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中西 传统节庆文化概述

Traditional Chinese and Western Festivals

— A Cultural Perspective

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Preface

This book is intended to explore a fundamental dimension of folklore. By folklore we mean the cultural traditions that are acquired and passed along by ordinary people as part of the fabric of their lives and culture. People consciously or unconsciously participate in the cultural traditions and share them with other members of their communities. Only through this experience of sharing can they build their cultural identities and develop a sense of belonging. Traditional festivals are always the most powerful expression of a community's political, economic, religious and psychological state. And they faithfully record the evolution of social customs. A study of the root meanings of the two English words "festival" and "holiday" can give us a better understanding about their value in folk traditions. The word "festival" consists of two Latin words—*festum* and *feria*. The former means "public joy and merriment" while the latter refers to a time free from work in order to honor the gods. "Holiday" is obviously a compound word that is originally spelled as "holy - day". They are special days when the whole community gathers together for merrymaking. They possess an even more significant aspect: The celebration

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of these days makes people more identified with nature and even the spiritual world. Traditionally the observance of festivals among the various cultures constituting human civilization is closely related to nature, namely, to the changing seasons and the corresponding planting and harvesting cycles. As it is generally assumed that supernatural beings are in charge of natural world and human affairs, people hold rituals to pay homage to those in the other world to seek blessing and protection.

The festivals under discussion here broadly fall into four categories: festivals of family reunion; ghost festivals; festivals in memory of historical or religious figures; lover's festivals. The multifarious customs characteristic of festivals of family reunion convincingly demonstrate the profound accumulation of both Chinese and Western cultures (In this book, the concept of "Western culture" is mainly confined to the cultures of the States and the U. K.). In spite of the long and tedious journey, the people living or working far away from their hometown will go out of their way to return home for the festivals. In the case of the Spring Festival, the especially busy passenger transport and the largest scale of the temporary flow of population make a unique social phenomenon of China. All the hardships during the journey are repaid when one arrives home and gets reunited with the family members. In Western holidays

as represented by Christmas, the joy in expressing affection and gratitude to family and friends is highlighted. Love for strangers has become part of the spirit of the holiday season as charitable campaigns are launched in an increasing number and in diverse forms. Despite its fearsome title, the second category provides people with an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs and attitudes about death, which can help soothe whatever fears they may have. Besides, as to the Chinese, ghost festivals are associated with the time honored tradition of ancestor veneration which is an indication of filial piety, the cardinal virtue of Chinese morality. Halloween, in contrast, is a time that reconfirms the social bond of a neighborhood by a ritual act of "trick or treating". Children try to overcome their fear of strange adults in exchange for candy while adults overcome their distrust of strange children in exchange for the pleasure of seeing their wild outfits and vicariously reliving their own adventures as children. The third category focuses on the festivals in memory of some great people who have exerted a profound influence on a nation or even the whole world. Qu Yuan is remembered by the Chinese as a patriotic poet and Jesus Christ is honored across the world as the incarnation of humility and holiness. Festivals glorifying the unparalleled feeling of romantic love have the universal appeal. The popularity of this kind of festivals keeps on growing as more and more

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people take this chance to show love not just to their sweethearts but everyone they hold dear and special.

In the present globalized society, people become more conscious of the importance of cross – cultural communications. As a key part of the intangible cultural heritages, both the Chinese festivals and the Western festivals have gone beyond their borders and gradually become known to the people outside their original domains. They are made international festivals. Thus it is equally worthwhile for people to learn their own cultural traditions well and to get some basic ideas about the traditional festivals in other cultures. Not only does this book present a brief introduction of the rich and colorful festival customs of different cultures, but it also explains their origins and historical development as well as their underlying social significance and cultural connotations. The readers are invited to compare and contrast for their own the traits peculiar to traditional Chinese and Western festivals.

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Chapter One

Festivals of Family Reunion

The Spring Festival

Origin

It's said that the Spring Festival has a long history of 2,000 years and evolves from a primitive sacrificial ceremony called Laji at which people offered farm produce and various games to Heaven and their ancestors to pray for longevity, fair auspices and in particular a good yield. It was held at the turn of the year. It is just interesting to note that the word "Year" known as "Nian" (年) in Chinese does possess profound cultural and historical implications. Celebrating the Spring Festival is colloquially called "Enjoying the Nian". "Nian" originally meant crop and was first adopted in the Zhou Dynasty to indicate a complete agricultural circle of planting and harvesting. Yet the concept of "Year" had already come into being in the calendar initiated in the much earlier Xia Dynasty.

Hundreds of years later, during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the famous historian Sima Qian revised the

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Xia calendar and the new one had been formally referred to as the Taichu Calendar and universally practiced until the end of the Qing Dynasty. This traditional Chinese calendar is also labeled the lunar calendar as distinct from the solar calendar or the Gregorian calendar widely observed in the western world. The Revolution of 1911 led by Dr Sun Yat - sen overthrew the Qing government and the Gregorian calendar has been adopted ever since. Thus the Chinese have got two beginnings of a new year to mark: January 1st ("Yuandan") in the solar calendar versus the first day of the first lunar month (the Spring Festival). Yet without question the latter, as the most important and ceremonious festival, is far more joyously and earnestly celebrated across the nation.

Preparations for the New Year

In traditional sense, the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month serves as the prologue to the Spring Festival celebrations, marking the beginning of a week's preparatory procedure before the Lunar New Year's Eve. It has been a long cherished custom to offer sacrifices on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month to the Kitchen God who is said to be appointed by the Jade Emperor of Heaven to attend to domestic affairs in each household both as a guardian and as a supervisor. Because of his overwhelming power, people hold him in high esteem and

place a memorial tablet with his name above the cooking stove or paste a picture on which are customarily portrayed the God himself and his wife and on both sides of which are displayed couplets expressing people's expectations for him: "Ascending to Heaven, praise the people for their good deeds; Descending to Earth, protect the people against all evils." Right before the God's leaving the family to report their behaviors to the Jade Emperor, people would hold a send-off ceremony with incenses, candles and various offerings among which melon-shaped maltose made from malt sugar and flour is a must. It's mostly intended to bind the God's teeth together so that he cannot speak ill and in certain regions it's alternated by distiller's grains that can fulfill the same purpose by making him drunk. Mongolian gazelle and pig's head are also viewed as substantial gifts to curry favor with or to bribe the Kitchen God. The last step of the ceremony is to burn the picture of the God, symbolizing his departure for Heaven. In a week's time, on the Lunar New Year's Eve, another simpler ceremony is held to welcome him back from Heaven during which people paste a new picture of his image on the wall.

After bidding farewell to the Kitchen God, people lose no time in giving a thorough cleaning to their houses—a custom stretching back to the times of Yao and Shun, two legendary sage kings in ancient China. The act of dusting (sweeping out the

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house) is initiated on the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month and will last till the end of the lunar year. It's apparently of practical significance and especially hygienic concerns: People strive to get rid of dirt and wipe out diseases by cleaning and tidying every nook and cranny of the house including the yard, the attic, the balcony and the cellar. All the bedclothes are washed and every piece of furniture is given a good rub. On top of the pragmatic function, the custom of "sweeping off the dust" has retained a symbolic dimension—an essential step in the rite of offering sacrifices to the gods. Coincidentally, the Chinese words "dust" (尘) and "oldness" (陈) share the same pronunciation and therefore are semantically associated and treated as a pun. The practice of improving people's living environment is also viewed as a ceremony of ringing out the old and the evil and ringing in the new and the auspicious.

Putting up New Year paintings is definitely a key part of household decoration in the Spring Festival—a long-standing custom infused with symbolic and aesthetic significance. The colorful pictures can be found on windows, walls, stoves, wardrobes and doors, especially the main gate which is considered as a link between the inside and the outside, the known and the unknown, and also the worldly and the supernatural. People just pin high hopes on the gods who are supposed to guard the gate and ward off evil spirits. The portraits of the gate gods

accordingly attract more attention and remain the focus of folklore studies. People in the Han Dynasty began to paste on the gate the images of two warriors respectively named Shen Tu and Yu Lei. Gradually, more and more historical and legendary figures have been added to the list of gate gods, among whom the most famous are Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong, the two powerful and valiant generals in the Tang Dynasty, as well as Zhong Kui, a righteous ghost sheriff and a buster of demons and goblins. As a distinct branch of folk art, traditional New Year pictures incorporate the features of Chinese paintings and woodcut prints. Their bold lines, bright colors and invigorating simplicity speak of and play up the festive atmosphere. Moreover, they derive their varied motifs from certain popular folk tales and familiar subjects, including the *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*, *Pines and Cranes Representing Longevity*, *Carp jumping over the Dragon Gate*, *Liu Hai Teasing the Golden Toad*, and so on. The following places are noted for their production of New Year pictures with distinguishing quality: Zhuxian Town in Kaifeng, Henan; Yangliuqing Town in Tianjing; Weifang City in Shandong; Taohuawu Street in Suzhou, Jiangsu.

Another prominent form of the Lunar New Year appliques is Spring Festival couplets written on red paper and hung on the gateposts or hall pillars. They actually have their roots in

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peach – wood charms bearing propitious remarks. Finally the relatively unpolished charms have been replaced by more exquisite and sophisticated couplets which contain two vertical lines matched in both tonal patterns and the arrangement of functional and notional words and one horizontal line made up of four Chinese characters and briefly summarizing the theme. They have acquired poetic nature and developed into a unique literary genre. The first recorded Spring Festival couplets are attributed to the ruler of the Kingdom of Later Shu of the Ten States Period: New Year sees lingering jubilation; Joyous festival ushers in a long spring. Later on, both urban and rural areas have witnessed a quick spread of the Spring Festival couplets and they have become an integral part of local life, eulogizing social development and reflecting changes in people's mentality.

Other decorations associated with Spring Festival celebrations include wall calendar, table calendar, paper – cuts, Chinese knots as well as the Chinese character “福” (Fu, means blessing, luck and happiness) which is conventionally pasted or hung upside down on the door. As the two Chinese characters “reverse” and “arrival” are homophonic, a reversed “Fu” is obviously intended to invite health and wealth.

Staying Late into the Night for the New Year

After the dinner on the New Year's Eve, all the family members get together, indulging in varied merrymaking activities while the rooms and yard are decked with red lanterns and colored streamers. People are expected to stay up late or just spend a sleepless night, waiting for the arrival of the New Year. In the past, this custom was referred to as "enduring the year" because the purpose of staying up all night on the New Year's Eve was to pray for good health and in particular longevity. If a child accidentally dozed off, the adults would wake him up immediately to save him from the supposed bad luck. Like other ceremonies during the Spring Festival, this one also epitomizes the farewell to the old year and the expectation for the new one. The family used to sit around the fireplace, chatting about the family trivia, joking with each other and expressing great longings for the coming New Year. The custom of burning fire and candles throughout the New Year's Eve originates from the primitive concept of "fire worship" and the ancient rituals to drive out the devils and the dark forces represented by them. Be it a fire pit or the fire set at the center of the courtyard, it is popularly known as the "flourishing fire" and supposed to be kept on during the whole night symbolizing eternity and in particular the continuation of felicity and peace, hence the saying "fires on the New Year's Eve and lamps on

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the Lantern Festival". The entertainments which were started a long time ago and are still prevalent today include playing the card games, Chinese dominos and mahjong while enjoying different sorts of snacks and beverages. Ever since 1983, there has been an evening party hosted by China Central Television (CCTV), the most influential television broadcaster in the country. It is generally known as *The CCTV Spring Festival Gala*—an all-star variety show begins at 20:00 on the Lunar New Year's Eve and lasts some four hours to entertain the people all over the country as well as the countless viewers around the world. Without exaggeration, it has been made an annual event of national revelry and possesses inestimable brand value. Every party is endowed with a peculiar theme and the image of the traditional symbolic animal (namely rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig) of the New Year is highlighted and displayed as the mascot in the prominent positions of the broadcasting performance hall. As always, the most eagerly anticipated and appreciated parts of the gala involve mini-plays and traditional Chinese cross talks. It seems that certain veteran comedians, including Zhao Benshan, Song Dandan, Pan Changjiang, Huang Hong and Gong Hanlin can always hold the interest of the audience and make them roar with laughter. Singing, dancing, traditional opera, acrobatics and magic are the other