

TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE

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Edited by Zhang Qizhi



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Introduction

As a product of human thought, the word “culture” encompasses a great deal. A system of thought and theory is known as ideological culture, which is the theoretical base underlying various modes of culture. In ancient China, ideological culture usually involved Confucianism (advocating the rule of rites, with the accent on the traditional feudal order of importance and seniority in human relationships); Taoism (upholding nature, tranquillity, non-action, or letting things take their own course, and opposing struggle); Legalism (encouraging the rule of law and opposing the rule of rites); and Buddhism. In addition, traditional Chinese cultures also include historical and cultural relics, such as pottery and porcelain, bronze, jade, silver, gold, and lacquer, bronze mirrors, and antique coins and currency; and art forms such as calligraphy and painting. Also included are ancient architecture, mausoleums, and ancient costumes and fittings. Apart from these, traditional culture embraces social systems as well as ancient books and publications on literature, history, medicines and life-nourishing approaches, agronomy, and astronomical chronicles. The Chinese nation, with its industriousness and wisdom, has created a long and everlasting history and a rich and colorful civilization.

Is there any generality underlying the various forms of traditional Chinese culture? Or what is their common and fundamental ethos? In our opinion, it may involve such aspects as follows:

The ethos of humanism. Ancient Chinese humanism came into being side by side with the evolution of Chinese history. In the

periods of emperors Yandi and Huangdi, dating back about 5,000 years, the idea of humanity was embryonic. Later, it developed and finally established the form of a system with a complete theory through the Xia (about the 21st to the early 17th century BC), Shang (about the early 17th to 11th century BC), and Zhou (about 11th century to 256 BC) dynasties until the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). This accomplishment must be credited to Confucius (551-479 BC), a great thinker and educator of the late Spring and Autumn Period and founder of Confucianism. He inherited the ethos of humanism passed down from the Shang and Zhou dynasties and further developed it with his creative theory. After his death, new developments and creations were made to enrich and improve the ethos of humanism not only in Confucianism, but also in other schools of thought and various academic disciplines.

The ethos of humanism has the following characteristics: It stresses moral self-cultivation and learning in order that one might become a man of virtue, with lofty ideals. In ancient China, ritual form and the rule of law were emphasized, striving for a harmonious coexistence between people of various social classes and status. To maintain social stability, particular attention was paid to the basic unit of society — the family, working out a variety of ethical codes and rules that family members should observe. It was believed that only by achieving harmony within the family, could stability and equilibrium in society be achieved. The ancient ethos of humanism was also expressed in the model of an ideal future society, in an attempt to build a world as one community, in which the talent of each member could be brought into full play. This kind of ethos of humanism has promoted a series of virtues for the Chinese nation: enterprise, persistence and firmness, deference to and support of elders, help for the childless elderly and the disabled, managing a household on the principles of industriousness and frugality and building the country through thrift and hard work. These virtues are precious intellectual wealth and the essence of the ancient Chinese ethos of humanism.

History is complicated. The ancient Chinese ethos of human-

ism was sometimes distorted in the course of development. In some aspects, it was misunderstood and abused by those with biased or extreme views. Due to over-emphasis on the family's role in society, for instance, the function and the social value of kinship among family members attained the most important position in social life. Also due to over-emphasis on the role of moral cultivation, social and legal systems were neglected. Morality was often personified as an omnipotent and omniscient "sage" or "god." As a result, the contributions made by the whole of society in social progress and development were neglected and diminished.

In this book, the introduction to traditional Chinese culture focuses primarily on the fine aspects of the culture that have been passed down. Some aspects appear incongruous with modern life and in these cases analysis and practical explanations are given. The ethos of humanism, demonstrated by ideological culture, also permeated various aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Descriptions of this will be given in the following chapters of this book.

The ethos of naturalism. In ancient China, different aspects of the relationship between nature and man were studied and explored by thinkers of various schools. Its appearance was by no means accidental, because in ancient China, the creation of a material culture, a system culture, as well as an ideological culture was based on the material foundation of agriculture. The scientific astronomical chronicle was invented very early in China as a result of agricultural demands. Theories on the relationship between nature and man sprang from the same source. The strongest demonstration of this was Taoism.

The Taoist classic *The Book of Lao Zi* regards "that which with no name" as the origin of heaven and earth, and "that which with a name" as the noumenon of everything in the world. ("Name" is merely a concept. Lao Zi, the founder of Taoism, believed that before the formation of heaven and earth there was only the "nameless" and that the "named" was only produced by man after heaven and earth and everything in the world had come into being.) They are used as nouns with a broad and extended range of meanings. All the scientific creations and inventions made by suc-

cessive generations, when categorized on the philosophical plane, could not transcend the limit of extension of the meanings of “being” and “non-being.” Lao Zi also proposed to recognize nature in a practical way, without any modification of human subjective imagination, because heaven, earth and the universe all came from the “Tao” or the “Way” (that is, the origin or noumenon of the universe and everything in the world) and Tao is naturalistic. This is the starting point of the ethos of naturalism in traditional Chinese culture.

The Book of Zhuang Zi, another Taoist classic, emphasizes that nature should be revered, loved and protected. This includes protection of the natural ecological balance. It by no means, however, requires people to do nothing in face of nature, but to recognize it by way of discovering and understanding its structure and properties. So long as nature is not harmed, people can use it to support their existence. The story of how to dismember an ox carcass as skillfully as a butcher described in *The Book of Zhuang Zi* is a typical demonstration of the doctrine.

This ethos of naturalism was the motive force of the development of ancient China’s science and technology, and great achievements were made in astronomical chronicles, agriculture, and traditional Chinese medical science. The relationship between man and nature was not limited to the means of existence. It extended to art works with a sense of aesthetics inspired by natural phenomenon, enriching people’s lives. This can be seen especially in calligraphy, painting, literature, cuisine, gardening and architecture. The relationship between man and nature can be harmonious or disharmonious. Natural calamities inflicted sufferings on humanity and our ancestors were often horror-stricken by nature’s roar. They could not scientifically explain the disasters caused by natural phenomena and supposed that man could not fight against the enormous power of nature (“heaven”) and must be reconciled to it. Nature was personified and attributed with consciousness as a God of nature to be worshipped. This contradicts the rational spirit of “nature.” Two schools of doctrines arose, therefore, concerning the “unity of the universe and man.” One dealt with the coordinated relationship

between man and nature, concerning man's recognition, protection and usage of nature, while the other deified nature and resigned itself to psychological and spiritual submission. The two schools of thought were separate but related.

The ethos of the "odd and even principle." The ancients observed that a hill has a sunny side and shaded side. They also observed the directions of the blowing wind and began to forecast changes in the weather. From these observations, they induced the two principles or categories of Yin and Yang which became an integral part of philosophy and other cultural disciplines. They also induced the concept of odd and even numbers from calculations while applying the idea of Yin and Yang to explain natural phenomena and human affairs. While exploring the mysteries of nature or seeking answers to various questions, the properties and changes of things were often observed through the figure "five," as in the "five elements" (metal, wood, water, fire and earth), "five sounds" (the notes of the ancient pentatonic scale), "five colors" (blue, red, yellow, white and black, as known as the cardinal five colors), and "five flavors" (sweet, sour, bitter, hot and salty). Laws of nature and changes in human life were also perceived from a standpoint which, they believed, could explain the inter-promoting relations between a contradictory pair of opposites. In ancient China, natural sciences such as Chinese medical science, were permeated with this odd and even principle. Before the Tang Dynasty (618-907), physiological and therapeutic theories were greatly affected by the "five elements" theory. After the Tang, Chinese medicine was gradually but markedly influenced by the "eight trigrams" of *The Book of Changes*.

The separation and combination of the odd and even principle were characteristic of the way of thinking in ancient China, through which many lively and colorful ideas were produced and developed. Accordingly many ideas of relativity were established such as inter-promotion and inter-restraint, restriction of destruction and support to construction, safety and danger, dynamic and static, left and right, up and down, complete and incomplete, noble and ignoble, superior and inferior, sense and sensibility, and

knowledge and practice.

The "doctrine of the mean" (that is, taking an impartial attitude of compromise in human affairs and relations) advocated by Confucius and Lao Zi's doctrine of "curbing destruction while supporting construction" is an example of theories on the alternation of the odd and even principle. In Confucius' view, the "mean" is a whole (or one body, and "one" is an odd number), exclusive of anything "more"(over) or "less" (under) than it. That is to say, "one" is derived from the exclusion of the "two" extremities in a situation. The doctrine of the mean is a dialectical way of thinking induced from the alternation of odd and even numbers, which is commonly used in various ancient Chinese classics. This way of thinking was successfully applied to military affairs, the national economy and people's livelihood.

The doctrine of "one is divided into two" conceived by the Confucians of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), is another example of the combination of the odd and even principle. When people observe the "one," or a unity, they should perceive the "two" in itself, or the integrated two parts of itself. And ultimately they sum up to the "one." Only then can a genuine and realistic understanding of something be attained.

The combination of odd and even permeates many other forms of Chinese culture as well as philosophy. Ancient architecture and the layout of ancient state capitals all embody the odd and even principle. The term "symmetry makes a unity" means that "odd" numbers are derived from "even" numbers.

Ancient architecture consists of a symmetry that must be incorporated to create a harmonious unity of a group of constructions.

The shaping beauty of ancient Chinese artifacts, in a sense, embodies the ethos of the odd and even principle. These articles, being molded in shapes to suggest a feeling of steadiness and dignity and taking into consideration of the relativity between the positions of the object and the viewer, are usually exquisite products of a combination of the odd and even principle.

The ethos of "communication" or "absorption and assimilation." Traditional Chinese culture is a common achievement made by the

whole Chinese people of various ethnic groups, in addition to assimilating the fine achievement of foreign cultures. The fine traditions of Chinese culture, far from being self-satisfied and conservative, have been enriched through mastering and assimilating the merits of various other systems of culture. This is the ethos of "communication" or "absorption and assimilation."

As early as in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), Chinese culture was developing without regional limitation, with exchanges of cultures between various feudal states in central China becoming more and more frequent. For example, Xun Zi, though a follower of the teachings of Confucius, extracted knowledge from various other schools of thought. He also criticized sharply aspects of all schools of thought including Confucianism itself. At the end of the period, *Lu's Spring and Autumn Annals* which had attempted to make a summary of those contradictory schools of thought, was also characteristic of this ethos, and at the time it was known as Eclectics.

Foreign cultures were also absorbed and assimilated. When Buddhism was first introduced into China, a good deal of it was explained using traditional Chinese concepts or metaphysical Taoist terms. As more translations of Buddhist scriptures became available, diverse schools of Buddhism were founded, many of which having marked Chinese characteristics and differing from the Buddhism of India. The Indian Buddhist scriptures were revised and blended with traditional Chinese cultural thought, producing a positive influence on various aspects of ancient Chinese culture.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), particularly in the late part of the period, many farsighted Chinese strove to learn from Western culture, especially Western science and technology.

By "communication," we also mean exchange and interaction between various schools of thought. By the time of the Western Han (206 BC to 24 AD), the doctrines of Confucianism and Legalism had been blended, Confucianism and Taoism supplemented each other, and some of the teachings of Buddhism were beginning to be absorbed.

The foregoing ethos is like a string underlying and going through various other aspects of the traditional culture.

We have just given a brief account of four aspects of the fundamental ethos of traditional Chinese culture, and more explicit demonstrations will be given in the following chapters of this book.

Now, about the value of traditional culture in modern times.

Traditional culture is a product of history but it also has value in modern times. Confucianism was founded 2,500 years ago and has been developed through the ages, but the original Confucian classics such as *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Book of Mencius*, and *The Book of Xun Zi* are still widely read. By "reviewing what one has learned and knowing the new," people can be enlightened in new ways about the meanings of life through reading these and Taoist classics such as *The Book of Lao Zi* and *The Book of Zhuang Zi*. Some of the ancient works are true masterpieces, handed down from generation to generation, never failing to appeal to their readers. Practically speaking, so long as mankind continues to exist, the flames of wisdom emanating from such works can never be extinguished, always lighting up the past, present and future of mankind.

The history of mankind has developed from the deep past to the present day and will continue to develop into the future. Its development is a whole and continuous process, as is the development of the ideological and cultural history.

For example, the theories of *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* (the first medical classic in China) are still valuable today, though they were formulated about 2,000 years ago. In a sense, some of its theories will always be valuable. Although people today live in much better conditions than did their ancestors 2,000 years ago, and have different ideas and concepts, human physiological structure remains the same.

Another example can be seen in the ideas of *The Book of Lao Zi* relating to a small state with a sparse population. These were products of past history under specific conditions and as history has developed, they have gradually lost their relevance. But the

book's descriptions about the evolution of nature, the relations between nature and man and many other important issues, are very close to some aspects of the laws of nature. These theories and doctrines are still valuable today.

The value of these classics can be understood in two different senses: superficial and deep. The superficial value is their popularity, being understood and used by many ordinary people. For instance, the maxims of Confucius and Lao Zi are regarded as good advice and are frequently referred to. It is common to quote Confucius, saying "When a friend coming from afar, isn't that after all a pleasure?" and Lao Zi, saying "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." But their value is by no means limited to this superficial sense. From an ideological and cultural viewpoint, past theories and doctrines have a deeper value for modern times. To discover this value requires a thorough and scientific study of them, reaching deep into their essence. In the case of *The Book of Lao Zi*, we must ask: What influence have his doctrines exerted on science in ancient Chinese and the world? What will modern scientists learn when they explore the mystery of nature? How should his views and observations about the structure of the universe be evaluated? These issues cannot be solved simply by quoting a few teachings and sayings from his book. They require arduous and painstaking thought and study on this important scientific subject. This is a subject which has been profitably studied by scholars around the world.

In the process of exploring such traditional values, one should not merely discuss ideology. Ancient artifacts, calligraphy, painting, costume, cuisine, and architecture should not be neglected. They all embody a certain historical and aesthetic value, which is almost eternal. For instance, the beauty of the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi (321-379), extremely popular in the Tang Dynasty, is still admired and enjoyed. There are countless examples such as this. Such tangible products of traditional Chinese culture embody much more value than that of the products of ideology. From these tangible products, people can clearly perceive a certain respect of the truth of history.

To study the value of traditional Chinese culture for the present requires researchers to have a historical point of view. But it does not mean that today's scientific creations are merely copies of past thought and culture. Carrying on the fine aspects of traditional culture without making innovations will only end up in a dead end.

As we advance to explore the past along a pathway, the creations of our ancestors will light up the torch of wisdom for us.