

## CHINESE CULTURAL HISTORY

**Introduction** China's geographic position far from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indus River civilizations allowed for its culture to evolve largely independent of most others in the ancient world. Many of its earliest art forms, religions, language(s) and other cultural markers were not found elsewhere. In later periods (the classical and post-classical epochs), the cross-pollination of culture and knowledge occurred with some regularity as China discovered other peoples and Chinese culture was, in turn, discovered by others. Buddhism, gunpowder, Chinese characters, and the magnetic compass are all examples of the free flow of ideas into and out of China. Still, Chinese culture is unique for its continuity and the scope of its influence. In particular, Confucianism was and remains a powerful religious and philosophical force in East Asia and beyond. Chinese characters spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and led to the development of the orthography of all these languages. Chinese notions on aesthetics, lithography and beauty have long been the standard for one quarter of the world's population. In short, Chinese culture is among the richest and most transcendent ever to be produced.

### PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

**Early Different Cultures.** The geographic area of modern China is vast and allowed for the creation of a number of different identifiable cultures in the neolithic period. Of the dozen or so known early cultures, three stand apart. First, the culture of the Wei River Valley (where it meets the Yellow River at the great bend) is perhaps the most well-known among scholars. Several archaeological sites have been explored in modern Shaanxi, Henan and Shanxi provinces. This culture is called Yangshao, so named because it is the contemporary village closest to the first digs. The Yangshao culture is considered to be extremely important because the earliest known monarchy, the Xia Dynasty, which spanned the late neolithic and early Bronze ages, is known to have been located in this area. The Xia Dynasty (2100 BCE-1600 BCE), was thought for many years by scholars to be more myth than verifiable kingdom. In the past few decades, however, it has become clear that this, one of the cradles of Chinese civilization, also birthed the first historical state. A second important early culture spans the Yangtze delta region, extends from the coast inland for at least 150 miles, north as far as Jiangsu province and south as far Zhejiang province. It is believed that there was a great deal of cross-pollination of technology, agriculture and culture between these two early groups, although the way of life in an area with abundant rainfall, moderate climate, and extremely fertile land was quite different than life on the semi-arid northern Chinese plain. During the Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE-1046 BCE), these two unique cultures expanded, intermingled and essentially created northern Chinese culture. The third culture is much further south and is understood to be the cradle of the still distinctive southern Chinese culture. Archaeological sites showing markers for this culture have been found in the coastal provinces of Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi and the island of Taiwan. Vietnam also lays claim to this, the Dapenkeng culture, but the Chinese are not enthusiastic about acknowledging the possible connection.

**Early Religion.** Given that each clan or group existed as linked but fairly independent units, religion for most of neolithic era China varied significantly. Customs and rituals were different from place to place and throughout time. Shamans likely led animistic rituals and acted as spiritual leaders. However, there is no evidence of an organized religion as we understand it in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, the early Chinese people were very spiritual and sought meaning in life through the supernatural. Most of what is known about late neolithic culture has been gleaned piecemeal through the excavation of burial sites and tombs. A few known tombs from the late neolithic were richly adorned with jade and other high-value objects, indicating the deceased was of high status in society. In these high status tombs, the remains of humans sacrificed along with the decedent have sometimes also been found. Most of the tombs discovered, however, are much more modest. Interred alongside human remains were ceramic jars, the number of which increased as the late neolithic period progressed. Residue found in the jars indicates that millet, rice or other food stuffs sometimes followed the deceased on their journey to the afterlife. Many of the ceramic jars were decorated with motifs that depicted local deities or beliefs. In some tombs, clay figures of animals have been discovered, indicating potential veneration of animal spirits. In others, jade or clay figures representing the human form have been found. One of the characteristic elements in late neolithic Chinese funerary is ancestor worship. The connection to Confucianism and filial piety is tantalizing, but unproven.

**The Arts.** There is scant evidence of many of the art forms as we know them today. Music, story-telling, painting, drama and the like almost surely existed but have disappeared from the human record. However, jade figures and ceramics remain. It is believed that a distinctive artistic tradition emerged in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE and is associated with the mastery of jade. Jade is a hard, semi-precious stone that is strong enough to hold its shape but

soft enough to carve without chipping or flaking. It is semi-transparent. Color ranges in hue from emerald green to white to dark brown. Jade in the neolithic period was mined in the modern provinces of Anhui and Jiangsu, but can be found in many other places in China and all over the world. Artists in the neolithic period carved jade for items of jewelry such as earrings, pendants, necklaces, hair ornaments and bracelets. Figures of humans and animals have also been found. Of particular note, some carvings appear to resemble a dragon. Other ceremonial items have been uncovered such as jade axes and blades, and *cong*, a square tube (4-12 inches tall) with a circular center. The significance of *cong* is unknown. But given its ubiquity was likely associated with religion.

## **BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)**

**Culture and the Influence of Early Religion.** Our knowledge of early Bronze Age culture is largely limited to that which archaeologists have been able to reveal through excavations. In particular, our knowledge of the religion practiced in early Bronze Age China is limited to the existence of bone divination. It is believed that a holy man or shaman wrote on animal bones, heated them and interpreted them based on how they responded to heat. He or she acted as something of an oracle in this rather elaborate ritual. Other vestiges of “civil religion” from the late Bronze Age remain in the form of the Jade Emperor and the concept of heaven, earth and the underworld. The Jade Emperor ruled over the heavenly court. The ruler of earth was known as the Son of Heaven. In this way, the concept of the “Mandate of Heaven” began to emerge to describe the divine right of monarchs to rule in the Zhou period (1046 BCE-475 BCE). Part of the job of the monarch was to maintain harmony between heaven and earth. It is interesting to note that monarchs could and very often did lose the “Mandate of Heaven.” In practice, this could happen if a monarch ruled poorly, taxed the people too heavily or otherwise engaged in behavior inappropriate for the Son of Heaven. Earthly harmony was then lost.

**The Arts.** Bronze Age art forms were also in evidence in China. Craftsmen, potters and sculptors were generally well advanced for the time, particularly in bronze metallurgy. Craftsmen fired colorfully-decorated pottery. Motifs sometimes consisted of geometric patterns and/or human and animal designs. Pottery ran the gamut between richly adorned, ceremonial items to those used in everyday life. Bronze itself, being very, very expensive is not as ubiquitous as pottery in the archaeological record. It is believed that only the elites were able to possess it. Nonetheless, bronze castings reveal a very high level of sophistication and artistry. Some items that have been discovered are very large, thick and heavy. This indicates that the craftsmen were able to maintain consistent temperatures in the casting and cooling processes.

**Writing.** One of the most distinctive characteristics of Chinese society during the transition from the neolithic to the bronze age was its creation of a written language with no known connection to other cultures. Proto Chinese symbols were initially developed from pictographs. Late neolithic/early bronze age Chinese first drew pictures of objects, which over the course of time transitioned into stylized images (pictographs) and then finally ideographs emerged. For example, a picture of a tree slowly evolved into the character 木. A drawing of the sun was transformed into 日, meaning day. Unlike ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, which also developed pictographs, Chinese civilization has retained its written language based on ideographs into the contemporary era. Indeed, over the millennia, Chinese symbols spread to its neighbors including Japan, Korea and Vietnam, although the latter two have since abandoned them. Chinese writing is written right to left, top to bottom. This reflects the media on which early Chinese most often wrote the language, which was flattened strips of bamboo woven together with string or cord and then rolled up to make a scroll. The earliest examples of Chinese writing have been found on animal bones and were likely associated with shamanistic practices such as divination. The precise timing and extent of Chinese language adoption by late neolithic/early bronze age people is not known, nor is it known when regional expressions emerged. But it is theorized to have been widely dispersed in at least two of the three early dominant cultures of the early bronze age.

**Literature.** In the late Bronze Age, some of the first recorded literary works emerged in China. The most famous is the *Shijing* (Book of Poetry). This work is a compilation of 311 poems gathered between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. It is believed that some were handed down as ritual songs from the Shang period and other poems are attributed to the Duke of Zhou, who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Given the mention of the Duke of Zhou, it is easy to understand that Confucius is given credit for compiling this work, although there is no way to verify this claim. Nonetheless, this book is one of five in the Confucian canon. It is important to note that the religion espoused by Confucius did not exist in an organized form before he himself began teaching in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. However,

many of the ideals he promoted are believed to have existed in China long before he was born. Other ancient works include the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) and the *Shujing* (Book of Documents).

## **IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)**

**Cultural Integration.** Culture in Iron Age China (and particularly under the Qin) was dependent on the monarch and the state. The chronicles tell us that the First Emperor (r. 220-210 BCE) was a tyrant who sought to control society and culture at virtually every level. Still, the area ruled by the First Emperor, though slightly less than one-third of the area of contemporary China, was nevertheless a very diverse place. The most important characteristic which indicated at least partial cultural integration of Iron Age culture in China was language. The First Emperor, not content with this state of affairs, successfully standardized the writing system and created a more common language. This made possible all the other elements of common culture— religion, shared heritage and experiences, similar social habits, related cuisine and the arts.

**Writing** Over the centuries, these characters evolved and were systematized into the language we now know as “old Chinese.” Linguistic archaeologists believe that old Chinese was likely less tonal than contemporary Mandarin Chinese, but was still based on ideographs. During the Iron Age, old Chinese in its written form was widely used among the elites in the old kingdoms and was the common thread weaving together the disparate kingdoms. It made possible significant people migrations, the exchange of ideas and best practices and eventually, under the Qin, the attempt at full, cultural and social integration. In addition, calligraphy became a well-established art during the classical age and is still practiced today as one of the traditional art forms.

**Confucianism.** The most important religion to emerge in the Iron Age was Confucianism. Unlike Buddhism, it is indigenous to China. Confucianism originated with the historical figure, Master Kung (Kung Fuzi), who was born in the kingdom of Lu in approximately 551 BCE. Though Confucius lived in a highly fragmented, fluid political environment, generational memory existed of a golden age, a fabled time of stability when sage-rulers governed judiciously and with integrity. Confucius was the quintessential wandering sage, a teacher who moved between the many kingdoms of China offering his knowledge and services to whomever he encountered. Confucius taught that rulers and the ruled should act in a moral fashion and that if everyone understood their place in society and acted in accordance with his teachings, society would function as it had in the days of old. Confucianism was a very public religion in the early Iron Age. It applied the patriarchal family system and filial piety to the state. The emperor was to act as the great father and the people were to follow and revere the emperor as they would their father or ancestors. The most well-known of Confucius teachings are found in the *Analects* (sayings). The *Analects* were compiled by Confucius’ disciples in the years after his death. No works written by Confucius himself are known to have ever existed. Confucianism was widely practiced in the years before the Qin came to power, but began to flourish during the period of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) when it was adopted by the authorities as a model of moral and social rectitude. Confucianism is not a monotheistic religion, does not have a well-articulated theory on the afterlife and emphasizes the present rather than the hereafter. Today, Confucianism in China is largely a philosophy and is not widely practiced as a religion.

**Daoism.** Daoism emerged at roughly the same time as Confucianism and is often described by Chinese scholars as its near opposite. Whereas Confucianism was a public religion, Daoism was private. In fact, throughout most of history, many Chinese were willing to embrace both because they addressed different areas of life. Whereas Confucian philosophy is exoteric and provides a practical, moral code for public life, Daoist ideology emphasizes the esoteric, the mystical and provides a guide for private life. There are two major texts in Daoism which are associated with the philosophers Laozi (604-531 BCE) and Zhuangzi (370-287 BCE). Though there is no evidence that either of these two were real historical figures, they are credited with compiling the foundational texts entitled the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. These works are believed to have been compiled over a period of centuries and served to explain the *Way* (the Dao). The philosophy of Daoism does not seek to find the single, objective truth, but rather points to the Dao as one way of understanding truth. Other than the Jade Emperor, it is difficult to speak of a single, monotheistic deity in Daoism. Daoism, like all Chinese religions, has not fared well under the leadership of the government of the People’s Republic of China. Other religions, such as Buddhism, have such a small number of followers today that they have very little influence on society in the People’s Republic.

**The Arts.** The Arts in Iron Age China are best exemplified by the Terra Cotta Warriors, which constitute a very small portion of the burial complex of the First Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi (259-210 BCE). There are believed to be

several terra cotta armies, each of which was to protect the emperor in the afterlife, but only one has been partially excavated. The one area which has been partially excavated encompasses more than 7 acres and is composed of 3 vaults. In the vaults are at least 8000 statues of soldiers, hundreds of horses, chariots and other war implements all situated in battle formation. The statues are approximately life sized, made of clay, painted, with none of the warriors' faces the same. Indeed, many archeologists believe that each of the warriors, which are anatomically correct and lifelike, represent a different person. It took 700,000 laborers from all over the emperor's kingdom more than 36 years to complete the complex.

**Sculpture.** The skill and sophistication of the sculptors, artists and laborers compares favorably to their counterparts in the Roman Empire. Each of the elements of the production process required the considerable expertise of 5-6 disciplines: sculptors, painters, smithies, metallurgists, chemists and the like. Each of the Terra Cotta Warriors was produced in three different phases. First, the legs were solid clay and had to be fired and cooled slowly and carefully in order to diminish cracking. Second, the torso was hollow and composed of cord-like sections of clay laid upon each other until completed. It was also fired and cooled using a different method than the legs. Third, the heads were hollow like the torso but were sculpted individually. Perhaps more impressive than the skill shown by the artisans was the organizational skill exhibited by the logisticians who provided the resources necessary to sustain the work force and the materials needed to complete the job. And then, of course, when the First Emperor died, all of this remarkable display was covered over and forgotten for approximately 2200 years.

**A UNESCO World Heritage Site.** The confluence of a shared concept of the afterlife (religion), the skill of the sculptors, painters and artisans (culture), and the organizational skills of the imperial household (government), provided the world with one of the most important cultural sites in the history of mankind. Only one very small portion of the First Emperor's necropolis has been excavated. In due course, the Chinese government might see fit to open the actual tomb of the First Emperor. If what remains undiscovered is as impressive as what has already been discovered, this UNESCO world heritage site will be rivaled in importance only by the great pyramids of Egypt.

## **POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)**

**Cultural and the Effects of International Influence.** The culture of post-classical China reached its pinnacle under the Tang (618-907). The capital city of Tang China was Chang'an, the eastern terminus of the Silk Road. This was important for the Tang economy, but it had an equally important effect on culture. Chang'an was a vast, cosmopolitan city which brought its inhabitants into close contact with foreigners from all over the world. Exposure to art forms from all over the world created an environment where new forms of painting, sculpture, porcelain and literature found expression. From eastern Persia came paintings of Polo matches; from India came Buddhist icons and statues of various Bodhisattva, to name just a few. These influences are evident in the art of the era. Of course, reverse pollination of culture occurred as well. The Chinese introduced fine porcelain into Mediterranean world, and later, the art of paper making and movable type. Tang artists are perhaps most well-known for sculpture and were world leaders in the molding of figurines of horses. In literature, the poet Li Bai (701-762) is remembered as one of the greatest men of letters of his time. He led an interesting life. Li was a member of the court, expelled for drunkenness and for writing romantic poetry about the emperor and his eunuch; then served the leader of the An Lushan Rebellion in 755 and was charged with treason, was pardoned and exiled; married four times and ended his life as a wandering poet. His poetry is known for its pedestrian tone, rich imagery and celebration of strong drink. As was the case in most monarchies, the crown supported various forms of the arts, from calligraphy, to poetry, to metallurgy, to painting and the like. Royal support for the arts during the early Tang period was sustained and significant.

**Mahayana Buddhism.** Buddhism flourished during most of the Tang period. In the years since its founding in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE on the border between Nepal and India, Buddhism had slowly become more and more accepted in China. During the early Han period (206 BCE-220 CE), it was a religion with very few followers, in part because it had to compete with two other well-established religions: Confucianism and Daoism. Nonetheless, as it took on more and more Chinese characteristics, it slowly gained followers late in the Han period. In so doing, however, it looked less like the religion which had been an offshoot of Hinduism. We know the branch of Buddhism that flourished in Northeast Asia as Mahayana (greater vehicle) Buddhism. This is to distinguish it from Hinayana (lesser vehicle) Buddhism practiced in Southeast Asia.

**State Support for Buddhism.** Unlike Confucianism, Buddhism minimizes the importance of the temporal world and emphasizes the afterlife. It is therefore easy to understand that in the political chaos following the collapse of the Han in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE that this religion would naturally appeal to larger segments of the population. By the time of the early Tang period, it was a major religion, supported by the crown and given special tax and landholding privileges. However, state sanction of any religion is a problematic situation. A monarch can easily withdraw support, require the clergy to bless a poor decision or otherwise change the religious landscape in very short order. During the reign of the Empress Wu (624-705), the Confucians had been savage critics of her policies and, in particular, her usurpation of the throne. In an effort to undermine their authority, she moved the crown even closer to the Buddhist institutions. Upon her death, the special privileges they had enjoyed were stripped from them. Much of the land they had acquired over hundreds of years was taken and many of the temples themselves were shuttered. In the aftermath of the death of Empress Wu, the practice of Buddhism was not always proscribed by law, but it was clearly frowned upon.

**Cultural Backlash.** After Empress Wu, Tang China appears to have undergone a conservative backlash in more ways than just religion. The state removed some of the incentives that foreigners enjoyed in the capital city of Chang'an. It was also no longer legal to socialize with foreigners and many left China altogether or went to other cities. Buddhism, as an indisputably foreign religion, suffered as well. And there was a state-sanctioned renaissance of Confucianism. In addition, the rich cultural expressions and outbursts of creativity that had characterized the early Tang period were found with less frequency.

**The Mongol Interruption.** During the Song period (960-1279), Chinese culture remained vibrant and strong. Indeed, Song period art objects are considered some of the most brilliant in all of Chinese history. However, Chinese culture was shattered by the Mongol invasions, particularly in the north where early fighting was intense and sustained. Though the Mongols did not seek to completely remake or destroy Chinese culture, an action they visited upon other conquered peoples, their influence on China was undeniable. There was a clear break between the culture and society of China before the Mongols and the culture and society of China after the Mongols.

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

**Culture and the Effects of Lamaist Buddhism.** Whereas Confucianism had dominated the religious landscape in China since the late Tang period (618-807) among the Han ethnicity, Buddhism experienced a minor renaissance during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The Buddhism practiced by the Qing monarchs, however, was not like that of most of the previous periods. Instead, the Manchu followed Tibetan Buddhism, a form of the religion which emphasizes Lamaism. Lamaism is a form of meditative Buddhism that transmits knowledge and religious convention from the teacher (Lama) to student. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that a series of great Lamas, such as the Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama, are reincarnated bodhisattvas who bring wisdom and knowledge to their students. The Mongols (Yuan Dynasty, 1271-1368) also practiced Tibetan Buddhism, but, like the Qing, did not impose it on the Confucian population. Nonetheless, it was not proscribed. Buddhist practice is often not monotheistic and the Qing monarchs were very willing to lead in corporate, ritual worship at the Temple of Heaven as an element of the civil religion promoted by the crown. Christianity was also evident in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and Qing periods. However, the numbers of adherents was very, very small—much smaller than the number of Christians during the Tang and Yuan periods. Still, a number of Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries made their way to China and provided accounts of life during their stay. These include men such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Adam Schall Von Bell (1591-1666). It is estimated that as many as one-hundred thousand Christians may have existed in China in the late Qianlong period (1735-1796).

**The Literary Arts.** In literature during the reign of the Emperor Qianlong, a genre of Chinese fiction writing—the detective story—became popular. Though the Chinese have a long history of reporting on criminal behavior as a way of conveying a morality play, detective stories seemed to have been quite common as a form of popular entertainment as well. One of the most well-known is the *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, a series of three stories of murder and intrigue. The author of this story is unknown. It depicts a man named Judge Dee and is set in the Tang period, although the cases it used for inspiration came from later periods. The extent of the circulation and appeal to the public of this particular work is not well known. However, it serves as an example of an increasingly popular form of literature in the early modern era. Several poets of renown also benefited from the considerable support of the Emperor Qianlong. Examples include Shen Deqian (1673-1769) and Weng Fanggang (1733-1818),

contemporaries who had no problem criticizing each other, but who were very influential in the writing of poetry, the collection and critique of anthologies and in teaching.

**Porcelain.** In the late Ming era, porcelain was perhaps the finest expression of artistry in China. Indeed, Ming vases and other items made of porcelain during the period are still among the most highly valued in the world. Chinese potters and sculptors were well known before the Ming period. But, it is during the Ming period that, for example, round, white plates with blue motifs of Chinese landscapes and other objects painted on them became the norm for export objects, although white and blue porcelain existed before. The skill and craftsmanship of these artists was unmatched around the world for decades to come and the secrets of Chinese porcelain manufacturing were carefully guarded.

**The Fine Arts.** Other objects of art such as monochrome painting and woodblock printing continued to develop. Some Ming and early Qing era innovations included the expanded use of color. In wood block printing, for example, Chinese artists developed a process whereby color could be added in stages to an image. Multiple copies of a single image, when complete, could have five or six different hues, creating the impression of depth and fullness rarely seen earlier.

## The 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

**Culture and the Influence of Traditional Confucianism.** Chinese civilization was very mature (some may view it as ancient) by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No new religions or governing philosophies emerged to challenge the orthodoxy of Confucianism and Daoism. The only exception was the Taiping movement (1850-1864), which was so violent and heretical in its belief system that many Chinese Christians were unable to support even its spiritual elements. As might be expected, there was a backlash among the governing elites against Christianity in the post-Taiping era. Indeed, in the decade or so after the Taiping Rebellion, there was a strong reactive movement to return China to its true Confucian path. There were several “self-strengthening” reforms instituted, most of which had as a stated goal the return of the people to more moral and upright behavior among all segments of society. When the final of the “self-strengthening” reforms (the 100 Days of Reform) was instituted in 1898, it had as one of its core elements the re-interpretation of Confucianism which, if taken to its logical end, could have questioned the political position of the Empress Dowager (1835-1908). For his trouble, the Emperor Guangxu (1871-1908)—who had supported and promoted this effort—was effectively placed under house arrest where he was assassinated in 1908 by arsenic poisoning. It appeared that traditional Confucianism, as interpreted by the ruling elites, was sacrosanct from both the spiritual and political perspective.

**The Literary Arts.** The late Qing period is not known for bold or innovative steps taken in the writing of fiction or other literary arts. Many authors and poets spent their entire careers writing about how to navigate the violence and turmoil of the turbulent 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the reform movements of the post-Taiping era, a number of Chinese traveled abroad and were exposed to vibrant and expansive cultural expressions seen in the literary and philosophical world—particularly in Japan. Some returned to China to become leading philosophers and authors. One such author is Huang Zunxian (1845-1905), who worked for the Chinese delegations in Tokyo, London and San Francisco. Huang respected tradition and was not a radical (as evidenced by his profession), but his poetry pressed the boundaries of literary convention. He is remembered for popularizing the word “civilization” 文明 (*wénmíng*—roughly interpreted “enlightenment through letters”). Others, such as Kang Youwei (1858-1927), an influential Chinese thinker who went into exile in Japan in 1898, continued to have influence well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among Kang’s most influential works are the *Datong Shu* (Book on the Great Community) and *Kongzi Gaizhi Kao* (The Study of the Reforms of Confucius). The latter formed part of the basis of the aborted 100 Days of Reform.

## 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY (1900-1950)

**The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of 1919.** The Chinese had participated in WWI by sending more than 100,000 laborers to work behind the lines in Europe for the British and French. Although only a few thousand died, many came back to their village with a fresh perspective. They were world travelers, had seen the carnage of the trenches, or their aftermath, and were unwilling to allow westerners or Japanese to maintain the fiction of their moral superiority. Among those who traveled to Europe in this program were Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), future Premier of the People’s Republic of China (second in command to Mao Zedong) and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), leader of the PRC from 1978-1992). The titular Chinese government had also cut diplomatic ties with Germany and eventually declared war

in 1917. Although they didn't provide soldiers or much in the way material aid, they did expect that they the German territories in Shandong province would be returned to Chinese control after the war. The problem was that Japan had seized these territories by force during the war and did not wish to relinquish what they had conquered. At the Versailles Treaty talks, the Japanese delegation was able to make its case directly as one of the victorious powers. Nonetheless, when the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were made known in May of 1919, the Chinese erupted in protest because portions of Shandong were to be leased to the Japanese according to the terms of a previous secret agreement between the two nations. The Chinese people felt betrayed by both their government and by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, because of his insistence on the implementation of "National Self-Determination" in all other elements of the treaty. The protest movement was sustained for many months and was felt in virtually all of China's major cities. In the aftermath, it was clear that this was an expression of a strong sense of nationalism in a country in which it had never been seen before. It is unfortunate, for the Japanese in particular, to have missed this dramatic shift in Chinese sentiment.

**The Literary Arts.** The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a flowering of new forms of expression in China. New authors using new forms of the language, commenting on things they had never been allowed to write about provided a fresh environment for the literary arts. The most well-known of all Chinese authors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Lu Xun (1881-1936). Lu wrote novels, essays and poems. Many of his books are works of political satire. One of his most famous is the satirical novella *The True Story of Ah Q*, which first appeared in serial form in 1921. Lu wrote in the modern form of the Chinese vernacular, a development which would eventually characterize all modern Chinese forms of literature. He is thus remembered for his biting political wit and for being a pioneer in the creation of modern Chinese literature. Lu wrote prolifically until his death from tuberculosis in 1936. He is known as one of the leaders in the "New Culture Movement" which sprang up in China after the May 4<sup>th</sup> period.

**New Youth.** Among the many elements of the "New Culture Movement" was the appearance of a journal known as the *New Youth*, founded by Chen Duxiu (who was also a founding member of the CCP). The first volumes were published in 1915 and pre-date the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, but the leadership of the journal happily tapped into the new nationalism of the May 4<sup>th</sup> era. The *New Youth* was also written in the vernacular (as opposed to classical Chinese) and was designed to appeal to the largest audience possible. The articles pointed out weaknesses in Chinese national character and called for the introduction of new ideas and new philosophies into China: communism, capitalism, pragmatism, democracy, nationalism, and the like which, if embraced by large segments of Chinese society could make China stronger. The *New Youth* even published Lu Xun's short story "A Madman's Diary" in 1918 (reportedly inspired by Nikolai Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*). Also included were reprinted articles from abroad. This provides evidence of just how sophisticated and international the "New Culture Movement" was in China.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1950-1999)

**Socialist Realism.** The fine arts, performing arts and visual arts were all under the control of the CCP in the years following 1949, as were all human endeavors. For the CCP, the arts provided yet another venue to educate the population on the true socialist path. In the visual arts, Chinese painters, printers and lithographers produced images depicting the ideal communist worker. Most often these images included a very healthy, happy man or woman (or a crowd) engaged in some form of heroic socialist activity: farming, heavy industrial work, large-scale marches, etc. There are few examples of landscapes, portraits or idle workers in evidence. Many, if not most, had an image of Mao Zedong as the benevolent father pointing the way to a brighter future. In virtually all images, the dominant color is red and a communist slogan provides the context. After the death of Mao, artists working in the visual arts were allowed to produce images that were not just to be used to promote communism. Today, there is a thriving visual arts community that produces just about anything they wish, as long as they don't explicitly or implicitly criticize the state.

**The Written Word.** The written word was understood by the communists to be one of the most dangerous but effective tools one can use to shape and mold society. It is not a surprise that in the literary arts in the years following 1949, all writing was strictly controlled by the state. The function of literature was to promote and glorify the communist system, to "serve the people and promote socialism," according to Mao. Most, if not all, of the literature produced during the revolutionary period is of little intrinsic value and there are very few authors who are remembered as being visionaries. One of the few is Hao Ran (1932-2008), who produced such works as the *Golden Road* (1972) and *Sunny Days* (1977). Hao first and foremost served the state and was even the literary editor of the CCP journal entitled *Red Flag*. It is worth noting, however, that though the literary arts have in the post Mao-era

been liberalized to a considerable degree, there is still no freedom of the press and no freedom to write and publish whatever one wishes. The Chinese authorities carefully scrutinize and monitor all written works. Books are still often banned and their authors fined, jailed or worse if there is any criticism of the state detected. This extends to any treatment of China's founding fathers such as Mao Zedong or Zhou Enlai. Therefore, one can write poetry, works of fiction, and even non-fiction as long one does not engage in social or political criticism. One of the most influential novelists in contemporary China is Mo Yan (1955-present), who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2012. Mo's selection is not without controversy because he has been willing to work within state systems. Indeed, he was vice president of the Chinese Writers Association, an organization recognized and sponsored by the Chinese government. Mo is known for his works *Red Sorghum Clan* (1986) and *The Republic of Wine* (1992).

**The Internet.** In addition to the traditional literary arts in which one uses paper and pen, the written word is also carefully controlled in the virtual world. China today seeks to carefully monitor and control all interaction on the internet. Bloggers in particular are targeted for what they write and face punishment in varying degrees. According to a CNN report from October 17, 2013, the Chinese government employs more than two million people whose sole responsibility is to police the internet for writing that has not been approved by the state. Web sites are regularly blocked on the mainland and there is no free flow of information within the country or from outside the country. This is a monumental task, but one to which the Chinese government is very committed. It is expected that the Chinese government will continue to increase their budget for monitoring the internet in the coming years. The written word remains an extremely dangerous thing for the CCP and the Chinese government is keen to control what topics are permissible in the public realm.

#### Readings

- 1) David Keightley ed., *The Origins of Chinese Civilization*, (University of California Press, 1983).
- 2) Li Feng, *Early China: A Social and Cultural History*, (Cambridge, 2013).
- 3) Simon Leys, trans., *The Analects of Confucius*, (Norton Press, 1997).
- 4) Keith Holyoak, Trans., *Facing the Moon: Poems of Li Bai and Fu Fu*, (Oyster River Press, 2007).
- 5) Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*, (University of California Press, 1999).
- 6) Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of 1919*, (Center for Chinese Studies, UC Berkeley, 1990).
- 7) Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Is it true that ancient Chinese civilization was different than all others? If so, what social markers and patterns of behavior distinguish China as different? What technological innovations, what cultural norms and what artistic expressions can only be found in late neolithic China? What early tools were the most important to the development of Chinese civilization? How might these have influenced Chinese society?
- 2) In the 300-400 year period of transition between the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, several of the world's most important religions were established. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism all found expression for the first time during this period. Others, such as Judaism, matured into the religions that are recognizable today. Was there something about this time in human history—and in China—in particular where conditions were just right to incubate and nurture all these new religions?
- 3) China's encounter with the west in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is often depicted as a clash of world-views, as a struggle between eastern and western civilizations. Is this a fair characterization? Were the Europeans

able to interact with the Chinese in the way that they did because of Chinese weakness or European strength? If so, what about China was weak? If so, what about the Europeans was strong?

## Texts

- 1) From the *Book of Poetry*, 11<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, Number 1

Here long, there short, is the duckweed;  
On the left, on the right, we gather it.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:  
With lutes, small and large, let us give her friendly welcome.  
Here long, there short, is the duckweed;  
On the left, on the right, we cook and present it.  
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:  
With bells and drums let us show our delight in her.

- 2) Confucius. From the *Analects*, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE

The Master said: “At home, a young man must respect his parents; but abroad, he must respect his elders. He should talk little, but with good faith; love all people, but associate with the virtuous. Having done this, if he still has energy to spare, let him study literature.”

The Master said: “Do not worry if you are without position; worry lest you do not deserve a position. Do you worry if you are not famous; worry lest you do not deserve to be famous.”

- 3) The poet Li Bai, 8<sup>th</sup> Century China, translated by Arthur Waley

The fields are chill, the sparse rain has stopped;  
The colors of spring teem on every side.  
With leaping fish the blue pond is full;  
With singing thrushes the green boughs droop.  
The flowers of the field have dabbled their powdered cheeks;  
The mountain grasses are bent level at the waist.  
By the bamboo stream the last fragment of cloud  
Blown by the wind slowly scatters away.

- 4) From the *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, found in Robert Van Gulik’s translation, Dover Press, 1976, pg. 5.

In the end, as a general rule, no criminal escapes the laws of the land. But it is up to the judge to decide who is guilty and who is innocent. If, therefore, a judge is honest, then the people in his district will be at peace; and if the people are at peace, their manner and morals will be good. All vagabonds and idlers, all spreaders of false rumors and all trouble makers will disappear, and all of the common people will cheerfully go about their own affairs. And if some wicked people from outside should happen to settle down in such a district, they will better their lives and reform of their own accord; for they see with their own eyes, and hear with their own ears, how strictly the laws are enforced, and how sternly justice is meted out. Therefore, it can be said that the

amelioration of the common people depends on the honesty of the magistrate; never yet has a dishonest official improved the people under him.

5) *Excerpts from The Republic of Wine (1992) [below first] and Red Sorghum (1986) [below second and third] by Mo Yan*

- 1) "Am I drunk?" he asked Crewcut.  
"You're not drunk, Boss," Crewcut replied. "How could a superior individual like you be drunk? People around here who get drunk are the dregs of society, illiterates, uncouth people. Highbrow folks, those of the 'spring snow,' cannot get drunk. You're a highbrow, therefore you cannot be drunk."
- 2) "I sometimes think that there is a link between the decline in humanity and the increase in prosperity and comfort. Property and comfort are what people seek, but the costs to character are often terrifying."
- 3) "Over decades that seem but a moment in time, lines of scarlet figures shuttled among the sorghum stalks to weave a vast human tapestry. They killed, they looted, and they defended their country in a valiant, stirring ballet that makes us unfilial descendants who now occupy the land pale by comparison."