

寻觅中华

余秋雨 著

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Quest for Chinese Culture

● Yu Qiuyu | Translated by
Ian Clark & Yang Jing

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藏 书 章

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

寻觅中华 = Quest For Chinese Culture: 英文/余秋雨著. —北京:新世界出版社, 2010. 1
ISBN 978-7-5104-0701-7

I. 寻… II. 余… III. 散文-作品集-中国-当代-英文 IV. I267

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2009)第 213555 号

Quest For Chinese Culture

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出版发行: 新世界出版社

社址: 北京西城区百万庄大街 24 号(100037)

发行部: (010)6899 5968 (010)6899 8733(传真)

总编室: (010)6899 5424 (010)6832 6679(传真)

<http://www.nwp.cn>

<http://www.newworld-press.com>

版权部: +8610 6899 6306

版权部电子信箱: frank@nwp.com.cn

印刷: 宁波市大港印务有限公司

经销: 新华书店

开本: 890 × 1240 1/32

字数: 150 千字 印张: 7

版次: 2010 年 1 月第 1 版 2010 年 1 月第 1 次印刷

书号: ISBN 978-7-5104-0701-7

定价: 32.00 元

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Preface



One

A student of mine once described an experience he had to me. One day, he was flipping through some old photos from his family chest. The pictures were all of the same person—a pretty and sophisticated woman. Even by today’s standards the way she dressed up seemed bold and creative. He hurriedly pulled his dad over to ask about her, and his father remarked, “That’s your grandmother.”

This gave my student a big surprise. His mom and dad were always very cautious, plain, and tight with money, and they only needed to step out the front door to mix into the gloomy crowds and never be found again. Wow! *Their* parents were actually like *that*.

After staring at the photo for a moment my student started to believe that the expression in the beautiful woman’s eyes was very similar to that of his father.

After that a stringent line of questioning ensued. Whatever his dad didn't have the foggiest recollection of was precisely what my student was most curious about.

This engendered an intense curiosity about his roots. Soon he would take that small bunch of pictures to a small village in the land of his ancestry.

There were still some old folks who knew his grandma, but strangely the elderly women who would have known the most about her situation didn't reveal very much. The only cooperative ones were the fiery-eyed village patriarchs who randomly spewed trivial details to the youth that sat before them.

After a few days, my student arranged appointments with three village patriarchs, mainly to interview them. The result was that he was getting more confused—his own paternal grandfather could have been one of the three, though on second thought maybe not. When he left the village he was starting to worry to the point that he didn't even dare look at any old man on the side of the street. He was still weighing the pros and cons of telling his father about what he had experienced over those couple of days.

When I saw my student I only told him one thing, that “you only need to know one thing—that you have suave genes.”

Two

When living among our most-intimate family members—or even after becoming parents ourselves—it's not necessary to know the origins of this family we have.

This is true for both small and large families.

When I was young, I, too, suddenly discovered the origins of my immediate family. I was taken over by an immense doubt which led me on a search to reveal the secrets of my extended family.

At the time I was twenty years old and my family had suddenly been tangled up in a political disaster—the so-called “Great Culture Revolution”. I was helping my father to write confession material every day. The extreme “leftist” faction that was in control of administrative power then accused my father of having political history problems because of a certain person who vaguely exposed my father. But they did not know what confession they wanted from my father, and the unclear nature of the daily questions posed to him ensured that this material would never be completed. In the process of copying I became very familiar with my own family's history (even to the minutest detail). While I was

writing I shared the nervousness, sorrow, bliss and shame of my elders. Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible for children to know that much about their family.

I feared inaccuracies in my father's recollections, so I constantly sought confirmation from my grandma, mother, and uncle. Their narratives promoted my understanding. I finally understood that this was a hard-working, timid, and charitable family of Buddhists. From the roof to the foundation not the slightest trace of having harmed others could be found.

Yet this understanding only confused me more. How could a family like this be afflicted with such evil? At first I thought that those few people in power must be lacking in conscience, yet they quickly left their posts. The chief of his work unit¹ was changed several times, so why would this evil continue? Even stranger was how all the co-workers and friends around us could easily see that our case was preposterous and unjustified—a case that had forced a populous family to the brink—so why wouldn't they help us a bit? The help we needed would incur no risk to them.

Surrounded by cold stares, I understood why Lǚ Xùn went on to analyze the concept of “citizenship” at his time. Moreover I already figured out that “citizenship” was the collective subconscious of a national population—a sort of ingrained culture.

It impaled me like a spear, but it was traditional culture that was being violently criticized in society then. I was again struck with confusion. Did this kind of ramshackle culture have it out with an outdated and superior culture? Or were both of these

simply worthless?

Both answers made me feel pessimistic. Just as Chinese culture had operated on fuzzy logic, then being a Chinese meant always using fuzzy logic.

So I felt that it would be better to do less watching on the shore of culture than dedicate myself to a lifetime of manual labor. Even today many old colleagues can still describe in detail the way I poured my sweat into the land as a farmer.

Three

Afterwards, the upper level of the extreme “left” wing crumbled like a stack of cards due to their own internal conflicts. Then some enlightened leaders from within the government took action to rescue Chinese culture, saving me in the process. Muddied and weatherbeaten, I went back to teaching, editing school books and compiling a dictionary, so it could be said that I was starting to familiarize myself with culture. Then again the extreme left re-appeared and called the cultural preservation movement a “verdict reversal” during their comeback, and that was when I made myself scarce on a mountain in Zhèjiāng. I started to study Chinese classics systematically, and I found it

difficult to stop. This led to independent genealogy study outside the library for the cultural shadows of our ancestors. Beyond that I went to the preserved homes of our ancestors' contemporaries in other countries, traveling to the farthest reaches of the globe.

In the end, I came to unravel many of the secrets of the greater Chinese family, which far exceeded my expectations. This of course should not be enjoyed selfishly, so I decided to recount my emotional experience of reading and traveling in articles for my fellow Chinese. They, too, have been through vicissitudes for their Chinese culture. However, really getting through them is a very difficult thing, because the rolling river of Chinese culture is rife with tributaries. To this end I've given up my old pedagogical method in favor of a "touching narrative", which allows me to converse more easily with the common reader, constructing a broad, two-way platform for exchange.

This experiment of mine was well-received by readers both domestic and abroad.

How well received it was surprised me, so I went to Mr. Bái Xiānyǒng to ask why. He said that I hit a gene in the DNA chain of Chinese culture which flows in the blood of every Chinese. When everyone is reading your books, he said, they are reading about themselves.

Four

Many books have been written on the path of life. Because of a large readership, they have encountered an unimaginable frenzy of pirating.

The pirated editions of my books in the Chinese domestic market already outnumber genuine editions by about ten to one. A few years ago I was invited to give a lecture at the Library of Congress where the librarians excitedly displayed their Chinese editions of my books (one after another) to the audience. However my wife and I could only exchange smirks as we discovered that most of them were pirated editions, thinking that most of them must have been bought in mainland China. Many among them were “collections” created by the pirates.

So I figured I didn't want to further trouble these pirates and went on to clean up what I've already published. It took me several years to finish the job, and I came up with this new collection called *Quest For Chinese Culture*. Most of the articles in this collection are familiar to readers in the Chinese cultural circle in the world, but I deem it necessary to give those who know little about the civilization a brief introduction to it, so I compiled this

very thin “trial edition”.

An ancient and enormous civilization may make its successors feel at a loss. And this collection also mirrors such feeling of mine as I tried to approach it step by step.

Early spring, 2009

footnotes:

- 1 “Work unit” is a term which means “place of work”.

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Who was Huángdì?



One

The storm that night was truly enormous and violent. I wondered if it could be a typhoon, but it seemed a bit too early for that. Experienced in a mountain cabin at midnight, I felt it more frightening than any typhoon.

I knew that no one else lived on that mountain. During the day some hikers would occasionally come around, but they just lived at the foot of the mountain. That's why the eye of this whirlpool got especially lonely. The forest that stretched long into the distance suddenly turned into a black sea of raging waves. The trees were no longer themselves, but rather reflections and support columns of all violence on earth. They rampaged wildly, howling and crashing everywhere. There was no flickering lamp, no wild animal cries, no signs of letup—nor a trace of dawn. If wispy clouds breezing along under a shining sun finally came, it could all just be a fatuous dream.

At a time like this the easiest thing to think about was the masses of ancient pioneers. When they were struggling their way through the wilderness, their most emotional moments must have been during midnight storms. This is because events like these occur on the cliff of survival—the crumbling wall of destruction. One can't but focus all their energies on it and be gorged in fear. Concerning common, everyday weather and landscapes, they could have cast a glance indifferently without having some distinct emotions well up.

At this moment I again started following that original train of thought, instantly jumping past all the dynasties—Xià, Shāng, Zhōu, Spring and Autumn, Warring States, Qín, and the two Hàns—to the prehistoric era. These tempests that can erase history brought to mind a savage epoch when man and nature were pitted against each other. Images were flashing up one after another, as if I were among them—yet somehow distanced. There were a few familiar faces—but on further inspection they were still strangers . . . and at this point I gradually fell asleep.

When I awoke to the sound of birds chirping, I knew that the storm had passed. Then the mountain scenery was radiant. I was lying in bed figuring out that since there was already nothing left to eat the day before, I'd have to go down the mountain and buy some food.

I had tried several kinds of food before, but I ultimately decided to buy condensed, enriched biscuits which thereafter became a staple of mine. These things were really thick, and

required a lot of water just to swallow. They were filling and cost almost nothing. It was in fact a wartime ration and should have been destroyed when its date of quality had expired¹. But during the Cultural Revolution the economy was in decline, food and clothing were in short supply, and condensed biscuits were dispensed for society's needs. People really didn't like these things, because they were coarse and hard to swallow. However to this beleaguered intellectual who could only get out once every few days, the biscuits were preserved, ready-to-eat meal that stuck to my ribs.

Since they were preserved so well, why didn't I stock up on some of these biscuits and save some extra trips? The reason can only be understood by those who have really been through hard times. There is always a need for insurance against mishaps, for example, when we have to pay hospital bills. If there's only a pinch of change in your pocket, how could you go and spend it all? So for this reason, if one saves a few coins for a rainy day, that's one more day of feeling a bit safer. But the actual price of this soothing sense is hunger—so when hunger came to outweigh security, I would go down for food.

Every time I appeared at the door of the biscuit store, the decrepit owner would turn around to get what I wanted without any questions asked.

His attitude toward me was totally cold, almost as if suspecting me to be a fugitive. According to the locution at that time, I would be “an enemy of the proletariat dictatorship”. But

apparently he never reported me. Judging from his age, he couldn't be without "a history problem". In any case this was the home town of Chiang Kai-shek, the former "president" who fled to the island of Taiwan in 1949 when he was defeated by Mao Zedong's army. Rarely would there ever be a family that wasn't related to the Kuomintang and that group who already went to Taiwan. As every family had their issues, arguments and declared suspicions were naturally minimal.

This would probably be one of the reasons why my teacher Shèng Zhōngjiàn came up with the plan for me to hide up on Fēnghuà Mountain.

As stated before, I accidentally came upon a hidden book repository of Chiang Kai-shek's, though it had to be abandoned after the events in 1949. It was abandoned, but not destroyed—just stripped of its title, windows closed up, and put under the watch of an elderly curator. After a long discussion of ancient classics and feeling that I was his confidant, that old man let me inside to get whatever book I desired.

Because of the torrential storms, the mountain roads were covered with fallen leaves and broken sticks. The air was especially fresh and the spring flooded. After making it up and putting away the crackers, I took an iron bucket to the side of the creek to get some spring water. Then I quietly sat, waiting for the library guard to come up the mountain and unlock the front door of the repository.

Two

In retrospect, hiding out on that mountain thirty years ago was a strange experience. Right when I got there, Chiang Kai-shek died in Taiwan. Later I left because I heard the news that Mao Zedong had died in Beijing. When the lives of two great contestants in twentieth-century China finally reached their end, an era was at an end, too. And it was right at that moment, some mysterious force brought me into one of their hometown book repositories. Just with the quiet opening of a door long closed, a house full of Chinese classic books were revealed inside.

All the vicissitudes of military and politics aside, there's surely no other nation with generation after generation of leaders who are so concerned with historical roots, so concerned with blood heritage, and so concerned with its own civilization.

China fared differently from other empires that waged war abroad and destroyed each other's civilizations. Even if her civil wars were worse, they were a struggle for the rightful inheritance of this civilization, and whoever won or lost would not destroy their own culture. Even the nomads from the outskirts who end up at the helm would sooner or later become one of her members.