

Introduction to Chinese Culture

Chung Mou Si Yun Cheng Si



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Foreword

It is not uncommon today for visitors to China to be awestruck by the hyper-modern shape of the nation's major cities. The steel and glass skyscrapers reflect both the buzz of life on the streets below and the cranes on the skyline constructing the next architectural wonder alongside. The impact of the country's double digit growth rates is evident everywhere in China's major urban centres.

Confronted with such dramatic twenty-first century hyper-modernity it is easy to forget the narratives that formed China's lengthy history and underpin her current success. While iconic structures such as The Great Wall and the Forbidden City stand as reminders of the power of dynasties past, the cultural logic that made such wonders of cultural heritage meaningful is not so evident. China's awe-inspiring past is connected directly to its equally awe-inspiring present by a common set of core stories that everyone raised in China cannot help but know. *Introduction to Chinese Culture* provides readers with precisely these core narratives that have sustained Chinese culture for centuries.

Despite all the shifts in economic, military, political and developmental spheres, there is a popularly embraced common knowledge about Chinese culture that the Chinese people feel is

fundamentally theirs at the core. Professor CM Si and his team have gathered the most important of these together to create an enlightening and accessible volume. It introduces readers to the key aspects of Chinese culture and brings the stories behind the key locations and personages together.

They have compiled this illustrated volume of 56 succinct essays grouped within 8 chapters, to cover the core myths, festivals, historical sights, food and sports, arts and crafts, language and literature, philosophy and international connections. These iconic stories, localities and cultural practices stretch back thousands of years and have emerged from amidst myriad other possible competitors as the foundational cultural grammar of twenty-first century China. Professor Si has drawn on his extensive experience in teaching and deep knowledge of Chinese culture to select the core components from amidst China's vast cultural heritage.

These essays not only tell readers about 'traditions' but they also tell us how these traditions have changed over time and transformed into contemporary practices and beliefs. We learn about how festivals evolve over time to cope with new social forces while still maintaining their integrity as time-honored 'traditions'. Professor Si explains how early Chinese scientific concepts that explained the nature of the world interacted with other types of science from around the world. We learn about the way that long-standing Chinese concepts of 'the calculation of time' in the annual cycle altered in relation to contact with Europe — but also how the Chinese calendar remains as a core marker for foundational cultural events such as Spring Festival, Yuanxiao and Qingming.

Taken as a whole, the chapters create a lively picture of how

complex interpersonal relations experienced by ordinary people throughout the centuries — such as love and romance; birth and death; friendship and loyalty — have been negotiated through storytelling. We also learn about the complex connection between individuals and their leaders through the chapters on the imperial dynasties through to the contemporary government with its 56 national minorities.

In sum, this book will be invaluable to all students of Chinese culture but also to the educated observer of world cultures and travelers to China. In understanding the foundational principles underlying Chinese culture, readers will be able to make far better sense of the uniqueness of the twenty-first century China that they see before them. Moreover, readers will recognize the features that Professor Si has narrated in the dynamics of the myriad Chinese communities in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe.

Congratulations to Professor Si and to Peking University Press for their foresight in producing such an accessible and lively introduction to the core of Chinese culture. China's importance to the world is more evident today than it has been for decades and this book will go a long way to ensuring enhanced knowledge of the culture that underpins the twenty-first century superpower.

Professor Louise Edwards (FAHA, FASSA)

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Chapter 1

Myths and Legends



1

How the World Was Created



Filling the Hole in the Sky

Where do our ancestors come from? How was nature formed? These questions were raised centuries ago. Different religions and all sorts of myths from various cultures attempted to provide explanations and answers to these questions, so as to satisfy human curiosity.

In the West, many people believe that God created the world, as well as every creature and things. However in China, people believe that it was a man called Pangu who created the world, and then transformed himself into different creatures and things. Nowadays temples can be found in numerous cities in China where he is worshipped.


Now you may ask, what

was the story? A long time ago, the Chinese believed that the universe was simply a mixture of gas, with absolutely nothing in it. There was a person whose name was Pangu. He was sad to see the world in such a state and felt that he should do something about it. He grabbed a hammer in one hand and an axe in the other, and then by using some mysterious power, he managed to separate the gas, forming the sky and the land.

Unfortunately, Pangu overworked himself and became really weak. Suddenly, something amazing happened. His breath became wind and clouds, his voice became thunder; his left eye transformed into the sun while his right eye transformed into the moon; his limbs became huge mountains, his blood became rivers, his blood vessels became land patterns, his muscles became fields and land; his hair turned into stars, his body hair turned into grass and trees, his teeth and bones turned into various minerals, his bone marrow turned into precious stones and gems, his sweat turned into rain and dew, and the little worms all over his body turned into millions of people.

Westerners believe that God created human and Gods are superior to us. However this is not the case for the Chinese. The Chinese think that they all have Pangu's power in their bodies. They regard themselves as the brightest among all living creatures, who have the power to overcome challenges and unfortunate circumstances. It is this belief in their power that has driven them forward for so many years. Many apparatus were invented to observe, calculate and read climate changes from nature, so as to avoid catastrophes.

You might be thinking that after the world was created, everything would settle down and start growing. Not so. It happened that one day, the God of Water and the God of Fire had a huge fight ending in a victory for the God of Fire. The God of


A decorative border at the top of the page featuring a repeating geometric pattern of squares and rectangles in shades of blue, green, and yellow.

Water, being the loser, was extremely frustrated and ashamed of himself. He was so angry that he bumped against the Buzhou Mountain which served to support the sky and separate it from the land. The result of this impetuous act was that, half the sky crumbled, opening up an enormous gaping hole. Through this hole, water from the river up in the sky ran down and flooded the land below. The whole world was in a complete mess.

The creator-goddess, Nüwa, felt upset at the sight of such a disaster, and she decided to fix it. From the river, she collected 36,501 multi-coloured stones, burning them with a fierce fire for seven whole days, turning them into lava. Then she took a big spoon, and began splashing spoonfuls of lava against the hole in the sky. Soon, the lava condensed and the hole was filled. After taking care of the sky, Nüwa then turned her attention to the submerged land. She burned huge amounts of weeds into ashes, which she used to fill up the flooded areas, and eventually the land reappeared. Everything went back to normal. From then on, the colours in the sky were explained by Nüwa's use of those multi-coloured stones.

To prevent such disasters from happening again, Nüwa started to look for suitable materials to use as pillars to hold up the sky. A sea turtle came to her and offered to help. She thought that was perfect, so she agreed to let the four legs of the turtle become the pillars of the sky. However, the world had become slightly different after the fight. The leg of the turtle that was holding up the north-western side of the sky was shorter than the others, which is why the sun, the moon and the stars all travel towards that direction. On the other hand, when the land crumbled, the south-eastern side crumbled most significantly. As a result, rivers in China all flow to the south-east.

You may recall that Nüwa collected 36,501 pieces of multi-coloured stones. After she finished her repair work, she realised that



a piece of stone was left unused. She decided to keep the stone for herself, but she accidentally dropped the stone as she travelled back to heaven. The final destination of this stone has become a mystery for people to ponder. Some say, it became the Yellow Mountain (also known as Huang Shan). Some say, it became the Pearl of the Orient — Hong Kong.

2 | The Dog from the Sky

With all our current advanced technology, various scientific discoveries have been made and many mysterious occurrences can now be explained using scientific evidence. Nowadays, we all know how the solar and lunar eclipses occur. However, back in the old days, there was no way people could understand this. When a total or a near-total solar eclipse happens, the sky darkens in the daytime. Centuries ago, people were frightened by this darkening of the sky. In order to ease people's worries and ease their fears, the Chinese came up with a story that explained the occurrence of eclipses.

The ancient Chinese believed that a lunar eclipse was the result of a dog from the sky eating the moon. But why would the dog eat the moon? There was a couple from the tribe of Lisu; the husband was called Gelishi, the wife was called Dumawu, and together they raised a dog. Every night, the couple spent time together dancing and enjoying themselves under the moonlight. Gradually, Gelishi developed a huge interest in the moon, and he started to wonder what exactly the moon was. Even after observing the moon for a long time and thinking hard, he still could not get a satisfactory answer. So he decided to use bamboo as a ladder to the sky, so that he could take a closer look at the moon and find out exactly what it was.

Before starting his journey, Gelishi said to his wife, "Dumawu,

after I'm gone, please remember, water the bamboo to keep it alive and maintain its growth. If the bamboo withers and dies, I will fall from the sky." With tears in her eyes, hoping that he would stay, she begged him, "I'm about to give birth to our baby, please don't go." He comforted her, "Don't worry, I will be back very soon!"

Gelishi took the dog with him and they started climbing up the ladder. On and on they went, and there were no signs of their return. Dumawu kept watering the bamboo, until she was about to give birth to her baby. At that time, she was in extreme pain and was so weak that she could not even leave her bed. Consequently, the bamboo withered. At this very moment, Gelishi and the dog were just about to reach the moon, so the dog made a final leap and landed on the moon, while he stretched out his arms to grab onto the moon. All of a sudden, there was a very loud noise, the ladder had snapped into pieces, and he fell from the sky.

Since the ladder was gone, the dog could never return to earth. There was no food on the moon, so when the dog was hungry, it



A Lunar Eclipse