a strong impact on human beliefs of the Chinese, but also on the language that people use.



For example, the language structure “不×” as in “不妨” (*bufang*), “不过” (*buguo*), “不禁” (*bujin*), “不管” (*buguan*), etc. are obvious signs of this belief, because the structure does not actually express the negative sense. But when a derogative idea do have to be expressed, Chinese people will choose to say “不×” instead of using the offensive straightforward language for that sense. For example, “他今天身体不好” (*ta jintian shenti buhao*. He is not well today). But, in language, “不好” in fact means “坏” (*huai*, bad). However, nobody in this case will say “他今天身体坏”. Another example is “这孩子字写得不错” (*zhe haizi zi xiede bucuo*. The child's handwriting is good). Again, in language, “不错” means “好”, and it is also the opposite for “错”, which is, of course, not used in complimentary situations, and this sentence does not in fact express “这孩子字写得错”, but express “这孩子字写得好”. So when expressing either complimentary or derogatory ideas, Chinese language does not go to extremes, but, instead, choose to take the mild way to say so. Therefore, when you are invited to dinner, the host or hostess will often say “没有什么菜” (*meiyou shenme cai*), “菜不好” (*cai buhao*), “没买到什么好菜” (*mei maidao shenme haocai*), “请多多包涵” (*qing duoduo baohan*) (Please excuse for the food





we offer, as I haven't got anything good. No good food. Sorry, ... etc.). But, in fact the food offered are rich and good enough, because the host/hostess has made a lot of preparations for the dinner party! Similarly, a Westerner in this situation would probably say, "These are some of the foods I selected and are well cooked. I think they'll be delicious, and I hope you'll like them. "

In addition, Chinese like to say “我们说……” (*women shuo...* We think...), “我们赞成……” (*women zancheng...* We agree that...), but in fact to mean “I think/I believe... I agree that...”, because Chinese want to be “mediocre” and not too “individual”! Similarly, such collocated and popular sayings as “知足常乐” (*zhizu changle*. Contentment brings happiness), “各打五十大板” (*geda wushi daban*. Punish the wronged and the wrong-doer alike), “比上不足,比下有余” (*bishang buzhi, bixia youyu*. Better than some, though not as good as others) are proof enough of the Moderation Principle, because they want just to show the kind of impartial, unbiased values focusing on present contentment, mediocrity, group value rather than on individuals, which is considered an important language manifestation of the Chinese language.

(2) Ostentation and Competitiveness Principle

“讲排场” (*jiang paichang*, putting up a show), “摆阔气” (*bai kuoqi*, displaying wealth) is deep-rooted in Chinese culture and a prevailing practice in modern Chinese life. For example, young people today will spend more than they can afford on marriage, for the wedding party and for the decoration and ornamentation of the wedding chamber. To display their wealth, some, in their daily lives, are always pursuing a super model of consumption as on clothing, houses, cars and other life necessities. This characteristic lopsidedness of life values often leads to a deformed and severe competitive behavior among the people.

Take “正宗” (*zhengzong*, genuineness) for example. “正宗” is originally a Buddhist wording, meaning “the directly-related successor of a certain religious sect”, but currently the saying has been more often used in trade dealings. For instance, “正宗牛皮鞋” (*genuine leather shoes*). The





commercials of this kind can be seen almost everywhere in markets. Sellers use the language in this way simply because they want to be avoided being suspected of having been selling fake commodities. So “genuine” is the word that sellers are trying to compete for—a label for the fame and quality of their products.

In economic sector, competitiveness shown in language is even more on the increase. For example, when mentioning the size of an enterprise, words used for can be “公司” (*gongsi*, company), “总公司” (*zong gongsi*, corporation) and then “集团公司” (*jituan gongsi*, group company). The last one, as the name itself tells, ranks the highest and seems to be the most powerful when the company’s capacity and the organizational structure is concerned (But they probably are the same in nature!). When talking about the quality of products, we have been trying to label them for “市优” (*shiyou*, Municipal Best), “省优” (*shengyou*, Provincial Best), “部优” (*buyou*, Ministry/Department Best) and “国优” (*guoyou*, National Best). Needless to say, products of “国优” are of No. 1 quality and nothing else can compete for it! (But probably the products have never been appraised or identified by any levels of authorities!) What’s more, some products on sale today are labeled “×××Gold Award in ×××World Trade Fair”, because they seem to be of better quality than those of “国优”! Another interesting example is in the service sector. As far as quality is concerned, people will choose to say “豪华型” (*haohua xing*, luxury) for the service facilities they offer; but then the saying “超豪华型” (*chao haohua xing*, super-luxury) soon comes out, as if that name means “better and upgraded service”! (But, in fact, they probably provide the same type of service or the service is even less better!)

“商场” (*shangchang*, market/bazaar) is the exact word which tells people the place where they can have their shopping done. But soon come out “×××购物中心” (*gouwu zhongxin*, shopping center), “×××商品总汇” (*shangpin zonghui*, commodity center) and “×××商城” (... *shangcheng*, commodity city). But people are disappointed to find that “商城” does not offer more and better quality goods or better services. Instead, they find the goods there are even more expensive! “(电)影院” (*dianyingyuan*, cinema) is the name familiar to all because movies are shown there, but the words “影城/影都” (*ying cheng/du*,





movie city) soon pop up just for the same business!

Sometimes it is really amusing to read such a piece of news as “商业系统 (*shangye xitong*) 评出了 (*ping chu le*) 100 位 (*yibai wei*) ‘优秀营业员’ (*youxiu yingye yuan*), 其中十名为 (*qizhong shiming wei*) ‘最佳的最佳’ (*zuijia de zuijia*, Best of the Best)” — “100 shop assistants have been selected and titled the ‘Best Shop Assistants’ in the Trade Sector, and 10 of them have been honorably titled ‘Best of the Best’”. Another sentence is “这些歌曲是 (*zhexie gequ shi*) ‘精华中的精华’ (*jinghua zhong de jinghua*)” — “These songs are ‘the Best of the Best’”. Isn’t the saying interesting? Doesn’t the language show the “Ostentation and Competitiveness” (攀比, *panbi*) nature of Chinese culture?

4. The Unification Principle

We all know that the word “狗” (*gou*, dog) carries a strong negative sense in many collocated Chinese sayings. For example, “走狗” (*zougou*), “狗东西” (*gou dongxi*), “狗腿子” (*gou tuizi*), “狗头军师” (*goutou junshi*), etc. They are actually the abusive language people use to call those who show the “loyalty” for their masters. But it still seems difficult for foreigners, or even some Chinese to understand why “狗” (a pet so loyal to its master) will mean so strongly negative in Chinese. The problem has been raised and much discussed in lexicology, but remains unsolved, simply because it goes far beyond the word itself can tell—a word that is closely related with history and with one of the nation’s important characteristics—the Unification Principle (大统一原则, *datongyi yuanze*) for a better understanding.

When we talk about the “unification”, we mean the “centralization” or “reunion” of the world matters. Since China has been under the feudal separatist rule for thousands of years, “power” and “monopoly” are the first priority for a hard-won unified state, which resulted from the long-time separation of independent states.

In Chinese literature or arts, we are all familiar with such moving

