

# CHINESE LITERARY HISTORY

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**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.

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

**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.

### **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.

**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)

**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.

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

**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 (*wénming*—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.

### Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

**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.

### Late 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

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