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**MAIN SYMBOLS IN CULTURAL MEMORY OF CHINA**

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**Abstract**

This paper studies basic Chinese characters in the context of cultural memory. The author considered traditional symbols associated with the origin of a group, which are designed to support its identity. The essence of these symbols is understood in interconnection with other symbols and images and “closed world” of the memory of the Chinese people and the symbolic core of Chinese culture open in the interweaving of their meanings. This paper reveals and analyzes the complex of such images of cultural memory that are ethically significant for China as a kind of connecting structures. For the convenience of presentation, the following classification of symbols is proposed: natural-space, landscape, zoomorphic, plant, graphic and numerical symbols. During the research, the main (core) ideas of Chinese traditional thought were determined, namely: the idea of natural-cosmic and social worlds as a single integral organism, the need to regulate the activities of society and a person in accordance with the highest principles, the cyclical nature and constant updating of all processes and the dynamics and interaction of natural elements and social phenomena. The paper also shows the functional spectrum of traditional symbols in modern Chinese society: the preservation of the culture of antiquity and the continuity of traditions have a restraining effect on the processes of borrowing ethically alien elements, balancing the periods of reforms and transformations, forming a sense of involvement of each citizen in the history of their country, developing a community of memory and feeling identity.

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## 1. Introduction

A symbol is a unique sign structure that indicates the polysemy and sacredness of a certain cultural phenomenon. It is a meaning-generating culturological constant, through which there is a reflection, consolidation and transmission of a value or ideal in a sensually perceived image.

It is necessary to note an important characteristic of any symbol: “it never belongs to any one synchronous layer of culture, it always pierces this layer vertically, coming from the past and going into the future” (Lotman, 1992, p. 192), thereby transferring meanings from one layer of culture to another and creating a common space of memory. As Lotman (1992) writes, “... the unity of the main set of dominant symbols and the duration of their cultural life largely determine the national and areal boundaries of cultures” (p. 194). In addition, symbols in cultural memory do not disappear, but circulate from the sphere of the actualized, manifested to the sphere of the potential and vice versa. Thus, the entire thickness of the past is preserved in the cultural memory, here the past is preserved as upcoming, but only the past that is valuable for the present is actualized.

This phenomenon can be traced especially clearly in the spiritual culture of China. The simplest Chinese symbol is inevitably accompanied by other symbols, it turns out to be inextricably linked with them and this symbolic relationship makes up a unique picture of Chinese culture – a kind of closed world of memory of the Chinese people. Moreover, symbolic forms in cultural memory are not established once for all, on the contrary they are mobile and cyclical: the stronger the power in the country, the stronger the connecting structures in society become. Similarly, in periods of weakening power, the connecting symbols disintegrate, moving into the sphere of the potential.

## 2. Problem Statement

Lotman (1992) wrote that “... it is simple symbols that form the symbolic nucleus of culture and their saturation makes allows judging the symbolizing or de-symbolizing orientation of the culture as a whole” (p. 192). Chinese culture is characterized by an exceptional degree of integration of ancient symbols into all spheres of life. Even food preparation has its own special symbolic meaning (Ma, 2015). Therefore, it will be important to consider the complex of such ethically significant symbols for China, namely the structures that connect society. Moreover, it is necessary to analyze these symbols in their interrelationship and dynamics as “folded generators of cultural memory” in China (Prots, 2008).

## 3. Research Questions

Classifying symbols according to the form of display, it is possible to distinguish natural-space, landscape, zoomorphic (animal), plant, graphic and numerical symbols. It should be understood that such a classification is not comprehensive and is required only for presentation, while it is more important to consider the following issues:

1. What spiritual values and ideas form the basis of the traditional symbols of Chinese cultural thought?
2. What is the functional significance of traditional symbols in contemporary Chinese culture?

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this research is to consider basic Chinese symbols in the context of cultural memory, highlight their main meanings and indicate their functional spectrum in modern Chinese culture.

The study and understanding of the functionality of Chinese symbols helps to answer questions related to the ethnogenesis and cultural genesis of the Chinese. It contributes to a more detailed understanding of the culture of China. This is also important in order to build a dialogue of cultures, because national identity is based not only on the common language and territory, but also on certain traditions and values of ethnic societies. The very essence of cultural and historical memory reveals a tendency towards conservatism, which manifests itself whenever it faces elements of another culture that are alien to it, thereby influencing the very mechanism of interethnic interaction. Knowledge and understanding of basic cultural symbols is important for peaceful coexistence and symphonic harmonization of different cultures.

## 5. Research Methods

This paper uses an integrated cultural-philosophical approach. In particular, during the course of the work, the methods of historical and philosophical interpretation, attribution to values, structural and comparative methods were used.

## 6. Findings

### Natural space and landscape symbols

The formation of natural and cosmic symbolism was greatly influenced by Taoism – the teachings of the great wise men of antiquity Lao Tzu (the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC) and Chuang Tzu (369–286 BC). The teachings about Tao, the opposing forces of Yin-Yang and the unified energy of Chi, permeating the entire universe, have become meaningful for the spiritual culture of China.

Tao is the ontological basis of the whole world, everything that generates the beginning, that precedes Heaven and Earth, the principle of cyclical time, the Highest path, unfolding in continuous motion. Tao gives rise to the One (Tai Chi – the Great Limit), the One gives rise to two (the forces of Yin and Yang), two give rise to three (three principles: Heaven – Earth – Man), three give rise to all that exists: this is how the origin of the entire universe is described in the Chinese tradition.

Yin and Yang are two opposite, but dependent on each other, fundamental forces. Their interaction sets everything in motion.

The union of Yin and Yang leads to the birth of things, the separation of Yin and Yang leads to destruction, the violation of the order of Yin and Yang leads to changes, the balance of Yin and Yang leads to constancy (Zhang, 2019, p. 5).

In Chinese traditional culture, three main principles are also united and interconnected – Heaven, Earth and Man. At the same time, the Tao of Heaven is expressed through the cosmic forces of Yin and

Yang, the Tao of the Earth is expressed through “softness” and “hardness” and the Tao of man is expressed through humanity and duty. In this context, Confucian values are already quite clearly manifested. Thus, a person turns out to be an accomplice in the regulation of natural processes. Building his behavior in accordance with ethical standards, a person acts as a kind of mediator of Heaven and Earth, its connecting link.

Subsequently, the philosopher Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BC) develops the concept of the unity of the natural and social worlds, putting forward the thesis of the mutual perception and response of Heaven and Man. Dong Zhongshu managed to create a whole system of natural philosophy, reconciling the ideas of Confucianism, Taoism, the doctrine of Yin and Yang and the five primary elements (Wu Xing), into which everything that exists is disintegrated: Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, Earth. Thus, Dong Zhongshu combined “natural processes, omens, human relations and state affairs into a single teaching, according to which public order (in particular, the transfer of the Heavenly Mandate) became a part of the natural cosmic development” (May & Tomoda, 1999, p. 18).

Landscape symbols include mountains and waters. Numerous rivers, giving life and fertile soil, seemed to ancient people inhabited by mystical creatures, dragons and snakes. “Mountains stretching upward, with inaccessible peaks, were considered as the habitat of the spirits of the ancestors and were a place for communication with Heaven” (Lopes, 2014, p. 203). The contemplation and reproduction of landscapes of mountains and rivers is reflected in Chinese traditional painting *Shan Shui* and in the “poetry of mountains and waters”. In Chinese gardens and parks, *Shan Shui* nature is reproduced in miniature, in each park there is at least one small lake and at least one stone is installed. In addition it is necessary to note *Feng Shui* dispensational system (Chinese geomancy, showing where and how best to build temples and dwellings), which attaches great importance to the flow of winds and waters. The very name *Feng Shui* is literally translated as “wind and water”.

#### **Plant and zoomorphic symbolism**

Plant symbolism, as well as landscape, is widely represented in landscape architecture, arts and crafts, painting and poetry. In Chinese painting, for example, there is *huangyao* direction (“flowers are birds”), in which the “four noble flowers” (*si junzi*) are depicted separately: orchid, chrysanthemum, bamboo and Chinese plum. These four flowers symbolize the qualities of a noble husband: an orchid is a great talent and wisdom, a chrysanthemum is a respected person in solitude and detachment from worldly affairs, bamboo is modesty and compliance and Chinese plum is a principled and strong-willed person, a fighter for an idea. Bamboo, plum and pine are also called “three friends in winter”: they endure winter firmly and are not afraid of cold winds and snow. They personify courage, inflexibility of character and are also a symbol of eternal friendship. Plant symbols are widely represented in the Taoist tradition: lotus, gourd, peach, tangerine and mushroom-chji.

Numerous zoomorphic symbols are also represented in Chinese culture. A dragon, the first in importance and one of the most widespread pictorial images is among them. Dragon images have been found on various objects since ancient times and have been preserved in traditional Chinese culture for thousands of years up to the present day. At the same time, the image of a dragon has always personified the most important concepts of life, natural elements and cosmic forces. In its original form, a dragon appears as a circle (uroboros snake) or, rather, a spiral and reflects the character of nature: flexibility,

dynamism, cyclicity, renewal (a snake shedding its skin), the interconnection of all things and phenomena.

In the religious sphere, a dragon is perceived as the totem-First Ancestor, the progenitor of all that exists and is invariably associated with the cult of fertility. People called dragons the lords of the rain: they believed that good weather and a rich harvest depend on a dragon (Garrido, 2020, p. 69).

A dragon was also associated with the emperor – the son of Heaven, the ruler on Earth. Probably, such ideas appeared in the Shang era (1600–1046 BC), when the dragon Kuei was one of the most important mythical creatures.

He was responsible for the cycles of death and birth of all things and was able to deify people, turn them into perfectly wise (sacred parents). The Shan rulers were respected as descendants of the dragon, they were endowed with supreme power and were under the protection of the dragon (Gorodetskaya, 2016, para. 8).

In the Han era (206 BC – 220 AD), the images of a dragon and phoenix also become key philosophical symbols. They are included in “four spirits” (*si shen*) along with a white tiger and a black warrior turtle. Usually the “four spirits” are located on the four cardinal points, each in its own part. A white tiger was considered as a symbol of the west, autumn, an azure dragon was considered as the east, spring and a cinnabar phoenix was considered as the south, summer and was located at the top of the tree. A turtle weaved with a snake was a symbol of winter and the north. The “four spirits” thus personified a single annual cycle.

The Chinese calendar cycle is also presented in zoomorphic images. The cycle consists of 12 years. Each year corresponds to a certain sign of an animal: rat, bull, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog, pig. In general, animal symbolism was actively used in Ancient China: on the basis of zoomorphic symbols, “Chinese pundits reinterpreted time, space, life and death” (Lakomska, 2021).

### **Numerical and graphic symbolics**

It is easy to trace the high degree of representation of numerical symbols: “4 noble men”, “4 spirits”, 12 signs of the zodiac. Indeed, a distinctive feature of Chinese culture is the unique classification of all things by numerological or graphic characteristics.

The very process of cosmogenesis, that is, the creation of the cosmos, the Celestial Empire, is described using numerical symbolism. In the philosophy of Lao Tzu, Tao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three and three gives birth to all things. All things contain Yin and Yang, they are filled with Chi and form harmony. The creation of the universe according to the “Canon of Changes” is presented as the birth of two principles from the Great Limit, 2 principles give rise to 4 images and they, in turn, give rise to 8 trigrams. The number symbol corresponds to a large number of heterogeneous realities. Thus, two principles can correspond to binary compositions Yin and Yang, Heaven and Earth.

Four images can be understood as four possible combinations of two principles, four cardinal points (north, south, west, east) and the corresponding mythological animals, four signs (Black turtle with a snake, Red bird, White tiger, Azure dragon). “The number 8 in general has a particularly favorable meaning in Chinese culture, because, firstly, it is related to the hieroglyph *fa*, meaning material well-being, wealth, and secondly, because it describes eight natural phenomena: Heaven, Earth, Thunder, Water, Mountain, Wind, Fire and Swamp” (Zhang, 2019). Eight trigrams are the foundations of the world order: “their interaction, transformation, growth and decline in “*I Ching*” explain the processes of change in all things”.

According to another tradition the fundamental foundations of the universe are five elements of *Wu Xing*. “The fivefold classification, originally presented by *xing* and having a characteristic spatial-temporal orientation, gradually became more complicated by means of correlation comparing its components with other objects” (Pushkarskaya & Garrido, 2020). In addition to the already mentioned natural elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water), there are other categories, for example, five directions (east, south, center, west, north), five colors (green, red, yellow, white, black ), five organs (liver, heart, spleen, lungs, kidney), five viscera (gallbladder, small intestine, stomach, colon, bladder), 5 feelings (anger, joy, thoughtfulness, grief, fear), five permanences (humanity, ritual, trust, justice, wisdom), etc. In this case, all parts are interconnected and interdependent.

## 7. Conclusion

The above mentioned classification of the key symbols of the spiritual culture of China is not comprehensive, but it illustrates well the basic ideas of Chinese symbols such as:

1) The relationship of any social phenomenon with the natural and cosmic world and the need to regulate the activities of society and a person in accordance with the highest principles;

2) Cyclicity, repetition and renewal of all processes, including social ones: for example, in the cultural memory of China, there is a constant process of returning to antiquity (traditional symbolism enshrined in ancient canons), rethinking basic values in the present and their actualization (introducing modern person);

3) The dynamics and interaction of all elements: when the elements are in balance, then their interaction occurs systematically, which allows contemplating the path of all things in the universe and even predict the course of time; when the balance is imbalanced, fundamental changes occur and it is difficult to predict the outcome of events.

Thus, the specific features of Chinese thought are “a view of nature, man and spirit as something organically whole, united by a complex system of interconnections” (Minyan & Abramova, 2010, p. 27), the comprehension of objects in their integrity and succession of development, as well as “increased scientific attention to the factors of chaos, organization and their rational management” (Minyan & Abramova, 2010, p. 28).

In general, all Chinese symbols are characterized by a pronounced consistency and integrity and are preserved in a potential or actualized form in the cultural memory of the Chinese people. Perhaps that is why it has such a long-term stability.

Cultural memory develops a sense of identity, stability and cohesion. By re-evaluating the past in accordance with the requirements of the present, society overcomes the problem of historical change: cultural memory creates the illusion of constancy in time and the presence of the past in the present (Hendel, 2010, p. 31).

Despite the great influence of the Western world, Chinese culture does not lose its identity. The preservation of antique culture and the continuity of traditions have a restraining effect on the processes of borrowing ethically alien elements, balancing the periods of reforms and transformations.

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