

中国经典文化故事系列
Chinese Classic Cultural Stories Series

Traditional Chinese Festivals

中国传统节日趣谈

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中国经典文化

Chinese Classic Cultural Studies

Traditional Chinese Festivals

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一、春节

1. The Spring Festival

春节，俗称“新年”，是中华民族历来最隆重的节日。

The Spring Festival, also called “the Chinese New Year”, has been the most significant and celebrated holiday of the year for the Chinese nationality.

我们往上追溯，至少在殷墟出土的甲骨文中，就已经出现“年”这个字了。那是刻成一个人弯着背肩负沉甸甸穗禾形状的象形字。可见早在殷商时代，就把“年”和作物收成联系在了一起。《穀梁传·宣公十六年》：“五谷皆熟为有年。五谷大熟为大有年。”《说文解字》释“年”字，也说：“谷熟也。”如今人们常说“年成”、“年景”，也是这个意思。农业社会里，庄稼一年熟一次，庄稼熟了，年也到了，很好记。

The Chinese character *nian* (year) can be traced back to inscriptions on tortoise shells unearthed in the Yin Remains. The pictograph *nian* was carved in the shape of a man bent with heavy ears of wheat on his back, which was an indication that *nian* has been closely related to the harvest ever since the Yinshang Period (1600 BC — 1046 BC). It was recorded in the *Guliang Commentary*, the 16th Year of Duke Xuan that





“New Year is the time of harvest, and a good year is a bumper crop.” “Year” is interpreted as “crops are ripe” in *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Explanation and Study of Principles of Composition of Characters*) written in the Han Dynasty (206 BC—220 AD), which is similar in meaning to “harvest of the year” nowadays. Since the crops are ripe once a year in agricultural societies, New Year approaches at the harvest time.

究竟把哪一天定为“年”，这就要涉及历法。历史上有过不同的历法，定出来的日子也不一样。汉武帝时，创制“太初历”，确立以夏历正月初一为岁首。《史记》、《汉书》称正月初一为“四始”，也就是岁之始、时之始、日之始、月之始；“三朝”，也就是岁之朝、月之朝、日之朝。从此以后，把夏历正月初一叫做“元旦”，沿用了两千多年。这就是说，历史上一般把过年的日子叫“元旦”。以前也有“春节”，一般是指“立春”这一天，和今天所说的春节不是一回事。

Which date is set as the beginning of the Chinese New Year? This has to do with the Chinese calendar. The date of the Chinese New Year varied throughout history due to different Chinese calendars. During the period of Emperor Wu in the Han Dynasty (206 BC — 220 AD), the Taichu Calendar was created, and the beginning of a new year was set on the first day of the first lunar month in the traditional Chinese calendar. The first day of the first lunar month is

regarded as “four beginnings” in both *Shiji (Records of the Historian)* and *Hanshu (Chronicles of the Han Dynasty)*, that is, the beginning of a year, the beginning of a time, the beginning of a day, and the beginning of a month. It is also called “three dawns” — the dawn of a year, the dawn of a month, and the dawn of a day. The first day of the first lunar month was kept as “the Chinese New Year” in the following 2,000 years. The day on which people celebrate New Year was usually called *Yuandan* (the Chinese New Year) in history. The Spring Festival used to refer to the Beginning of Spring, which is different from what it means now.

辛亥革命以后，废除夏历，中国开始用公历，就把公历1月1日叫做元旦，称夏历正月初一为春节。从此以后，中国人便有了每年要过两个年的风俗。不过在民众中间，还是约定俗成，只把过春节当做真正意义上的过年，并且总是把年过得红红火火、热热闹闹的。

After the Revolution of 1911, the traditional Chinese calendar was abolished, and the Gregorian calendar was adopted. January 1st is called *Yuandan* (New Year), while the first day of the first lunar month is named the Spring Festival. Therefore, the Chinese people have got the custom of celebrating two New Years. The populace at large tend to celebrate the Spring Festival as the real New Year with



continuous festive celebrations.

春节的风俗，古代有祭祀、朝会、宴饮、占卜、迎神、贺年、玩赏等等内容，随着岁月流逝，这些内容也在发生变迁；各民族、各地域的做法又不尽相同，我们无法一一细说。这里只能大致上作些介绍。

In ancient times, the celebrations of the Spring Festival included offering sacrifices to ancestors, making an audience with the emperor in the morning, holding feasts, telling fortune, welcoming the God, paying a New Year call, and attending entertainments, etc. The customs varied with the passage of time, differed between regions and ethnic groups, and cannot be covered in every detail. The following is only a brief introduction to the custom.

旧时过年，一般都在上一年的十二月二十三日就拉开序幕了。一般要扫尘，也就是打扫卫生，还要置办年货、裁制新衣、祭灶、祀祖等，十分忙碌。

The 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month was the prologue to the Spring Festival celebrations in the past. There would be a tight schedule of thorough cleanings, special purchases for the Spring Festival, tailoring of new clothes, worshipping the Kitchen God, and offering sacrifices to the ancestors.

从前，家家户户都在灶间供奉“灶君司命”，俗称“灶王爷”。传说他是被玉皇大帝派到每户人家来保护和监察这一家人的神灵。旧时的灶头上有个灶王龛，贴一张神像。神像上画一个灶王爷，也有的画一男一女，或一男二女，女的就是灶王奶奶。灶王神像两旁贴一副对联：“上天言好事，下界保平安”，正好说明了这个神灵的职责。据说灶王爷平时留在家中，到了每年的腊月二十三或二十四日，就要上天去汇报这户人家这一年的品行。这件事关系到家家户户的命运，所以不能马虎，要像模像样地送一送。送灶神上天的仪式，俗称“送灶”。

Every household used to make offerings to *Zaojun* or the Kitchen God, who was said to be appointed by the Jade Emperor of Heaven to protect and monitor each household. A shrine to the Kitchen God was displayed above the kitchen range with a picture





of the God on it. On the picture was drawn the Kitchen God, or sometimes a male and a female, or a male and two females. The female was the Kitchen Goddess. Poetic couplets were written on both sides of the picture, on which his duty was expressed as "To Report Good Deeds in Heaven, To Bless People on Earth". It was said that the Kitchen God stayed at people's homes during the year except that he would go to Heaven on the 23rd or 24th day of the 12th month of the lunar year to report the family's behavior to the Jade Emperor. Since the report would determine the destiny of each household, people would hold a kitchen memorial ceremony, or a send-off ceremony as it was commonly called.

送灶在黄昏时举行，要用香烛、供品祀奉，供品中必定有饴糖，据说这是为了让他甜甜嘴，有的说是要让饴糖粘住他的牙，让他无法说坏话。也有的地方让灶君吃酒糟，也是为了使他醉醺醺的，就不再说坏话了。看起来，这是人们在耍弄小聪明，为的是保护自己。最后将神像揭下焚烧，意味着灶君“升天”。有的地方，这时候还有一些人会挨家上门唱歌跳舞，同时向主人乞讨，称为“送灶神”。

The ceremony was held at dusk, with incense, candles and offerings. Maltose was a must to make the God honey-mouthed or to stick his teeth together so that he would not speak ill. In some regions, people would offer him distillers'

grains to make him drunk so that he would not speak ill. People played these tricks to protect themselves. After the offerings, the picture was torn off and burned to send the Kitchen God to Heaven. Then people in some regions would go from door to door, singing, dancing and asking for a treat, which was the send-off ceremony of the Kitchen God.

到了除夕夜，还要“接灶”。意思是要把灶神再从天上接回来，也有一个祭祀仪式，把新的一张灶君神像贴到灶王龛里。

On the Chinese lunar New Year's Eve, people will hold a welcome ceremony — to paste a new picture of the Kitchen God above the kitchen range to welcome him back from Heaven.

“爆竹一声除旧，桃符万象更新。”这副尽人皆知的春联正好勾勒出春节风俗中最引人注目的两个事象：放爆竹、贴春联。

“Firecrackers Ring out the Old, Couplets Ring in the New”, the well-known couplets sketch the two highlights of the Spring Festival: setting off firecrackers and pasting Spring Festival couplets.

爆竹的初意是辟疫驱厉。南朝梁的时候就有这种风俗了。古人以为山里有一种精怪，名叫山魈，常来捣乱。人们把竹子捆成一捆，放在火里烧，发出噼里啪啦的声响，山魈害怕了，就逃走





了。后来，这种爆竹逐渐演变，成为鞭炮，后来又有了烟火。当然，放爆竹，它的原始意义早已淡化，如今只是图个喜庆热闹而已。

The original meaning of setting off firecrackers was to exorcise the devils and diseases as well. This custom dates back to the Liang Period (502 AD—557 AD) of the Southern Dynasties (420 AD — 589 AD). A demon in the mountains named Mandrill always made trouble. The crackings of the burning bamboos tied together would frighten the Mandrills away. Later on, the burning bamboos evolved into firecrackers and then fireworks. The setting off of firecrackers has lost its original intent, and is now a way of celebration.

春联，起源于古代的“桃符”。古人在桃木片上写神荼、郁垒二神的名字，春节时挂在门口，以为就可以使恶鬼望而生畏，不敢进门骚扰了。这是在那个时代里人们的一种想法。五代以后，开始在桃板上书写联语。到了明代，又把桃木板改成纸，就和今天的春联很相似了。许多地方的风俗，不仅大门上要贴春联，屋里屋外凡是可以张贴的地方，新年里也都要张贴一些字画。年画的起源，也与桃符有关。先是把门神绘在桃符上，久而久之，绘画的题材趋向世俗化。还有的要倒贴一个“福”字，或是剪各种窗花来粘贴，或是悬挂中国结，说到底，都是为了趋吉避凶。民国初年，有人把年画和月历结合起来，以后就逐渐演变成成为挂历，风靡全国。

The Spring Festival couplets originated from peachwood charms in ancient times. On the peachwood charms were written the names of the two Gods “Shentu” and “Yulei”. At the time of the Spring Festival, the peachwood charms were hung up at the doorway. Once it was generally accepted that devils would be terrified by the sight of peachwood charms so that they would be kept away from the house and from bothering people. People began to write couplets first on peachwood after the Five Dynasties (907 AD—960 AD), and then on paper until the Ming Dynasty (1368 AD—1644 AD), which bore a striking similarity to the modern practice. Quite a few regions observe the Spring Festival by pasting couplets not only at doorway, but also inside and outside of the houses. Some calligraphies and paintings are put up on the wall as well. The New Year paintings also originated from peachwood charms. The theme of the paintings was merely about the Door God. It later developed into various subjects of social conventions. The Chinese character “Fu” (meaning “blessing” or “happiness”) is usually pasted upside down (in Chinese the “reversed Fu” is homophonic with “Fu comes”). Windows are decorated with paper-cuts and the Chinese knots are hung to pursue fortune and avoid disasters. In the early years of the Republic of China (1912 AD — 1949 AD), the New Year paintings were combined with the monthly calendars, which



later developed into wall calendars and became popularized throughout the country.

大年三十又称除夕，一般要在家中祭祖。全家人团聚，吃年夜饭。年夜饭总是特别丰盛，让全家人都吃个痛快。古时，人们要喝屠苏酒，据说这是名医华佗发明，后来又由名医孙思邈流传开来的。北方人过年还喜欢吃饺子，饺子像元宝，象征着新年大发财。有人说，这是另一个名医张仲景发明的，他看到寒冬把穷人的耳朵都冻烂了，便配制一种“祛寒娇耳汤”，送给穷人治冻伤。这种很像耳朵的药膳，后来就演变成了饺子。当然，很多风俗的形成往往有个漫长的过程，和我们在这儿说的一些传说掌故并没有真正的关系。不过千百年来人们一直这么口耳相传着，这里寄托着人们对历史的理解和对生活的感情，还是很值得我们去体味的。

The 30th of the twelfth lunar month is also known as the Chinese New Year's Eve, on which people would always stay indoors to offer sacrifices to ancestors. All the family members get together to have the family reunion dinner, which is always luxurious. In ancient times, people would drink "Tusu spirits", which was said to be invented by the famous doctor Hua Tuo and popularized by another famous doctor Sun Simiao. People in northern China eat *jiaozi*, which takes the shape of gold ingot from ancient China. People eat them and wish for money and treasure in the coming new year. According to one legend,

jiaozi was invented by another famous doctor Zhang Zhongjing. At the sight of the frostbite on his patients' ears, he compounded decoctions of Chinese medicinal herbs to dispel cold and soften the skin of the ear. The medicinal cuisine looked like ears and later developed into *jiaozi*. Obviously, the development of customs usually undergoes a slow process, and may not necessarily be associated with the above-mentioned legends. Over the years, these legends have been passed down orally. People's understanding of history and their deep affection for life are implied in the legends and are worth our appreciation.

除夕要守岁，从吃年夜饭开始，一家人在一起边吃边聊天，一直要到深夜，迎接新年的到来。在许多地方，除夕夜灶膛里的火是不可以熄灭的，人们会在灶膛里，或是瓦盆里煨上一段粗壮的树根，或是炭结，让它一直燃到年初一，象征着薪尽火传，绵绵不绝。这里似乎有着对远古时代“火崇拜”的依稀回忆，很是耐人寻味。

According to the custom, people will stay up late on the Chinese New Year's Eve. Family members have dinner together, and chat till midnight to welcome the New Year in. In most areas, the fire in the chamber of the kitchen range should not be put out on the eve. People will place a thick tree root or a carbon block in the range or in an earthen basin, to



let it burn until the first day of the lunar New Year. As one piece of fuel is consumed, the flame passes to another. It symbolizes eternity, and has a hint of the worship of fire as in ancient times.

守岁又称“熬年”，这里也有个故事。说是从前有一种凶恶的怪兽，人称“年”。每当除夕夜就会出来伤害人畜。人们为了躲避它，除夕夜早早关门，不敢睡觉，坐等天亮，所以称为“熬年”。到了年初一，大家出来一看，都还活着，于是相互祝贺，表示庆幸，如此而已。据说有一个除夕夜，“年”窜进江南一个村庄，吃掉很多人。有一家挂红布帘，穿红衣服的新婚夫妻安然无恙。还有一家小孩在院子里点燃一堆竹子玩耍，也没事。人们这才明白过来，原来年兽怕红，怕光，怕响声。于是相沿成习，过年的时候要贴红纸，穿红衣，挂红灯，敲锣打鼓，燃放爆竹，据说就是这个缘故。

Staying up on the eve is also called “Survive the *Nian*”, derived from a story. In the good old times, there was a beast called *Nian*, which came out to hurt people and animals on the New Year’s Eve. To keep away from it, people would close doors early and stay awake till daybreak, so it is called “Survive the *Nian*”. On the 1st day of the first lunar month, people would congratulate each other on their survivals. It was said that once on a New Year’s Eve, *Nian* ran into a small village to the south of Yangtze River, and devoured a lot of