

Shen Fuyu

Time

- *Chinese Jieqi*



Logos Communications



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Lìchūn

Every solar year around February 4th, as the sun reaches the celestial longitude of 315°, it is “Lìchūn”. “Lì” means “begin”, for the coming of spring. Lìchūn has fifteen days and is divided into three pentads with each pentad having five days. The first pentad is Dong Feng Jie Dong (East Wind Thaws). The second pentad is Zhe Chong Shi Zhen (Hibernating Insects Awaken). The third pentad is Yu Zhi Fu Bing (Fish Swim Upward Close to the Surface of Ice). From Xiǎohán (Minor Cold) to Gǔyǔ (Grain Rain), there are eight *Jieqi*. Each *Jieqi* has three pentads totaling twenty-four pentads. Each pentad also corresponds to a flower. Here are the flowers for the three pentads in Lìchūn: the first is winter jasmine, the second is cherry blossom, and the third is magnolia.

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Lìchūn¹

Three days ago, Taishi—the royal astronomer—reported to the Emperor, “Lìchūn is coming, spring will be beginning soon.” Upon hearing this, the Emperor took a bath and abstained from eating meat as he respectfully waited for the coming of spring.

The little bugs hibernating in the soil were the first to sense spring’s breath. Even so, they still did not awaken immediately. They stretched their arms and legs and kept asleep. The vegetation woke up. The grass hadn’t turned to green from yellow but their roots were already becoming moist and tender. The trees’ dry straight branches also turned soft and flexible. You could see the green inner core if you took a branch off a tree. Children

1. Lìchūn: the start of spring

already stopped playing on the frozen river, not only because the ice started melting after the east wind had paid its visit, but also because there were other games going on that wriggled their little hearts.

They were going to welcome the spring. The god of spring, Ju Mong, lived in the temple of the eastern village. He was in charge of the breath of the spring and the harvest of the year. He could even add years of life to the blessed ones. His small temple was hidden in the depth of the woods where nobody went. As winter came to an end, the woods looked like a bleak ink drawing without dyed colors. However the spring was coming.

The day before Lichūn, the silent village suddenly became disturbed. Far away from the village, a large group of dignified troops came winding down the small country road. The villagers knew that they were the Emperor's troops coming to welcome the spring from the troops' distinguished drum sound. There were a countless number of green flags behind the Emperor and his ministers, the marching army looked magnificent.

The ritual of bowing down to Ju Mong was very solemn and noble. After bowing to the spring god, the Emperor held up his wine glass and sprinkled the wine on the floor in front of Ju Mong. Then he bowed down again.

People moved out of the way for Ju Mong after the ritual had finished. Ju Mong was leaving for the capital city with the crowd. He stood steadily on a bench carried by big and strong villagers. His face was a human face but he had a majestic bird's body. He was watching the far beyond and it seemed that he would fly away at any moment. Overhead the green flags waved in the wind. Standing next to Ju Mong, there was a large and regal bull made of clay.

The crowd that had assembled to welcome Ju Mong to the town was endless. Children had dressed themselves as spring messengers. They ran everywhere they could while cheering and shouting, "Spring is here! Spring is here!" Soon, other people joined them in their call, "Spring is here!"

Ju Mong passed the people who were waiting for him. Many people held red candles. They greeted one another and exchanged their candles as well as their fortunes and wishes.

The next day was Lichūn. From early morning hawkers could be seen in the streets selling radishes and yelling, "They are crispier than pears!" This day would bring them so much business thanks to the tradition that everyone had to eat a radish for Lichūn. It was called "the bite of spring".

Later the sky turned bright. Adults and children were biting their radishes as they gathered together slowly at the city gate. The clay bull was standing tall with its head up. Mothers held their children towards and circled around the bull while praying, “Don’t get sick, don’t get sick.” Few children could resist reaching out to touch the clay bull even though they had been told that no one was allowed to touch the bull before the ceremony.

The highest local official took charge of the ceremony. He dressed neatly, directed his subordinate officials, lifted a willow whip and whipped the clay bull three times. The willow branch was 24 Chinese *cun*² long representing the 24 Chinese *Jieqi*³. Then the highest official gave the willow branch to the other officials. Finally he gave the willow branch to the public so the public could pass the branch on and keep beating the bull. The crack sound of the whip signaled the start of the spring plowing. Finally the clay bull scattered into pieces and soil fell out from it. There was a smaller clay bull hidden inside. The crowd rushed up to fight for the broken pieces of the clay bull. Sprinkling the soil from the clay bull on the field would bring a

2. *Cun*: the Chinese measurement, similar to inch

3. *Jieqi*: solar terms

good harvest. Bringing the soil into the house would help silkworms produce good silk. The soil taken from the bull's eyes and mixed with medicine could help cure eye disease. Even sprinkling some soil in the cowshed would lead to plump and sturdy cows.

While young men fought for the soil, girls wearing spring flowers in their hair were giggling. Above the girls' heads, silk braided swallows, butterflies and moths were swinging in the wind like they were ready to fly.

There was no need to be discouraged if you didn't get any piece of the broken clay bull. The hawkers on the street had already begun to display rows of small clay bulls. The little bulls were standing on colored paper and willow whip decorated buttons. There were a great many other clay characters that children were dying to buy.

In fact, mothers had already dressed up their children in beautiful outfits. The children's hats had stitched spring chickens wrapped with fabric made of cotton. The spring chickens had beans in their beak. The number of the beans depended on the age of the child. Children also had spring dolls hanging off of their waists representing the blessing from their mothers.

It was time to go home. Everyone already had the words "good spring"

on their front doors. They also put exquisite beautiful spring flowers on their south-facing windows. Fathers let children put the clay they had recovered from the clay bulls on the horns of their own cattle. Mothers reminded fathers not to get the water from the river today.

The purpose of eating radishes and not getting water from the river was to avoid feeling spring sleepiness. The spring is the foundation of the year. We can't be lazy on any spring day.

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-Chinese Jieqi

Yǔshuǐ

Every solar year around February 19th, as the sun reaches the celestial longitude of 330°, it is Yǔshuǐ. After Lichūn, the east wind melts the ice and the ice becomes rain water. Yǔshuǐ has three pentads: the first pentad is Lai Ji Yu (Otters Make Offerings of Fish), the second pentad is Hong Yan Lai (the Wild Geese Arrive), and the third pentad is Cao Mu Ming Dong (Trees and Grass Start Growing). Here are the flowers for the three pentads in Yǔshuǐ: the first is rapeseed flower, the second is apricot blossom, and the third is plum blossom.

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