

## FEATURE



# HARMONY

## The Essence of China's Culture of Peace

By Ruby Tsao

### A HISTORY

Chinese culture must have precious values since all kinds of people have been drawn to it throughout history. Historically, China was conquered by foreign tribes numerous times, most notably are Mongol's Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) and Manchu's Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Genghis Khan conquered the vast territories spanning the continents of Europe and Asia. Since, he did not learn the Chinese culture of peace, he was not able to govern his conquered territories effectively and coherently. His grandson Kublai Khan was influenced by Chinese culture along with other Mongol royalties. With the help of Han Chinese, he established the Yuan Dynasty with Beijing as the Capital. During the Qing Dynasty, Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong adopted Chinese culture extensively. They were great rulers of consummate Confucian qualities with long reigns of 60 + years each. The Manchu's were so assimilated into Han culture that they lost their own identity. Time and again in China, a foreign tribe invaded China, and then adopted Chinese culture to establish a new dynasty. They then assimilated into the population in the melting pot of Han culture. Neighboring countries such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam and many other East Asian countries have also embraced Chinese culture. China did not use military force even when China had the power to do so; neighboring countries just embraced Chinese culture voluntarily.

China has always been a peaceful country. For 1,800 out of the last 2000 years, it had been the richest country until invasions by Japan and Western Colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. China did not initiate major invasions even at the height of its power. Today,

it has maintained peaceful and friendly relation with neighboring nations including the 14 countries bordering China on the north and west. Chinese culture is a culture of peace. Let's examine it in more details.

### CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is the main ideology in China, but it does not encompass the whole range of thoughts and facets of Chinese culture. Taoism and Buddhism are also important elements in the making of the Chinese character. Confucianism and Taoism both originated in China about 2,500 years ago. Buddhism came to China in the first Century from India. These three beliefs form the core values of Chinese culture.

Confucianism is not a religion, but rather a code of ethics for proper personal behavior to promote good human relationships and a harmonious society. This is in stark contrast of the militarism and expansionism of the Western powers and later Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries. During the last 150 years or so, China has always been at the receiving end of invasions and attacks. Because Confucius (551-479 BC) never claimed divinity, his philosophy did not exclude other beliefs. He proclaimed that "Ren" or "Kindness" is the basis of all human relationships - as citizens, father/son, husband/wife, brother/sister and friends. With personal character perfected, family harmony follows, which builds a harmonious society that leads to good government and world peace. This ideal is the same as "Utopia" in the West. He was an advocate of life-long learning. His emphasis on education is an important legacy that influenced Asian students even today. In an atmosphere of respect for other beliefs, all

religions that came later such as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity have coexisted peacefully.

## TAOISM OR DAOISM

Taoism has its origin from an ancient Chinese thinker named Lao Zi ( 570 – 510 BC). The years may not be exact although Confucius was considered his contemporary. History tells little about his life except that he left us a book “Dao De Jing “ of 5,000 words - the scripture of Taoism. Zhuang Zi (369-286 BCE) was an important Taoist philosopher whose book entitled “Zhuang Zi” became very important to followers of Taoism. He wrote fables and interesting stories to illustrate the many facets of Taoism. Taoism is not a religion in the strict sense because there is not a supernatural being or “God”. To put it simply, it’s more a belief that man is part of nature, and that there are elements of Yin (the negative) and Yang (the positive) in all natural things. Everything is fine when there is balance between Yin and Yang. It is a way of life to live in harmony with nature. The essence is to let nature take its course. Thus, the fruit is the sweetest when it is naturally ripe. It is sour when prematurely plucked from the tree. We call it “progress” when we try to conquer nature, and to change nature to serve humans. In the end, are we really better off when natural resources are depleted and the environment polluted? It seems that nature was not the problem. We, the human beings, are the ones to create problems in nature.

Only now, we are beginning to see the wisdom of Taoism. Even in the West, there is interest in Taoism in today’s concept of living in harmony with nature. Sometimes “to do nothing” is better than “Much Ado About Nothing”. Taoists call it “wu wei” – do nothing – similar to “minimalism”. In the U.S., there is a saying: “Less is more”. Just go with the flow, in time, everything will fall into place. All the fuss, all the self-inflicted agony, is not necessary after all. One thing popular in the West is “Martial Arts”. It was started by Taoists in their pursuit of a healthy body with the ability to defend oneself against attack. They also believe in “feng shui”–the optimal arrangement of things

to receive the best cosmic energy from the environment. Some may think it is superstition; actually, a lot of it is common sense. Most Chinese feel better to believe it because it provides a psychological confidence. Whether there is any scientific basis to it all, it gives us an advantage to feel lucky about things.

Taoism also played a role in imperial governance. After the ravages of Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), people suffered under the harsh rule and burdens of war and government projects. Early emperors of the succeeding Han Dynasty (206 BC- 220) notably Han Wendi and Han Jingdi, practiced Taoist “Wu Wei” policy. They understood that after a period of warfare and turmoil, people were left destitute. The wise emperors pursued a policy to leave people in peace to tend to their own businesses and production of crops for a time of recuperation without burdens imposed by the government. This period of peace and recovery was called “Wen-Jing Prosperity” which paved the way for a united China that has lasted to this day for 2,200 years. The rationale was — to remove the government functions to collect taxes and to wage wars—both detrimental to people’s welfare. With less government burdens, people knew how to pursue their own welfare in a prosperous society.

## BUDDHISM

Buddhism came to China in the first century during Han Dynasty. It flourished in China while it entered a long period of decline in India to this day. The first temple was called White Horse Temple, in the city of Luo Yang, to commemorate the White Horses that carried the scriptures to China. A Buddhist Monk named Xuan Zang went on a difficult journey through deserts to India to carry Buddhist scriptures to Chang’an, today’s Xi’an. He was instrumental in popularizing Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Many more temples had been built since then. Gradually, Buddhism developed Chinese characteristics and became a popular religion in China and deity figures in temples

have adopted Chinese features. From China, it spread to Japan and Korea and other Asian countries.

Although considered a religion, Buddhism does not have a supernatural being or a creator in its belief. Buddhists believe in “reincarnation”—to be reborn in the next life. They strive to do good deeds in this life in exchange for a good next life. To them, there is no permanence in this world. The body is a temporary vehicle to reach nirvana. They believe that human beings can be carefree if they give up their worldly attachments. Just let go. One can be set free from the chains of worldly concerns. Suffering comes from too much care and unrequited love. Everyone has the potential to reach enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson taught us “All men are created equal”. To Buddhists, all living things are created equal. They have love and respect for all lives. It is a most peaceful religion, not believing in killing of any kind — even killing animals for food. This is the basis for a vegetarian life for monks in Buddhist temples as well as many secular Buddhists.

## CO-EXISTENCE

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism coexisted peacefully throughout history. In 2,500 years of Chinese history, there was never a war among religions, or even Islam and Christianity that came later. Confucius, Lao Zi and Buddha were considered saints of wisdom, not supernatural beings in a religious sense. They were compatible in their beliefs of peace and harmony. Since they were not “gods”, there was no exclusivity in their beliefs. Many temples feature all three “saints” in the same building.



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## THE MAKING OF A CHINESE CHARACTER

In China, a gentleman with character perfection is called a Jun Zi. The character of a Jun Zi is a Confucian by day and a Taoist by night. Confucianism is an active philosophy to engage in affairs of the world, to pursue achievements and to serve the people; Taoism is a passive lifestyle to withdraw to nature and to pursue a healthy life, free from worldly concerns. Confucianism and Taoism play a complementary role as guiding principles in the life of a Jun Zi. There is wisdom to reach for the highest achievements and contribute to society when times are good; and to retreat to nature and be able to hold the head high when times are bad.

Many tourist attractions have been built around revered historical figures where they had their homes, or where they composed literary masterpieces, such as Huang He Lou, Teng Wang Ge, Yue Yang Lou, ...etc. Some Confucian scholars such as Su Dongpo, Lin Zhexu, Tao Yuanming, tried to serve the country in various positions. When they could not accomplish this or when they were exiled from the government, often because of evil forces in the Emperor’s court, they would retreat to the country to adopt a Taoist life-style, to live the simple life of a scholar-farmer with dignity and poise. They were content to write poetry to “pick chrysanthemums under the east fence”. To them, fame and fortune were just smoke and clouds passing before the eyes. These scholars had incredible strength of character to withstand adversity and wait for another day to shine. After being banished to remote and desolate places, they continued to work on various projects to

benefit local people. While serving the emperors, they aimed always to serve the people.

## POETRY, CALLIGRAPHY AND ART

Children started to recite poetry when memory power was best. When they grew up, they would have a lifetime for comprehension and enjoyment. There is a special charm in Chinese poetry not found in other languages. Combining individual characters, matching nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, numbers with numbers and colors with colors in parallel lines give Chinese poetry symmetrical beauty. Poetry is an important component in Chinese culture. Famous Tang poets such as Li Bai and Du Fu are very much admired by the Chinese. Du Fu's modest home in Chengdu has been renovated many times in his honor. People remembered his poem lamenting the leaking roof when it was blown off in the wind. Today, his memorial hall is now a series of lovely cottages situated in a beautiful garden, befitting to a great poet of his stature—a must stop for every Chinese who visits Chengdu. Another tourist attraction built by people of Chengdu is Wu Hou Chi to commemorate Zhu Ge Liang - a most respected figure of supreme Confucian qualities, a symbol of wisdom in Chinese history. It was named as his memorial hall even though the original name was Tomb of Liu Bei, the king Zhu Ge Liang served with the utmost diligence and loyalty until death.

Chinese art is full of imagery be it a painting, a sculpture, a carving of wood, jade, bamboo or stone, or a piece of embroidery. More important in Chinese paintings are the noble ideals and images of an idyllic life of serenity, among the beauty of nature, free from worldly concerns. There is rich meaning beyond mere techniques of art. Paintings of bamboos and lotus flowers present the images of humility in a noble character or a symbol of purity growing in mud, yet untainted. Chinese art is well loved by many people in Asia.

The beauty of Chinese calligraphy is altogether another art form, rivaling paintings in

its sophistication. One ancient form is beautiful; it's like an artistic design with geometric beauty. Another totally free form in fast moving lines is like abstract art. There are a variety of styles. Calligraphy training started from childhood. Some people spend a lifetime to practice calligraphy to perfection.

## CHINESE LANGUAGE

The Chinese language has a special charm in its beauty. Each character is a picture—and a picture is better than a thousand words. Different word combinations mean different things. No matter what dialects people speak, the written words have the same meanings to everyone in China, even to people in Japan and Korea. It's also timeless — a uniting force because the Chinese share the same culture through written works. During the short reign of Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), China was united as one country after Qin Shi Huang Di (First Emperor) conquered all the neighboring states. Prior to his reign, various states had different systems. Even written languages were not uniform. Although considered a tyrant, nevertheless, the First Emperor made a long-lasting contribution to unify Chinese language, standardize measurements and carriage wheel sizes. This has had a great impact on Chinese culture, the glue that cemented China as one great united country ever since. Likewise, the US is a great country united by the use of a single language. In Europe, alphabetical languages are phonetic in nature, written languages are not universally understood. People cannot communicate in spite of similarities in the spelling of their languages.

## INTEREST IN CHINA

In recent years, there is a newfound enthusiasm in Chinese culture. Books and TV lectures on Chinese philosophy, history, literature ...etc. have become very popular. People were denied access to Chinese classics when traditional Chinese culture was denounced during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Now they begin to recognize the richness of Chinese culture and its value on the building of personal

character. This is because, ultimately, achievements of any country depend on the quality of its people.

Chinese culture with its emphasis on education, character development, hard work, family harmony and frugality has contributed to the success of Asians. Many people associate the Asian economic success with the “chopsticks culture”. Countries using chopsticks all seem to enjoy prosperity. It was even speculated that early use of chopsticks helps brain development. It does take considerable dexterity for a two year old to maneuver two sticks with five fingers to get slippery food into the mouth.

Chinese food is an important part of Chinese culture, the main attraction in Chinatown, a magnet to draw the interest of all kinds of people, not just the Chinese. Foreign people become interested in Chinese culture first through Chinese food, and people love to read the wise sayings found in fortune cookies. Countries where chopsticks are used have significant influence from Chinese culture: Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore and other Asian countries. Now Chinese food is popular around the world, we may say that China has conquered the world not with a “Big Stick”, but with “chopsticks”.

## PEACEFUL NATURE OF CHINESE CULTURE

The charm of Chinese culture is in the love of peace, in kindness among humans, in harmony with nature, in the balance of Yin and Yang, in the wisdom to know when to advance and when to retreat - in other words, the “art of life”. It is also to live a “life of art” in the appreciation of poetry, calligraphy and art. The culture is to live a life of peace and serenity free from conflicts and strife.

What we need in the West is better understanding of the peaceful nature of Chinese culture so we need not view the rise of China as a threat.

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