

Hang Jian
Guo Qiuhui

CHINESE ARTS & CRAFTS

History, Techniques and Legends

Translated by Zhu Youruo & Song Peiming



CHINA
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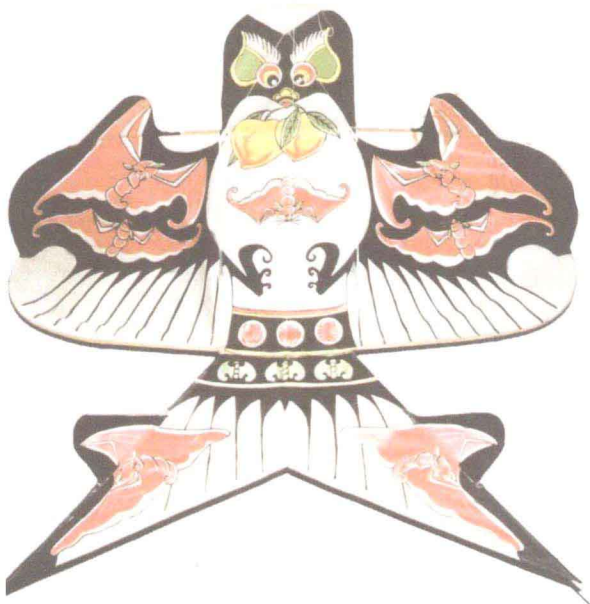
⦿ Cultural China Series

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Author: Hang Jian & Guo Qiuhui

Translator: Zhu Youruo & Song Peiming

Pictures Provided: Hang Jian, Guo Qiuhui & Sheng Yuanfu

Executive Editor: Gao Lei & Wu Yamin

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Preface

The traditional arts and crafts of China have won unique good reputations in the history of the material culture of the various nationalities in the world. Since Zhang Qian (?-c.114 B.C.) of the Han Dynasty served as an envoy abroad to the Western Regions (a Han Dynasty term for the area west of Yumenguan, including what is now Xinjiang and parts of Central Asia) and the gradual formation of the Silk Route, the traditional arts and crafts of China have been introduced in an unfailing way to the Middle East first via the Central Asia and the Western Asia and then to Europe and the five continents and four oceans. At the time when other nationalities intruded or disorders caused by continuous military operations, Chinese craftsmen in the successive dynasties of past ages could often survive by virtue of one single skill and became emissaries for diffusing the culture of different nationalities. In the traditional Chinese philosophy, Chinese



Happy Farmers, a New Year picture of Yangliuqing, depicting the happy rural life in the traditional society of China.

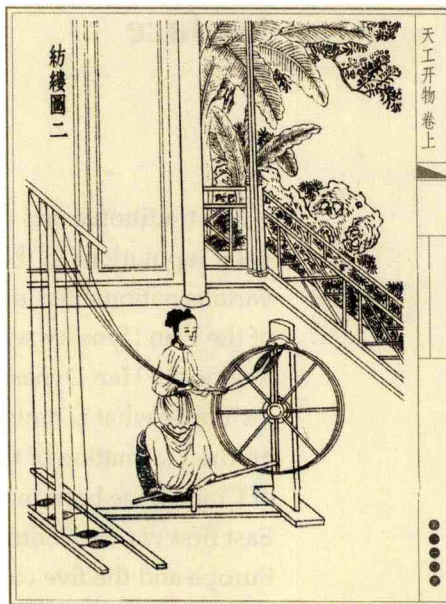


ancient thinkers started, as early as in the first century, to use handicraft skills to compare to and interpret various kinds of considerations in the ways of running a state or looking at life.

All this is related to the unique geographic location of China and its farming culture that was formed continuously for a very long time.

The mainland of China possesses a long coastline but its source of civilization, the Central Plains (comprising the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River), goes deep into the inland. The three earliest systems of state power in China, the Xia Dynasty, the Shang Dynasty and the Western Zhou Dynasty, all emerged

in the inland. For the nationalities that grew up on plains and in mountain areas, cultivation and irrigation of land were the most important ways of existence. As a result, the astronomical calendar, the fabrication of farming tools, and the ethical concept of how to get along well with others all developed on such a premise. It was this kind of life and the style of art in the agricultural farming society that decided the special features of the traditional arts and crafts of China. Its workmanship surrounded the practice of tilling the farm by men and spinning and weaving by women as well as the way of starting to work at sunrise and to rest at sunset. The initial state of all articles and utensils was closely related to the purpose of different uses. They should be convenient and simple for use, having the wisdom of fitting in with agricultural civilization. Even at its top-level, i.e. the arts and crafts for court use and those for scholars, the



Picture of spinning and weaving in *Tiangong Kaiwu* (Exploitation of the Works of Nature).



vestiges of practical use and tradition of simplicity were still maintained. Its decorative style was natural. Within the vision of natural economy, hills and waters, animals and plants were the main patterns and ornaments. Absurd or ferocious decorations were scarcely seen. Instead they were full of optimistic spirit and progress making.

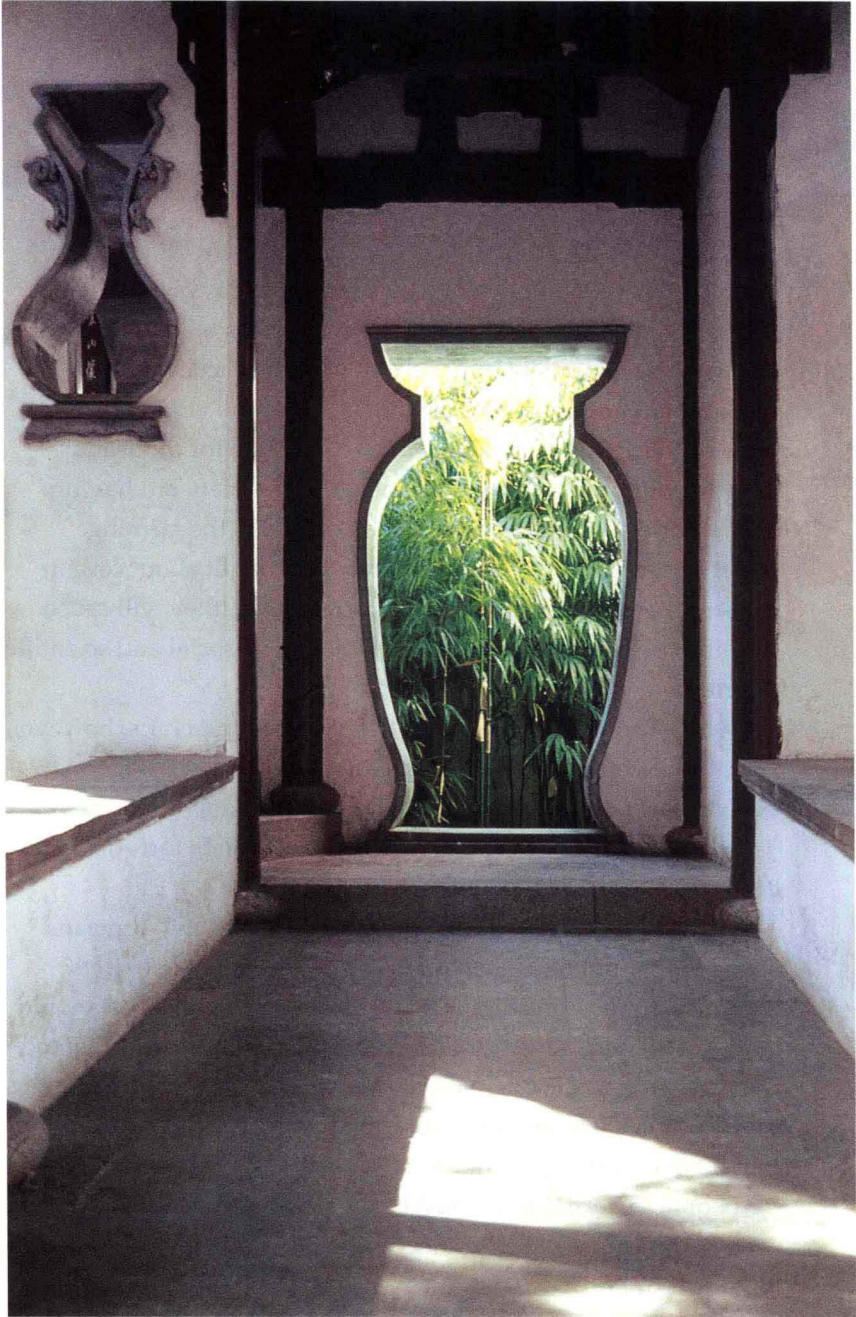
The Chinese traditional ethics has an argument "Riding a hobby saps one's will to make progress," which was used to oppose "diabolic tricks and wicked craft" so as to hold in check excessive development of skills that had no practical value. The influence of this idea has made the arts and crafts of China develop along the orientation of functionalism for thousands of years without having made waste to the society but having made workmanship develop to the extreme in the farming society instead. Nevertheless, it has also brought about certain conservation as when skills reach certain level, they will cause certain check and hesitation to the advance of social and scientific progress.

On the whole, the tradition of Chinese arts and crafts, however, is worth praising. It has left us abundant cultural heritage, including a lot of man-made articles and wisdom of life.

The wisdom implied in the traditional arts and crafts of China can be summed up in the following six aspects:

The first aspect is "to value life and to use objects." It means emphasis should be laid on man's life, all man-made objects should be under control and for all skills the first priority should be given to human beings. This is what we call "people-oriented" today. This aspect is of great importance to the development of the traditional arts and crafts of China. Maybe someone will say that there is nothing strange for this idea as arts and crafts are for people's use and man must be regarded as the main body. Yet such a simple issue like this once had a history with many twists and turns in Europe. After the Industrial Revolution in Britain, as





A simple and unsophisticated garden in the south of the Yangtze River.



the batch production with machines lowered the production cost and brought about the cheapest products, many people spoke highly of machine production and cheered for the achievements of the Industrial Revolution. However, before long when people found the products turned out by machines were all exactly the same, poorly and hastily manufactured, they began to be discontented with machine-made products, thinking that they denied man's individuality and that it was a compulsory way of life for all people to use the same articles roughly made. On the other hand, to the producers of the batch production in the entire large industrial society, the division of labor along the assembly line was very elaborate and human beings became only a part of the machines. During the whole process of work, there was not any slightest delight worth mentioning. It was not like the traditional manual labor which could give you a feeling of closeness to the natural materials, touching them with your fingers and thinking of them while you were making. When working in the rhythm of agricultural economy, people had a kind of natural delight to work in the country. That was why William Morris (1834–1896), a utopian socialist and idealist in design, appeared in Europe in the 19th century.

At the very beginning, the traditional Chinese arts and crafts gave full considerations to the factor of human beings in making articles for use. Mechanical production in China also already reached a fairly high level in the early stage, particularly at the rudimental stage of capitalism at the end of the Ming Dynasty. At the then Shengze Town of Songjiang (under the jurisdiction of Wujiang of Jiangsu Province today), cotton-weaving industry was already rather developed. Quite a few households had five to ten hand looms and even employed workers to operate them. There was also a clear division of labor between production processes. Nonetheless, this kind of production mode close to capitalist large industry did not develop from quantitative to qualitative



change. The seeds of capitalism at the end of the Ming Dynasty, from beginning to end, did not greatly raise the volume of production and make maximum surplus value so that it could be input for extended reproduction and cause revolutionary changes in textile industry just like the Industrial Revolution in Britain through the reform of power in textile industry. Those cotton-weaving proprietors interrelating in innumerable ways with agriculture in the Ming Dynasty input the money they earned from cotton-weaving industry either into agricultural production again or into family construction such as to build houses, to buy land, to take concubine and bear children. Of course, it contains on the one hand the backward side of agricultural economy but on the other hand it also reflects that the feudal society of China laid emphasis on people's life instead of developing mechanical production to extremes. This is closely related to the ancient idea of China to value life, to make man-made things under control, and to give the first importance to human beings in arts and crafts.

The second aspect is "to attain practical use and to benefit man." It lays emphasis on utility and people's livelihood. During the Qianlong Reign (1736–1795) of the Qing Dynasty when Western missionaries or diplomatic envoys of various countries came to China, most of the presents they presented to the emperor were playthings, such as chime clocks with robots. It shows that not all the things manufactured in the West at that time were not for practical use or people's livelihood. On the contrary, the objects



Changxin Palace Lamp of Western Han Dynasty, 48 cm high, stored in Cultural Relics Research Institute of Hebei Province.



manufactured in ancient China always laid stress on functional uses. Guan Zhong (725–645 B.C.), a thinker in the Spring and Autumn Period, said something to the effect that wise craftsmen in the ancient time always followed the rule of not wasting their wisdom to make playthings of no use to people. Mo-tzu (c. 468–376 B.C.), a thinker in the Warring States Period, also raised a viewpoint of “doing what is beneficial to people and not doing what is not beneficial to people.” Today their views seem very simple but at their time were of great significance. So we can see the Chinese saying of “diabolic tricks and wicked craft” did not become the main trend in the feudal society of China lasting for a few thousand years, from beginning to end. The main trend of the traditional Chinese handicrafts was only the production of those things laying emphasis on practical use, closely related to national economy and people’s livelihood, and maintaining humane concerns.

The third aspect is “to give full play to the actual shape of raw materials by careful examination.” It stresses the relationship between arts and crafts on the one hand and skills and materials on the other. There were many outstanding examples in this aspect. For instance, when making furniture, skillful carpenters knew how to make use of the characteristics and grain direction of timber to deal with different structures; when making ink stones, good artisans knew how to make use of the natural material quality of a particular piece of stone to shape beautifully into an ink stone; and when carving jade articles, excellent jade artisans knew how to give full play to the “coincidental natural colors” on a piece of jade and carved something with practical purpose according to its special features. These are only small examples of how handicraft articles were made in accordance with their respective uniqueness. From the macroscopic viewpoint, traditional arts and crafts of China paid great attention to materials and technical conditions and designed



articles in line with functional requirements. When talking about how to design a landscape in his *Xian Qing Ou Ji* (Occasional Verbal Messages to Repose My Digressive Feelings), Li Yu (1610–1680, a famous man of letters at the turn of the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty) said the essential thing of landscaping was its appropriate entirety. This is a point of great importance. Under the major background of farming society, the Chinese never made any object deviating from the life of farming society and the handicraft articles made at different period of time were basically all harmonious with the way of life. The gilded bronze lamp of Changxin Palace of the Western Han Dynasty is one of the outstanding examples of Chinese traditional handicrafts. It is really an ingenious design to filter the smoke dust by making use of sealed water, to discharge the smoke with flue and to adjust the light by a rotating structure.

The fourth aspect is “to follow nature in an ingenious way.” It emphasizes that inspiration should be drawn from nature so as to maintain the harmony between man and nature. In the past people always thought the term “to follow nature” was only an expression commonly used in painting. Actually, it has also run through the traditional arts and crafts of China, following nature and drawing inspiration from nature so that harmony between man-made articles and nature could be maintained. In ancient China, its expression was particularly obvious such as the various bionic lamps and lanterns in the Han Dynasty, the saw invented by master artisan Lu Ban (c. 507–c. 444 B.C.) and the competition of air vehicles (flying kites) between Lu Ban and Mo-tzu. The inspiration of all this was drawn from nature. In addition, the wooden ox and gliding horse invented by Zhuge Liang (181–234) mentioned in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* for transporting army provisions along the narrow passages in Sichuan Province were also designed with the combination of machinery and bionic shapes. There were many





Folk pillow showing a fish with tiger head.

such similar examples in ancient times. Even some instruments for astronomical observation, such as the seismograph invented by Zhang Heng (78–139), a Chinese scientist in the Eastern Han Dynasty, were also made in accordance with some shapes related to nature. *Xiu Shi Lu* (Lacquer in Ancient China), a monograph about lacquer handicraft written in the Ming Dynasty, put forward explicitly the idea of “following nature in an ingenious way.” During the Qianlong Reign many luxury goods were made of porcelain in animal shapes. There were even more examples in folklore utensils such as fish-shaped plates, incense bags, cake molds, gate locks, etc. The shapes of animals not only have functional significance but also contain the unique symbols of Chinese folk culture.

The fifth aspect is “to convey truth with skills.” It implies that skills also contain ideological factors and attention should be paid to both ideas and articles so that the functional operation and technical labor that seem inferior can be combined with doctrines and theories that seem superior. As early as in the pre-Qin Dynasty, this concept was formed, of which the influence of the Taoist School thought was the greatest. The Confucian School had similar ideas, such as “to convey truth with writings.”



Though the relationship between theory and practice was often not properly dealt with in the Chinese history and the trend of looking down upon practice and stressing on theory was widely spread, theory has never been more important than practice in the daily life of ordinary people.

The sixth aspect is “to balance outward grace and solid worth,” which means the unification of content and form in nature as well as the unification of function and decoration in handicraft articles. Many examples can be found in the traditional arts and crafts of China. Viewed from the general development of man’s culture, decorative art is an aspect of great importance. However, the emphasis of the unification of content and form on the one hand and the unification of function and decoration on the other can avoid the trend of dropping into formalism or paying attention to function exclusively. This is the outcome of the Confucian influence of “balancing outward grace and solid worth.” It requests people to maintain forever the orientation of balancing outward grace and solid worth in the respects of way of life, code of conducts and the relationship between man-made articles and man.

What is mentioned above is the wisdom of the traditional arts and crafts basically summed up from the mainstream thoughts of imperial nobles or scholars. However, the wisdom of the handicrafts of ordinary people is more excellent and richer. It has its own independent system often contained in man-made articles, pithy formulas (often in rhyme), legends and stories. Viewed from the process of the ancient history of China, the development of traditional arts and crafts is basically normal and healthy. Though some over-elaborated tastes and likings did occur during some periods in the history, the traditional arts and crafts of China, from the viewpoint of the whole history, were all in conformity with the development of the productivity at that time and expressed temperance and real aesthetic quality and style.



History and Background of the Traditional Arts and Crafts of China



Arts and Crafts during the Primitive Society

In the early stage of human society, stone artifacts were the main implements of production. Through the fabrication of stone artifacts man had a better understanding of the effect and significance of hands and thus handicrafts gradually developed. As early as 1,700,000 years ago, at the age of the Yuanmou Man in Yunnan Province, China, the ancients of China began to make rough stone artifacts as implements or weapons for



Jade dragon of the Hongshan Culture, collected in Wengniute Prefecture Museum of Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region.

