



Chinese Folk Customs

中国人的 民俗世界

Kuai Dashen Qi Hong ◆ Author
Peng Ying ◆ Translator

*Do you know how to deal with
Chinese people in real Chinese way?
Do you want to be really involved
in Chinese life to understand Chinese
important festivals and customs?*



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Chinese Folk Customs Abstract

This book, through a detailed account of the various facets of the folk customs of the Chinese people, such as the customs of festivals and celebrations, daily-life customs, social customs, religious customs and folk arts, vividly shows the evolvement of the Chinese folk culture and its present situation and throws light on the rich meanings therein. Concise and captivating, it will furnish the reader with a broader knowledge and deeper understanding of the colourful local customs and habits, history and culture of the Chinese nation.

内 容 提 要

本书从中华民族的岁时节庆风俗、人生风俗、生活风俗、社会风俗、信仰风俗、民间艺术等各个侧面，深入浅出地叙述了中国民俗文化的历史和现状，生动地展现了中国民俗的丰富内涵。

本书文字简明生动，内容丰富有趣，可使读者对中华民族的风土民情、历史文化及民族风俗习惯等有更加深刻的了解和更为全面的认识。

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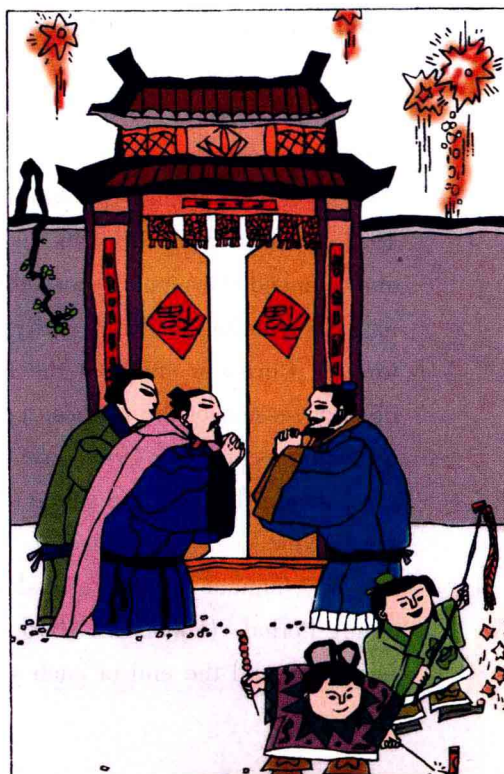


Chapter One Chinese Folk Customs and the Four Seasons

Spring Festival—The Commencement of a Lunar New Year

Spring Festival, the first day of a Chinese Lunar New Year, is the most important one among the traditional festivals in China. People celebrate the Spring Festival after a whole year's toilsome as a way of welcoming the coming year and saying goodbye to the past one, therefore it is also the peak season for traditional activities around the country. The first day of Chinese Lunar New Year, which is now called "Chun Jie" (literally means Spring Festival) was termed as "Yuan Dan" (literally means the commencement of the year) in ancient times. The word "Yuan Dan" first appeared in the poem *Ya Yue Ge* (The Song of the Graceful Music) in the ancient Nan Dynasty (420-589 A.D.): "The four natures (heat, warmth, coldness and coolness) originate from Yuan Dan and the longevity starts from

On the morning of the Spring Festival, people greet and bow to each other.





This picture describes the joyful celebration of the Spring Festival in an official's family.

today.” In the Song Dynasty(960-1279 A.D.), Wu Zimu, a writer gave Yuan Dan a clear definition in his book *A Dream of the Grain*: “The first day of the first lunar month is called as Yuan Dan and thus commence the new year, marking the beginning of a new round of seasons.” The word “Yuan” means the first and the commencement while “Dan” means the morning, and the combined meaning of Yuan Dan is the first morning of a year.

In the year 1911, the revolution of 1911 led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen overthrew the autocratic regime of the Qing Dynasty(1644-1912 A. D.), the last feudal empire in Chinese history. He set January the 1st of 1921 as January the 1st of the calendar year of the Republic of China, and changed the name Yuan Dan into Chun Jie (Spring Festival). Before the founding of People's Republic of China, it was decided to follow the Christian era from the founding day of PRC during the first plenary session of the Chinese people political consultative conference on September 27th in 1949. From then on, January the 1st of the western calendar began to be called “Yuan Dan” and the first day of the Lunar New Year “Chun Jie”.

The annual Spring Festival has a long history. Back to the Yin Shang Period (1600 B.C.-1046 B.C.), people offered sacrifice at the beginning and the end of each year to honor Gods and ancestors, to



show gratitude to Gods, as well as to pray for the harvest in the coming year. It was written in ancient books that “The ripen five common cereals (rice, maize, millet, wheat and beans) indicate a good Nian (year), which means harvest. Consequently even now there remain such terms as Feng Nian(a plenty year), Huang Nian(a famine year). Nian Cheng (harvest). Celebrating the Spring Festival came to be a widespread social custom in the Han Dynasty(202 B.C.-220 A.D.).

Many folklores relate the origin of the Spring Festival. The ancient character Nian(literally means a year) is a pictograph, shaped like a lizard, with a head, a tail and stretched feet. A widely-accepted folklore depicts Nian as a monster moving faster than the wind and howling louder than the thunder. Since it had ate and hurted numerous people and cattle, God chained it amid the remote mountains as a punishment and only allowed it came out once a year. On the night of December 30th, all the people hided at home and stayed up all night to prepare for the sudden attack of Nian, since no one knew the exact time when the monster would break in. The way people spending the night is just like striving for a pass, therefore Nian was also called “Nian Guan”(literally means the pass of Nian) .

However,when Nian came out one year,it was suddenly frightened by the crack of burning bamboo in a village. In flight it was dazzled by a red coat hanging on the clothesline, and broke into a cottage only to get blinded by the shinning lamp. Hence it fled to the deep forest on the mountains and didn't dare to come back again. Henceforth people took advantage of Nian's weak points: the color red, the loud sound and the fire flash, and tried various ways to scare it away such as to stick red paper onto the door, set off firecrackers, beat drums and strike gongs, and light lamps in the house.

The traditional ways of spending the Lunar New Year eve have been passed down through generations though the monster Nian had already been driven away. Even today people still give new year's greetings by clasping hands and bowing to each other on the very day of Spring Festival, i.e. the first day of a Lunar New Year, which in ancient times meant to congratulate each other for surviving Nian's attack. To add to the cheerful atmosphere of the day people began to



make feasts, which was called “Guo Nian” (celebrating the Spring Festival). Gradually, the day became the commencement of the New Year with all these celebrations.

There is another beautiful legend concerning the origin of the Spring Festival. Once upon a time there lived a smart and industrious young man, named Wan Nian. Having observed the movement of the shadow of trees and the rhythm of dripping streams, he formulated a new calendar by measuring those two indicators and presented it to the emperor for a name of the festival. The emperor said: “Spring is the beginning of a year, so let’s call it Spring Festival.” After years’ study and revision, Wan Nian, already a wrinkled and hoary old man, presented the improved calendar to the emperor again. Deeply moved by his dedication, the emperor conferred the title “God of Longevity” upon him and named the calendar “Wan Nian Calendar”. In honor of Wan Nian, people called the Spring Festival “Guo Nian” and put up the portraits of “God of Longevity” in every household.

Generally speaking, the Spring Festival starts from the sacrifice on the 8th or the 23rd of La Yue (the last lunar month) and lasts until the Lantern Festival (the 15th of the first lunar month), while in a narrow sense the festival only refers to the first day of the first lunar month. The holiday season includes various traditional activities with strong ethnic flavors.

On the morning of the Spring Festival, people greet and bow to each other. Junior generations kowtow to the seniors of the family and come out to greet the neighbors. Grown-ups say to each other auspicious words such as “Good luck on your way”, “Wish you fortune”, “Wish you good health and longevity”. In the Song Dynasty some officials found it troublesome to call on each one for the greetings, so they figured out a new way—they cut the plum blossom paper into a rectangular piece with a width of two cun (1cun equals 3.33cm) and a length of three cun, and wrote their names and addresses on it. When the festival arrived they sent the cards to friends, which was the prototype of the current New Year cards. The custom prevailed in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) and during the later years of the Qing Dynasty, the cards were made of red cardboard. Up to now it is also



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delightful to write down your greetings and wishes on the exquisite cards and send them to relatives and friends.

The dishes for Spring Festival are abundant and palatable. The diet habit differs in the north and south of China: south people prefer sweet food such as the sweet lotus seeds, rice cakes and glutinous rice balls, signifying a

happy and sweet year, while north people enjoy dumplings. It is also a tradition to wear new clothes on the Spring Festival in spite of the financial situation of the family and to come back home for the family gathering no matter how faraway a man works. In the past, there were many taboos regarding the Spring Festival. For instance, on the morning of the Spring Festival, sweeping floor was forbidden for fear of sweeping the good luck away; the married daughters were not meant to return to her parents' home for fear of destitution, and scissors and knives were forbidden as well for fear of quarrels. As for the great feast, fish, an indispensable dish, were not be eaten since the Chinese word "Yu" for fish is homonymic with the word plentitude; and if the dumplings were broken, people only said "Open" instead of "Broke". Besides, in the morning parents often wiped children's lips with tissue paper in case that they might blurt out something ominous. Although partly from superstition, all those customs reflect people's good wishes for a safe and sound year.



In this New Year picture, the baby sits on the lotus and holds a carp in his arms, because the lotus and fish are homophonic in Chinese to the phrase meaning every year could be affluent.



Red Spring Couplets Pasted on Every Door

—From Peachwood Charms against Evil to Spring Festival Couplets

A long time ago, in the ocean stood a beautiful mountain called Dushuo mountain, on the top of which grew a huge peach tree with plenty sweet and juicy holy peaches. To the northeast of the tree was a gateway through which all the spirits should pass. Shen Tu and Yu Lei, two brothers guarded the gateway, and accompanied by a tiger.

The two competent brothers were in charge of punishing the evil spirits—they bound them with the reed ropes and let the tiger eat them, so all the evil spirits were afraid of them. Then they became the Gods against evil and people made planks (with a length of 7-8 cun and a width of 1-2 cun) from the peachwood with their portraits or names on them, and drew tigers and hung reed ropes on the doors in order to ward off evil influence and wish for peace. At that time those planks was called “Tao Fu”(Peachwood charm). Today Japanese people’s custom of setting pines in front of doors and hanging a rope knot above the lintels derived from this ancient Chinese tradition.

What is the reason for choosing the peachwood for the charm? In

The custom of pasting couplets on Spring Festival has been past down to today.

ancient China, people used to think that peachwood, the essence of wood, was holy and could subdue evil spirits and ghosts. As time went by, the portraits of Shen Tu and Yu Lei on the charm were replaced by the auspicious words against the evil such as “The charm here, the evil away”. In the Five Dynasties (420-618A.D.), the Emperor Meng Chang of Kingdom Shu wrote a couplet on the charm: “The new year roots in the beneficence of the ancestors





People buy New Year pictures, Spring Festival couplets and door pictures for the Spring Festival.

and the Spring Festival promises the everlasting spring on earth", which was regarded as the first couplets in China.

In the Song Dynasty, pasting couplets on doors had been already accepted as a prevailed custom, with its name remained the "peach-wood charm". The official name "Chun Lian" (the Spring Festival couplets) was created by Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang in the Ming Dynasty. Once on the eve of the New Year, he delivered the imperial order that all the people from officials to the commoners should paste a couplet on the door. On the following morning, going around incognito, he saw a butcher's house did not put up Spring Festival couplets and then wrote one for the illiterate man in accordance with the butcher's profession. The couplets went as "Two hands blaze a way of life and death, one knife makes a clear cut of rightness and wrongs", while the horizontal scroll was "The hereditary skill". Taking the couplets, the butcher kowtowed to Zhu Yuanzhang out of gratitude.

Thanks to the Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, the custom of pasting Spring Festival couplets flourished. Today when Spring Festival approaches, couplets with varied contents are everywhere, especially in





Farmers in the northern part of China paste spring couplets to welcome the New Year.

Kuang Dui (couplets on the door frames), Heng Pi (the horizontal scroll), Dou Fang (the square piece), Chun Tiao (the spring strip), choosing the proper couplets depends on the occasions where they are to be pasted. For instance, Dou Fang, also called the leaf of doors, square shaped sometimes with a character Fu (Bliss) on it, is usually pasted on the furniture and screen walls. Some people paste the piece upside-down on purpose, which means bliss arrives, in Chinese the word “Dao” (upside-down) is with the same sound as the word “arrive”. Also, the contents of the couplets are colorful: the one near the oven might go as “The glow flashes on the mountain caves, the smoke flows to the cloud nine”; in the barn it may be “prosper the manger” fully reflecting the owner’s wishes. In some villages it is a custom to write on red paper the character “You”, which means white tiger against evil, so as to wish for safety and felicity. The horizontal scrolls are pasted above the lintels as a part of a whole set of couplets, containing four characters like Fu Gui Ji Xiang (wealthy and lucky), Jiang Shan Wan Dai (long live the rivers and mountains), Wu Gu Feng Deng (a bumper harvest), Jia Guan Jin Lu (rise the rank and the salary).

“A new year, a new month and a new spring fall, red spring couplets pasted on every door.” People celebrate the Spring Festival with great enthusiasm bearing the expectation of a blessed year.

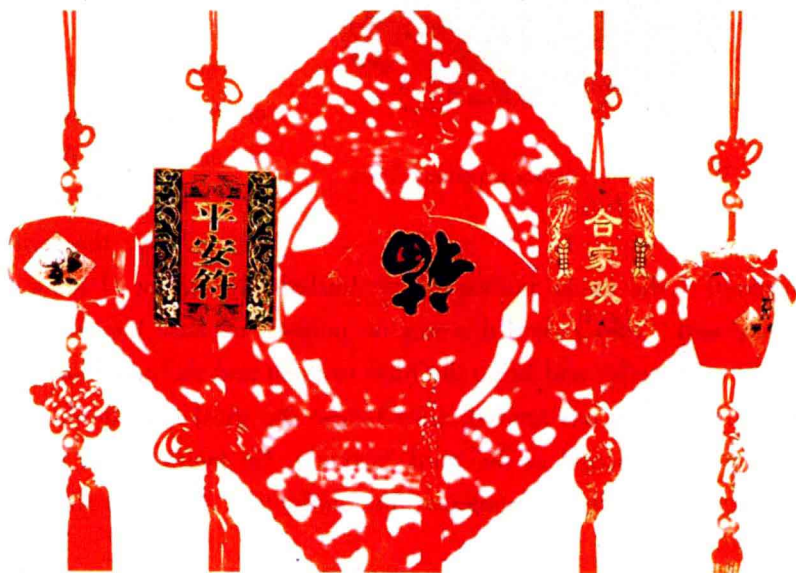
small towns and villages. It is believed that whether rich or poor, couplets always bring happiness and good luck home, and promise a better year.

There are various kinds of spring festival couplets differing in their shapes and sizes, such as Men Xin (the center of the door),



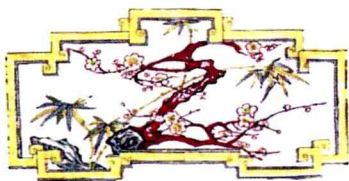
The Character “Happiness” Pasted Upside-down

During the Spring Festival, every household pastes the character “Fu” (happiness) onto the doors, walls and near the ovens following the old customs. As the book *Dream of the Grain* recorded “When Spring Festival came, all the people from the aristocrats to commoners should sweep the floor, wipe off dust, clean rooms and yards, renew the pictures of door guardians, hang the portraits of Zhong Kui (God against evil) and peachwood charms, paste spring plates, and offer sacrifices to ancestors. Here the spring plates refer to the character “Fu” on the red paper. The word “Fu” now means “happiness”, but in the past the meaning was bliss and to paste the character shows people’s longing for a happy life and wonderful future. To make their wish more sincere, some people pasted it upside-down, indicating that happiness had arrived.



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It is said that in the Ming Dynasty, the Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang ordered to paste the character “Fu” on the doors of his clique as a secret sign and planned to kill all the rivals he hated. Known the scheme, the Queen Ma sympathized with those innocent people and informed them in advance, so before dawn all the houses had got the character



The word "Fu" means happiness, bliss, fortune and lucky star.

moment, the queen persuaded her husband by saying "I knew that family well, they pasted this way on purpose because they knew you would come today and bring the bliss to them and the upside-down Fu means that bliss has arrived. (in Chinese the word "upside-down" is with the same sound as the word "arrive"). On hearing this, the emperor calmed down and pardoned the family, thus a disaster was avoided.

The incident circulated about the city and people began to follow the practice in honor of the benevolent queen and in the hope of happiness.

on the doors. However, an unlettered family pasted the character upside-down.

On the following day, the men sent by the emperor Zhu to carry on the plan found out all the houses had the character with no distinction, except one got it upside-down. Perplexed by the situation, they had no choice but to report it to the emperor. Furious as he was, the emperor Zhu ordered to kill all the members of that unlettered family on account of defiance of the imperial administration. At the critical

