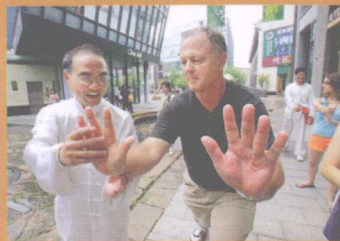


CHINA IN PEACEFUL DEVELOPMENT



Value of Traditional Culture for the Present Era

■ By Zhang Xiping



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

传统文化的当代价值: 英文/张西平著; 温晋根译.

—北京: 外文出版社, 2009

(和平发展的中国丛书)

ISBN 978-7-119-06112-2

I. 传... II. ①张... ②温... III. 传统文化—研究—中国—英文
IV. G12

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2009) 第200262号

策 划	崔黎丽
作 者	张西平
责任编辑	曹晓娟
英文翻译	温晋根
英文审定	Paul White 韩清月
内文及封面设计	天下智慧文化传播公司
执行设计	姚 波
制 作	北京维诺传媒文化有限公司
印刷监制	冯 浩

传统文化的当代价值

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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

北京外文印刷厂印刷

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

2009年(大32开)第1版

2009年第1版 第1次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-06112-2

17-E-6858P



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I

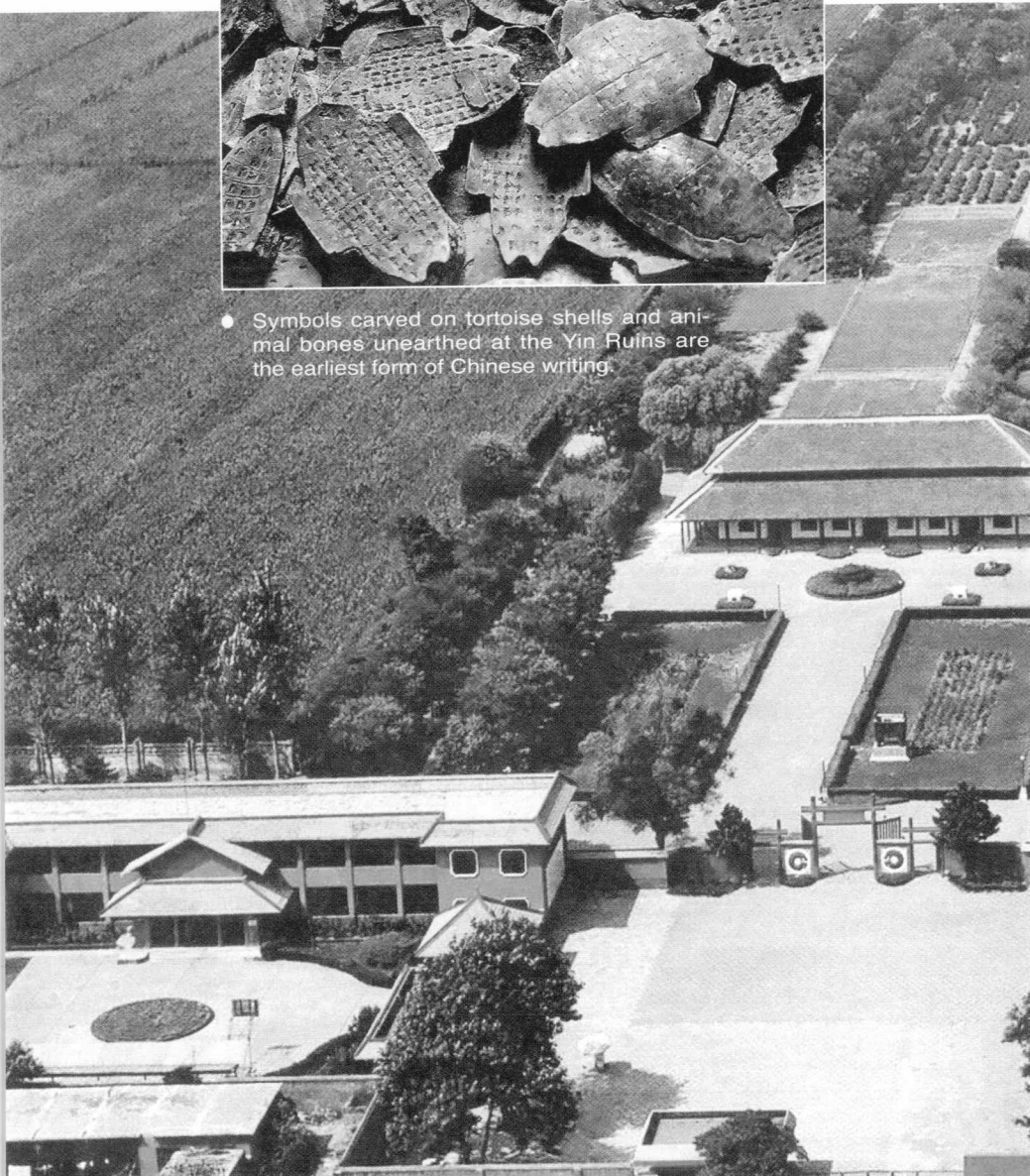
Chinese Culture in the Context of World Cultures

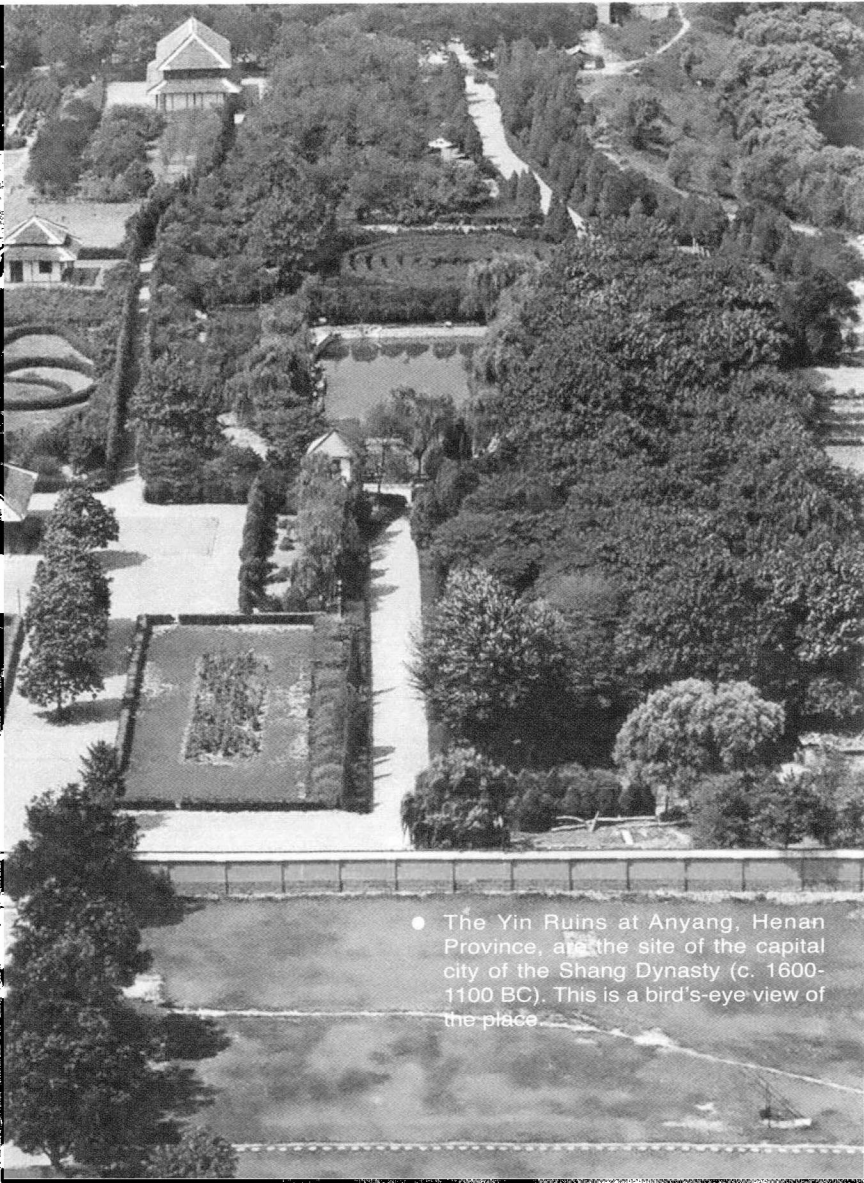
Miracle in the Cultural History of the World

China is well known as one of the four nations with the earliest civilizations in the world. Unlike those of Egypt, Babylon and India, Chinese civilization, born on the East Asian side of the Euro-Asian continent, had long been separated from other regions by high mountains in the west, deserts in the



- Symbols carved on tortoise shells and animal bones unearthed at the Yin Ruins are the earliest form of Chinese writing.





- The Yin Ruins at Anyang, Henan Province, are the site of the capital city of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1100 BC). This is a bird's-eye view of the place.

north and oceans in the east. This relative geographic independence exerted an important influence on Chinese culture in two ways:

First, compared with other cultures, Chinese culture came into being basically independent of other cultural influences. It established its own writing system, ways of thought and social structure. Only after that did it begin to contact other cultures. Though foreign cultures had exerted significant influences on it, those influences came after its system and structure had already been largely shaped.

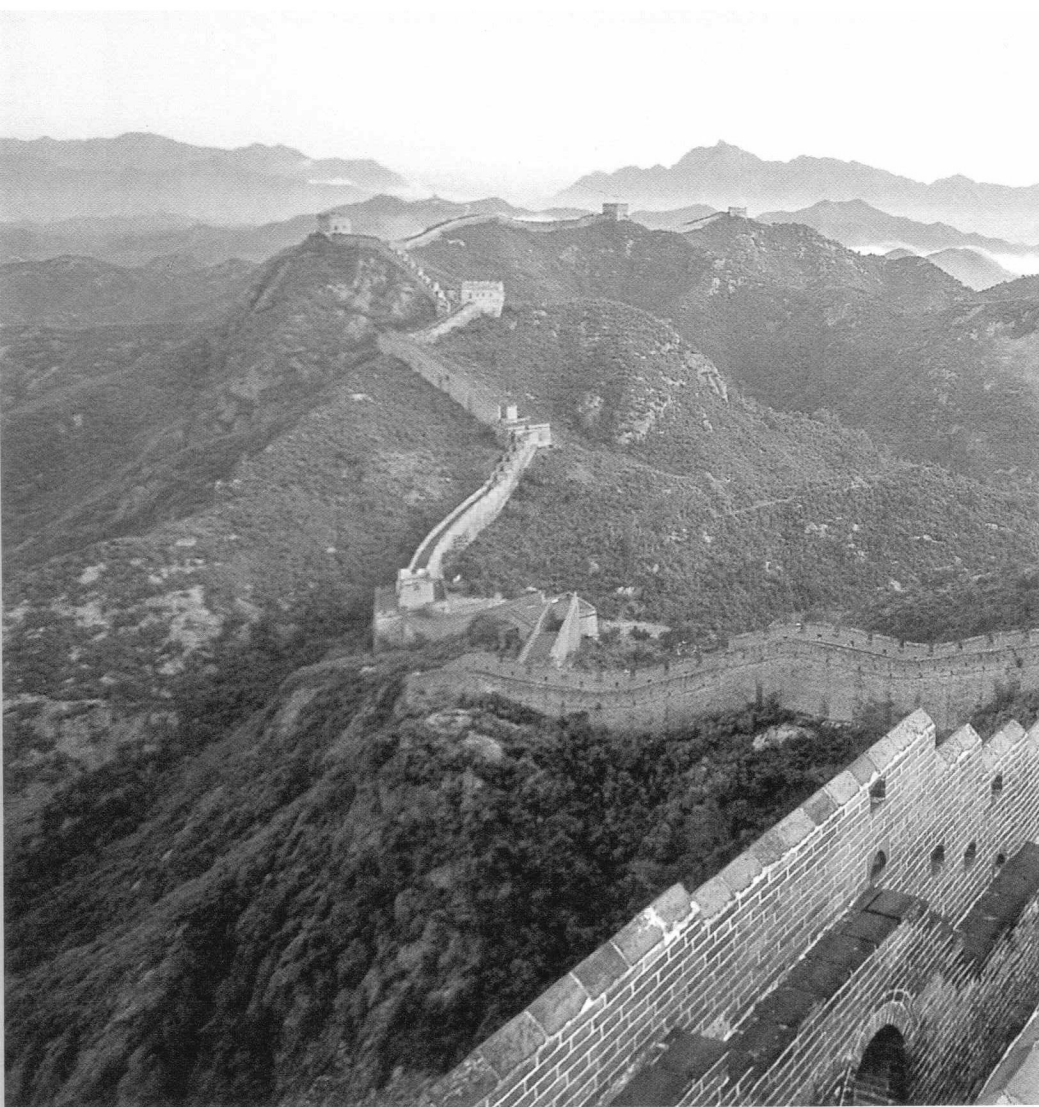
Second, thanks to China's unique geography, the birth and progress of its culture were not interrupted or altered under the impact of foreign nations. The land on either side of the Great Wall had always been home to all the Chinese people. The process of the merging of the Han ethnic group with the nomadic peoples to the north of the Great Wall was the history of the Chinese nation. Far from interrupting the growth of Chinese culture, ethnic conflicts became part of the historical process of ethnic fusion and national development. Many other cultures – in Europe, Asia and other regions in the world – degenerated under the impact of foreign invasions. Only Chinese civilization has continued uninterrupted for thou-

sands of years. This is a unique phenomenon in the history of world civilizations.

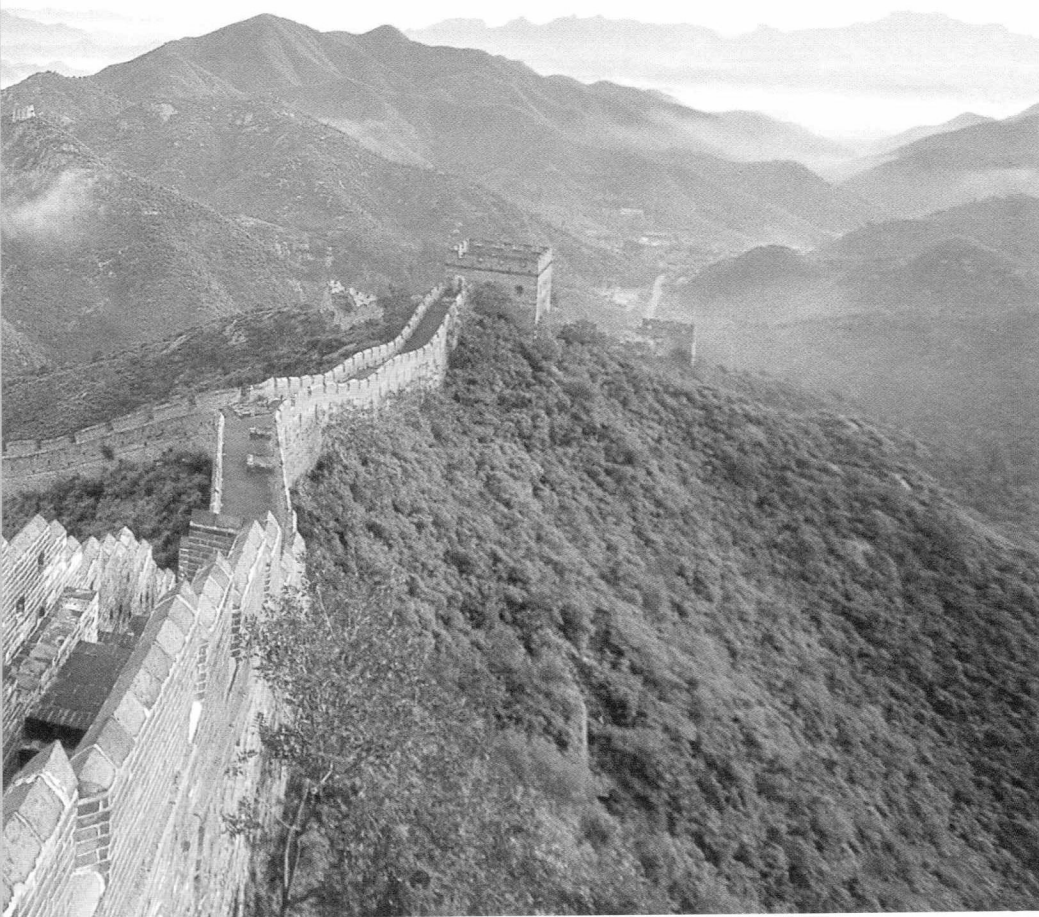
Chinese civilization has not only retained its independent and coherent way of development, but has exerted much influence on neighboring cultures with its advanced attainments. For over 2,000 years, from the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) China was the leading nation in Asia. Its neighbors learned profusely from Chinese culture, and, on this basis, built cultural systems conforming to their national characteristics. Prior to the 19th century, Chinese culture radiated over Japan, Korea and Vietnam, in coexistence with the world's other four cultural circles – Christian, Eastern Orthodox, Islam and Hindu.

German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel (1770-1831) held that all history proceeds to Christ and derives from Christ. The birth of the son of God is the axis of history. This theory of an “axis” of history that takes the Christian historical outlook as the focus of human history is clearly based on the importance of Christianity in Europe and is a product of Eurocentrism, and so it cannot explain the whole history of mankind.

Modern German philosopher Karl Jaspers



- The Great Wall, built to ward off nomad invaders, has become synonymous with ancient Chinese civilization.





● Confucius, founder of Confucian ideology

(1883-1969) put forward a more reasonable explanation of human history. He divided the history of human cultures into four stages. 1. The Promethean age, i.e., the period when languages came into being, and tools and fire were used; 2. From 5,000 BC to 3,000 BC, when the four earliest civilizations emerged; 3. From 800 BC to 200 BC, when human civilizations arose in China, India, Palestine and Greece; and 4. From 200 BC to the present day. From the 17th century on, the world has been in a period of scientific and technological development. Jaspers called the third stage the “Axial Age” to correct Hegel’s Christian bias.

Jaspers’ “Axial Age” is a key point in the advancement of human civilization. Getting rid of the involvement of any specific belief, it provides a measurement acceptable to Western people, Asian people and the whole human race:

It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 BC, in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 BC. It is there that we meet with the most deep-cut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the “Axial Period” ... The most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period. Confucius and Lao Zi were living in

China, all the directions of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mo Di, Zhuang Zi, Lie Zi, and a host of others; India produced the Upanishads and Buddha, and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to scepticism, materialism, sophism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught the challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah, to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer, of the philosophers Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato, the tragedians and Archimedes. Everything that is merely intimated by these names developed during these few centuries almost simultaneously in China, India and the Occident without any awareness of each other.

What is new about this age all over the world is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences unconditionality in the depth of selfhood and in the clarity of transcendence. ... In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created. (Was ist Philosophie?, Karl Jaspers,

Piper, München and Zürich, 1997, pp. 91-92.)

Jaspers' discourse is in fact a summary of the entire structure of the development of world culture. The "Axial Age" is a starting point of human civilization and a base on which it has grown. As the Chinese literary giant Wen Yiduo (1899-1946) said, "Like the other three nations, the Chinese nation heralded the line along which its culture would develop over thousands of years ever since it uttered its earliest cry... Our culture was basically shaped from its very beginning."

Chinese culture is the only surviving culture born in remote antiquity. As historian John Desmond Bernal points out that China has been a major center of human civilization and science for centuries.

Essential Characteristics of Chinese Culture

1. Belief in unification of state and nation.

When talking about the characteristics of Chinese culture, the historian Qian Mu (1895-1990) points out that the merging of "state" into "nation" is the starting point for understanding Chinese cul-

ture. "When we talk about the history of Chinese culture," he said, "we must pay attention to two matters. The first is that Chinese culture was the exclusive creation of the Chinese nation. In other words, it was created by the state. In Chinese history, 'nation' and 'state' have for long been one. The second phenomenon is an inference from the first point; just because Chinese culture is an exclusive creation of a nation or state, the progress of the culture over 4,000 to 5,000 years has come down in a continuous line, never interrupted. We see more of its expansion than its transformation."

After a long time of ethnic fusion, the Chinese nation, like a great torrential river with the Huaxia (Cathay) tribes in the Central Plains as the main stream, has been assimilating and merging elements of other groups, and has been expanding and renovating itself into a great community. Ethnic cultures like those of the Xiongnu (Huns), Xianbei, Jie, Di, Qidan (Khitan), Liao and Jin (Jurchen) have all become parts of the blood in the veins of Chinese culture. Without the merging of those elements, Chinese culture would not be so profound and all-encompassing. In the fusion of diverse cultural elements, each ethnicity retains characteristics of its own culture