Bamboos are beautiful plants widely found in countries in Asia. There are large bamboo forests in China, Japan, Korea, and many Southeast Asian countries. The cultivated bamboo groves in China and Japan are particularly magnificent and captivating. My painting shows a scholar studying in a mountain abode among beautiful bamboo groves on a summer’s day.

All parts of the bamboo can be used. It is therefore a plant very much liked and valued by Asians. Young bamboo shoots serve as nutritious food in Asian meals. Soft bamboo shoots, stems, and leaves are major food sources not only for the giant panda of China, but also for other animals such as the red panda of Nepal, the lemurs of Madagascar, and chimps and elephants. The trunk can be used for building houses, furniture, river rafts, musical instruments, household utensils, decorative arts, and craft items, as well as weapons. When cut and sliced into thin long strips, bamboo trunks are used for weaving. Bamboo fibers from leaf and stem extracts are used for making paper and in the manufacture of textiles. Bamboo cannot be bent easily, like an upright person with a strong backbone who cannot be easily persuaded to change his stand or principle of righteous behavior. Thus, the bamboo signifies the...
traditional good virtues of a person: standing for truth and not yielding to oppression or pressure from those who are powerful and wealthy. The hollowness of the trunk of the bamboo symbolizes another virtue—humility.

For centuries, bamboo has been a very popular subject for Chinese ink-brush paintings and poetry. Its long life makes it a Chinese symbol of longevity. It has a profound meaning in Confucian iconography. Bamboo for the Chinese is much more than a plant. According to Confucian teachings, human characteristics correspond with those of a bamboo. The plant’s straight stem is the symbol of moral strength, pliant yet unbreakable by the adverse winds. Its knot represents harmonious integration with others. The branches represent flexibility. The hollow inside of the bamboo stalk symbolizes the purged clarity of mind, or the absence of chaos, that is a prerequisite for constructive thinking. The leaves symbolize subtlety and the poetic mind.

There is a well-loved poem in praise of bamboo by the famous Chinese writer, poet, artist, calligrapher, pharmacologist, and statesman, Su Shi 蘇軾, also known as Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 (1037–1101) of the Song Dynasty 宋朝, which reads as follows:

宁可食无肉,不可居无竹。无肉令人瘦,无竹令人俗.

It is translated as follows:

“I would rather eat meals without meat, but cannot live at a place without bamboos. A meatless diet causes a person to be thin, while lack of bamboo makes a person vulgar and materialistic.”

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