

## Chinese Literary Arts – Ancient period

**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.