

The Basics of Traditional Chinese Culture



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Compiled by: Zhi E'xiang

Foreign Languages Press Beijing

图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

中国传统文化 ABC / 支鄂湘主编.

—北京: 外文出版社, 2005

ISBN 7-119-03904-0

I. 中 ... II. 支 ... III. 传统文化—简介—中国—英文

IV. G12

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2004) 第 140096 号

责任编辑 余冰清

封面设计 蔡 荣

插图绘制 李士伋

印刷监制 冯 浩

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<http://www.flp.com.cn>

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sales@flp.com.cn

中国传统文化 ABC

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© 外文出版社

外文出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄大街 24 号)

邮政编码 100037

北京蓝空印刷厂印刷

中国国际图书贸易总公司发行

(中国北京车公庄西路 35 号)

北京邮政信箱第 399 号 邮政编码 100044

2005 年(大 32 开)第 1 版

2005 年第 1 版第 1 次印刷

(英)

ISBN 7-119-03904-0/G. 12(外)

01600(平)

7-E-3653P

Splendid Chinese Culture: An Introduction

In his famous work *Science and Civilization in China*, Dr. Joseph Needham, an outstanding British expert of scientific history in modern times, commented that if one did not think it too troublesome to read through his voluminous book, he was sure one would find surprisingly that Europe had absorbed varied and colorful technologies from China. Francis Bacon, father of modern Western science, also admitted that China's three inventions—printing, gunpowder and compass—had changed the face of the whole world.

China had really been one of the great centers of human civilization, science and technology for many centuries, having written a brilliant chapter in the world's cultural history, which we may see from the following examples:

China was well known for its agricultural civilization. Rice and corn—present-day world's major food grains—were first cultivated by Chinese ancestors in the Yangtze and Yellow River valleys 7,000-8,000 years ago.

China was the "origin of silk." As far back as 5,000 years ago, Chinese ancestors had mastered the skill of raising silkworms, and that of reeling and weaving silk. Over 200 silk and linen fabrics were unearthed in the No.1 Tomb of the Han Dynasty at Mawangdui, in Changsha City, Hunan Province, in 1972, including an intact plain gauze unlined garment, which was soft, bright, and as thin as a cicada's wings, fully showing China's superb weaving art of 2,100 years ago. Way back in the Han (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) and Tang (618-907 A.D.) dynasties Chinese silk fabrics had continuously flowed to West Asian and European countries, winning great favor with the people there.

Known as the "birthplace of tea," China was the first country to plant tea and use it as a beverage. As far back as 2,700 years ago, Shen Nong discovered the detoxicating function of tea, and used it to cure diseases. People started to drink tea in the Han Dynasty. Chinese tea found its way to Japan, Korea and some other countries in the fifth century, and sold to the European and American nations in the 17th century. Henceforth tea drinking had become popular all over the world. The savory Chinese tea, which is beneficial both to improving one's intelligence and preserving one's health, has become one of the three most important drinks in the world, on a par with coffee and cocoa.

Known as the "home of chinaware," China was the first country to invent porcelain. The "primitive celadon" was baked in the Zhou Dynasty over 3,000 years ago. During the Tang Dynasty, porcelain production entered a varied and colorful stage. The celadon produced in the Yue Kiln during the period was as green as jade, and was an important item on China's export list. China had become

one of the most civilized and rich countries in the world during the Tang Dynasty, a period of great prosperity, when envoys, students, businessmen and monks from Asian and African countries gushed into China as tidewater. Situated in the central part of Asia, China was in frequent contacts with other nations, becoming a bridge linking Asia, Africa and Europe. All this had provided convenience for the export of porcelains. Chinese porcelains were spread westward along the “Silk Road” developed in the Han Dynasty, i.e., from Xinjiang to Persia, Syria, as far as to the Mediterranean countries. It reached Korea and Japan either directly from the northeast, or along the sea route from Mingzhou (modern Ningbo), Yangzhou and Quanzhou. In the Tang Dynasty, a maritime trade commissioner was appointed in Guangzhou to supervise navigation and shipbuilding, as well as foreign trade. Guangzhou became an important port, where merchants from home and abroad thronged. Starting from there, one might reach Southeast Asian countries, or get to the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean coast, Egypt and Syria by rounding the Malay Peninsula. As porcelain was an important export product, scholars called the navigation route the “Porcelain Road.”

The Chinese ancestors had created one age of civilization after another, as well as varied, colorful and complete material and intellectual cultures, covering fields ranging from metallurgy, papermaking, printing, gunpowder, compass, astronomy and mathematics to costume, tea ceremony and cuisine, and from philosophy, institutions and systems to ethics, morals and social customs. The thousands-of-years-old history of Chinese culture is replete with splendid achievements, clearly showing China’s contributions to world civilization and its friendly contacts with other peoples. From it we seem to be able to hear the clear and melodious sound of camel bells on the “Silk Road” and catch glimpses of the sails of ships gliding on the vast expanses of green water. Today, China is opening its door to sincerely welcome friends from afar. When you appreciate the magnificent views atop the Great Wall, seek your old dreams in front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the former Imperial Palace in Beijing, visit the massive terracotta army of Emperor Qin Shi Huang in Xi’an, or taste the delicious Beijing roast ducks, you will feel that China’s long-standing, unified and continuous traditional culture is still shining brilliantly.

It is universally known that human labor is a creative activity carried out in accordance with the rules of beauty. The tens of thousands of artifacts with historical, scientific and artistic values are embodiments of beauty. This book includes 22 special topics, including the achievements of the Chinese people in material and cultural fields. The authors, who are all experts of traditional Chinese culture, have tried their best to explain the broad and profound contents of Chinese culture in vivid and popular language. To really understand a nation, one must get to know its culture and tradition. It is our hope, therefore, that this book will lead the readers to the palace of traditional Chinese culture to understand a great nation through appreciating the mysterious and interesting cultural views, both old and new.

Contents

The Yellow Emperor and the Dragon Culture	1
Confucius and Confucianism	6
Taoism and Traditional Chinese Culture	11
The Influence of Buddhism on Traditional Chinese Culture	16
The Lord Guan Culture and Lord Guan Temple	21
A General View of Traditional Chinese Medicine	26
The Magic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion	33
Qigong Breathing Exercise	36
Probing the Mysteries of Wushu Martial Arts	40
Fascinating Chinese Characters	47
Tea and Teahouses	51
Alcoholic Drinks	59
Silk	63
Chinese Dress and Accessories in Various Periods	66
The Fan	76
Bamboo	83
Chopsticks	93
Traditional Chinese Musical Instruments	98
The “Four Treasures of the Study”	106
Chinese Ceramics	115

The Yellow Emperor and the Dragon Culture



The Yellow Emperor.

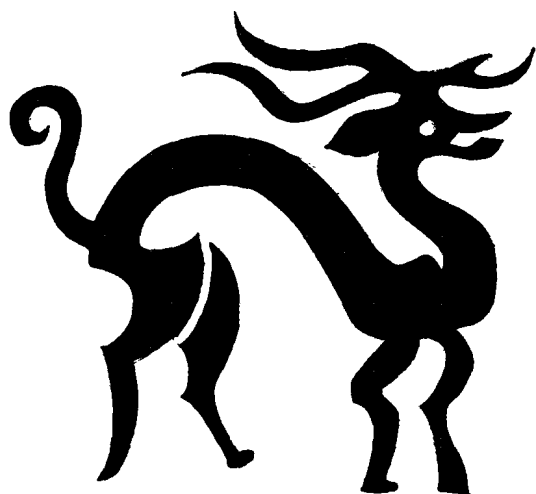
During the primitive clan commune period 5,000 years ago, two tribal chiefs—the Yellow Emperor and Yandi Emperor—lived in the Yellow River Valley. They were regarded as the earliest ancestors of the Chinese nation.

The original surname of the Yellow Emperor was Gongsun, and because he lived in the Jishui River area, he later changed it to Ji. He prospered on the Loess Plateau of Shaanxi Province, hence his name. Five thousand years ago the Yellow Emperor led his tribe to rise to the north of the Weishui River in Shaanxi Province, and then gradually to move eastward to reach the Yellow River bank in the southern part of Shanxi Province, and Zhuolu in Hebei Province.

The Yandi Emperor also prospered in areas to the east of Qishan



An early Western Zhou Dynasty bronze carving of a dragon.

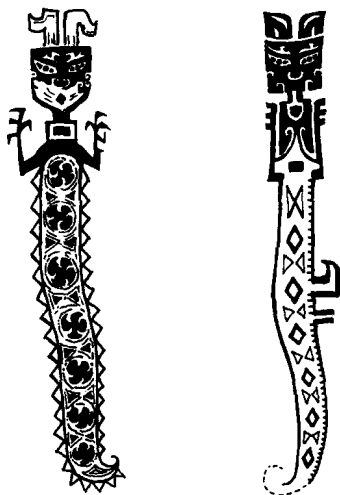


A bronze dragon carving from the Warring States Period.

Mountain in Shaanxi Province. Because he lived in the Jiangshui River area, he used Jiang as his surname. Compared with that of the Yellow Emperor, the Yandi Emperor's development route slanted south, extending eastward along the Weishui and Yellow rivers, reaching Henan and Shandong provinces, and then going southward to the Jiangnan Plain and Hunan Province.

Since both of them had created the ancient civilization of the Yangtze and Yellow river valleys, laying the foundation for the 5,000-year mansion of Chinese civilization, the Yandi and Yellow emperors were honored as the earliest Chinese ancestors by the Chinese people both at home and abroad.

During the process of the continuous multiplication and development of the clans and tribes, the Yandi tribe collided with the Jiuli tribe in the southeast. Yandi asked the Yellow Emperor for help when he was defeated. The Yellow and Yandi emperors then jointed

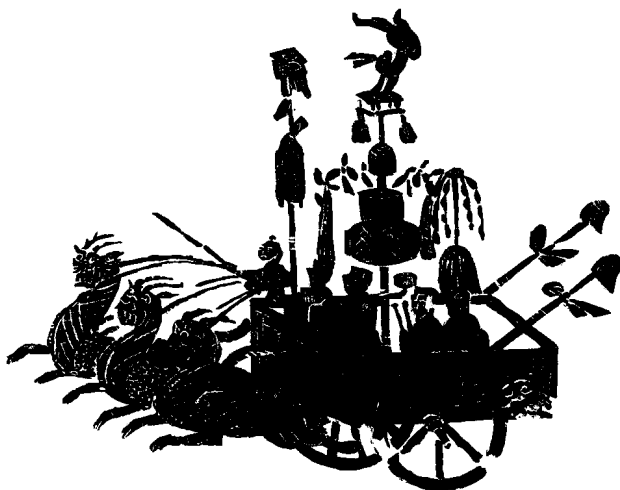


Bone carvings of a human head on a snake's body from the Yin Dynasty (late Shang Dynasty).

hands and defeated Chi You at Zhuolu. But then a battle broke out between the two former allies at Banquan, ending in the failure of Yandi. Finally, the Yellow Emperor was honored by the tribal chiefs as the leader of the tribal alliance formed at the meeting initiated by the Yellow Emperor, thus settling China's basic domain. The integration of the clans was accelerated in the post-war period, culminating in the formation of the Huaxia tribe, the main body of the Chinese nation.

Out of some cultural psychology and ideology, the Chinese ancestors created dragon, a cultural product which was actually non-existent. A great number of explanations and descriptions of the dragon can be found in ancient Chinese books. One says, "The entire body of the dragon was integral with different parts. Riding floating clouds, it nourished Yin and Yang." Another says, "The dragon, born in water and covered with five colors, could change into a tiny silkworm when it wanted to become small; change into a formidable giant when it wanted to become big; rise above the clouds when it wanted to go up; and sink to the bottom of a spring when it wanted to go down." Still another says, "Its horns looked like those of a deer; head, camel; eyes, ghost; neck, snake; scales, carp; talons, hawk; palms, tiger; and ears, ox."

These descriptions show that, in ancient Chinese people's minds, the dragon was a mixture of various animals with no regular shape but with the abilities of raising winds and rains, soaring to the sky and diving to the bottom of a sea, and bestowing favors on all



An Eastern Han Dynasty stone carving found in Yinan in Shandong Province.

creatures on earth.

Why was the dragon so magical?

As far back as 5,000 years ago, each clan or tribe regarded a deity as its guardian god as well as its symbol, i.e., totemism. When a clan or tribe annexed another one, it would add its most distinctive symbol into its own to represent its victory. Therefore, the mixed shape of the dragon was actually an agglomerate of the totems characteristic of different clans in the formative stage of the Huaxia tribe, or the Chinese nation.

The dragon originated from the powerful Yellow Emperor tribe in the Central Plains, and finally took shape in the process of the merger of the various clans. With a strange shape, it had great magic power. It was regarded as one of the Four Auspicious Animals that could bring courage, strength and happiness to people. The other three auspicious animals were the unicorn (a legendary animal with the shape of a deer, with horns on the head, scales on the whole body and a tail); the phoenix (a legendary fowl with beautiful feathers, supposed to be the king of birds, the male ones being called *feng* and the female ones *huang*); and the miraculous turtle.

With its becoming the totem of the Yellow Emperor tribe and the

龍



Different forms of the Chinese character *long* ("dragon") from different periods.

Yellow Emperor himself symbolizing unification and agglomeration, the dragon also became a symbol of unification and agglomeration.

Due to people's ardent love and worship of the Yellow Emperor, the dragon had become high in their favor, and the strong awareness of the dragon culture had penetrated deep into the various fields of Chinese culture for thousands of years. Buildings were named after the mythical beast, such as the Dragon Palace, Dragon Gate and Dragon Court, and decorated with dragon patterns, and artworks featured its dignified and grandiose images, imbuing them with great artistic charm and strong aesthetic appeal. There was also the Dragon Dance, Dragon Feast, Dragon Tea, and so on and so forth.

Even today, the dragon embodies people's ideals, wishes, wisdom and strength. It is also a symbol of the Chinese nation. For this reason, people of other nations refer to China as the "huge dragon in the East," and the "descendants of the Yandi and Yellow emperors" all over the world also proudly claim themselves to be the "descendants of the dragon."



The ancestral emperor
Xuan Yuan (Yellow Emperor).

Confucius and Confucianism



Confucius.

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) was a philosopher, political thinker and educator of ancient China, whose influence is still felt across the world.

Confucius lived in an era when China was rent by dozens of feudal states. Confucius was born in Zou of the State of Lu (modern Qufu, Shandong Province). He descended from a noble line in the State of Song, which had declined long before he was born. Confucius lost his father when he was three years old, which made his family fare from bad to worse. He was always fond of learning. In his younger days, he tended warehouses and cattle and sheep for other people, at the same time earning his living by managing wedding and funeral affairs for rich families. Therefore, he could get access to both the ordinary people to understand their sufferings and upper-class people to be familiar with their etiquette. He had also gradually mastered rich knowledge of ancient Chinese culture, becoming an erudite standing apart from his peers. He served as minister of justice in the State of Lu for a short term, during which he had many outstanding achievements to his credit.

An admirer of Duke Zhou, a great statesman of the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century-771 B.C.), Confucius also wanted to introduce the political institutions developed by Duke Zhou to the State of Lu. However, due to the great social upheaval and the intensified contradictions between the upper and lower classes at that time, he could not realize his ideals, and he was very much upset. So he started to travel from state to state.

He ran into snags everywhere, failing to obtain an important post in any of those states. He had no alternative but to return to his native state when he reached the advanced age of 68. Since then, he had devoted himself to education. He widely recruited and cultivated students, breaking the “monopolization of learning by the government,” and adding a splendid chapter in China’s educational history. At the same time, he engaged in editing many classics, including *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Book of Music*, making an everlasting contribution to spreading, sorting out and preserving the ancient cultural heritages. He died at the age of 73.

His students or even their students had recorded Confucius’ lifetime words and deeds in *The Analects of Confucius*, which systematically reflected his thoughts and opinions. Many of his words have become famous adages often quoted by Chinese today.

Scholars have always agreed that “benevolence” (*ren*) is the core of Confucius’ ideological system. The implications of the code of conduct, or the “rites” (*li*), he advocated at that time naturally covered some administrative systems, which had to be guaranteed by the concept of “benevolence.” Asked about “benevolence,” he replied, “It is to love all men.” Asked about the way of realizing “benevolence,” he proposed two principles, that is, that “You should not do to others what you would not have them do to you,” and “Wishing to be established himself, one should also seek to establish others, while wishing to be enlarged himself, one should also seek to enlarge others.” Worthy of special attention is that Confucius explicitly affirmed differences in social relations—difference between the close and the distant and between the high and the low. Therefore, there were differences in the love of the “benevolent.” Of course, we cannot interpret Confucius’ views out of the context of his era. We cannot claim that he was advocating the views of the modern Western world, such as the so-called “universal love” and “everyone being born with the inalienable rights of man.” Nevertheless, one thing is certain, that he had sort of changed the ruling-class idea of treating the slaves as if they were beasts of burden, and openly opposed the “cruelty” of “putting the people to death without having instructed them.” In this connection, his views contained elements of affinity to the people, pro-

gressiveness and rationality.

He also comprehensively summarized the ruling experience of the patriarchal hierarchical society, that the rulers should not forget to educate people in benevolence while practicing brutal tyranny so as to rid the ruled of the idea of “rebellng against the authority.” The best course was to alternate severity with leniency, or the “rule by virtue.” He openly opposed rulers riding roughshod over the people solely by power, believing it was unpopular to “rule by force,” which the “benevolent” should definitely not practice.

Unlike Sakyamuni, Jesus Christ and Muhammad, Confucius was by no means a religious leader of ancient China. Although he “venerated the will of Heaven,” he did not believe in the next life, nor did he believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits. He said: “While you do not know life, how can you know about life?” and “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” The great modern Chinese writer Lu Xun gave a very high opinion on this when he said: “Confucius was a really great man. Although the belief in ghosts was very popular in his time, he would not swim with the tide.” The liberal ideas had undoubtedly exerted profound influences in China, so that, after Confucius’ thought had become official philosophy, later feudal rulers found it hard to control the people with religious ideas and to check the spread of ancient atheism. Some people attempted to turn “Confucian studies” into a “Confucian faith” on a par with Buddhism and Taoism, and even the Christian faith from the West. However, the attempt failed to become reality. As a result, religious beliefs in China had never overridden “politics” (royal authority), which was a unique characteristic of traditional Chinese culture.

As Confucius’ most outstanding contribution to Chinese culture lay in education, he was called the “teacher of all ages” by the later generations, and became a “sage” in feudal society. He was the first to advocate the idea of “making no distinction of social status in teaching,” breaking the past privilege of the nobles monopolizing culture and education, and expanding the social basis of education, which had played a very important role in promoting the inheritance, spread and development of ancient academic thinking. The Confucian canons produced by Confucius and his disciples, such as the “Five Classics” (*The Book of Songs*, *The Book of*

History, The Book of Changes, The Book of Rites and The Spring and Autumn Annals) and the “Four Books” (*The Analects of Confucius, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean and Mencius*), had become national-level required readings for intellectuals.

As education always serves a given political purpose, Confucius was no exception. His ideal that “Officialdom is the natural outlet for good scholars” was completely reasonable in the ancient time, when studies in special fields were not well developed. Compared with the practice of ruling the people by some nobles who had neither learning nor skill, and only idled away their time in pleasure-making, it was really a progressive new idea. However, Confucius opposed students engaging in agricultural production, for he believed that the main purpose of education was to reinforce and improve the social ruling order and ease the contradictions between the ruler and the ruled. Therefore, the disciples must learn to “administer a country.”

However, being “insatiable in learning” and “tireless in teaching,” and having engaged in education wholeheartedly over dozens of years, Confucius had summarized his correct and valuable experience to enlighten numerous scholars of great attainments, especially educators, of the later generations on the attitude toward study and ways of thinking. Adhering to a conscientious spirit of seeking knowledge, he held that “one should know what one really understands and admit what one does not know—this is knowledge,” which was very similar to the opinion of the famous Greek philosopher Socrates. He also stressed that “If the name is not right, then speech will not be in order; and if speech is not in order; then nothing will be accomplished,” a viewpoint that well reflected the special characteristics of his philosophy and established a lofty example of studiousness for the later generations by associating one’s “name” with one’s “speech,” and one’s “speech” with one’s “action.”

Confucius believed that only by “carrying forward the cause pioneered by the predecessors” could the people “forge ahead into the future,” i.e., they should open up the new future without breaking the old tradition, which was another important characteristic of his thinking. Instead of blindly advocating the restoration of ancient ways, he believed that they should carry out concrete reforms by “increasing” or “decreasing” the old

rules and regulations, but not by “destroying the old and establishing the new.” In treating cultural heritages, he asked people to “review what has been learned” in order to “learn something new.” Therefore, he paid great attention to drawing lessons from historical experience, as he put it in the words such as “I am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity, and earnest in seeking it there.” These sayings had somewhat helped later generations to attach importance to historical studies.

All schools of thought contended for attention in China after Confucius died. To meet the political needs arising from the realization of national unification, Liu Che, Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-25 A.D.), “banned all schools of thought and only venerated Confucianism.” The “old liners” and “reformers” among the feudal scholars of the successive dynasties creatively elaborated the Confucian thought by “absorbing what they needed” from the materials of the Confucian School according to the social characteristics and ideologies of the various periods. This had resulted in the extraordinary complexity of the history of the Chinese study of Confucian classics, a complexity caused by the mingling of positive contributions, negative influence and even arbitrary distortions, so that, after continuous revisions over the centuries, it was difficult to judge which school represented the true features of the Confucian doctrine. At the present, some countries either praise or criticize “Neo-Confucianism.” Due to association with the present practical problems of different natures, and the divergences of understandings, the situation has become even more complicated, so people will have to study it carefully from different angles. However, modern experts and scholars agree unanimously that in spite of its dross and negative elements, Confucianism, as a cultural heritage, will play a positive role in economic development and modernization in modern society so long as people act in the spirit of “discarding the false and retaining the true, destroying the old and establishing the new.”

(by Shi Jun)

Taoism and Traditional Chinese Culture



Zhang Daoling, or Celestial Master Zhang.

Taoism is an indigenous Chinese religion. It formally appeared at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), taking Lao Zi as its founder and venerated deity, and *Dao De Jing*, or *Tao Te Ching* (*Classic of the Way and Virtue*) as its leading canon. Later, it listed the gradually developed person-ages of the Taoist philosophical school as its *Zhen Ren* (True Man, who has attained enlightenment or immortality through practicing Taoism),

and included the Taoist works in the *Dao De Jing*. As a result, the scope of Taoism was expanded, covering both the immortality alchemy and the teachings of charm, and the Taoist philosophical school was lumped together with the Taoist religious faith. Today, besides the general term “Taoist school,” there are also such appellations as the “immortals’ school” and the “Lao Zi-Zhuang Zi studies.” Taoist followers also call Taoism the “immortals’ doctrine,” “alchemists’ doctrine” or the “Taoist school.” When summarizing the major constituents of the history of Chinese thought, historians often mention “Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism” at the same time. Taoism in this connection refers to both the Taoist school and Taoist faith.

People often say that “Taoism attaches great importance to life, while