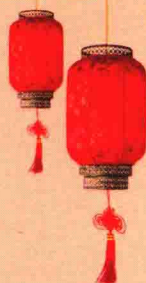




Sharing the Beauty of China

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CHINESE FESTIVALS



Wang Xuewen



China Intercontinental Press



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Foreword

“Happy like during a festival!”

Whenever people cheer for joyful things, they sigh like this. This is the most direct feeling that festivals give to man.

The festival is a universal cultural phenomenon of human society. It is generally thought that festivals are group-based periodic special days with relatively stable contents and forms. Whether it is agricultural society, industrial society or information society, colorful festivals always run through. There are all kinds of festivals including traditional festivals with a long history and modern festivals established with the founding and development of the nation and state; political festivals, religious festivals and mundane festivals; festivals for certain professions and festivals particular to certain sex groups and age groups; festivals on the theme of sacrifice, festivals on the theme of love, festivals on the theme of gathering, festivals on the theme of entertainment and competition, etc.

The origination of festivals had the characteristic of “pure fabrication” but was not meaningless and causeless. We can always find the origins of festivals and the reasons why they can be inherited in the physical geography, history, culture, political system and economic mode of festival celebrators. Festivals revive, explain and inherit man’s past, shape, interpret and maintain man’s present, and at the same time herald, inspire and create man’s future. Try to imagine how insipid man’s life would be in the even, indistinctive and continuous absolute stream of time without the creative and unique

cultural time intervals of festivals. In man's life, they contribute to man's colorful cultural world like a string of beads connected by time and a skeleton supporting daily life. Without festivals, man would lack much spirit and interest. As scholar Liu Dong says, "Life lacking celebration of festivals is not civilized life, and a civilization having lost celebration of festivals is certainly a lost civilization."

China is a major country of festivals. In the long history, vast territory and diversified ecology, various Chinese ethnic groups created, inherited and developed the diversified culture of festivals. How many festivals does China have? There is no exact number. The saying "important festivals come every three days and common celebrations come every day" vividly reflects the numerous Chinese festivals. These festivals are stages epitomizing Chinese culture and its important components. Various elements of Chinese culture such as myths, legends, religions, rites, traditional Chinese opera, music, dancing, foods and drinks, arts and crafts are inseparable from festivals. They carry the Chinese nation's historical memories, cultural creations, social mechanisms and joys of life. In festivals, people satisfy their sensual needs, strengthen group recognition, realize multiplication of ethnic groups, and look for mental peace and spiritual solace.

In modern times, the lineage and status quo of Chinese festivals, just like the Chinese society in rapid development and drastic transformation, show unprecedented complexity and diversity. On the one hand, complaints such as "there is no festival any more" and "festivals are boring" are incessant, and on the other hand, there is an upsurge of "festivals" celebrated in the name of festivals seen everywhere. Traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-autumn Festival and some festivals of minority ethnic groups are carried forward in the context of China's development, but the spirit and content of festivals are transforming. Some traditional festivals such as the Shangsi Festival and Land

God Festival are gradually shrinking for various reasons and are even reduced to records in old books or memories in hearts without any trace in real life. Though festivals such as the May 4 Youth Day, June 1 Children's Day and National Day emerged in the modern development of the nation and state, they are deeply embedded in the Chinese people's time system. They are accustomed to looking forward to and celebrating these "new festivals." Western festivals such as Christmas and Valentine's Day are much favored by Chinese youth. Such a lineage of festivals mixing traditional and modern ones, global and regional ones, religious and mundane ones is presented to common people. In the course of time and life, these festivals have become special moments in the Chinese people's daily life and constituted the Chinese people's life combining tension and relaxation.

Chinese Festivals is a superficial observation of current Chinese festivals. We select 21 festivals from the numerous festivals, and then proceed from the spirit of festivals to write about seven topics including Tenacious Memories, Holy Sacrifice, Mundane Revelry, Rhythm of Production, etc. While looking back at history, we focus more on the presentation of the current situation in the hope of giving a brief account of current Chinese festivals to readers. Of course, themes of festivals are usually comprehensive with compound characteristics. The themes of a certain festival include not only sacrifice, but also gathering, entertainment, etc. Therefore, this classification of themes is only a writing strategy adopted to highlight the features of a certain aspect of Chinese festivals.

FESTIVE CHINA



Festivals are special cultural implications added in the stream of time by different ethnic groups relying on their fortunes. Every country's festival is closely related to the history and traditions of this country and group of people, reflecting unique cognitive and behavioral modes and having unique cultural value. To understand Chinese festivals, we should put them in the context of China's historical and cultural veins and development.

Origins of Festivals

The traditional Chinese character for festival contains the character component for bamboo and is classified into the category of the character component for bamboo in *Origin of Chinese Characters*. Beginning from tender sprouts, bamboos grow one joint every time the shell falls off. Our ancestors described segmenting according to certain regular patterns with the bamboo growth pattern of pushing out the old, bringing in the new and growing higher joint by joint, hence the Chinese character for festival. The rhythm of regular segmenting of bamboo joints is also extended to instrumental music, rites, morals and philosophy – for example, according to *Near Correctness – Explanations on Music*, “harmonious music is called festival” and in *The Book of Changes*, there is a special section on “Festival Diagram.” The meaning of the Chinese character for festival shows that festivals are intervals set by the Chinese people in the time system.

Such intervals are not set randomly. First of all, they are based on China's system of seasons. Ancient Chinese people divided time according to the rules of natural changes, added cultural marks, and gradually refined a time system for guiding production and life – seasons. In the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), China formed a complete system of four seasons, eight periods and 24 solar terms: one year includes four seasons and eight periods, and each period is divided into three solar



Ecological and rice agriculture in the southwest of China (Taken by Wang Xuewen)

terms. The four seasons are spring, summer, autumn and winter, and the points marking the eight periods are the summer solstice when daytime is the longest, the winter solstice when daytime is the shortest, the spring equinox and autumnal equinox when daytime and nighttime are the same, the beginning of spring when the weather gets warm, the beginning of summer when the weather gets hot, the beginning of winter when the weather gets cold and the beginning of autumn when the weather gets cool.¹ The 24 solar terms are remembered by people in the forms of ballads and proverbs.

Song of 24 Solar Terms

Beginning of Spring, Rain Water, Waking of Insects, Spring Equinox, Pure Brightness and Grain Rain

Beginning of Summer, Grain Full, Grain in Ear, Summer Solstice, Slight Heat and Great Heat

Beginning of Autumn, Limit of Heat, White Dew, Autumn Equinox, Cold Dew and Frost's Descent

Winter Solstice, Slight Snow, Greater Snow, Winter Solstice, Slight Cold and Great Cold

Solar terms begin on the 6th and 21st days in the first half of the year



Wind and rain bridge in Liping Dong Stockade Village, Guizhou (Taken by Wang Xuewen)

and on the 8th and 23rd day in the second half

Two solar terms in each month begin one or two days earlier or later than these dates at most

In ancient times, China relied on this time system of seasons to coordinate the relationships between people and nature and between people and society. Of course, this time system was not only a time marking system, but also a means to realize divine rights, ritual rights and political rights. Through arrangements for “instruction on the calendar” such as calendar promulgation and sacrificial ceremonies, rulers ruled, controlled and guided people’s life in all seasons. Seasonal festivals gradually took shape in such imitation of superiors by inferiors – for example, on the day of the beginning of spring, the emperor should personally lead various officials to the suburbs of the capital for the arrival of “spring gods” (God of Grain and Spring Ox). This



Figure of Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism (Taken by Wang Xuewen)

custom was implemented as an official rite throughout China from the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911). Now, there are still folk customs of “welcoming spring” and “whipping the spring ox” in China. Though according to documents, there were sacrificial ceremonies and content arrangements for these solar terms in the past, it should be noted that not all solar terms developed what later generations called festivals. Today, solar terms that we still take as festivals include Pure Brightness and Winter Solstice.

It is generally thought that in the period of the Wei and Han dynasties, with the change in social, political, economic and cultural conditions, traditional seasonal sacrifices gradually shifted towards mundane seasonal festivals and changed from domination by the ruling class with divine rights and political rights to spontaneous recognition and acceptance by the civil society, and the system of seasonal festivals that has influenced China for 2,000 years was basically

Peace lanterns hanging high in the Mazu temple of Hsilo Town, Yunlin County, Taiwan before the Spring Festival



formed.² What cannot be ignored is that apart from the system of four seasons, eight periods and 24 solar terms, some Chinese minority ethnic groups have their own calendars. Though their festivals are influenced by the calendar for the Han people mainly, they are still closely related to their own calendar systems. Tibetan festivals are determined according to the Tibetan calendar. The Shui ethnic group inhabiting the southwest of China has the Shui calendar, and two important festivals of the Shui ethnic group – the Duan Festival and Mao Festival – are both determined according to the Shui calendar.

We can say that festivals emerged from the system of seasons, but the emergence and development of many festivals in later ages deviated from the system of seasons. Even if many festivals originated from the system of seasons, they also kept looking for support by other forces in later development, increasing, revising or replacing cultural explanations on festivals' origins and development and festivals' content formation and changes. The natural rhythm became a cultural rhythm and a social rhythm.

One prominent phenomenon is that historical and regional myths and legends have become the most common explanations on the origins of festivals. The Dragon Boat Festival was originally related to ancient people's concept of "Evil May" when spring turned into summer and diseases prevailed, but was gradually associated with commemorating and reminiscing about Qu Yuan in later ages (it was also associated with Wu Zixu and Jie Zitui in some areas). Dragon boat races also evolved into dispersing fish in the river to prevent them from eating Qu Yuan's body at the bottom of the Miluo River. The legend about Gou Ya who subdued an evil dragon still circulates in the Miao ethnic group in Guizhou's Qingshui River Basin, and dragon boat races are held to pray for favorable weather and bumper grain harvests. Such diversified explanations are closely related to the historical and cultural traditions of the region and group of people as well as the local natural ecology, and have abundant local



The Double Seventh Festival has to do with people's astronomical knowledge. This is a stone relief of the Eastern Han Dynasty collected by the Nanyang Museum of Han Dynasty Stone Carving in Henan. At the right side, the boy turning back his head, holding a whip and leading a cow is the Cowherd. Three linked stars of the Cowherd Constellation are carved above the Cowherd. Four linked stars in the shape of a house are in the lower left corner. The woman kneeling in it should be the Weaver Girl.

characteristics. Of course, with the influence of modern education and mass media, the saying that sacrifices are offered to Qu Yuan on the Dragon Boat Festival are more and more prevalent.

Religious and sacred narrations are another important source of festivals. Ten Chinese ethnic groups believe in Islam, and most of these ethnic groups' festivals originated from the Islamic calendar and *The Quran*. Eid al-Fitr is the 1st day of the 10th month of the Islamic calendar. According to Islamic law, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar is Ramadan every year, and all healthy adult Muslims shall fast the whole month – eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, etc. are prohibited from sunrise to sunset every day. After the end of fasting, to celebrate the satisfactory completion of one month of fasting, people go to mosques to attend meeting ceremonies. Eid al-Adha, also called Feast of the Sacrifice, is the 10th day of the 12th month of the Islamic calendar, commemorating Abraham and his son's spirit of sacrificing themselves for Allah. The 8th day of the 4th lunar month is the Buddha's Birthday Festival, which originated from Buddhism