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A GLIMPSE OF THE CHINESE CULTURE - A HISTORICAL APPROACH

Fong Hon Kah

THE BEGINNING OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION

The earliest civilizations of the world were those of Chinese, Indians, Egyptians and Babylonians.

The Chinese civilization originated in China proper and flourished at the vast alluvial tracts of Huang Ho (Yellow River) and its tributaries about six thousand years ago. The relics of recent excavations by the Chinese archaeologists showed that about five to six thousand years ago the cultural development at Chang Kiang (Yangtze River) region had already reached a high level.

Ancient China was well protected by the natural barriers. On the east and the south there are Pacific Ocean and South China Sea; on the west there are almost unsurmountable mountain ranges; and on the north there are vast deserts and frigidzone. Thus the fertile tracts of land along Huang Ho and its tributaries provided the most favourable conditions for human habitation and became the cradle of Chinese culture; and because of the natural barriers and the vastness of the country, compared to the other three civilizations, Chinese civilization has been far less interrupted, and has been able to develop continuously until today. Under such circumstances, it is only natural for the Chinese people to become contented, peace-loving, humane, compromising, tolerant, conservative and introvert. In fact, China in the olden days was a world by itself. The Chinese believed that China was situated in the middle of the world, and thus they called their nation “Chung Kuo” (Middle Kingdom). The Chinese culture was so advanced, and was as beautiful and bright as a flower (hua), that China or Chinese was called “Chung Hua”.

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Jabatan Muzium Sarawak

A GLIMPSE OF THE CHINESE CULTURE
– A HISTORICAL APPROACH –

by

Fong Hon Kah

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ANCIENT CHINA

Huang Ti

According to Szuma Chien, the great historian of the Han Dynasty, the recorded history of China started from the reign of a prominent ruler called Huang Ti (Yellow Emperor). That was about 4,600 years ago. Huang Ti distinguished himself first by defeating Yen Ti at Pan Chuan and then

exterminating Chih Yu at Chuo Luk, both in Honan Province, and assumed the role of supreme leader of the tribes in China.

During the reign of Huang Ti, the Chinese people had already learnt how to breed silkworms and to reel the silk from cocoons, thus solving the problem of clothing. Having learnt farming, building of houses and construction of ships and carts, they also solved the problems of food, housing and transportation. The basic needs of mankind were satisfied. In addition, the people had also learnt to use a primitive form of writing, and developed a system called *tien-kan* and *ti-chih* for the counting of time. Compass was also invented at this time, and Huang Ti himself made use of it in his war against Chih Yu. Thanks to the use of compass, he won the war.

It seems rather unlikely that there could be so many important inventions during the reign of Huang Ti, but the relics of the excavations carried out in China during the 1970s showed that about 6,000 years ago, the Chinese people living along the Yangtze River region had already learnt to breed silkworms, to grown padi, and had acquired the sophisticated techniques of building. They also had learnt to rear pigs, buffaloes, sheep and dogs, to make fine cooking utensils, and to use sharp weapons. The primitive form of writings was also found on the pottery unearthed.

Huang Ti was the first common leader of the tribes in China. All the succeeding rulers claimed to be the descendants of Huang Ti, including the leaders of the barbarians living along the borders. That is why the Chinese people are called "the descendants of Huang Ti".

The Chinese believe that their first ancestor was a half-man half-dragon creature. So they also call themselves "the offsprings of dragon". Could it be the totem of a tribe in ancient China?

Emperor Yao (2357–2256 B.C.)

Ti Yao or Emperor Yao (2357–2256 B.C.) was the fifth generation of Huang Ti, and was the most reverential emperor in the history of China. He was sincere, thoughtful, intelligent, capable and possessed all the good qualities of a great leader. Confucius exalted: "Great was Yao as a King. How exalted! It was the greatness of Heaven that Yao took as model. How vast! The people lacked terms to describe him. How exalted were his accomplishments. How brilliant his elegance!"

During the reign of Emperor Yao the people were taught to observe the five basic human relationships: For sovereign and subject there was obligation to fulfill; for father and son there was a sense of being a family; for superior and inferior there was propriety; for husband and wife there was distinction of function; for friends there was good faith.

When Emperor Yao was getting old, he abdicated his throne, not to his own son the crown prince Tan Chu, but to a capable and popular Minister in his court by the name of Shun. When Shun became the Emperor, he made Tan Chu the Marqius of Fang (or Fong) District. The son of Tan Chu, Lin, adopted Fang (or Fong) as his surname. He was the seventh generation of Huang Ti and the third generation of Emperor Yao. That was how the Fangs (or Fongs) acquired their surname. Many Chinese got their surname in this manner, while others got their from the title of their ancestors or the natural phenomenon of the place where their ancestors lived.