

洋

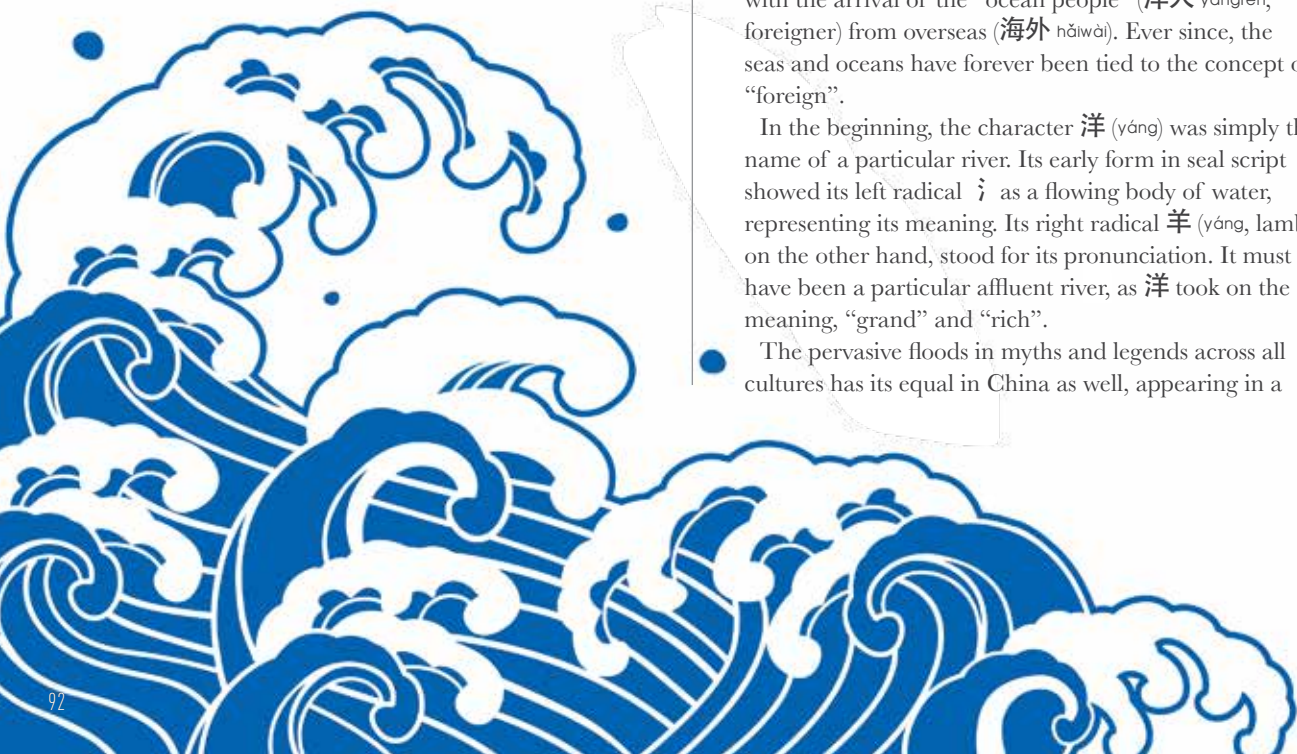
Bringing out the foreigner in all of us

有一天，陆地上的中国人发现了
另一个世界

Humans are inherently egocentric, and we all like to think of ourselves as the center of the world. The ancient Chinese believed they were in the center of all lands, hence the name “Middle Kingdom”. To them, oceans were the definitive boundaries of the world as they knew it, and that’s why they also refer to anywhere within the country as “within the sea” or 海内 (hǎinèi). However, their world expanded with the arrival of the “ocean people” (洋人 yáng rén, foreigner) from overseas (海外 hǎiwài). Ever since, the seas and oceans have forever been tied to the concept of “foreign”.

In the beginning, the character 洋 (yáng) was simply the name of a particular river. Its early form in seal script showed its left radical 氵 as a flowing body of water, representing its meaning. Its right radical 羊 (yáng, lamb), on the other hand, stood for its pronunciation. It must have been a particular affluent river, as 洋 took on the meaning, “grand” and “rich”.

The pervasive floods in myths and legends across all cultures has its equal in China as well, appearing in a



洋

SEAL SCRIPT

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CLERICAL SCRIPT

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CURSIVE SCRIPT

洋

REGULAR SCRIPT

report to the Emperor in the West Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-25 C.E.) by the collator of the ancient geography book *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (《山海经》 *Shānhǎi Jīng*): “In the old days, a flood covered every corner of the country.” (昔洪水洋溢，漫衍中国。 *Xī hóngshuǐ yángyì, mǎnyǎn Zhōngguó.*) As such, 洋溢 (*yángyì*) was used to describe the grand scale of the flood. When 洋 took on the meaning of “grand” or “rich”, it often appears in doubles, such as 洋洋. For instance, the verse “河水洋洋” (*héshuǐ yángyáng*) in *Classic of Poetry* (《诗经》 *Shījīng*) means: “The Yellow River was wide and affluent.” It doesn’t stop at describing floods or rivers; 洋洋万言 (*yángyáng wànyán*) also describes a long text with thousands and thousands of words. 洋洋洒洒 (*yángyáng sǎsǎ*) is to say a text is copiously large and flows well, and along those lines, 洋洋大观 (*yángyáng dàguān*) means “a spectacle of a variety of things”.

Besides “rich, grand, and affluent”, 洋洋 also describes the state of being extremely happy and satisfied, such as in 洋洋得意 (*yángyáng déyì*) and 喜气洋洋 (*xǐqì yángyáng*). Such meaning is also passed down from the days of ancient China: in the immortal 11th century essay “Memoir at Yueyang Tower” (《岳阳楼记》 *Yuèyánglóu Jì*), a poet wrote, “On the tower, how happy it is to hold a cup of wine and enjoy the gentle breeze and the grand view of Dongting Lake.” (把酒临风，其喜洋洋者矣。 *Bǎ jiǔ lín fēng, qí xǐ yángyáng zhě yǐ.*)

Nevertheless, the core meaning of 洋 retains its wet connotation, and when combined with 海 (*hǎi*, sea), the character is used to indicate the largest bodies of water on earth, ocean, or 海洋 (*hǎiyáng*). The Pacific Ocean is 太平洋 (*Tàipíng Yáng*), the Indian Ocean is 印度洋 (*Yīndù Yáng*), the Atlantic Ocean is 大西洋 (*Dàxī Yáng*), and the Arctic Ocean is 北冰洋 (*Běibīng Yáng*).

Along with the “ocean people” came a wide variety of novelties never before seen on the mainland, and as such, people



conveniently added 洋 to each one of them to indicate their origin. Foreign language was 洋文 (*yángwén*), and the Western suit was called 洋服 (*yángfú*) at first, although 西服 (*xīfú*, Western attire) is more widely used today. If you studied abroad, it was called 留洋 (*liúyáng*, literally, “to stay in the ocean”). All foreign products are naturally 洋货 (*yángguò*, ocean goods). At this point, creating new words was straight forward, just keep adding 洋: a match was called “ocean fire”, or 洋火 (*yángguǒ*) and cement was “ocean dust”, or 洋灰 (*yánghuī*). Many of these “ocean” words are still in use today, such as “ocean scallion” or 洋葱 (*yángcōng*, onion) and “ocean babies” or 洋娃娃 (*yángwáwa*, dolls).

Fashion and modernity also reached across the sea, giving rise to the word 洋气 (*yángqì*). Literally “foreign air”; it means “outlandish or stylish”. Besides admiration for the early foreigners, some curious spectators had a hard time understanding cultural differences. The word 出洋相 (*chū yángxiàng*) literally means “to display foreign looks”, which means “to cut a sorry figure”.

As the phrase 崇洋媚外 (*chóng yáng mèi wài*, worship things foreign and fawn on foreigners) suggests, admiration of foreigners is to be entirely condemned. Even the word 洋化 (*yángguà*, adapting to the foreign way of life) has a certain sting to it. Some believe the foreign ideas only provide a means to a Chinese end, such as in the phrase 洋为中用 (*yáng wéi zhōng yòng*) suggests: “to absorb what’s beneficial for China from foreign culture”.

In opposition to the ocean, we have earth, which is 土 (*tǔ*). It means “native, indigenous, unrefined, crude, and rustic”, the opposite of 洋. It seems no one wants to stay 土, yet adapting to the 洋 would be entirely unacceptable, either. The obvious solution? Just add some “Chinese characteristics” and the problem will be solved in no time.

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