

● Cultural China Series

Wei Liming **Chinese
Festivals**

Translated by Yue Liwen & Tao Lang



CHINA
INTERCONTINENTAL
PRESS

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Chinese Festivals





Chinese Festivals

China is a country with a long history of about 5,000 years. In its ever-forward history course there have developed a good number of traditional festivals which are of rich varieties and long standing. The culture of festivals rooted deeply in the people, and it thus shows its enormous vitality. In spite of the change of times, it has gradually become part of the heritages of the colorful Chinese culture.

The generation and development of festivals is a course of their shaping, perfecting and then their gradual integrating with the social life. It is the result of the social development which has reached a certain stage. The increasing productive force of the society, the ever-improving conditions of people's life, and the emergence and frequency of the religious activities has all provided a stage for the emerging and developing of festivals. Most of the traditional festivals in ancient China had something to do with the development of astronomy, calendar and mathematics. The beginning of these traditional festivals was particularly related to the later decided 24 seasonal division points under the traditional Chinese lunar calendar. All of the 24 seasonal divisions had almost been settled by the time of Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220). These



"Joyful Peasants," New Year poster. Absolutely different festivals and customs can be formed on the basis of traditional agricultural production.



"Busy peasants" and "Busy peasant women," New Year posters of Yangjiabu, late-Qing Dynasty.

divisions helped to form festivals, for in their work and life, people developed different customs and activities which can express their good wishes according to the yearly change of seasons and natural phenomena. Based on these customs and activities, festivals began to take their shapes.

A large part of the Chinese festivals had already showed the rudiment in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), such as the New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, Lantern Festival, *Shangsi* Festival, *Hanshi* Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Double Seventh Festival, and Double Ninth Festival. However, the shaping and spread of



Twenty-Four Seasonal Division Points

Season	Division points	Solar calendar	Lunar calendar	Ecliptic (degree)	Significance
Spring	Beginning of Spring	4-5 Feb.	Early first lunar month	315	Spring begins
	Rain Water	19-20 Feb.	Middle first lunar month	330	The amount of rain increases
	Waking of Insects	5-6 Mar.	Early second lunar month	345	The hibernated animals are awoken by the spring thunder
	Vernal Equinox	20-21 Mar.	Middle second lunar month	0	The sun shines above the Equator and the day and night go halves
	Pure Brightness	5-6 Apr.	Early third lunar month	15	Pure and bright; trees and grass thriving
	Grain Rain	20-21 Apr.	Middle third lunar month	30	The rainfall begins to increase and grains grow well
Summer	Beginning of Summer	5-6 May	Early fourth lunar month	45	Summer begins
	Grain Budding	21-22 May	Middle fourth lunar month	60	Grains begin to be in the milk
	Grain in Ear	6-7 Jun.	Early fifth lunar month	75	Awany crops like wheat begin to ripe
	Summer Solstice	21-22 Jun.	Middle fifth lunar month	90	The sun shines above the Tropic of Cancer and the day reaches its longest time
	Slight Heat	7-8 Jul.	Early sixth lunar month	105	Hot
	Great Heat	23-24 Jul.	Middle sixth lunar month	120	The hottest time
Autumn	Beginning of Autumn	7-8 Aug.	Early seventh lunar month	135	Autumn begins
	Limit of Heat	23-24 Aug.	Middle seventh lunar month	150	The summer-heat begin to die down
	White Dew	7-8 Sep.	Early eighth lunar month	165	Getting cold and dews begin to show up in the morning
	Autumnal Equinox	23-24 Sep.	Middle eighth lunar month	180	The sun shines above the Equator and the day and night go halves
	Cold Dew	8-9 Oct.	Early ninth lunar month	195	Getting colder and the morning dew is very cool
	Frost's Descent	23-24 Oct.	Middle ninth lunar month	210	Getting colder and frost begin to show up

(continued)

Season	Division points	Solar calendar	Lunar calendar	Ecliptic (degree)	Significance
Winter	Beginning of Winter	7-8 Nov.	Early tenth lunar month	225	Winter begins
	Slight Snow	22-23 Nov.	Middle tenth lunar month	240	Slight snowfalls
	Great Snow	7-8 Dec.	Early eleventh lunar month	255	Great snowfalls
	Winter Solstice	22-23 Dec.	Middle eleventh lunar month	270	Sun shines above the Tropic of Capricorn and the day reaches its shortest time
	Slight Cold	5-6 Jan.	Early twelfth lunar month	285	Cold
	Great Cold	20-21 Jan.	Middle twelfth lunar month	300	Extremely cold

the customs has gone through a long time of development. The primal customs were related to the primitive worship and some superstitions and they often had something to do with the colorful legends and stories, which have covered a romantic veil on the festivals. The religion also influenced the festivals to a certain extent. Some historical figures, after merging into the culture of festivals, also became more memorable in the history. All these factors have contributed to the profound historic and cultural charm of festivals.

By the time of Han Dynasty, the major traditional Chinese festivals had been settled to a large extent. The Han Dynasty was the first golden period after the great union of the whole country. At that time, the nation was in a stable position in terms of political and economic life and the science and technology were developing rapidly. Regional cultures such as the cultures of Qin, Chu and Qi-Lu, which had had a long history, integrated with each other in such a historic way that they finally formed a cultural community, which is represented by the culture of Han nationality. The factors above helped to create social and cultural conditions for the finalization of festivals.

Coming to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the festivals had stripped off its mysterious coat of primitive sacrifices and



superstitions and changed into more entertaining amusement. Many relaxing activities appeared and soon prevailed as a kind of fashion. Festivals became so joyful and colorful that they really became happy events. Owing to the communication between different nationalities and the development of religions, new vigor was always being infused into the culture of festivals, and the customs are able to last till today.

The traditional Chinese festivals not only are an important part of the cultural life of the Chinese people, but they also play a special role in the commercial trade and cultural communication. Almost every festival is the day of trading and communicating. In these festivals, farmers exchange different products; townspeople improve their living conditions by purchasing goods; scholars share their works with each other; and the government also hold some grand activities to establish or reaffirm the moral principles as a kind of conduction.

The generation and development of traditional festivals is a long course of the accumulation of a nation's historical culture. The strong cohesion and considerable comprehension of traditional Chinese festivals is just in accord with the rich and colorful history of Chinese nation. China has a lot of ethnic groups. Apart from some important traditional festivals of Han nationality, the other fifty-five ethnic groups also have their own peculiar festivals and customs. People today can easily make out an exciting picture of ancient people's social lives through the customs of festivals that originated from the ancient time and last till today. Getting close and even into the culture of these colorful festivals, you can get in touch with the essence of the Chinese culture.

Due to the development of society and the advancement of times, people's views about life have changed greatly, and the culture of Chinese festivals is changing with time, too. Since the Revolution of 1911, China entered a phase where different styles of festivals co-existed with each other. Some of them rose and some of them fell. On the one hand, a few important ones, the four major festivals (the Spring Festival, Pure Brightness Festival, Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival) in particular, are still widely celebrated among people. Not only did they



The couple of golden wedding are presenting roses to each other for a romantic Valentine's Day.

inherit the essence of the culture of traditional festivals, but they also developed more forms and took in some new elements of the new time. Some less important festivals, on the other hand, were gradually forgotten and had faded over the years. Recently some western festivals were introduced into China, and these “foreign festivals” such as Valentine’s Day, Fools’ Day, Mothers’ Day and Christmas Day are becoming more and more popular among the Chinese people, especially the city youngsters.

As people’s living conditions keep improving and their lifestyles change gradually, the ways of celebrating the festivals have changed, too. Combining both tradition and fashion, they show a trend of diversification. A large number of people stick to the traditional customs no more and begin to choose a more simple and casual way to celebrate the festivals. Some new stuff drew people’s attention: the Internet and short messages have brought a brand-new way of expressing good wishes between people. The Chinese festivals and the festival life of the Chinese people are getting more and more colorful and exciting.

The festivals introduced in this book are only a little part of the numerous and rich Chinese festivals, though they will provide an entry to the charming Chinese folk cultures.



A beautifully decorated Christmas tree outside a shopping mall.

Traditional Festivals





China covers a large area and consists of a number of ethnic groups. Different areas and ethnic groups have formed different customs concerning food, clothing, shelter and transport, festivals, courtesies, sacrifices and religion, weddings and funerals. All of these customs have lasted for hundreds of years and have become part of the culture of different areas and ethnic groups. At the same time, some of them become the festivals and customs shared by all the Chinese people and merged into the traditional Chinese culture.

Laba Festival

Name: *Laba Festival*

Date: the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month

In China, the twelfth month of lunar year is called “*la* month,” and the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month is thus called “*Laba Festival*” (eight reads *ba* in Chinese) or “*la* day.” *Laba Festival* is a traditional festival of Han nationality. It is also regarded as the prelude to the Spring Festival.

It is recorded that *Laba Festival* originated from the ancient Chinese *la* ceremony. The Chinese people have always paid great attention to agriculture ever since the ancient time. Whenever there was a bumper harvest, the ancient people would regard it as the result of all gods’ bless, so they would hold a grand ceremony to celebrate the harvest, which was called a “*la* ceremony.” After the ceremony people would entertain their fellow villagers with the porridge that were made of their newly gained broomcorn millet. Everybody would get together to enjoy the festival. The *la* ceremony later developed into a festival mainly to commemorate the ancestors. In the 5th century, the government decided that the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month is the *Laba Festival*.

After the spread of Buddhism into China, people made up another story based on the traditional custom of honoring the ancestors and eating porridge, saying that the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month was the day when Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, became a Buddha. The story goes that Sakyamuni had practiced Buddhism

for many years and the hunger turned him into just a bag of bones and he intended to give up. Right at that time a shepherd girl helped him with rice and porridge, which restored energy into him and brought him into the right track of thought. Contemplating under the bodhi tree, he finally became a Buddha on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month. To commemorate this event, the Buddhists began to make porridge with rice and dried fruits to make offerings to the Buddha on that day every year, and the porridge was called “*laba* porridge.”

The Chinese have been **eating *laba* porridge** for over one thousand years ever since the Song Dynasty (960-1279). At that time, the central and local government as well as the monasteries would make *laba* porridge on every *Laba* Festival. This custom became particularly popular in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The emperor, empress and princes would grant *laba* porridge to their officials and servants and send rice and fruits to the monasteries. All the families would make *laba* porridge to honor their ancestors, too. People not only got together to enjoy the food with their family members but also shared their food with other families to show their good wishes.

There are all kinds of *laba* porridge. The traditional *laba* porridge should include eight main materials and eight supplementary materials, which accord with the “*ba*” in “*laba* porridge” and suggests good luck. (“*Ba*,” in Chinese, is usually related to “*fa*,” which means prosperity.) The main materials usually consist of beans like red beans, mung beans, cowpeas, haricots, peas and broad beans and grain like rice, millet, polished round-grained rice, sticky rice, wheat, oat, corn and broomcorn. People can choose what he prefers from these materials. The supplementary materials can usually be chosen from preserved peach, preserved apricot, walnuts, jujube paste, chestnuts,



Two “Old Beijingers”
enjoying *laba* porridge.



persimmons, melon seeds, lotus seeds, peanuts, hazels, pine nuts, preserved pear and raisins.

After choosing the main materials, it is time to put them into a pot full of water and cook them on a slow fire. When all these have been done, some sweet seasonings like sugar, rose and sweet osmanthus will be added into it. The *laba* porridge varies in different areas in China, and the most delicate one is in Beijing. There are more types of fruits in the rice, such as jujube, lotus seeds, nuts, chestnuts, almonds, pine nut kernels, longans, hazels, raisins, water chestnuts, roses, red beans and peanuts, summing up to more than twenty types.

People usually began to get busy since the night of the seventh day in that month. They wash the rice, steep the fruits in water for some time, pick out the good ones, peel them, get rid of the kernels and finally began to cook all these materials from midnight. After that, the slow fire will keep them until the next morning when the *laba* porridge is finally done.

If the family is very particular about the festival, they will pay special attention to the color of the porridge. All the deep-colored beans will not be taken into consideration. Only polished glutinous rice, seeds of Job's tears, water-nuts and lotus seeds are chosen as the materials and made into porridge. The white porridge placed in exquisite dishware is not only delicious but also good-looking. Moreover, it is also an indication of good luck and bumper harvest. The Chinese think that it is a very agreeable scene to have the whole family gathering at the table and eating the delicious *laba* porridge. Families which are even more particular about the festival will carve the fruits into shapes of people or animals and knead the food with colors such as jujube paste, bean paste, tomatoes and haw jelly cakes into the figures in the legends. This kind of *laba* porridge, however, can only be seen on the altar tables of some big monasteries.

When the *laba* porridge is done, it should first be offered to gods and ancestors as the sacrifice. Next will be the relatives and friends, and the porridge must be sent out by noon. Finally the whole family will enjoy it together. The leftover *laba* porridge, even if it is left after several days, is considered as a good omen since it suggests that there will be leftovers every year. What's



Steeping laba garlic.