

Story of Ancient China

By Suzanne Strauss Art

SELECTED PASSAGES

The ancient Chinese imagined the dragon to be a sort of king of all of the scaly creatures - the fish, lizards, and snakes - who lived in dark, wet places. In time, a series of myths evolved about the powerful (but kindly) dragons that lived in the ocean and rivers. It was said that when the tides came in, the dragons were surfacing. When the tides went out again, the thirsty dragons were taking a long drink.

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To reaffirm her new lofty status, she [Empress Wu] built an imperial temple for her ancestors at Luoyang. This immediately sparked a revolt among the nobles, who had had enough of Wu's pretensions. Her henchmen put down the revolt within a few months, but because she now worried about future uprisings, she created a rather large secret police force. It's a good thing she did, too, because the Tang princes soon joined together in another rebellion to force the feisty usurper out of power. The secret police nipped that revolt in the bud. Then they eliminated not only the princes but nearly all members of the imperial family. Wu was clearly not a woman to tangle with!

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Kites have been flown in China since about 400 BCE. According to legend, Kongshu Pan (the god of craftsmen) built the first kites in the shapes of birds. They had bamboo frames that were covered with silk. The earliest kites were intended to carry messages to the heavenly spirits, such as pleas for rain or requests for a bountiful harvest. Daoists meditated as they flew their kites, and some hardy souls even rode the "hard wind" on kite-like structures. They were history's first wind surfers!

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Confucius believed that nobility should be based upon personal merit, not an accident of birth. This being true, shouldn't the highest government offices be open to those best

qualified? Confucius certainly thought so, and he often spoke about a system of examinations to select the men most capable to serve in the government. But few leaders supported this idea. They were mostly the sons of noblemen who got their jobs through family connections. Why should they compromise the advantages of their social class? Confucius was simply ahead of his time.

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Shi Huangdi's last years were consumed by his worries about dying. These were not happy times for his subjects, either. The peasants groaned under the demands of serving in the army and laboring on massive building projects. But, of course, everyone was afraid to complain.

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Since every word [character] in a Chinese poem offers a variety of images, it's up to the reader to decide which fits best for him. In this way, a poem is very much like a painting. It creates a mood, but speaks to different people in different ways.

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Liu Bang arrived at the pinnacle of power in an interesting way. He was ordered to bring a group of laborers to work on the emperor's tomb. When they were delayed by rain, he decided to set the men free rather than face death - the penalty for arriving late. Suddenly out of work, Liu joined a gang of outlaws. In time he found himself involved in the rebellion against the Qin. His talents for leadership quickly propelled him into the role of commander of the rebel forces. In 206 his followers acknowledged him as "King of Han." he was now ready to challenge Xiang Yu for control of the empire.