



Insights Into Chinese Culture

YE LANG
ZHU LIANGZHI

Translated by
CHEN HAIYAN · ZHANG SIYING

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Ye Lang
Beijing, China

Zhu Liangzhi
Beijing, China

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FOREWORD

The 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, attended by athletes and visitors from 205 countries and regions, will be the largest ever Olympic Games in history.

Since the dawning of the twenty-first century, the international community has been paying greater attention to China. People around the world want to learn more about Chinese culture in more comprehensive and profound ways. The Beijing Olympics will provide just such an opportunity. Friends from all parts of the world will savor the 5000-year-long culture of this country and see what modern China is really like today.

It is at such a hopeful time that Profs. Ye Lang and Zhu Liangzhi have written this book to share with readers their insights into Chinese culture.

Several years ago, Prof. Ye Lang and I became friends when we worked together in initiating aesthetic education programs for children and youth, in an effort to improve their overall qualifications. Professor Ye is an influential philosopher and aesthetics scholar in contemporary China. In 2002 and 2003, he concurrently served as the Dean for three departments at Peking University: Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Arts. Professor Zhu has long been engaged in research in Chinese philosophy and arts, with his special focus on Chan Buddhism, painting, calligraphy, and landscape gardening.

Beyond general knowledge, this book provides a detailed, vivid introduction to certain unique features and highlights of Chinese culture. The

authors have attempted to represent the spirit and core values of Chinese culture. They have also tried to exemplify the inner world, the life views, and aesthetic interests of the Chinese people. They hope this book will serve as a popular introduction to Chinese culture for readers both in China and abroad. At the same time, they also hope their insights can provide a new perspective for readers to gain a deeper understanding of the true essence of Chinese culture. Their effort is truly applaudable.

The authors have strived to present the text in a vivid and colorful way, hoping that readers may get “a living flavor” of Chinese culture. Subjects covered in his book range from ancient wonders such as the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army, and traditional residences of ordinary people, to enduring artworks of calligraphy, painting, landscape gardening, Peking Opera, and porcelain. Under the authors’ pen, these subjects have all been imbued with a living spirit to epitomize Chinese people’s real-life interests. In the description and analysis of *A Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*, or of Old Beijing and Old Shanghai, the authors provide readers with glimpses of Chinese people’s contentment with a peaceful and harmonious life. This is perhaps part of the reason why Chinese culture has lasted for thousands of years.

This book is not a general introduction of knowledge. Instead, the authors have carefully selected some key points and highlights to showcase the big picture of Chinese culture. Stories about clothing, food, housing, and traveling, and aesthetic pursuits in music, sports, calligraphy, and painting all reflect the Chinese people’s spiritual world and life interests. For example, the authors have discovered in a game of *weiqi* (go) “kindred friendship,” which means that they communicate and cooperate with each other in the spirit of coexistence.

Not only is the text written in a superbly fluent and fascinating way, the accompanying illustrations also bring to life the splendor of many aspects of Chinese culture.

Insights Into Chinese Culture presents to the international community the splendid culture of ancient China and the spiritual world of ancient Chinese people. It also demonstrates the broad, moderate, open, and inclusive inner world of contemporary Chinese and their pure, tasteful interests. These features, I believe, should make this book of interest to friends in other parts of the world.

The publication of *Insights Into Chinese Culture* is a timely addition to the content of the “People’s Olympics.”

李 岚 清

April 2018

Li Lanqing
Vice Premier of China from 1993 to 2003

PREFACE

With her economy on a fast track and growing national strength, China is playing an increasingly bigger role on the world stage. As host of the 2008 Summer Olympics, the 2010 World Expo, and the 2022 Winter Olympics, to name just a few major events, the country with a millennia-long civilization is opening up wider to and integrating deeper with the rest of the world.

Against this historic background, the international community is paying greater attention to China and friends in other countries are keen to gain a more real, lively, and deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Meanwhile, we Chinese should also strengthen our own cultural consciousness by understanding it more comprehensively, in a more vivid way, and at greater depth.

We have compiled this book to provide a vivid, accessible, fresh, and in-depth description of the Chinese culture for both Chinese and overseas readers. We believe that only a deep understanding can illuminate the nature of Chinese culture.

For this purpose, we have distanced our writing from the usual ways in the past. One was all-inclusive, resulting in a book that was more a condensed history of culture than a reader on culture, covering the histories of philosophy, art, and so on. The other way was presenting a condensed dictionary of Chinese cultural terms, which were huge in number but scant and abstract in explanation. Such explanations were

a far cry from vivid and specific descriptions of Chinese culture, not to mention helping the reader appreciate its inherent spirit.

Our writing differs from previous works by focusing on certain features and highlights of Chinese culture. Our in-depth introductions are substantiated by typical examples and materials. In so doing we attempt to present the spirit of Chinese culture, and its inherent meaning and core values. We pay special attention to the common values shared by humanity and modern implications our culture can offer, which are precious spiritual wealth not only of the Chinese nation, but also of humankind as a whole. At the same time, we attempt to demonstrate the inner world and cultural character of the Chinese people, especially their attitude toward (everyday) life and love for life (existence), and their wishes and pursuits. These, as well as their aesthetic interests, play an extremely important role in the nation's survival and development.

We hope our book will help readers not only gain specific knowledge about Chinese culture, but also appreciate its inherent spirit, the Chinese nation's great strength of life and creation, and the Chinese people's character, spirit, and interests, all in a vivid way.

For example, from *The Analects* and the structure of the Temple of Heaven, we can tell that the Chinese people hold reverence for nature.

From Confucian philosophy and traditional paintings of mountains, rivers, flowers, and birds, we can tell the Chinese people's love for life and their appreciation for the beauty in the unity of man with every other being.

From *Laozi*, *The Book of Changes*, the ideas of Chan Buddhism, the theories of traditional Chinese medicine, and the sports of *taiji quan* and *weiqi*, we can tell that the Chinese people not only have the capability of creation, but also the life wisdom of pursuing harmony between man and nature.

From *Sunzi's Art of War*, we take the warning of "refraining from war"; from the seven voyages to the Western Seas headed by Zheng He, we learn the diplomacy of "sharing peace"; and from the Great Wall built over a span of more than 2000 years, we see the Chinese people's eternal yearning for a peaceful life.

From the popularity of ethnic costumes and customs in the capital Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) in the heyday of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), and Shanghai's love of Western lifestyle in the early twentieth century, we see the Chinese people's open and inclusive attitude toward foreign cultures.

From Xuanzang's (602–664) and Yijing's (635–713) earnest study of Buddhism in India, respectively, for 17 and 24 years, and the large scale and high grade of the translation academies they hosted, we see the Chinese people's great enthusiasm in absorbing cultures of different kinds.

From the Buddhist statues in Maijishan Grottos in Gansu Province; the smiles of Buddhist statues in Qingzhou, Shandong Province; the smiles of court ladies in tri-colored pottery of the Tang Dynasty; and the unyielding spirit of Monkey King, hero of the classic novel *Journey to the West*, we see the Chinese people's optimistic, calm, and confident attitude toward life.

From the classic painting *A Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*, which depicts the carefree and happy life of the ordinary people in the capital of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), we see the Chinese people's content with a peaceful, pleasant, and harmonious life.

From pigeon whistles in the blue sky over Old Beijing, and the contented and joyful atmosphere in its small wine shops, we see how ordinary Chinese find happiness and interests in everyday life.

From the bustling, delightful, and festive scenes depicted in the New Year paintings of Yangliuqing of Tianjin Municipality and Taohuwu of Suzhou City in Jiangsu Province, we see the Chinese people's strong wish for a peaceful and prosperous life, the most common, essential, and unchanging wish.

From the square bronze kettle with a lotus-and-crane lid dating back to the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC), the calligraphy works of Wang Xizhi (303–361), and the poems of Li Bai (701–762), we see the Chinese people's soaring, bright, and elegant artistic spirit.

From pure porcelain wares, gardens in rain and mist in areas south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, and the graceful *qipao* for ladies, we see the Chinese people's graceful taste for life and sense of beauty.

From music instruments, board games, wine, and tea, we see the Chinese people's pursuit of an aesthetic life.

And so on and so forth.

In a word, we hope this book will present not only factual knowledge about Chinese culture, but also insights into its inherent spirit and core values, so readers can appreciate the Chinese people's spiritual world and gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese culture.

In terms of language, we attempt an accessible and interesting style, with high readability and a typical Chinese flavor. We have inserted more

than 250 illustrations with captions to supplement the text and hope our readers will enjoy them.

Beijing, China

Ye Lang
Zhu Liangzhi

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since its first edition with color illustrations was published in 2008, *Insights Into Chinese Culture* has been reprinted with black and white illustrations. The edition in the original complex Chinese characters has been published by Chung Hwa Book Co. (H.K.) Ltd. Foreign-language editions include English, Korean, Japanese, Russian, French, German, Spanish, Armenian, and Arabic, with the last two already licensed to Armenia and Egypt, respectively.

The first edition (in simplified Chinese characters) has been reprinted more than 20 times, with sales exceeding 100,000 copies. Thanks to criticisms and suggestions some readers have proposed to the publisher and the authors, we have made revisions to the original text and illustrations, including correction of some errors and addition of new content.

We'd like to thank the readers for their love and help, the publisher for continuously improving the book, and all the friends for their assistance.

Beijing, China
January 2016

Ye Lang
Zhu Liangzhi

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Wisdom and Beliefs

The relationship between heaven and humanity is one of the most basic themes in Chinese philosophy. It is the fundamental relationship between the universe and human life. Confucius (551–479 BC) is one of the founders of heaven-humanity study. Classic works like *Laozi* and *The Book of Changes* also take this theme as the focal point of their discourse.

In Confucius' eyes, heaven is the natural world, which continuously creates life. Heaven is sacred in nature; humans should regard heaven with awe and gratitude. Such an attitude has been kept in the Chinese culture till now. A representative example is the architecture of the Temple of Heaven.

The key concept in Confucian thought is *ren*, which essentially means love and respect for life. Under the influence of Confucius, the Chinese people have developed a strong sense of ecology. We believe that humanity and everything in the universe are one and the same, all belonging to a big world of life. Therefore, we should extend our love for family members to other people, and to everything in the universe.

Confucius emphasizes that those who seek education should aim to improve their spiritual world, and to seek a more meaningful and valuable life. His view on education pioneered the theory about the state of life, which is unique to traditional Chinese philosophy.

Heaven-humanity study, created by Confucius, Laozi (dates of birth and death unknown), and works like *The Book of Changes*, represents the highest level of wisdom of ancient Chinese philosophers.





CHAPTER 1

Confucian Thought on Heaven and Humanity



Confucius (551–479 BC), known in China as Kongzi, given name Qiu and alias Zhongni, was a native of Zouyi (present-day Qufu in Shandong Province) of the State of Lu during the late Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC). A great thinker, educator, and founder of Confucianism, Confucius is an ancient sage to the Chinese people. His words and life story were recorded by his disciples and their students in *The Analects*.

An enduring classic of Chinese culture, *The Analects*, has influenced all thinkers, writers, and politicians in the over-2,000-year-long history of China after Confucius. No scholar could truly understand this long-standing culture or the inner world of the ancient Chinese without this book.

Much of Confucian thought on Heaven and people represents universal human values. This is perhaps why Confucian thought in the twenty-first century still retains the interest of not only the Chinese but also people in other parts of the world.

HEAVEN: SOURCE OF LIFE

In the Shang (1600–1046 BC) and Zhou (1046–256 BC) dynasties, the prevalent concept of “Heaven” was that of a personified god, which influenced Confucius. Generally, however, Confucius regarded “Heaven” as nature. He said, “Heaven does not speak in words. It speaks through the rotation of the four seasons and the growth of all living things.” Obviously, Heaven equalled nature in the eyes of Confucius. Moreover, nature was not a lifeless mechanism separate from humans; instead, it was the great world of life and the process of creation of life. Human life was part and parcel of nature as a whole.

Confucius’ equation of Heaven with the creation of life was an innovative idea in his time. The natural process of life creation was the “way of Heaven.” This idea was later developed in *The Book of Changes*, as it stated “Continuous creation of life is change.”

As the natural process of creation of life, Heaven was the source of all living things and the source of all values. This was the “virtue of Heaven.” Thus, *The Book of Changes* said, “The great virtue of Heaven and Earth is creating life.”

In the natural process of creation of life, Heaven had its inner purpose in creating all things as well as protecting and improving life. Heaven had originated humanity, and humans were obliged to accomplish this

purpose. In other words, humans are born with a sense of “heavenly mission,” and this is the meaning of human life.

Confucian “Heaven” also had a certain sacred element, which was related to it being the source of life. Thus Confucius required people to hold Heaven in awe. He says that a person of virtue must “respect his heavenly mission,” listen to and live out the purpose of Heaven by caring for and improving life.

Under the influence of Confucius, the ancient Chinese developed a sense of awe and belief in Heaven. To them, Heaven was the highest sacred being, with its profound mystery never to be fully understood by mortals. It was not a supernatural, personified deity like the Christian God, but was the world of ever-generating life. The highest principle of Heaven is to give birth to all beings ceaselessly. Giving birth to all beings is also the virtue of Heaven, which is the source of all values. It can also be understood as the mandate or the heart of Heaven. In other words, the sacred mission of Heaven is to give birth to and nurture all beings. As the most intelligent of all beings, humans should take to heart the purpose of Heaven by cherishing life. If one remained “ignorant and disrespectful of one’s heavenly mission” by killing or maiming life, one would be punished by Heaven. Confucius said, “He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray.” The Confucian respect for and belief in Heaven represented a form of religious spiritualism of the ancient Chinese.

In the twenty-first century, the Confucian caveat of “standing in awe of the ordinances of Heaven” still holds true, as human society begins to pay greater attention to ecological civilization. Humans should indeed listen to the voice of nature, respecting and loving it as the world of life. This is our sacred mission and gives value to all human life.

REN: FROM LOVE FOR PARENTS TO EVERYTHING IN THE UNIVERSE

Ren and *li* are the two core concepts of Confucius’ doctrine about people.

When his student Fan Chi asked him about *ren*, Confucius replied, “Love for one’s fellow beings.” This is Confucius’ most important interpretation of *ren*. Love for one’s fellow beings is universal love. Confucius further emphasized that this kind of love should “begin with the love for one’s parents.” He believed no one could love people in general if they did not even love their own parents. Confucius regarded “filial piety and fraternal duty” as the essence of *ren*. *The Doctrine of the Mean* quotes

Confucius as saying, “The greatest love for one’s fellow beings is the love for one’s parents.” Confucius mentioned several times that children should love their parents. He also said, “Children should not travel far while their parents are alive. If they have no choice but to do so, they must retain some restraint.” He did not mean that children should not leave their parents at all. What he meant was that children should not make their parents anxious about them while away from home. Children should take to heart the feelings of their parents and this is filial piety. Confucius said again, “Children should think often of the age of their parents. They should feel happy for the health and longevity of their parents. They should also feel concern for the aging of their parents.”



Cry of Deer in a Red Maple Forest (*detail*), *unknown Song Dynasty*

These words of Confucius are still meaningful today. Parents' love for their children remains the same as in his time. The lines by the Tang-Dynasty poet Meng Jiao describe a situation that is still relevant today:

“Thread in my loving mother’s hand/Sewing the clothes for her son to travel.” Yet how few of those who have left their parents are conscious of their parents’ concern about them? Parents always remember their children’s birthday, yet how few children often remind themselves of the age of their parents, a cause of both happiness and concern?

By *ren*, Confucius meant universal love based on love for one’s parents. How should people love one another then? Confucius said, “One should be aware that other people may have similar desires as oneself. While fulfilling one’s desires, allow others to fulfill theirs as well.” He further said, “Do not do toward others anything you would not want to be done to you.” Thus from oneself to one’s family, from family to society, one should extend love to all people. Mencius (c. 372–289 BC), a great Confucian scholar, best summarized *ren* as, “loving one’s parents, loving the people, loving everything in the world.”

Today, the Confucian doctrine of “Do not do toward others anything you would not want to be done to you” still holds true for humankind.

LI: SAFEGUARD SOCIAL STABILITY AND HARMONY

Li refers to rituals, traditions, and norms in social life. Of these, Confucius regarded burial rituals and ancestral worship rituals as the most important, because they arose from human feelings. He said, “A child is not able to leave his parents’ bosom until he is three years old.” He naturally loved his parents. The ritual of wearing mourning for a deceased parent for 3 years was an expression of the child’s love and remembrance. This example shows that *li* is an expression of true love for one’s parents.

Confucius placed emphasis on *Li* with the aim of preserving social order, stability, and harmony. *The Analects* says, “The role of *li* is to maintain harmony among people.” This is the remark by one of Confucius’ disciples, but it reflects the teacher’s thought. The role of *Li* is to maintain harmonious relationship among people in social life.

Li also has philosophical implications. While individuals have a limited lifespan, life in nature is everlasting. Life is given by one's parents and extended through one's children. In this way, a limited, individual life becomes merged with the limitless life of nature; the individual dream of eternal life can thus come true. Through burial rituals and ancestral worship rituals, people are able to experience the everlasting continuity of life, appreciating the value and meaning of life. This gives people metaphorical solace.

SEEKING A MORE MEANINGFUL AND VALUABLE LIFE

Before Confucius, only the nobility had the right to education. He was the first person in Chinese history to initiate private education. According to historical records, Confucius taught for many years and trained 3,000 disciples. A total of 72 of them excelled in the "six arts," i.e., ritual, music, archery, chariot driving, calligraphy, and mathematics. A great educator, Confucius has been admired by later generations as the "sage of sages."

Confucius believed the basic goal of education was to cultivate "persons of virtue," who should have sound character and uplifted minds. Such persons should be able to shoulder important social responsibilities and to make contributions to society. Confucius regarded lofty ideals, great virtue, love for one's fellow beings, and the "six arts" as the general principles of education. Of these, virtue was the most important. His students were involved in a variety of professions, including politics, trade, education, diplomacy, ritual ceremony, and classifying ancient books. Whatever they did, they all wanted to improve their learning of the humanities and to enhance their virtue.

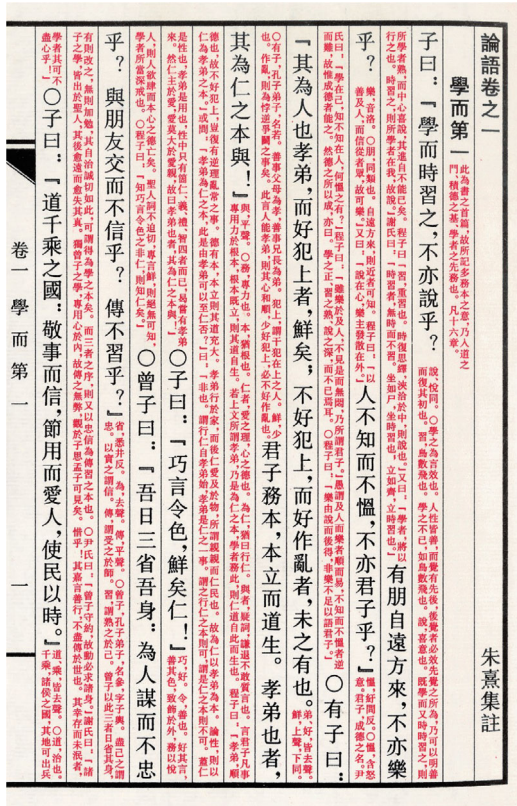


Three Masters Smiling Beside Tiger Stream, *unknown artist, Song Dynasty*

Confucius emphasized aesthetic education. He said, “Studying *The Book of Songs* inspires the spirit and helps one appreciate beauty. Studying *The Book of Rites* enables one to behave properly as a person of enlightenment. Studying music lifts the spirit and helps one to enjoy life.” He also said, “Simply knowing the highest standard of virtue (i.e., love for one’s fellow beings) is not as good as setting it as one’s goal. Setting it as one’s goal is not as good as enjoying the practice of it.”

On one occasion, Confucius asked several of his disciples to talk about their aspirations. Zi Lu and Ran You wanted the opportunity to administer a state. Gongsun Chi wanted to become a master of rituals. Zeng Dian said, “My aspiration is different from theirs.” “That is acceptable,” said Confucius. “We are only talking about our own aspirations.” Zeng Dian then said, “(My dream) is to wear spring robes in late spring and to swim in the Yi River with five or six adults and six or seven children. We shall enjoy the breeze where people pray for rain. Then we shall go home, singing all the way.” Confucius sighed, “Ah, I share Dian’s aspiration.” This famous dialog demonstrates the different aspirations of the four students, which reflected their different outlooks on life. Confucius’ agreement with Zeng Dian indicates that while he stressed individual contribution to society, he regarded the highest state of life as harmony

among people and harmony between people and nature. His was a true aesthetic outlook on life.



A page from the Analects

Under the influence of Confucius, Chinese thinkers of later generations all believed that students and scholars should not only increase their knowledge, but, also and more importantly, broaden their minds and enhance their spiritual ethos. In other words, they should continually seek the greater meaning and value of life. Many modern scholars think the theory on the perspective on life is the most valuable feature of Chinese philosophy. It all began with Confucius.



Hanbi Pavilion in Jichang Garden, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province