

The Spring Festival: A Window into Chinese Culture

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Abstract

With the increasing rise in the global economic integration of countries, the cultural exchange of different people in the world is becoming broader. The culture of a people is unique in its own way. This uniqueness constitutes the diversity and richness of the culture and civilization in the world today. People of different nations and ethnicities have, based on their cultural background and religious beliefs, developed different attitudes and ways to solve problems. To avoid misunderstandings and contradictions in the course of cross-cultural communication, understanding and respecting the customs of other nations is of great importance. The traditional festivals are the outstanding cultural heritage of a nation, and the precious spiritual wealth of mankind, so different festivals reflect different cultures. China, which has the largest population in the world, is widely known for its long history and rich culture, including its ancient language, traditional arts, and festivals. Chinese traditional festivals are the soul of national spirit and the epitome of Chinese civilization. With the fast economic development noticed in China, and it being the second largest economy in the world today, different countries of the world are showing interest in having mutual economic and cultural relation with China. The government of China is also working effortlessly to make Spring Festival which is the most important festival in China, a globally recognized and valued festival. This paper discusses the Spring Festival with the broad aim of understanding Chinese culture, as it is the most important event celebrated by people of Chinese ethnicity. It introduces the Spring Festival by looking into the activities carried out during the festival, including the customs associated with it, the seven lucky dishes prepared and eaten, as well as taboos traditionally avoided during the festival. However, many activities and customs related to the festivals though still significant are less observed among younger generations.

Keywords: China, culture, spring, festival

1. Introduction

The Chinese have various ways of marking different events such as the new year, commemoration of national achievements, remembrance of ancestors, and heroes. The Spring Festival which is the focus of this paper celebrates the New Year according to the Chinese calendar. The Chinese new year marks the first day on the Chinese calendar which is a lunisolar calendar traditionally starting in Spring with 'lichun' the first of the twenty-four solar terms in the lunisolar calendar (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_New_Year). In a repeating cycle of 12 years, every year in the Chinese calendar is assigned an animal and its reputed attributes by the Chinese zodiac, which is a classification scheme based on the lunar calendar.

The 12 zodiac animals in their order are: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig.

Below are the 12 zodiac animals and their respective years;

Zodiac Animals	Chinese Name	Recent Years
Rat	(鼠 shǔ)	1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996, 2008, 2020, 2032
Ox	(牛 niú)	1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997, 2009, 2021, 2033
Tiger	(虎 hǔ)	1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1986, 1998, 2010, 2022, 2034
Rabbit	(兔 tù)	1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999, 2011, 2023, 2035
Dragon	(龙 lóng)	1929, 1940, 1952, 1964, 1975, 1988, 2000, 2012, 2024, 2036
Snake	(蛇 shé)	1930, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1976, 1989, 2001, 2013, 2025, 2037
Horse	(马 mǎ)	1931, 1942, 1954, 1966, 1977, 1990, 2002, 2014, 2026, 2038
Sheep	(羊 yáng)	1932, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1978, 1991, 2003, 2015, 2027, 2039
Monkey	(猴 hóu)	1933, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1979, 1992, 2004, 2016, 2028, 2040
Rooster	(鸡 jī)	1934, 1945, 1957, 1969, 1980, 1993, 2005, 2017, 2029, 2041
Dog	(狗 gǒu)	1935, 1946, 1958, 1970, 1981, 1994, 2006, 2018, 2030, 2042
Pig	(猪 zhū)	1936, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1982, 1995, 2007, 2019, 2031, 2043

With 2020 being the year of the rat, 2021 being the year of the ox, 2022 the year of the tiger and so on. The 12 zodiac animals are known in Chinese as (十二生肖' shí èr shēng xiāo) and they are believed to influence people's personalities, compatibility, and fortune, depending on the individual's birth year. For instance, according to the zodiac sign, people in the year of the rat are very creative and amiable. They have a generous spirit, but can be judgmental. They are opportunist and also do well in entrepreneurial endeavors. Also, those born in the year of the dog are faithful, trustworthy, helpful, and also work hard to protect those they care about. Whereas, those born in the year of the rooster are extravagant, progressive thinkers, and unafraid to be indifferent. People born in the year of the monkey are fast thinkers, confident, intelligent, and have high sense of humour, etc.

2.0 The Chinese Spring Festival

The Spring Festival (春节 chūn jié) is the Chinese festival that celebrates the beginning of a new year on the traditional Chinese calendar or lunar calendar. The Spring Festival is one of the most significant Chinese Festivals, hence the importance attached to its celebration.

Spring Festival is the most popular, most important festival in China, rich in cultural activities. These festive folk activities have important social functions, and cultural symbolic significance in philosophy, ethical, social relations, and psychology of the people. (陈连山, 2004). Ancient customs have always influenced the way people celebrate the

Spring Festival including the activities people engage in as well as taboos avoided during the Festival.

Spring Festival is the most widely known and most important festival in China. He also believes that the Spring Festival is compatible, scientific and non-religious. It was originally a ceremonial day to pray to their gods and ancestors for a good planting and harvest season. It was also a time to fight off monsters, and bring family members together for feasting (何星亮, 2013). The Spring Festival as the most grand traditional cultural festival of the Chinese nation, its influence is not limited to mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, but also highly valued by Chinese living overseas (阮静, 2014).

Traditionally, the Spring Festival celebration begins on New Year's Eve and ends on the 15th day of the first month of the Chinese New Year. In the modern day China, a seven-day government approved holiday is usually observed starting from the day before the New Year, as a result most workers and employees usually enjoy seven days off from work.

believe that the Spring Festival is an important symbol of excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation. In the struggle for building a prosperous society in this world of culture diversification, it is necessary to strengthen the inheritance and development of the traditional Chinese festivals represented by the Spring Festival (宋中发&张明, 2018). Legend has it that the Spring Festival originated in the Shang dynasty (about 1600 BC-1046 BC), when people succeeded in fighting against a brutal monster (年 nián). The traditional customs of having a family reunion, decorating the house in red ornaments, and setting off firecrackers symbolize an attempt to drive away the monster.

The origin, formation process, customs and tradition, and exploration of Spring Festival connotation should be given much attention (王文章, 2012). This is to preserve the heritage of the people.

2.1 Spring Festival Activities

During the Spring Festival, people engage in various activities which include, putting up decoration, reuniting with family members, giving of gifts and red envelopes, setting off firecrackers and fireworks, etc.

(i) Putting up Decoration

Streets and buildings are usually decorated with red ornaments. Red is the main colour for the festival, because it is believed to be an auspicious colour. Traditional lanterns are hung in the streets, while red couplets are pasted on doors and windows depicting images of prosperity. Besides sticking couplets, the Chinese character (福 fú), which means blessing, good fortune, yearning for a happy life and wishing for a better future and prosperity, is also pasted on walls and doors - entrance doors in particular. The traditional art of paper-cutting is also displayed, as various designs of the celebrated zodiac animal are cut out from red fluorescent paper and pasted on various surfaces, mostly windows.

(ii) Family Reunion

As the Spring Festival approaches, people return to their ancestral homes from different metropolises like Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing, and other cities, to reunite with their family members and spend time together. On this new year's eve, the whole family sits around a table and eats the home-made dinner, chatting about the events and occasions of the passing year. The new year's eve dinner (年夜饭 nián yè fàn) is called reunion dinner (团圆饭 tuán yuán fàn) and is believed to be the most important meal of the year. After the

dinner, family members sit together to watch the annual Spring Festival Gala televised yearly by the China Central Television (CCTV). Spring Festival is also a time when relatives are visited, discussions are held and gifts exchanged.

(iii) Giving of Gifts and Red Envelopes

In China, giving of red envelopes, (红包 *hóng bāo*), is a way of conveying best wishes for the coming year, and on New Year's Eve, children begin to receive red envelopes with lucky money enclosed from their older relatives as new year's gift. The red envelopes always contain money, and are given mostly by parents, grandparents, and siblings to younger family members. Employers also give red envelopes to their workers. Chinese regard red as the symbol of energy, happiness, and good luck. Sending red envelopes is a way of sending good wishes and luck to people.

(iv) Setting off Firecrackers and Fireworks

Setting off firecrackers and fireworks has long been part of Chinese tradition, especially during festivals and celebrations. On new year's eve, firecrackers and fireworks are set off at the stroke of midnight to scare away evil spirits and celebrate the coming of the New Year. They are also set off to ward off misfortune and bring good luck.

In recent years, many cities in China have implemented environmental safety and protection laws restricting the use of firecrackers and fireworks, allowing them only at designated areas.

2.2 Customs Associated with the Spring Festival

(i) **The sweeping of dust:** As the new year approaches, families sweep and clean their homes, and this sweeping of dust is done few days before the Spring Festival. The essence of this tradition is to sweep away all the bad luck of the passing year. It aims at eradicating the old and fostering the new.

(ii) (守岁 *shǒu suì*) is one of the traditional customs practiced on Chinese New Year's Eve, people stay up late or all night to welcome the New Year. It is one of the most important traditions of the Spring Festival and has existed for a long time. It was first recorded in the Western Zhou dynasty, where on the new year's eve, people do not sleep at night, but stay up till morning to welcome the New Year.

2.3 Seven Lucky Chinese New Year Foods and Their Symbols

During the Spring festival, especially new year's eve, there are seven dishes which are believed to bring good luck for the coming year.

The auspicious symbolism of these traditional Chinese new year dishes is attributed to their pronunciation or appearance. Great importance is attached to how the dishes are prepared, served, and eaten.

Below are examples of dishes eaten during the Spring Festival including their significance and wishes associated with them;

2.3.1 Fish (鱼 *yú*)- an increase in prosperity

The pronunciation of the Chinese word for fish,(鱼 *yú*) is similar with that for 'surplus'(余 *yú*). People always hope for a surplus at the end of the year. It is believed that if something is saved at the end of the year, then it is possible to make more the next year. Fish is a traditional Chinese new year's dish which is always present on the dinner menu on New Year's Eve. Eating fish is considered to bring surplus and abundant harvest, as well as good luck and fortune in the New Year.

(i) Wishes Associated with Fish

There are also good wishes associated with eating fish, especially on the new year's eve;

(a) (年年有余 (鱼)*nián nián yǒu yú*): a wish for surpluses and abundant harvest every year.

(b) (鱼跃龙门 yú yuè lóng mén) (derived from a myth about a carp which became a dragon by leaping over the dragon's gate). It is used as a metaphor for success or promotion resulting from courage and perseverance.

(c) 2.3.2 Chinese Dumplings (饺子 jiǎo zǐ)- Wealth

Dumplings are classic Chinese new year food, and a traditional dish eaten on the Chinese New Year's Eve.

Legend has it that the more dumplings you eat during the new year celebration, the more money you can make in the new year.

Dumplings are generally made of minced meat and finely-chopped vegetables, wrapped in a thin and elastic dough skin.

(i)Wishes Associated with Dumplings

(a) (招财进宝 zhāo cái jìn bǎo): 'Bringing in wealth and treasure' - a felicitous wish for making money and amassing a fortune.

2.3.3 Glutinous Rice Cake (年糕 nián gāo)- a higher income or position

The pronunciation of (年糕 nián gāo) is similar to that of (年高 nián gāo), mostly used in the new year as (年年高 nián nián gāo) which means 'going higher year after year', implying that as years go by, one's status improves.

(i) Wishes Associated with Glutinous Rice Cake

(a) (年年高 nián nián gāo): Going higher year after year. It can be used to wish for academic progress, business success or work promotion, etc.

2.3.4 Spring Rolls (春卷 chūn juǎn)- Wealth and Prosperity

Spring rolls are Chinese new year's dish, especially popular in Eastern China. They are called spring rolls because they are traditionally eaten during Spring festival. They are made of cylindrical-shaped rolls filled with vegetables or meat.

(i) Wishes Associated with Spring Rolls

(a) (黄金万两 huáng jīn wàn liǎng): 'a ton of gold' (associated with the appearance of fried spring rolls which look like gold bars).

2.3.5 Sweet Rice Balls (汤圆 tāng yuán)- Family Togetherness

The name of the dish, (汤圆 tāng yuán), sounds similar to (团圆 tuán yuán), which means reunion, and the round shape of the balls, which is associated with the Chinese family tradition of sitting on a round table, all signify reunion and being together.

(i) Wishes Associated with Sweet Rice Balls

(a) (团团圆圆 tuán tuán yuán yuán): happy (family) reunion.

2.3.6 Fruits of Good Fortune- Fullness and Wealth

During the Chinese new year celebration, some fruits that are always eaten. Such fruits include; oranges, tangerines and pomelo. They are particularly selected because they are round in shape and golden in colour, symbolizing fullness and wealth. They are believed to bring good luck and fortune due to their pronunciation and writing. The Chinese word for orange, (橙 chéng) sounds the same as the word for success (成 chéng), the Chinese character for tangerine, (桔 jú), contains the Chinese character for the word 'luck' (吉 jí), while the Chinese word for pomelo (柚 yòu) sounds similar to (有 yǒu) which means (to have).

2.3.7 Longevity Noodles (长寿面 cháng shòu miàn)- Happiness and longevity

Longevity noodles symbolize a wish for longevity. They are longer than regular noodles and are always uncut. Chinese people eat them especially during Chinese New Year and birthday celebrations.

2.4 Spring Festival's Taboos

Taboo is an inhibition or ban that result from social custom or emotional aversion. It is a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place or thing.

2.4.1 Taboos on colour and clothing

Chinese usually wear red or other brightly-coloured clothes during the Spring Festival to go with a festive and happy mood. In China, it is a taboo to wear black or white clothes during Chinese new year as they are traditionally associated with mourning. Black and white colours are funeral colours in Chinese culture. During the New Year, funeral colours are not welcomed and thought to be inauspicious and may bring death to the family.

2.4.2 Taboos on money and numbers

People endeavour to avoid borrowing money on New Year's Day. And all debts are to be paid before or on new year's eve. Borrowed money is not demanded on the new year's day to avoid being unlucky throughout the year.

During the Spring Festival, people always try to avoid giving money or items associated with the number, four. This is because the Chinese word for four, (四 sì), sounds similar to (死 sǐ) which means death. Giving of money with the number 4 is avoided as it may imply a death wish to the receiver. This includes amounts like 40,400,444, etc.

2.4.3 Taboos on people's behaviour and actions

People tend to avoid visiting relatives on the fifth day of the first lunar month. It is believed that the visitation would bring poverty and bad luck to the relatives because the fifth day is the day the god of wealth is welcomed, and it is believed that the visitor would go home with the relatives' wealth. Having a haircut on the New Year's Day might lead to the death of one's maternal uncle. People endeavour to have a hair cut before the New Year. Avoid breaking bowl, jars, mirror, etc, because it is believed that breaking those things might cause money loss and family division.

2.4.4 Taboos on food

Chinese see taking medicine on the New Year's Day as a taboo, because the sickness might continue till the end of the year. Once it's new year's day, the sick throw away their drugs believing that the sickness will flee from them. People even tend to leave hospitals as the New Year draws closer, unless they are in critical condition.

2.4.5 Taboos on spoken words

Chinese believe that the cry of a child during the Spring Festival might bring illness, and misfortune to the family. To avoid children crying during the spring festival, parents try not to punish their children even if they misbehave. Words like death, kill, poverty, sickness, pain, loss, etc are also avoided, especially during the celebration.

In China, many of these taboos though still relevant are less observed especially by younger generation.

3. The Significance of Chinese Spring Festival in the Global World

In this era of economic globalization, protecting the cultural ecology of different ethnic groups and regions is as important as protecting the natural ecology. In this contemporary China, national traditional festivals are cultural heritage that need to be preserved and protected (萧放(2009).

Spring Festival is celebrated by both Chinese and non-Chinese in many countries of the world. Since the 1990s, Spring Festival has become increasingly fashionable in countries and regions where Chinese have migrated to. During the Spring Festival celebration, presidents and government officials from different countries of the world convey their goodwill messages to the people of China, as a way of celebrating with them. It is a festival

of cultural exchange and an opportunity for different people of the world to communicate and appreciate different cultures. As the population increase of people around the world putting interest in knowing and understanding the cultural values of the Chinese Spring Festival increases, the Spring Festival is becoming more internationalized.

Spring Festival is the time for family reunion. People visit their relatives and friends, exchange good wishes and discuss. Chinese especially the young people go out for shopping, visit malls, and eateries and spend time together. During this festive period, people pray for prosperity, happiness, bright future, total wellbeing of body, and harmonious interpersonal relations among them. People also tend to avoid involving themselves in those activities that might bring bad luck to them in the future. With the increasing efforts of Chinese government and millions of Chinese citizens living overseas, this festival is receiving more and more international recognition. It is the love for Chinese culture, and the high degree of cultural consciousness that has encouraged the spread of Chinese Spring Festival and its customs to other parts of the world.

4. Conclusion

Although there are different ways of celebrating the Chinese Spring Festival, the need to maintain family ties and communicate with relatives remains strong. Family reunion is still the theme of the Spring Festival and one of the main reasons it is celebrated. The Spring festival still maintains its vitality through both traditional and new forms of celebration. The new year tradition may have undergone some changes, but the significance of the Spring Festival remains strong. The culture of a nation should always be in a dynamic, and growing state; rather than being fixed. A great nation should never lose its own traditional culture, but rather preserve and protect. It should also be flexible in appreciating other people's culture and tradition. Peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and appreciation, and mutual inclusion are very important while projecting our culture to other people of the world. With the rapid development in modern Chinese society, these traditional customs have been adapted with new elements.

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