**Chinese Bamboo Culture**

China is not only famous for its national treasure, the giant pandas, but also the giant panda’s staple food -- bamboo. The Chinese love bamboo, and bamboo culture has been rooted in their minds for a long time. To the Chinese people, bamboo is a symbol of virtue. It reflects people’s souls and emotions.

![Image of bamboo forest](image)

Bamboo is viewed as a symbol of traditional Chinese values. It is an example of the harmony between nature and human beings. Ancient Chinese people designated the plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum as the "four gentlemen", and pine, bamboo and plum as the "three friends in winter". People think its deep root denotes resoluteness; its tall, straight stem represents honor; its hollow interior modesty and its clean and spartan exterior exemplify chastity.

Ancient Chinese literature held bamboo in profound esteem. This explains why there are so many writings and paintings dedicated to the plant throughout history.

**Origin**
Possessing the most bamboo of any country in the world, China is well known as the Kingdom of Bamboo. China grows 400 species of bamboo, and one third of all known bamboo species in the world are grown in China. China has the largest bamboo planted area, and the area which produces the most bamboo in China is the south Yangtze River area -- a very popular destination among tourists from all around the world.
The history of Chinese people planting and using bamboo can be traced back 7,000 years. As early as the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th century B.C), bamboo was already used in various aspects of ancient Chinese people’s daily lives. It was used for food, clothing, housing, transportation, music instruments and even weapons. Before the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) when paper was invented, strips of bamboo had been used as the most important writing medium more widely used other materials, such as silk, animal furs and rocks. China’s first books were crafted from bamboo strips on string. Thus bamboo played an important part in the daily life of ancient Chinese people, and its role as a writing medium helped keep history records and traditional Chinese culture for us to study.

In traditional Chinese culture, bamboo is a symbol of Oriental beauty. It represents the character of moral integrity, resistance, modesty and loyalty. It also stands as an example of loneliness and elegance, among others. This value becomes one of the major themes in Chinese painting, calligraphy and poetry. For thousands of years, generations of artists praised bamboo in the name of this spirit.

**The Spirits of Bamboo Culture**

Bamboo has the title of "gentleman" among other plants. As a symbol of virtue, bamboo is always closely related to people of positive spirits. Famous Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Bai Juyi (772-846) summarized the merits of bamboo according to its
characteristics: its deep root denotes resoluteness, straight stem represents honorability, its interior modesty and its clean exterior exemplifies chastity. Bamboo culture always plays a positive role in encouraging people to hold on when facing tough situations.

**Stories of Bamboo Culture**
Throughout history, bamboo has given inspiration to many artists. A large number of artistic works have been made with the theme of bamboo, including poems, paintings and music. There are lots of legends and stories derived from bamboo culture.

1. **Mottled Bamboo (Bamboo of Imperial Concubines)**
According to legend, during the reign of Emperor Shun (an emperor of the far ancient age of China more than 2,000 years ago), there are nine evil dragons on the Jiuyishan Mountain of Hunan province. Emperor Shun decided to help his people kill the evil dragon, because his people were suffering from the disasters brought by the evil dragons.

Ages passed, and Emperor Shun did not return. His two wives, Ehuang and Nuying were worried about their husband. They decided to go to Hunan to look for Emperor Shun. They were told Emperor Shun died trying killing the dragons. At hearing the sad news, they cried tears of despair. The tears fell on the soil by the Xiangjiang River, and bamboo growing on the river bank was stained. There was something like
fingerprints on the bamboo, and people said they are the fingerprints left by the two imperial concubines when wiping their tears. The red mottles on the bamboo came out from the blood of the tears.

2. Mengzong Bamboo
Mengzong, a scholar in ancient China, was a filial son who loved his mother so deeply that one of his stories was listed in the book of "24 Stories of Filial Piety" (the book keeps the records of 24 touching stories of filial people in ancient China).

During one winter, Mengzong’s mother was sick, and she wanted to eat some bamboo shoots. But usually bamboo didn’t grow shoots during winter, so Mengzong failed to find any bamboo shoots for his mother. He cried near the bamboo, and later he found some bamboo shoots at the places he cried. He took the bamboo shoots back home to cook for his mother. After eating the bamboo shoots, Mengzong’s mother became better gradually. People said the bamboo shoots came out because Mengzong’s filial piety had moved the heavens.

Bamboo and Characters

Bamboo formed the earliest ties with Chinese characters, which can be traced back to the New Stone Age 6,000 years ago. The pictographic symbol for "bamboo" was found on the pottery unearthed in the Yangshao cultural relics of Banpo Village, Xi'an in 1954, and the symbol was also discovered in oracle bone inscriptions and
inscriptions on ancient bronze objects. Between the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) to the Jin Dynasty (265-420 AD), the people wrote on "bamboo slips". Many of the earliest Chinese historical documents, such as the Book of Story and The Book of Rites and Analects of Confucius, were recorded on such material, making great contributions to the development of Chinese culture.

**Bamboo and Science and Technology**

The application of bamboo in science and technology is really thrilling. The Chinese invented a bamboo drill dating back to the Shang Dynasty (1600-1100 BC). In 251 BC Li Bing, Sichuan prefecture, led the local people in building the Dujiang Weirs, the first irrigation network in the world, in which bamboo played an important role. The world's oldest water pipe was also made from bamboo. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) the Sichuan people successfully sank a 1,600-meter-deep well with thick bamboo ropes. This technology did not spread to Europe until the 19th century, and in 1859 the Americans drilled the first oil well in Pennsylvania by using the technology.

**Bamboo and Architecture**

Bamboo has been used in architectural art since long ago. During the Han Dynasty skilful craftsmen built a magnificent palace for Emperor Hanwudi with bamboo. In southern China where bamboo is abundant, bamboo stilt houses are common residences for the people. Today, some minorities in Southwest China, like the Dai people in Yunnan, still live in the two-storied bamboo stilt houses — the upper floor of the house contains bedrooms, kitchens and balconies, and the ground floor is used to house poultry and domestic animals. The bamboo houses set off by green plantain trees makes for a lovely picture.
As it is light and tough with elasticity and bearing capacity, bamboo is an ideal building material, which can be used to construct houses, scaffolding and pillars. Enlightened by the Painting of Orchids and Bamboo, a masterpiece of the great Qing-dynasty painter and calligrapher Zheng Banqiao, Bei Luming, the world-famous architecture-design master, designed a 315-meter, 70-story mansion for China Bank. This magnificent building still stands lofty and firm in Hong Kong despite the horrible typhoons.

**Bamboo and Music**

Bamboo also has close ties with Chinese music. Among the cultural relics unearthed from the Zenghouyi tomb in Suixian County, Hubei Province, the 13-tube bamboo panpipe was the earliest one ever discovered. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), musical performers were called zhuren (literally "bamboo people"), as most of the instruments were made of bamboo.
Bamboo is indispensable to many traditional Chinese musical instruments, including the flute, sheng, zheng, jinghu, erhu and banhu. China's first national bamboo orchestra has a great variety of bamboo musical instruments, such as a dozen kinds of bamboo flutes, bamboo dippers, a bamboo percussion instrument composed of five or six drums of different sizes, and the huge dragon drum made of the world's thickest bamboo. When enjoying the pleasant music played by a buffalo boy with a bamboo flute, a love melody played by Miao young people with a lusheng, and some modern popular music played with bamboo musical instruments, one will be intoxicated with the purest sounds of nature.

**Bamboo and Bamboo Products**

Bamboo basketwork was first invented by the Chinese people during the New Stone Age. Ancient people wore a large bamboo hat to protect them from rain and bamboo shoes to walk on muddy roads.
Bamboo cloth was invented in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) and became a tribute to the emperors. With the development of the society and the progress in cultural life, there were an increasing variety of bamboo products including seats, such as bamboo chairs, bamboo stools and bamboo sofas; and sleeping furniture, such as bamboo deck chairs, bamboo beds, bamboo mats and bamboo pillows. Clothing was also made of bamboo, including bamboo hats and bamboo shoes. They also made decorations, including bamboo screens, bamboo curtains, bamboo vases and bamboo lanterns. As for containers, there are bamboo cupboards and bamboo cases; tableware, such as bamboo bowls and bamboo chopsticks; and writing materials, like bamboo brushes and bamboo pen containers. Farmers use bamboo tools like bamboo baskets, bamboo brooms and dustpans, and bamboo poles, as well as fishing tools, means of transport and many other daily necessities.

People appreciate bamboo carving as one of the special handicrafts of China. This traditional art took shape in the Six Dynasties (222-589) and became popular during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. The intelligent ancient Chinese not only made various daily necessities and tools for production with bamboo, but also engraved them with beautiful decorative patterns. Bamboo carvings cover a wide range of subjects such as images of Buddha, figures, flowers, animals, landscape and pavilions.

**Bamboo and Food**

Bamboo adds luster to Chinese food. The delicious and crispy bamboo shoot has won the people’s favor since ancient times. In his beautiful prose Bamboo Shoot,
Liang Shiqiu, a famous modern Chinese writer, vividly described the famous Beijing cuisines of "stewed shrimps and winter bamboo shoots" and "ham with stewed winter bamboo shoots". People also use bamboo to make wine, which tastes mellow and savory.

Bamboo can also be used as medicine. In his masterpiece Compendium of Materia Medica, the famous Ming-dynasty pharmacologist Li Shizhen recorded the great medical value of bamboo.

**Bamboo and Scholars and Artists**

The tall, straight and beautiful bamboo has been a favorite for Chinese scholars and artists since ancient times, who have sang high praises of its character. Bai Juyi, a great poet of the Tang Dynasty, compared bamboo to a "virtuous man" in his article. Zheng Banqiao, a celebrated Qing-dynasty painter and calligrapher, devoted his whole life to painting bamboo.

Many ancient scholars chose to live in seclusion in deep mountains surrounded by bamboo forests, where they drank wine, wrote poems or painted pictures while enjoying the beauty of nature. By leading such a simple life, they wanted to stay away from worldly affairs. Su Dongpo, a famous writer of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), wrote in his poem, "I would rather eat no meat than live without bamboo."