**Language and Culture Show and Tell: Mandarin**

**Li-Yun Liao**

**Transcript**

S1: portrait of Confucius

S2:

The aim of this video is to make this collection accessible to as wide a range of people as possible. Whether you are a serious student of the Chinese language and/or culture, or merely curious for your own personal edification, we hope to spark your interest with this selection.  We’re going to start with the simplest (the Chinese way of greeting people), then provide some cultural and historical background to some traditional Chinese ways of doing things.  We will cross-reference other cultures wherever relevant.  After that, we’ll take you into Chinese characters and the reasonings behind their formation. We hope you will enjoy the show!

S3:

You might have heard Chinese people saying “nǐ hǎo” when they see each other.  You might also think that “nǐ hǎo” is “hello” in English.

That’s correct, and yet not. The literal breakdown of “nǐ hǎo” is “you good”, for saying one hopes the other party is well.

S4:

When Westerners see each other, they’ll shake hands as well as say “hello”.  These days, Chinese people will also shake hands, but this is not the Chinese people’s traditional form of etiquette.

S5:

The traditional form of greeting each other is 作揖 zuò yī. So, what is 作揖 zuò yī? We can look at it this way: it’s like two people in a Chinese martial arts kungfu film bowing to each other with both hands clasped in front of their chests just before they start sparring.

Today, we want to talk about 作揖 zuò yī here, so that you can surprise a Chinese person with your knowledge the next time you see them.

S6:

作揖 zuò yī is a common form of etiquette in daily life.

Apart from general social settings, one would often 作揖 zuò yī when thanking people, conveying one’s best wishes, apologising, or asking for a favour.

To make the obeisance, place both hands in front of the chest, clasped, left hand over the right.

Ancient Chinese people took the left to be the non-threatening side, because it’s the right hand that holds the sword. So it was normally the left hand over the right, as a sign of goodwill.

S7:

The Western practice of using the right hand to shake hands is to let the other party know that the sword-wielding hand is no longer free to attack them.

By the same token, Japanese people bow to each other to show that they trust the other party not to chop their head off while they’re bowing with the back of the neck exposed. Bowing is historically linked to the samurai (warrior) class, so this theory makes sense.

S8:

Now have a look at this portrait of Confucius. Confucius was the founder of Confucianism, a system of philosophical and ethical teachings.

Everything he said had a profound influence on the Chinese culture. He’s now known worldwide.

S9: Followers of Confucianism based their thinking on the 周礼 Zhōu lǐ, the Rites of Zhou, which is a compilation dating from the middle of the 2nd century BCE.

The Rites of Zhou was a work on bureaucracy and organisational theory. It was originally known as 周官, *Zhōuguān*, "Officers of Zhou" covering Etiquette and Rituals.

S10:

Look at the portrait. Confucius has both hands clasped across his chest. This is a sign of piety, sincerity, respect and modesty.

This is the 作揖 zuòyī we’d told you about earlier: making a slight bow with the hands folded in front.  It is also called the 拱手礼 gǒng shǒu lǐ: cupping one hand over the other in front of the chest.

It must be pointed out here, however, that a mistake had been made by the painter of this portrait. Confucius’s hands should have been left over right in the traditional 作揖 zuò yī gesture, but it’s the other way round in this portrait. The only explanation would be that the artist was not Chinese, as no Chinese person would make the mistake of conveying a 作揖 zuò yī gesture with the right hand over the left, let alone the grand master philosopher Confucius himself.

You might want to ask: What is Confucius holding in his hands?

Confucius was a teacher. The thing in his hands is called a 戒尺 jièchǐ / “discipline ruler” -- which was a wooden strip (or a narrow plank) used by tutors for carrying out corporal punishment on students.

Of course, this “discipline ruler” was not exclusive to China.  It was found in lots of schools in the West as well.

S11:

Here, it must first be pointed out that the status of “left” and “right” in traditional Chinese culture is not single-tiered nor fixed.

Most people tend to use their right hand for doing things, e.g., writing, and eating.  Therefore, the left hand, by contrast, seems clumsy and slow or awkward. In some cultures, e.g., Islam, it is actually the prescribed custom to use the right hand for eating, and the left hand for the toilet routine.

S12:

The meanings of “left” and “right” in classical Chinese are: “right” for things running smoothly or for approval; “left” for things not going to plan or for opposition.

This also gave rise to the tradition of “the right being respected, and the left being lowly”.

In the southern Chinese dialects of 潮州 Cháozhōu (/Teochew) and 福建 Fújiàn (/Hokkien), the word for right hand is 正手 “upright hand”, the word for left hand is 倒手 “reverse hand”.  This gives a clear indication to how they look upon the two hands.

It is also because it is in the Han Chinese nature to exercise reserve and restraint that demotion was expressed by the ancient Chinese as 左迁 zuǒ qiān / “left shift / shifting to the left”.

S13:

Look at the structure of the character for “the right” 右 yòu. You will see that it has a box shape in the bottom right corner.  The box shape is kǒu 口, which means mouth, so the right hand is the hand for eating.

The character for “the left” zuǒ 左 has, in the bottom right hand corner, what looks like the English letter I in upper case.  This is gōng 工, which means “manual labour”, so the left hand is for working.

When handing over something to someone, e.g., a business name card, one ought to, in principle, use both hands.  This is a sign of respect because it is an indication of the giver focusing his total attention on the act.

If, for whatever reason, one can only use one hand to hand over something, then it **has** to be the right hand.

S14:

男左女右 nán zuǒ nǚ yòu / “male left female right” also seems to have seeped into all aspects of the social life of the Chinese people through common practice becoming accepted custom.

The arrangement of public lavatories is male lavatory on the left, female on the right.

Wedding rings are worn on the left hand for men and on the right for women.

When posing for a wedding photo, or attending some ceremonial outing, a married couple will often be arranged with the man on the left and the woman on the right.

If the proper positioning is not observed, people will laugh at them for violating the customary practice of 男左女右 nán zuǒ nǚ yòu / “male left female right”.

In Palmistry, the same 男左女右 nán zuǒ nǚ yòu /  “male left female right” applies.  One reads the left palm for men, the right for women.

S15:

In the Chinese way of viewing a person’s character, people are grouped under two main categories of yīn and yáng.

Men are more forceful and strong, which comes under 阳 yáng and the left side.  Women are milder and gentler, which comes under 阴 yīn and the right side.

Speaking of yīn and yáng: they are two Chinese characters with special meanings.  The simplified version of the character for yīn 阴 has “moon / 月 yuè” in it (on the right), whilst the simplified version of the character for yáng 阳 has “sun / 日 rì” in it (on the right).

There’s no straightforward good or bad in yīn and yáng, nor straightforward nobility or lowliness.  Rather, the yīn and yáng talked about in fēngshuǐ (“wind water”, or geomancy, the art of divination) is blending and harmony, and balance.

S16:

Let’s move on to Chinese characters.There are six ways to generate them.  The most common is pictographs or pictograms, i.e., ideograms. As time is a bit limited here, we’ll not go into every single one of them. We’ll just show you a few interesting Chinese characters, for example: It’s not hard to see from the first picture that the character rén means “human”.

Follow the stages of development for the characters ěr, meaning “ear”, and mù, meaning “eye”, in the second picture: you will see how they evolved from the diagrammatic images. Also, the characters in the third picture for rì, meaning “sun”, and yuè / 月, meaning “moon”, in yīn and yáng.

S17:

Conclusion (portrait of Confucius)

We hope that you have enjoyed your brief journey through the basic aspects of the Chinese culture.  The scope of this video only allows a small selection.  If you have found it interesting, you could be more adventurous and start your own exploration.  There is so much to the Chinese culture that it’ll be an adventure that goes on and on and on.  Happy exploring!

Right, are you now ready to test your knowledge with our simple multiple-choice Quiz below?  You can go to the Key at the end to check your answers.  Have fun!