

Timeless Symbols

- Scott Rowe

Unfortunately in some parts of the world governments still ban the practice of Masonry. In China, since the inception of Communism, Freemasonry has been outlawed, although the independent island of Taiwan has currently ten recognized Masonic lodges with some 750 members. It is a cruel irony that history shows some of the teachings and beliefs of ancient China were founded on principles with startling similarities to modern day Freemasonry and yet the same fraternal practices are now against the law there.

Before this ban, there was a discussion in the District Grand Lodge of China in 1879 which pointed out that 4,000 years ago China symbolized earth with an altar which was a perfect cube. The circle was deemed the emblem of heaven, and great importance was attached to the North East and South East locations as the beginning and the end of an object in view. One of the oldest words in the language of the time was literally "square and compasses" and it signified right conduct. In the Book of History, an account of a military expedition, it was stated; "Ye officers of government, apply the Compasses!". That same book described a proper Magistrate as a "Man of the level, or the level man". The skirret was revered and used as a hieroglyphic symbol which meant the origin of things. Upon the succession of a new emperor of a dynasty a temple was erected under the supervision of a Grand Architect and aprons were worn which bore the emblems of respected religious offices. One of the oldest books in their language, the Shu-King, mentions two jewels which were usually made of jade and were none other than the well known Masonic symbols, the square and the plumb rule. During the Emperor's prayers all symbols of office were removed and he was clad in a lamb skin cloth.

The famous philosopher and teacher, Confucious, stated that only at seventy-five years of age could he venture to follow the inclinations of his heart without fear of 'transgressing the limits of the square.' Almost three hundred years later, and two hundred before the birth of Christ, the great student of Confucianism, Mencius taught that just as the most skilled artificers are unable, without the aid of the square and compasses, to produce perfect rectangles or perfect circles, so must all men apply these tools figuratively to their lives, and the level and the marking line besides, if they would walk in the straight and even paths of wisdom, and keep themselves within the bounds of honor and virtue.

Freemasons cannot even agree on the origins of our modern day craft beyond the formation of our Grand Lodges in France and Britain in the early 1700s, so it is not to be implied that we owe our belief system to the ancient Chinese. It is nevertheless a truth that great thinkers of every age have independently held that certain fundamental tools of architecture, necessary for the solidity and lasting qualities of buildings, can also be the speculative tools that represent the virtues of honesty, uprightness and morality.

These timeless symbols are still in use today in Freemasonry, because they represent fundamental truths. A true right angle was necessary to form a square 5,000 years ago, just as it will be required to form one 5,000 years hence. The morals, codes of conduct and virtues that were so important to the survival of mankind in the ancient past are just as relevant today and will be for future generations.

Perhaps one of the deepest lessons from Masonic symbols is that their nature is as unchanging and important as truth itself.