

Traditional Chinese Culture and Everyday Life

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Abstract

Culture and life, these two concepts always stick together. The renaissance of the traditional culture and classics in this new century could be said as an inevitable process of the Chinese history. Represented by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, the traditional culture and thoughts are ubiquitous in every aspect of the Chinese people's life. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish the influence resulting from a particular thought. This article explores the fact that the Chinese people's life is the result of the common interaction of these three thoughts from three aspects.

Keywords: traditional Chinese culture, Rites and Music, leisure, everyday life

Introduction

China was a feudal state when the Emperor of Qin Dynasty, Qin Shihuang united the various states and became the first emperor of unified China in 221 BC. He started the feudal society of China which lasted for nearly two thousand years, until the end of Qing dynasty (1911). Before that China saw more than a thousand years of slave society. As we know, apart from the Han ethnicity, China has fifty-five other minorities. Each minority has its own cultural features and traditions, but the history of China and main cultural stream, were created by the people of Han and the culture of Han has been regarded as the orthodox.

Most Chinese cultural rites were set up as early as in the slave society of Western Zhou Dynasty (西周 1046-771 BC). While in the Eastern Zhou dynasty (东周 770-256 BC), which was divided into the Spring & Autumn period (春秋 770-476 BC) and Warring State period (战国 475-221 BC), many thoughts and theories like Confucianism and Taoism, great philosophers like Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Mencius, Xunzi and Mozi flourished and appeared in great numbers. The rites of Li represented by the Rites of Zhou, Rites and Ceremonies, and The Book of Rites (《周礼》《仪礼》《礼记》), which were set up in the Zhou dynasty have proposed an ideal society format. In such a society, everyone's behavior were restrained by the rites and each should abide by the principles of rites. These are the systematic ethics and rites that have

influenced the Chinese people through the dynasties, up to the present day, in spite of a temporal break-off in the last century.

Confucianism and Taoism are the two main cultural schools that have deeply influenced Chinese people's life. Whereas Buddhism, a religion that has had a profound impact on Chinese people's life did not enter into China until the Han dynasty. Chinese people's lives have been mainly influenced by these three cultural schools for a very long time; all the Chinese living philosophy, art and the daily life could be explained and understood through them. Confucianism is described as a tradition, a philosophy, a religion, a humanistic or rationalistic religion, a way of governing, or simply a way of life.¹ While Taoism differs from Confucianism by not emphasizing on rigid rituals and social order, but is similar to it in the sense that it is a teaching about the various disciplines for achieving "perfection" by becoming one with the natural rhythms of the universe called "the way" or "道", which has a great impact on the Chinese people's spiritual life. Besides Confucianism and Taoism, Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism has also shaped Chinese culture in a wide variety of areas including art, politics, literature, philosophy, medicine and material culture. Therefore it can be said that for a thousand years, Chinese history, culture and its people's life have been under the impact of these three main philosophical and religious thoughts.



Picture of The Hundred Schools of Thought

(Source: Baidu Images)

The inheritance and promotion of culture formed the lifestyle of people and in turn, the lifestyle carries and continues the culture.² The traditional Chinese culture was found everywhere in the lives of the Chinese people. For example, the concept of filial piety in the family, the rites in the society and benevolence (仁) in politics from the culture of Confucianism, the concept of man and Nature, or "let things take their own course" (无为) from Taoism, all have the reflections of culture in people's daily rituals and activities. Nevertheless the thoughts of Buddhism have been localized from India as Chan thoughts after finally making consensus with the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, whose thoughts have exerted a great impact on the Chinese literary class. Certainly, with a

¹ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction To Confucianism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 38-47.

² 田学斌, 《传统文化与中国人的生活》, 北京: 人民出版社, 2015年, p.3.

large territory and a big population, China also has its cultural diversities. China's geographical region can be divided into small parts, each having distinct sub-cultures. Such distinctions gave rise to the old Chinese proverb: "praxis vary within ten li (里), customs vary within a hundred li (里)."³ But in spite of the diversities, we could always find the common ideological roots and foundations for them.

1. The Rites and Music

China, as one of the world's oldest cradles of civilization, is famous for its etiquette. Traditional Chinese culture could be called as the Culture of Rites, which is inalienable to its civilization. But the concept of rites in Chinese tradition is different from the Western and Indian concept of religious customs. Rather, li (礼) embodies the entire spectrum of interaction between humans, Nature, and even material objects and it includes every aspect of people's social activities and daily life.

Music (乐) is an unavoidable topic when we talk about the rites (礼), for they are two inseparable parts and always put together in the Chinese culture. The rites and music are two different concepts, which were advocated by Confucius, and have appeared in the six Confucian classics. Duke of Zhou (周公) of the Western Zhou dynasty is the founder of Li. In the book of Zhou Li (Rites of Zhou), he puts 礼 (rites), 乐 (music), 射 (archery), 御 (charioteering), 书 (literature), 数 (maths), these six forms of art (六艺) as the basic life skills for the ruling class. Both rites and music have been closely related from the slave society during the dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou, to the nearly two thousand years of feudal society. Furthermore, the concept of harmony in Chinese culture and the harmonious society in the modern society comes from music.

Traditional Chinese music was divided into two categories, the ritual music and the secular one. The ancient Chinese thought that "music" is made from the union of the inner heart and the outside stimulation, and is expressed in the form of rhythmic sound played by instruments, lyrics and also the related dance forms. It could be said that rites are a kind of constraint for the high officials and noble lords, but music is reconciliation between all classes, and the goal of music is to create balance within individuals, Nature and society. Music was used to express the feelings, and wishes for people to live in a harmonious society, as in Chinese "乐者天地之和, 礼者天地之序也", means music is the harmony between the earth and heaven, and rites is the order between them.

Under Confucian concepts, music is considered to have the power to transform people in becoming more civilized, and leading people "back to the correct direction in life". This not only signifies the guiding role of music, but also emphasizes on the power of the rulers. As "文王兴周, 鸣琴而治" talks about the king of Wen in the Zhou dynasty who is said to have used qin to educate his people, thus attained a clean politics and low rate of crimes (政简刑清). To some extent, music became a part of rites on many ancient occasions such as the coronation of the kings, wedding or funeral ceremonies as well as sacrifices, or on solemn occasions like ceremonies and sacrifices in the temple or at banquets for entertaining guests in ancient times. Many ancient forms of music and musical instruments such as bianzhong (编钟) and guqin (古琴) are symbols of high social status of the ruling class, which holds a lot of importance in the culture of rites and music. Guqin was first created

³ 十里不同风, 百里不同俗。Here li (里) literally equals five hundred meters; ten li or hundred li are virtually referring to the size of an area.

in the Zhou dynasty and was initially played in a band and later on it gradually started being played by people individually. As one of the important musical instruments, guqin was mostly played in an orchestra performance in different ceremonies as well as sacrifices.



Bianzhong of the Warring State

(Source: Baidu Images)

Just as Arnold Perris puts "when the early rulers formed the li [rituals] and yue [music] their purpose was not to satisfy the mouth, stomach, ear and eye, but rather to teach the people to moderate their likes and hates, and bring them back to the correct direction in life.⁴ In the book of "Yue Ji" (《乐记》) it says knowing music is almost like knowing the rites; only after mastering both rites and music, can a man reach high morality⁵. Thus if you don't understand music then you also cannot say you understand the rites; music was regarded as important as the rites in the ancient Chinese society.

Same thoughts are reflected at many places in The Analects of Confucius (《论语》). "If a man is without moral character, what good can the use of the fine arts do him? If a man is without moral character, what good can the use of music do him?"⁶ It means if one who does not have benevolence, how would he promote the rites and music? Rites are the materialization of Ren (仁) or benevolence, while rites rely greatly on the formats of musics, which are inseparable from each other. Both Rites and music are used to constrain and help a man become noble. Just as Confucius remarked: "In education sentiment is called out by the study of poetry; judgement is formed by the study of the arts; and education of the character is completed by the study of music."⁷ That means one should learn the rites and music first then he could be called a noble man to the final harmony and unity. And he also said: "...in addition to the above qualities, if he could culture himself by the study of the rites and music, he would then be considered a perfect character."⁸

⁴ Perris, Arnold, "Music as Propaganda: Art at the Command of Doctrine in the People's Republic of China", cited in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol.27, No. 1 (1983), pp. 1-28.

⁵ 知乐则几欲礼矣。礼乐皆得，谓之有德，德者得也。Tian Xuebin, *Traditional Chinese Culture and Chinese people's life*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2015, p.2.

⁶ 《论语·八佾》，“人而不仁，如礼何？人而不仁，如乐何？” Gu Hongming (辜鸿铭), *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius*, Kunming: Yunnan Publishing Group, 2011, pp.28-29.

⁷ 《论语·泰伯》，“兴于诗，立于礼，成于乐。”Gu Hongming (辜鸿铭), *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius*, Kunming: Yunnan Publishing Group, 2011, pp.118-119.

⁸ 《论语·宪问》，“文之以礼乐，亦可以为成人矣。”Gu Hongming (辜鸿铭), *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius*, Kunming: Yunnan Publishing Group, 2011, pp.228-229.

Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that music became part of rites, not just because of it being an art form, but because in Confucianism, it could purify the people's mind to reach high morality so as to result in healthy and orderly social customs. Traditional Chinese music carries too many cultural elements in different instruments, playing methods and expression forms. Some of them may sound odd and strange to foreigners, but to any Chinese, they are special and familiar, and that is why it is so difficult to appreciate it without the knowledge and feeling of Chinese culture.

2. The Culture of Elegance (“雅”) and Vulgarly (“俗”)

In the western sociology, culture is divided into “high culture ” and “popular culture”, “Mass Culture” or “Low Culture”, according to the influence and popularity of the activities. Usually, people would regard that “High culture” is a means that is related to the words “art” and “civilization”, such as Mozart’s music and paintings of Van Gogh while the “popular” and “low” culture, enjoyed by the masses and ordinary people, is a little bit far from the “art”. In some sense “high culture” and “art” are “above” or “superior” to the other ones. Same is with the the Chinese culture. Influenced by the Confucian ideas, the traditional Chinese culture admires the elegance against extravagance and vulgarity. Within the Chinese culture there are two kinds of traditions: one is called “雅” (elegant), the other is “俗” (vulgar). So we often say the former is like the sunny spring and white snow (阳春白雪) while the latter is like the countrymen (下里巴人). Sometimes they would be in opposition and look down upon each other. However, for most of the time, both of them combine the core of traditional Chinese culture and have formed the living habits of the Chinese people, whose life has been deeply influenced by these two traditions.

For a long time, the culture represented by the social elites or nobility were regarded as elegance (“雅”), and on the contrary, those folk activities among the common people were regarded as vulgarity (“俗”). So sometimes the culture of elegance (“雅”) would be thought of being too high to be popular (曲高和寡), in which “曲” means the song of the *guqin* music. In fact, the culture of “俗” could be the folklore, the living habits and customs formed by a community in the adaption to the Nature, as well as the festivals and ritual of sacrifices, which are popular among the common people.

Just as many sociologists and people shared this art, the elegant culture or high culture is about the effects of works of art which are exposed to them. They are not just a collection of objects, or some activities, but is “a process whereby the best works of art constantly challenge us, compelling us to rethink our views and attitudes towards the world. If we regularly expose ourselves to the greatest artistic achievements, our lives will be constantly cleansed....”⁹ However, those activities we are enjoying today were once the privileges of the high class or literary people in ancient China.

In Imperial China, there were eight forms of “雅” culture: 琴 (the *guqin*), 棋 (the game of Go), 书 (calligraphy) and 画 (painting), 诗 (poetry), 酒 (wine), 花 (flower), 茶 (tea). Any well-educated scholar was expected to be skilled in the first four forms of art (四艺): “琴、棋、书、画”. Here we can see that music was once

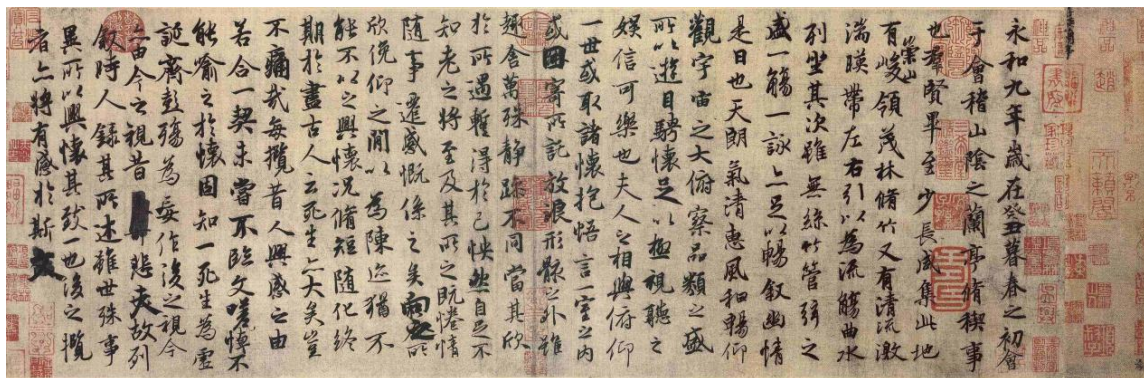
⁹ Inglis, David, *Culture and Everyday Life*, London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, pp.53-54.

¹⁰ See No.20, p.53.

regarded as the most important element for a decent life in old China and was a part of the rites. In the core of elegant culture lies the rites. However, there are many forms of traditional rituals of the rites which are formed from the culture of vulgarity. Rites considered as the constraints of society also originated from people's life.

Except for those individual elegant activities, there were also "eight elegant public gatherings" (八大雅集) among the old literati and noble scholars in ancient times. The contents are similar to the elegant things done by the individuals, but only in a collective way. Participants of these gatherings were the elegant individuals who came together to perform the elegant activities such as playing the guqin, painting, and writing poems. The most important element was the presence of an elegant mood. For example, *Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion* (《兰亭序》), the most noted and famous Chinese calligrapher Wang Xizhi's (王羲之 303–361) work in the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420) describes the elegant gathering of a number of poets at Lanting near the town of Shaoxing (绍兴)¹¹ for the Spring Purification Festival (立春), where a poem should be composed impromptu when the floating wine cup stops in front of a poet. The poet is required to compose a poem after consuming the cup of wine. In Chinese it is called "曲水流觞".

Whether the people chose the entertainment of elegance or vulgarity, noble or low, all the social activities of a certain community are manifested within their cultural characteristics. Thus they form their lifestyle. The Chinese people and their culture are of no exception. But due to the admiration of power and status attached with those forms of art, those elegant activities once enjoyed by the upper class have always been the favorites of the Chinese people till today.



Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion (《兰亭序》)

By Wang Xizhi (王羲之 303–361)

(Source: Baidu Images)

¹¹ Shaoxing is a town in Zhejiang province.



Painting titled “Poetry over the Floating Wine Cup” at Lan Ting
(Source: Baidu Images)

3. The Culture for Leisure

In the long history of China, the whole society was divided into four prominent classes: educated social elites, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants (士农工商). The majority of first category were mainly from the ruling class, who enjoyed a high social status and social fortune. The latter three belonged to the labour class, which usually came from the bottom of the social pyramid. According to their work, each class had its own rituals and focus on life, but as Chinese, they all have had a common love—the love for leisure.

The Chinese people are famous all over the world for their diligence but are rarely known for being lovers of leisure and entertainment, which they actually are. Sometimes the leisure activities is a kind of self-cultivation, closely related to the traditional Confucian philosophy, which proposes that people first need to rectify the mind by self-cultivation, in order to regulate the family, country and the world in turn. Whereas in the thoughts in Taoism, people are taught to live naturally without too much pursuit of worldly fame and success. Zhang Chao (张潮), in the Qing dynasty once wrote in his work *Shadows of Serene Dreams* (《幽梦影》): People’s fun lies in the leisure time but it does not mean they have nothing to do; they could play qin, go travelling, make friends, drink tea and read, all of which are great sources of happiness in the world”.¹² These kinds of activities which we have already discussed, belong to the culture of elegance, mostly enjoyed by the ruling class or the ancient literati. But for the common people, the choices are actually more. So many activities of the Chinese folklore are actually for entertainment. For instance, during grand celebrations of the lantern festival, going out to appreciate various decorations of lights and lanterns have become a very joyful pastime for the people.

¹² 清·张潮，《幽梦影》，“人莫乐于闲，非无所事事之谓也。闲则能抚琴，闲则能游名山，闲则能交益友，闲则能饮茶，闲则能著书，天下之乐，莫大于是。” Zhang Chao, *Shadows of Serene Dreams* (《幽梦影》), Xi’an: Sanqin Publishing House, 2018, p.91.

The Chinese people are truly lovers of leisure and entertainment, as Lin Yutang put it “Chinese is known as a great idler”.¹³ He thinks that culture is essentially a product of leisure. The art of culture is therefore essentially the art of loafing. From the Chinese point of view, “the man who wisely idle is the most cultured man”.¹⁴ Chinese people’s love for leisure is a temperament, which is derived from the influence of traditional philosophy and culture, especially Taoist philosophy. Whether the people are wealthy or poor they would go after an idle life. So the forms of leisurely life are various, some are called “雅” (elegant), and some are “俗” (vulgar), but the common ground in both of them is not to make life a humdrum routine exercise. Therefore, they would love to make every effort in finding ways to entertain themselves. In the book *My Country and My People*, Lin Yutang has summarized 65 forms of activities in the Chinese leisure time from the basic material needs such as eating and clothing to the spiritual practices like enjoying different types of art and visiting temples¹⁵. And most of those forms are still alive in the modern Chinese people’s everyday life, not to mention what Lin listed, date back to a century. People in modern times have more choices.



A painting of Chinese Recreation— a game of fighting crickets (斗蟋蟀)

(Source: Baidu Images)

After one hundred years, life in contemporary China has changed a lot, and people’s occupations cannot be just put into those simple four categories, but the essence of Chinese people’s lifestyle has not changed, the love for leisure and freedom, the pursuit of art and romance are still in the nature of Chinese. Some forms of entertainment once loved by the ancient Chinese are still popular in modern China. For example, playing mahjong (搓麻将) and watching local opera (看社戏). The love for such individual hobbies among the modern Chinese people has not disappeared. In this sense, we can see in their leisure time people would choose the activities of both elegance or vulgarity, in other words, the “high culture” and “popular culture”.

¹³ Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living*, Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2017, p.319.

¹⁴ See No. 24, p.321.

¹⁵ Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People*, Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2017, p.639.

Conclusion

To put it briefly, “culture and life were entangled together and influenced each other. Culture could exist beyond the changes in politics.”¹⁶ Even after the end of a dynasty or an era, the culture still continues, which unites the hope of a stable Chinese community for thousands of years. The same way in which artistic works or traditional customs could prevail for thousands of years. One such example would be music, which is an important form of expression for the people to enjoy life or escape from reality. Traditional Chinese music is not only an artistic form, but also an important component of the traditional Chinese Confucianism, juxtaposed with the Rites.

Reference

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¹⁶ 田学斌, 《传统文化与中国人的生活》, 北京: 人民出版社, 2015 年, p.3.