

The Chung Wah Heritage

Yit-Seng YOW

Ethnic Chinese wherever they are associate themselves as huaren 华人. Through the world there are numerous associations in the name of Chung Wah, though the English spellings differ from place to place.

The first Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (also known as Chong Wa Benevolent Association) was established in San Francisco in 1882; the Casino Chung Wah (a social club) was founded in Cuba in 1893, the Chung Wah Association was formed in Perth in 1910, Chung Wah School in Hawaii was founded in 1919; Chung Hua Hui was incorporated in Indonesia in 1927, etc.

The term Chung Wah 中华 (zhonghua in Mandarin) was coined in the year 300 (during the Wei-Jing era) adopting two words, “zhong” 中 and “hua” 华. As we all know, the word “zhong” refers to China, it also means “central” or “middle”; while “hua” refers to a region and people known as Huaxia 华夏, where a group of tribes lived along the Yellow River, in part of today’s Shanxi, Shaanxi and Henan provinces.

Some four thousand years ago, this region was considered civilised, compared to the surrounding areas. This is the region where two outstanding leaders, Emperor Yan 炎帝 and Emperor Huang 黄帝, ruled with wisdom and authority. Today Chinese throughout the world call themselves “*descendants of Emperors Yan and Huang*” 炎黄子孙.

Emperor Yan 炎帝 is also known as the “Divine farmer” 神农, he is the forefather of Chinese agriculture. The “Divine farmer” carefully studied the weather and the soil and taught his people how to plough the land, planting and harvesting crops. He was credited with tasting hundreds of herbs to ascertain their qualities. The earliest and one of the most authoritative texts on Chinese herbs, the “Compendium of Chinese herbs” 神农本草经; compiled some time during the end of the Western Han period (25 – 220 AD), honours his name. The divine farmer was legendary for a population faced with limited food resources when they moved away from hunting and gathering and gradually became farmers to till the land.

Emperor Huang 黄帝 (not to be confused with the Chinese word for an emperor 皇帝), is sometimes known as the “*Yellow Emperor*”. Also known as Xuan Yuan Shi 轩辕氏, he used his extensive knowledge of the terrain (mountain, rivers, marshes, plains), local knowledge, leadership and indomitable courage to lead his tribe in battles. In a decisive campaign, he defeated the belligerent and numerically superior army of Ji You 蚩尤. The tribal chieftains anointed Xuan Yuan the “Son of Heaven” and leader of the united clans.

The Emperor Huang is also known for one of the ancient classics, the *“Inner classics of Emperor Huang”* 黄帝内经, compiled by scholars and physicians in the Han dynasty (206 – 220 AD). This is one of the oldest comprehensive medical texts in the world, covering a broad spectrum of topics such as theory of medicine, diagnostics, acupuncture, etc. This text is also an importance source book pertaining to the Chinese philosophy, Daoism.

With considerable foresight, the Emperor Huang prohibited marriage within their own tribe, resulting in intermarriage between tribes, as well as merging of blood-lines, resulting in a new race known as the Hua Xia 华夏, the predecessors of the Han nationality to which more than 90% of the Chinese people belongs.

Over several hundred years of hard-work and uninterrupted prosperity, the region eventually gave birth to the flower of early Chinese civilization. The middle Yellow River basin that extends westward from today’s Zhengzhou into the Wei River valley near the present city of Xi’an is known as the "cradle of Chinese civilization." Virtually all of China's major dynasties and much of its native culture emerged from this region.

It is inevitable that outstanding personalities of such stature are embroiled in the Chinese mythology. As dragon symbolised imperial or supernatural power, the Emperor Huang is said to have ascended to the heaven in a dragon 黄帝乘龙升天.

The entity [Zhonghua] 中华 has evolved as an ethnic and cultural identity for the Han people. When the Han people was under siege, notably towards the end of the Qing dynasty, when China was under threat from external and internal factors¹ [zhonghua] was once again highlighted, as a conscious, national identity.

“Get rid of the Manchus, restore the zhonghua nation” 驱除鞑虏、恢复中华 as part of the slogan for the 1911 revolution. It galvanised the general population to overthrow the non-Han, invading race, the Manchus.

After the 1911 Revolution, the official definition of "Chinese people" 中华民族 was expanded to include non-Han ethnicities as part of a comprehensive Chinese nation, in order to boost the unification of different races in China.

This national identity became a very powerful force during the Japanese occupation in the 1930s and 1940s. The communist formed an alliance with the kuomintang nationalist in 1937, invoking the [zhonghua] identity, to jointly fight the invading imperial Japanese army, in the face of untold atrocities.

A popular anti Japanese song composed by poet and playwright TIAN Han 田汉 was used as a rallying call, stating that *“The zhonghua people have reached its most dangerous time”* 中

¹ Chung Wah Association and the 1911 Xin-hai revolution, Chung Wah Magazine, November 2011

华民族到了最危险的时候. This masterpiece, "*the march of volunteers*" 义勇军进行曲 is now the national anthem of the People's Republic of China.

The [zhonghua] identity is so fundamentally important that it is enshrined in the official name of both the People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国 and the Republic of China 中华民国. Indeed this identity transcends national boundaries, as it is the most commonly used identify for ethnic Chinese throughout the world.