

A Research on the Difference and Its Relevant Forming Causes Between Chinese Festivals and Western Festivals

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ABSTRACT

Festivals, as an important topic in the communication between China and Western countries, have become hot topics for cultural scholars and college teachers to make the relevant researches on. However, during the past two decades, most researching focuses have mainly centered the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festivals; few of researches have something to do with the causes which result in the difference between Chinese festivals and Western festivals. This thesis begins with a brief introduction about the definition of "festivals" and the significance in doing the relevant research. Then a detail illustration has been made on the difference between Chinese festivals and Western festivals from the following aspects such as historical origins, festival customs, celebrating ways and festival dietary. Finally an elaborate analysis has been made on the causes leading to the above differences in cultural values, religious believes, geographical environment and life styles, hoping that some valuable references or suggestions have been given or made to push forward the similar researches among college colleagues in the future.

Keywords: Differences, Chinese festivals, Western festivals, Forming causes.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the past thousands of years, different countries or nations have brought up different cultures, which have been embodied in their respective life styles, thinking patterns and behavioral conventions. Festivals, as the most collective embodiment of different regional unique cultures, have been emphasized very much by most countries in the world. However, because of lots of differences in geographical environment, social customs, religious beliefs and dietary habits, there are a great number of differences between different national festivals especially between Chinese festivals and Western festivals. Starting with the discussion of the definition of festivals, this thesis mainly talks about the differences of Chinese festivals and Western ones in historical origins, festival customs, celebrating forms and festival dietary, then a detail analysis will be made on the forming causes of the above differences from the following aspects such as cultural values, geographical environment as well as life habits,

which will be favourable to promote the mutual understanding and tolerance between different cultures, making a great effort to create a beautiful and harmonious world together.

2. THE DEFINITION OF "FESTIVALS" AND THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR MAKING A RESEARCH ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE FESTIVALS AND WESTERN FESTIVALS

When it comes to the definition of "festivals", different people have different opinions. Generally speaking, festivals refer to the days which are contained in daily life and endowed with some special social cultural significance in one year. They are the summary or extension of a regional or national politics, economy, culture and religion[1]. As well, festivals are usually regarded as important constituting parts of the national culture, including the personality, psychology, believes, concept,

thinking patterns, moral sentiment and aesthetic tastes formed or accumulated in the national historical long river as well as the value orientation contained in the deep structure of lots of national cultures[1]. They are important cultural carriers and the consequence for a national spirit to breed in the special social soil for a long time as well as the most outstanding and characteristic demonstration of a national ecology[1].

As for the significance to make a research on the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festivals, first of all, it is beneficial to achieve an overall understanding about different festival cultures, on basis of which we can learn about some relevant festival dietary culture and festival taboos. Secondly, by carrying out a deep research on the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festival, it is favourable to reduce or avoid some unnecessary misunderstandings or conflicts as well as enhance the mutual respect and containment, which is helpful to establish a harmonious community with a shared future for the mankind. Finally, making a research on the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festivals can make more and more foreigners learn about China and Chinese traditional culture, which is very beneficial for Chinese culture to go to the world, manifesting the unique fascination of our traditional culture to the world people and improving cultural confidence greatly in the end.

3. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE FESTIVALS AND WESTERN FESTIVALS

While talking about the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festivals, it is mainly reflected in the following aspects such as origins, customs, celebrating forms and dietary etc. And a detail comparison will be made on these aspects between Chinese festivals and Western festivals.

3.1 The Different Origins of Chinese Festivals and Western Festivals

For most Chinese festivals, they mainly originate from the sacrificing activities and the productive activities of the ancient Chinese[2]. Taking Spring Festival for an example, it is well known that Spring Festival is the most important in China. It was said that Chinese Spring Festival originated from the ancient "Laji" a sacrificing activity which was usually held in the last month of

the lunar year to pray for a good harvest in the coming year by presenting some wild animals hunted in the cold winter[6]. After all, winter was the best hunting season especially in Northern China at that time when all the beast had to come out in search for food with all the leaves fallen down from the trees and all the grass died away. The ancient Chinese persons held the sacrificing activities at the end of every year. By worshipping or sacrificing the ancestors and all the divinities, they hoped to usher in a good bumper year in the future. Of course, it was a good opportunity for most people to have a complete rest and an adequate entertainment in order that they could get ready for the busy agricultural activity in the coming year. Nowadays, there still exist some sacrificing activities in some areas both in Southern China and in Northern China during Spring Festival. When Spring Festival comes, it is a convention for people to worship their ancestor by gathering in the ancestor hall or burning the paper money in front of their forefathers' tombs. Apart from worshipping the ancestors and the divinities, some Chinese festivals have something to do with the great historical figures. For example most people tend to link Dragon-boat Festival with Qu Yuan, a famous politician and poet who lived in the Warring States period whereas there was a direct connection between Qingming Festival and Jie Zitui, a respectable loyal minister in the Spring Autumn Period.

Another origin of Chinese festival has something to do with people's productive activities in ancient China. As we have seen, China has been a large agricultural country since the ancient time, and agriculture has been occupying the dominating status in the mind of most Chinese people, which can be verified from the popular saying "Food is the paramount necessity of the people" in China. From the Spring and Autumn period, Chinese people began to arrange and carry out some agricultural activities according to the change of the climate and the seasons. Consequently, there are popular sayings such as "Spring plowing, Summer growing, Autumn harvesting and Winter storing" among most Chinese persons. During the process for the ancient Chinese people to engage in the productive activities, some relevant festivals came out at the same time. Taking Spring Festival for an example, not only does it mean a reunion moment for every Chinese family, also it stands for the beginning of the agricultural activities in the New Year. That was the reason why the ancient emperor tended to worship the heaven and the earth, ploughing the

field by themselves to set a good example for the people all over the country. Similarly, Mid-Autumn Festival also has two meanings: it symbolizes the reunion of each family on that day, in addition, and it is also the moment for people to celebrate a good harvest after hard work [5]. For most Chinese people, Winter Solstice Festival is not only a solar term to symbolize the coming of the coldest moment in one year. As well, it reminds all the people of making an adequate preparation for the winter by storing enough food and dry wood.

Comparatively speaking, Western festivals are classified into productive festivals and religious festivals. However, as time went by, some festivals related to the productive activities have been forgotten by people little by little, only a few of them have been passed down. For example, Halloween is said to originate from the ancient Celtic festival known as Samhain, marking a celebration of the good harvest at the end of the harvest season[7]. Thanksgiving was also said to celebrate the good harvest for the first time after the early Europeans arrived at North America, they lighted the campfire, entertaining the local Indians with turkey and some other delicious food to show gratitude for their warm help during the hardest time. As well as the above two, most Western festivals have much to do with religions, especially Christianity[2]. After all, Christianity is the most popular religion in the Western world, and almost all the Westerners belong to Christians. Therefore it is not difficult to understand that most festivals in the Western countries such as Christmas Day, Easter Day and Fool's Day are directly connected with Christianity. Of all the Western festivals, there are still some ones which are established to commemorate some persons. For example, Valentine's Day was said to be associated with a priest named St. Valentine who was martyred about 270 A. D. by the emperor Claudius II Gothicus. Nowadays most Westerners celebrate Valentine's Day not only to convey their love to each other but to show the salutation to such a priest with a dedicating spirit and a helpful mind.

3.2 The Comparison of Festival Customs Between China and Western Countries

Concerning about Chinese festival customs, they are mainly displayed in the following aspects concentratedly. Firstly, lots of customs in China mainly convey the happiness and the best wishes. For example, when Spring Festival comes, most people tend to do some cleaning, paste the Spring

Couplets or paper cuttings, lighten firecrackers or fireworks, give red envelopes and have a family reunion dinner in order to express their great happiness and convey the best wishes to their family members, friends and relatives. When Mid-autumn Day comes, people tend to sit together for having moon cakes and drinking the wine fermented with osmanthus flowers to show their missing and best wishes to their families and friends. In addition, some festival customs are used for praying for a healthy body and worshiping the ancestors, the sages or the divinities. For example, the reason for people to insert the willow branch or sweep the tomb during Qingming Festival is just to sacrifice their ancestors or worship an ancient sage named Jie Zitui who lived in the Spring Autumn period. Also the purpose for people to hang the wormwood or drinking realgar wine during Dragon-boat Festival is just to ward off all kinds of illness, what's more, people's having rice-puddings and their making a dragon-boating race are just to pay a salutation to Qu Yuan, a great politician and poet living in the Warring States period.

When it comes to the customs for Western Festivals, most of them also want to express the happiness and best wishes for the coming of festivals. For example, in order to welcome the coming of Christmas Days, decorating trees in front of their houses or courtyards is very common among most Westerners to establish a happy festival atmosphere. And disturbing Christmas puddings and sending Christmas cards or other gifts have become a popular phenomenon just to convey the best wishes to each other. On Valentine's Day, sending Valentine's cards or chocolates to each other between the sweethearts are very popular with most Western young persons just to show their sincere love. Also, some Western customs are relevant to ward off the evils, taking the customs of Halloweens for an example, the purpose for most people to dress themselves up as ghosts or devils and lighten the pumpkin lamp is just to keep people away from the disturbance or injury of all the disembodied spirits.

3.3 The Different Ways of Celebration Between Chinese Festivals and Western Festivals

Talking about the different ways of celebration between Chinese festivals and Western ones, they are much closely connected with their respective cultural values and national personalities. For most Chinese people, family affection has taken the most

important position in their mind. Therefore it is not difficult to understand that going back home to reunite with family members especially with their parents has become the unique social and cultural phenomenon in China when Spring Festival or Mid-Autumn Day comes. Nowadays Chongyang Festival has also become a one to show the love and respect to the old persons. More and more Chinese people tend to take advantage of such an opportunity to show their love and gratitude to their parents by going back home with gifts. Having a dinner with parents or other family members has become another celebrating method for most Chinese festivals. Consequently, whenever at Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Day, or at Dragon-boat Festival and Chongyang Festival, having a dinner with family members or relatives has become a popular convention.

As for the ways of celebration for Western festivals, the situation is quite different. Unlike most Chinese people, most Westerners don't have the convention to celebrate the festivals with their parents or other family members. Instead, they would rather stay at their own home or go out with their good friends. What they tend to do is just to send cards to express their sincere greetings to their family members or parents whether at Christmas Day, or Thanksgiving Day. Seeking the manifestation of the individuality and a fervent atmosphere is another characteristic for Westerners' ways of celebration. As a result, at Halloween, most young men tend to dress themselves up as devils or ghosts at their will to demonstrate their distinction. Most Children usually go to door to door for making "treat or trick" game. When Carnival Day comes, almost all the Westerners go to the street for the grand carnival parade by wearing colorful and fantastic clothes, and most young persons tend to have a carnival party by drinking, singing and dancing to spend such an exciting night.

3.4 The Differences of Festival Dietary Between China and Western Countries

When it comes to Chinese festival food, it is rich and colorful with many different varieties. And almost all the festivals have their representative food with the special meanings. For examples, when Spring Festival comes, it is a popular convention for the northern Chinese people to have Jiaozi, a delicious food with meat and vegetables in the flour, whose shape is just like the ingot in ancient China. Therefore having Jiaozi at Spring Festival stands for making a great fortune in the

coming New Year. Also the pronunciation of the word "jiaozi" has a homo phonic tone with the Chinese character "交子", so eating Jiaozi also symbolizes the alternation between the old year and the New Year. In the south of China, people tend to eat Niaoao, a festival food made of glutinous rice flour, implying that all of us will be promoted to a higher position in the New Year. January fifteenth in Chinese Lunar New Year is called the Lantern Festival, when people tend to watch many different kinds of colourful lanterns and make some guessing games. On that day, both in the north and in the south, people tend to eat sweet dumplings, a delicious food with the sugar and black sesame generally in the glutinous rice flour, which means reunion. Zongzi is the popular food at Dragon-boat Festival, which is made of the glutinous rice with candied dates or salted duck eggs wrapped in reed leaves generally. It was said that when Qu Yuan jumped into the river on May fifth in the lunar year, all the people nearby threw Zongzi into the river in order for fishes or shrimps not to bite Qu Yuan's body. That is the reason why most Chinese people especially in the south tend to eat Zongzi at Dragon-boat Festival. On Mid-autumn Day, it is very common for all the Chinese people to eat moon cakes, a delicious festival food with the round shape like the moon. Perhaps while eating moon cakes, most of us can't help looking up at the moon in the sky and missing the family members in our home town.

Unlike such rich and colorful Chinese festival food, there are not so many varieties of Western festival food. Generally speaking, Western festival food mainly includes meat, vegetables as well as fruits, and the meat food includes pork, beef, and mutton. On Christmas Day, Westerners tend to have roasted beef, toasted chicken, vegetables and fruits, and the most important dish is Turkey, which is regarded as the most characteristic Christmas food. Turkey is also an indispensable dish for Thanks-giving Day, which is sure to be offered at all the Westerners' tables on that day. As well as turkeys, cranberry jams, sweet potatoes, cooked corns, pumpkin pies are also regarded as the traditional food for Thanks-giving Day, which is very popular with most Westerners[4].

4. THE FORMING CAUSES FOR THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE FESTIVALS AND WESTERN FESTIVALS

As for the causes which lead to the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festivals, there are lots of related factors which mainly center on the following aspects such as cultural values, historical traditions, geographical environment, religious belief and life habits etc. Here a few of them will be chosen for making a detail instruction.

4.1 Cultural Values

As a large ancient oriental country, during the past five thousand years, China has been influenced greatly by Confucianism for a long time, which has still dominated most Chinese thinking method and behavioral pattern even in today's daily life. And benevolence and filial piety are the main doctrines of Confucianism. Therefore respecting the parents or concerning about the family members has become the essential principle for thousands of years[4]. That's reason why going back home to reunite with the parents or other family members has become a universal social phenomenon when Spring Festival or Mid-autumn Day comes. That is also the reason why Chongyang Festival has been established as the special day for the old persons in order for the children to show the love and concern to their parents.

However, freedom, independence as well as equality are the common cultural pursuits among most Westerners. In order to seek for their own freedom and independence, most people especially the young persons try their best to display their individuality and pursue their desired life rather than accept any control or confinement[4]. In Western families, there is an equal relationship existing between children and parents. It is normal for children to call their parents or grandparents by their names directly, which is unimaginable and unacceptable in most Chinese families. Therefore, when Christmas Day or New Year's day comes, it is not surprising that most Westerners especially the young persons would like to celebrate these festivals at their home or stay with their good friends instead of going back to their hometown and staying with their parents or grandparents. What they usually do during these festivals is just to send Christmas cards or New Year's cards to convey their best wishes to their parents or other family members. And during Halloween or

Carnivals, most young Westerners tend to dress themselves up as ghosts or devils, participating in the grand parade on gorgeous clothes, holding the parties by drinking champagnes, singing and dancing to express their emotions as much as possible.

4.2 Religious Belief

Unlike most Westerners who tend to believe in a religion with heart and soul devoutly in their lives, most Chinese persons belong to pantheists, and they take the pragmatic attitude toward all the divinities. That is, such a belief does not belong to a lifelong spiritual or mental one but a temporary and deliberate one[3]. Most Chinese people tend to worship the divinities only when they meet some difficulties or disasters in their daily lives. And the purpose for them to do so is just to pray for the blessing from the divinities in order that all the family members or relatives will have a good health and fortune away from any illness or danger. Therefore some relevant social customs and taboos have been passed down from the old generations in some Chinese traditional festivals. For example, before Spring Festival every year, December twenty-third in the lunar calendar is regarded as the primary New Year when most Chinese people tend to worship the kitchen god, hoping that he will say something good for the ordinary people when visiting the Jade Emperor to bless all the masses' peace. And January fifth in the lunar calendar is said to be the day for welcoming the god of fortune. Most Chinese people tend to worship at the shrine of Mammon especially in the northern Chinese rural areas in order for the whole family to make a great fortune in the coming New Year. On Double Seventh Day or Mid-Autumn Day, most young persons often worship the Weaver Girl at the Vega temple or sacrifice the Moon Lord so that they will find their satisfying lifelong partners as soon as possible.

Comparing with most Chinese people, all the westerners belong to Christians. The doctrine of Christianity demands that all the Christians must believe in the Jesus Christ devoutly and consistently without mixing any realistic personal benefits. The purpose for them to believe in Christianity is just to acquire the guidance from Jesus and achieve the maximum mental satisfaction instead of reaping the personal interests in their daily life[3]. For most Westerners, believing in Jesus Christ is the most important part of life and all the people' words or behaviors are guided or

restrained by the doctrine of Christianity. Therefore, lots of festival activities in Western countries have much to do with Christianity. For example, Christmas is the most important festival in the Western countries, which was dated back to some celebrating activities for the birth of Jesus Christ. The word "Christmas" is made up of two parts, "Christ" and "mas", which means that all the Christians should go to the church and hold a worship to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Easter Festival is said to be the day for Jesus Christ to come back to life after he was nailed to death at the crossing because of the betrayal of his thirteenth disciple, Judas. On the day, children try their best to find the color eggs hidden in the garden because eggs are the symbol of life, implying that Jesus will come back to life. Easter rabbits are also the Westerners' favourite animals on that day because they are said to bring Easter color eggs to the children. As well as Christmas Day and Easter Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Carnivals are also closely linked with Christianity and there are some corresponding religious activities or customs.

4.3 Geographical Environment and Life Styles

As for Geographical environment and life styles, they are also the main causes resulting in the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festival. The above factors mainly have a great influence on the festival food between China and Western countries.

As we have seen, China is a country with a vast territory and there is an outstanding difference in climate between the north and the south. Most regions in the north are famous for the dry weather and the deficient rainfall, whereas the climate in most areas of the southern China is humid with the abundant rainfall all the year, which has had a direct influence on the dietary structure and the dietary habits in two areas[3]. It is well known that people in the north mainly live on the flour food because wheat is mainly produced in the whole northern part of China. Most southerners like having rice from the morning to the evening because rice is the most important grain crop in the southern part of China. Such a difference of dietary structure directly determines people's dietary convention, making a great effect on their respective festival food in two areas. So it is easier to understand why most northerners have Jiaozi during Spring Festival whereas the southerners liking eating sweet dumplings or Niangao.

Similarly, at Dragon-boat Festival, people living in the northern China usually have fried dough sticks or the sugar cake, a fried food made of the boiled flour with the black sugar in it. However people living in the south tend to have Zongzi and salted duck eggs. In addition, China is a large agricultural country with the history more than five thousand years. And the agricultural production going through thousands of years has formed the advanced productive technology and skillful manufactured techniques, which makes the festival food in our daily life more elegant and exquisite, which can be verified by varieties of colorful Zongzi or moon cakes with many different kinds of stuffings in them during Dragon-boat Festival or Mid-Autumn Day.

Unlike China, most Western countries are located near the sea, belonging to the oceanic countries where the fishery and shipping industry have been very prosperous since the sixteenth century or seventeenth century ago, which has also shaped most Westerners' personality traits full of challenging spirit and pragmatic consciousness, influencing their dietary styles further. Therefore, most Western foods pay great attention to the production efficiency and practicability rather than elegance or delicacy[3]. Thus, the festival dietary is almost the same more or less whether it is on Christmas or Thanksgiving Day, unlike most Chinese persons who can enjoy the special delicious food in each festival. As well, most European or American countries belong to the oceanic climate with the comfortable temperature and abundant rainfall. And there are lots of vast grasslands or pastures in these regions, which makes the animal husbandry very well-developed, forming their daily dietary structure made up of the meat food mainly. Consequently, we can see such a popular phenomenon that Westerners tend to offer the meat food such as, pork, beef, mutton, chicken, especially turkeys and so on as well as some vegetables or fruits at the table for celebrating the coming of Christmas, Thanksgiving Day, or New Year's Day.

5. CONCLUSION

As a collective embodiment of cultural accumulation and an important bond to link with many different cultures, festivals are playing more and more significant role both in inheriting the native culture and exchanging with some other foreign cultures. Therefore it is of great significance to carry out the research on the

differences between Chinese festivals and Western festivals. However, it is a complicated and challenging job to make an overall and detail research on such an issue for a convincing conclusion, which needs the common effort from the cultural scholars, college teachers and folk experts. It is certain that as long as all of people work hard to make a centered coordination, there must be a breakthrough in the research about the differences between Chinese festivals and Western festivals, which is sure to be helpful to reduce the divergence and increase the consensus in the cultural exchange between China and Western countries in order for the mankind to get well along with each other and create a better community with the shared destiny in the future.

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