



ESSENTIALLY CHINESE

CHINESE STUFF



波普客 **POPCORN**

Translated by Liu Jun



China Intercontinental Press

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Preface

In the modern consumer society, the powerful media and omnipresent advertisements are ushering globalized commodities into our lives at an unprecedented speed. It seems to take us only one night to get exactly the same things as most people in the rest of the world do, for instance, Coca-Cola, iPod and Nokia. Most of these commodities are very influential, being designed for imaginary customers of an identical lifestyle. Before the joy of possession subsides, people have become addicted to the commodities. Still, there are a great number of ordinary objects that have been used everyday and reflect a nation's characteristics. Is it possible for us to sort out and record the common but typically Chinese things in this vast country? As soon as we began this work, we found ourselves busy with a field survey like sociologists, and we have been constantly amazed by the number and creativity of the Chinese things. We do not aim at displaying what has already been put into the categories of history and folk customs (such as Peking Opera facial masks and snuff bottle), or glorious icons such as the four ancient inventions. What we have focused on are common things that are used in details of modern Chinese society. In our search for the Chinese things, we have been following three criteria: "local nature", "transformation" and "extra functions".

About "local nature". Many ordinary things embody Chinese wisdom, such as Tiger Balm for treating headaches, scalds and other minor ailments and Banlangen (an instant herbal mixture for treating colds). Originated from the common folks, these things have left a long-lasting influence on the life of the Chinese. Without taking a fresh angle to view them, a Chinese will find nothing special about these things. A good example is the thermos bottle with printed flowers which is used in most Chinese families to store hot water. But in some fashion shops of Paris (where locals don't drink hot boiled water), such a bottle is put under limelight and tagged with a price that is unbelievably expensive for a Chinese. Another aspect of "local nature" comes from the social-political tradition of the country. The big brown envelopes used to keep one's file, the crimson banners embroidered with praises, the red sleeve badge, etc, are good examples in this respect. As the social structure changes continuously, these things have been stripped of their original ideological features and become "habitual" items closely intertwined in daily life. They have withstood the test of time and broken free of the boundary of time. When a modern office is decorated with a crimson banner with golden embroidered words, neither the hosts nor the guests find it in conflict with its environment. As the level of globalization deepens, Chinese are adopting fresh angles in viewing their own life. An

interesting change has been the replacement of red sleeve badges by badges for security volunteers before the Olympics is held in Beijing. Although most of the “Chinese things” we discuss here are not meticulously made or involve latest technology, they nevertheless enable readers to catch glimpses of the Chinese way of thinking, which opens a window to the Chinese culture.

About “transformation”. Quite a number of “Chinese things” came to the country from elsewhere. But the Chinese way of life has transformed them in terms of appearance, function, number and meaning. One example is the bicycle. It is said that there are at least 470 million bicycles in China. The relation between the vehicle and the rider has changed due to the huge number. The bicycle is also transformed in structure. Most bicycles in China are equipped with a basket in front (so the rider can carry some vegetables back home) and a child seat made of plastic or bamboo at the back (the family relies on the bike to send the child to school). The structural change is realized with people’s wisdom and merchants’ acumen. While studying Chinese things, we’ve been observing the way of life in the country from a different angle. The transformation of an object is not a passive process to meet demands, but an active model that reflects the relations between man and object, as well as man and society. Many international products have influenced the domestic production. Some Western brands have sought local partners to produce their products in China. It is getting ever more difficult to distinguish the origin of a commodity. However, once a product enters the daily life of common Chinese people, it is always modified to a certain degree to fit local needs.

About “extra functions”. Compared with Western products, some Chinese things are designed for extra needs beyond basic requirements. The itch scratcher nicknamed “asking no one for help” (*bu qiu ren*), the electronic foot bathing tub, products like these provide glimpses of the particular attention that Chinese give to the quality of life.

We have abstracted the Chinese things from their settings, so we could dig out their structural meaning and cultural context. This analysis of individual subjects (items, architecture, things, men or women) is aimed at discovering the aesthetics of Chinese society in daily life.

Office & Classroom

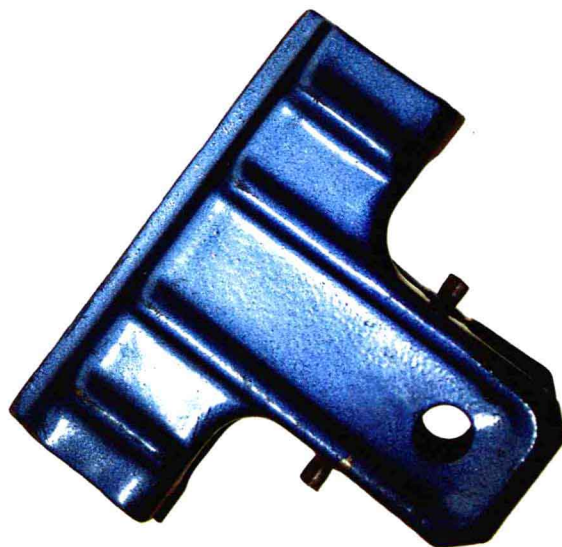
Brown envelope | Iron clip | Writing exercises book | Embroidered banner | *Xinhua Dictionary* |
Exercises books with checked paper | Train ticket | Name plates | Abacus | Cankao Xiaoxi |
Wenquxing Electronic Dictionary | Certificate of merit for "Three-Good Student" | Official seal | 100-yuan
note | Invoice | Banknote verification machine | Pulled school bag | Business calendar

Brown envelope

The brown envelope contains a person's identity and other records. But the person can never open his or her own file, which is mysterious as the black box on a plane. Every Chinese has such a file envelope containing yellowing pages that keep record of the person's life. Coming from the traditional household registration system, the brown envelope is still an important way through which the government rules the country. Ever since a person's birth, major happenings in one's life are filed away in this envelope. There are questions like: From which date to which date, where did you study or

work? Are you politically progressive? Who are related with you? The brown envelopes are sealed and stored in a dark room. Nowadays, Chinese still rely on the ID card and household registration card to prove their identities. But occasionally, they also need the brown envelope to prove their innocence. For decades, the brown envelope has maintained its humble appearance. Even in the time of digital information, a person's crucial records are still stored in this ordinary envelope. Everyone has such an envelope, but how much is the file related with the person's actual life?





Iron clip

With a heavy paper board and two iron clips, Xiao Wang began painting. She is now a teacher in an art school. Whenever she thinks about the days she spent painting in the children's palace, the two used iron clips always come to her mind. The iron clip is a common stationery item in Chinese offices. The bigger ones are used to bind newspapers and the smaller ones clip invoices. But besides the common functions, some clips are used in imaginative ways. Master Li puts a clip on his nose while sleeping, for he believes this can stop his thunder-like snoring. Many families clip the mosquito incense, which stops burning at the iron clip, so the incense can be used next time. Zhang Jianjun, a soldier, uproots unwanted moustache with a clip. Before colorful plastic clips become popular, housewives often

sealed bags of food with iron clip. In the past, department stores in small counties had iron wires linking the cashier and the counters. There were many iron clips on the web of wires. The shop assistants would bind cash and receipts on the iron clips and throw them towards the cashier. The cashier, usually a woman, took the cash, got the change and wrote the invoice, then bound them on the clip and threw it back in a precise and elegant manner. The iron clips are very strong. Once it gets hold on something, it seldom lets the object loose. At times when materials and chances were scant, the spirit of the iron clip was a virtue for those who were eager to hold on to opportunities, ideals and a better future.

Writing exercises book

When Chinese children begin learning calligraphy, they have to struggle with the painting brush held vertically in their small hands. The writing exercises book has proven to be a very patient and effective teacher. Printed with the strokes of Chinese characters in light red ink, the exercises book enables children to navigate their brush along the correct order. "A person's handwriting is a true mirror of one's character," teachers and parents often say this to children, as if someone who has a good handwriting is guaranteed for high esteem in the society. Old Wang often points at the writing by officials and warns his child that no matter how prominent an official is, the poor handwriting will let him down and lose face in public. The child understands little

of this teaching, but has to continue working on the exercises book. In China and abroad, in history and at present, bibliotists have devoted themselves to the study of handwriting. Today, when urban students attend computer lessons at the first grade, parents have to make extra efforts to let their juniors understand the importance of calligraphy. Thanks to modern technology, one can input a long Chinese article in the computer with a variety of software and change the characters into any writing style available in the database. But there are some people who still believe in the merits of writing with a brush. That's why writing exercises books are still in good demand and printed with various styles left by ancient calligraphers.



Embroidered banner

When the Chinese want to express their gratitude in the most respectful manner, they would present a banner embroidered with the praise. It is common to find such banners in the meeting room of many “units”, a term referring to the place where a Chinese works. Every time a meeting is held, the staff will be surrounded by banners showcasing the unit’s awards and praises. The government grants banners to outstanding figures in certain areas; the common people also like to use this means to show their respect or gratitude. The same banner can be used among different levels of social status. The words are often succinct when the banner is given as an award. For instance, “The 2nd Class of Grade 3 in the high school has won First Prize in the tug-of-war contest”, or “Zhang Weihong is honored as the role model of spiritual civilization”. But the eloquence can be surprising in the event of expressing utmost

gratitude. A patient might present a doctor with a banner that says: “Hua Tuo (an ancient doctor) reborn, bringing back spring with wonderful hands” as shown in the picture, or “Virtuous doctor who helps the needed with great skills”. A student might give his or her alma mater a banner that praises the school as “spring breezes that bring timely rain to nurture the earth silently”. People often send banners to governmental agencies with gratitude. For example, they would praise the police as “brave and fearless, with a great social conscience”, or “good police for the people, guardians of life”. For the governmental agency that alleviates disaster-stricken areas, the people would say “sending charcoals in snow, bright sun in winter”. There are numerous such praises, which are often arranged in antithetical couplets. For Chinese, things in even number are considered perfect.

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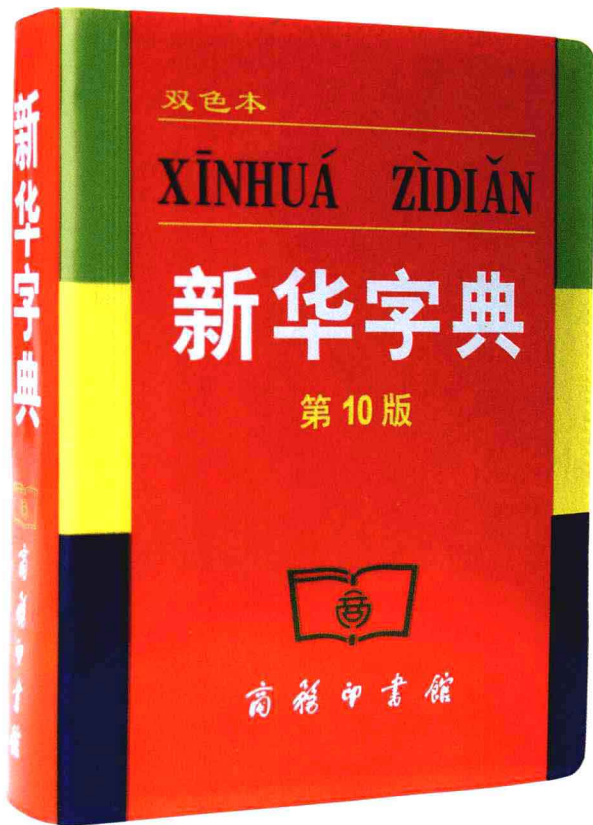
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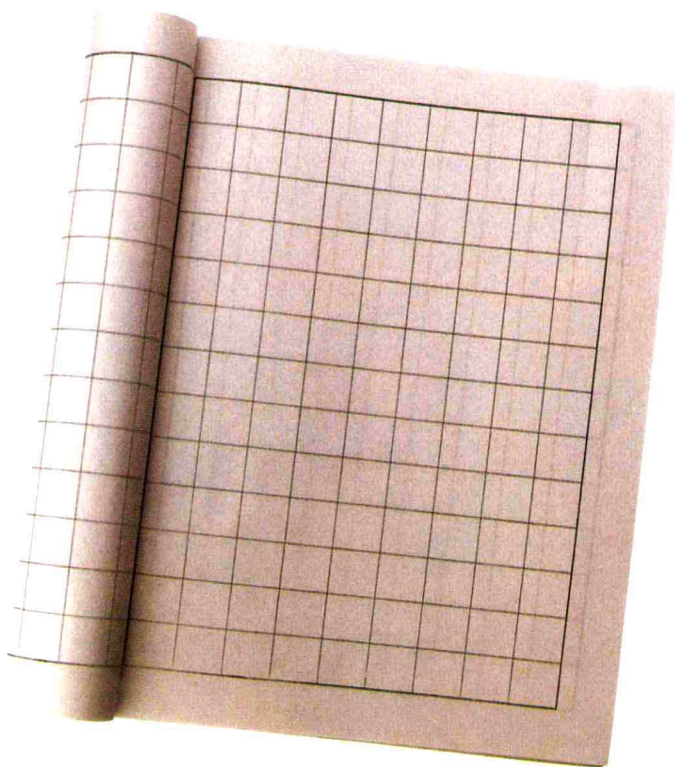
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Xinhua Dictionary

To Chinese learning their language, *Xinhua Dictionary* is like a Bible. First published by The Commercial Press in 1953, the small dictionary has influenced several generations. Each character is arranged according to its pronunciation in *pinyin* and explained in detail, with succinct examples. The 10th edition, published in 2003, has been sold for some 400 million copies. Some sources say it is the most widely used dictionary in the whole world. From professors to taxi drivers, almost every Chinese resorts to the dictionary when they aren't sure of a word's meaning or pronunciation. Fan Wei, a rickshaw driver in

Anshan, Central China's Henan province, has memorized every word of the dictionary that has more than 500 pages and some 9,000 entries. The "living dictionary" can tell the page, line and explanation of every character. Old Wang, a retired worker, always keeps a *Xinhua Dictionary* by his pillow. The dictionary that has accompanied him since the apprentice days has rippling cover and curled pages. Some people say that an ordinary man is just like a *Xinhua Dictionary* – it is easy to understand and always at hand; it is the best companion in a person's life.





Exercises books with checked paper

There are just a few countries in the world where students use exercises books with checked paper, but there are more students in the world learning to write in this way. Every Chinese student begins writing with such exercises books. The small checks carry the structure, mobility and essence of written Chinese characters. Mr Zheng recalls that in his childhood, he often thought about games while writing on the exercises books. "I didn't see that the characters were running out of the checks, until my dad hit me suddenly on the head. He would order me to rip off the page and rewrite everything." Like Mr Zheng, many people remember the dull afternoons and even late nights when they had to copy an article

for some five or ten times as a punishment for their naughty deeds. Once a clever boy put some carbon paper between several pages to copy the text. But the teacher discovered the trick and displayed the exercises book in the class. Everyone had a hearty laugh, except for the poor boy. Young Chinese born in the 1980s have learned writing with the computer. They are amazing at sending mobile phone messages with *pinyin*. But the speedy input software has alienated the younger generation from writing. Some of them have neglected differences in homophones and even made fun of the words. It is a pity that the beauty of written Chinese characters that has inspired ancient calligraphy is not gaining wide appreciation as before.

Train ticket

Decades ago, train tickets were small pieces of hard paper at half the size of a name card. Today, a thin piece of paper doubling the original size is printed at ticket windows linked with the national network. What makes the train ticket special in China is the Spring Festival, the most important traditional festival in the country when everyone is supposed to go home for family reunion. Chinese pay utmost attention to the banquet on the Eve of the lunar New Year that usually falls in late January or early February. As millions of students who begin their winter vacation in January join migrant workers who are eager to bring cash to their rural home, the world's biggest traffic must be achieved in a matter of days. A train ticket, though priced just a few hundred yuan for a distance of thousands of kilometers, is hard to get. Chen Chao, who had found a reliable source to get the ticket,

was let down at the last moment. The young man searched online and finally discovered a compatriot who was selling the ticket as he couldn't go home. But Chen had to spend the New Year's Eve on the train. He felt very sad in the empty train, listening to firecrackers along the way. But in a way, Chen didn't have to endure the crowds. Those who only have a ticket for standing room are forced to remain immobile for hours, as every corner of the train is stuffed with people. In the long journey, it is almost impossible to get to the toilet, which is often congested despite the smell. Some ingenious businessmen have made good profits selling diapers for grown ups. It is safe to say that train ride is a pleasant journey in the country most time of the year. But be prepared for some extremes, should you plan a trip around the major holidays such as the Spring Festival and National Holiday (on October 1).

