

Research on Chinese and Western Traditional Festival Culture Contrast

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Abstract. Today, with the development of economic globalization and China's market economy, people liberated their thought, provided conditions for western culture merging into our society. Some western festivals have become popular among the new generation in China. This acceptance of the western culture and traditional festivals reflect the fusion of the Chinese and western cultures. Chinese traditional festivals are the soul of national spirit and the epitome of Chinese ancient civilization. We should change the ignorant customs and maintain the excellent ones which can embody national features. The precondition of learning foreign culture is to get a good knowledge of our own national culture. In cross cultural communication, we should not have blind faith in foreign things and ignore national dignity, and we should prevent the culture erosion phenomenon when communicating with westerners.

Introduction

The traditional festivals are the most fundamental and most representative part of world culture. With more and more frequent Chinese and western cultural exchange, the research on traditional festivals plays a more and more important role in cross-cultural communication. Chinese and western traditional festivals have different cultural background. Chinese traditional festival culture takes agricultural culture as basis and the festivals are set according to lunar calendar; however, the western festivals take Christianity as basis and they are set according to solar calendar. Besides, Chinese and western festival culture also has different content. Chinese festivals are featured by food and wine, while western festivals are featured by entertainment. In terms of view of value, affected by collectivism, Chinese traditional festivals pay attention to group activities and inheritance of moral trait; however, affected by individualism, the western festivals pay attention to expression of personal emotion and psychological feelings. In addition, Chinese festivals seek for happiness and harmony, while western festivals are always of tragedy color. The author will make a contrast on cultural difference in Chinese and western traditional festivals from 3 aspects, that is, origin of traditional festivals, celebration ways and customs of festivals, and superstition and taboos of festivals.

Origin of Chinese and western traditional festivals

The origin of festivals is an integral part of traditional festivals; as the existence basis of festivals, the origin of festivals is the most fundamental factor which causes difference in Chinese and western traditional festivals.

Origin of Chinese main traditional festivals

Spring Festival

The Spring Festival is the most important festival among Chinese traditional festivals. During the Spring Festival, people will go back home from different places to reunite with family members together so as to enhance relation between relatives. However, at the every beginning, the Spring Festival is not used to stand for ringing out the Old Year and ringing in the New Year, but used to celebrate for "arrival of spring". When the spring comes, peasants start to sow seeds in the field, that is, "The whole year's work depends on a good start in spring". As early as in Xia Dynasty, the first day of lunar January was regarded as "the beginning of one year"; till Han Dynasty, this day was celebrated as a festival. After the Revolution of 1911, Chinese traditional lunar calendar was abolished; the first day of January was called New Year's Day (that is, new year), and the first day

of lunar January became Spring Festival. Therefore, Chinese people have a costume of celebrating two new year festivals.

Tomb-sweeping Day

In China, April is an important month to ghosts. In this month, the ghosts will go out from the hell, and people shall gather together to conduct a ceremony to welcome each family's ghosts. In Tomb-sweeping Day, people generally will sweep the tombs for dead relatives and prepare abundant sacrificial offerings. The Tomb-sweeping Day of solar calendar is one of China's 24 solar terms, and the original intention is to remind people that the spring has come back to the earth, everything has gone green, and the busy farming season starts.

Dragon Boat Festival

The Dragon Boat Festival in the 5th day of lunar May has a history of more than 2,000 years, and it has been listed as national intangible cultural heritage. There are many versions of origin of Dragon Boat Festival; however, the version with most far-reaching influence is to commemorate the Chu State poet Qu Yuan in the Warring States Period. He was frustrated for his talent and finally committed suicide by drowning himself in Miluo River. After he was dead, people gathered by the river to lament his death; in order to not let fishes and prawns in the river eat Qu Yuan's corpse, people threw rice dumplings, eggs, and other food into water.

Chinese Valentine's Day

Chinese Valentine's Day has a touching folk legend. The Cowboy and the Weaver Girl loved each other and got married. After the Queen of Heaven knew that the Weaver Girl came down to earth without permission, she was so angry to separate them by use of a Heaven River; however, she was finally moved by their love and allowed them to meet each other in the 7th day of lunar July every year.

Origin of western main traditional festivals

Christmas

As a Christian festival, Christmas is regarded as a festival to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. This day can be traced back to A.D. 4th century. The Christmas will be continued for 12 days, and this period is full of generous, enthusiastic, good and beautiful wishes.

Halloween

Halloween originates from ancient Celts' late summer festival in the evening of October 31. Ancient Celts regarded the first day of November as late summer festival to celebrate starting of winter and welcome new year. In the evening of October 31, the young people were fully dressed and lifted pumpkin lantern to walk around their village to celebrate the harvest in autumn. Ancient Celts thought that the ghosts would return to the world to cause troubles and damage villagers' food in this evening; in order to not be recognized by ghosts, people would wear costumes of various kinds of animal shapes. This is the origin of Halloween costume.

Valentine's Day

Saint Valentine was a priest of Roman Empire in the 3rd century. At that time, the emperor Claudius II announced to abolish all marriages for the purpose of winning enough uncommitted men to enter the battlefield. The priest Valentine thought that this decree was unfair, thus he secretly held wedding ceremonies for young lovers. After Claudius II knew the situation, he ordered to put Valentine to death; later, people who once received Valentine's help commemorated him in his funeral day -- February 14.

Thanksgiving Day

The origin of Thanksgiving Day can be traced back to Thanksgiving Day held by Plymouth colonists in December 1621. In order to escape from religious persecution, a batch of puritans took "Mayflower" ship from England to Plymouth. In that winter, they suffered hunger and cold, and the local Indians helped them to spend the cold winter and settle. Later, this batch of puritans regarded the 4th Sunday of November as Thanksgiving Day to express their thanks to local people and the God.

Celebration ways of Chinese and western traditional festivals

The celebration of festivals is the core of traditional festivals. The linguists think that different countries have different celebration ways of festivals, which can reflect the features of different countries.

Spring Festival and Christmas

Because the Spring Festival is the most important traditional festival for Chinese people, it has many celebration customs. Since the sacrifice is made for the Kitchen God in the 23rd day of lunar December, the prelude of Spring Festival is opened, including sweeping, do shopping for the Spring Festival, making new cloths, and making sacrifice for ancestors, etc. Before Spring Festival's Eve, the spring festival couplets will be pasted on all families' gate, and the spring festival couplets originate from peach wood figures hanging on the gate in ancient time. People paste “福” which means happiness in the center of gate in an inverted way and decorate paper-cuts and Chinese knot on windows, all of which symbolize seeking for good luck and avoiding disaster.

The 30th day of lunar December is Spring Festival's Eve; in this day, people will worship their ancestors in their home and share abundant family reunion dinner. Later, people will chat with each other till late night, which was called “stay up late or all night on New Year's Eve”. In ancient time, it was said that a monster called Nian would come out to hurt people on New Year's Eve, but it was afraid of red, fire and great sound; therefore, people paste red paper-cuts, wear red clothes, light red lamps, beat gongs and sound drums, and set fireworks and firecracker to scare off this beast; those customs are passed down from generation to generation. The 1st day of lunar January is the first day of Chinese New Year; people will mutually pay a New Year call, and the children will obtain New Year presents from elders – money given to children as a lunar New Year gift. The celebration activities of Spring Festival will be continued to Lantern Festival (the 15th day of lunar January).

In western countries, people can feel Christmas spirit one month before festival. Every family will purchase Christmas tree, decorate their house, and prepare gifts; the whole family members will reunite together at home to celebrate Christmas. On Christmas Eve, people will step into church to sing Christmas songs; on Christmas, people will also go to church to participate in various kinds of religious activities. One of important customs on Christmas is to mutually present Christmas cards, and another custom is to present gifts mutually. People think that the first Christmas gift is thrown by Father Christmas living in North Pole from each family's chimney and presented to children, and he will present gifts to children according to children's performance in one year.

Chinese Valentine's Day and Valentine's Day

These two festivals are romantic festivals celebrated by lovers. At night of Chinese Valentine's day, the young unmarried women will pray for Vega to let herself become more intelligent. Those women put a needle on the water surface; if the needle is not sunk into water, it shows that this woman is intelligent enough to get married with others, thus Chinese Valentine's Day is also called “the Begging Festival”.

In Valentine's Day, the westerners will mutually present greeting card and flowers to express their love. The representative gifts presented in modern Valentine's Day include heart-shaped pattern, pigeon, and angel Cupid with wings.

Tomb-sweeping Day and Halloween

Tomb-sweeping Day is a festival of solar calendar, and it is generally in the 4th day, 5th day, or 6th day of April. In Chinese language, the original meaning of “清明” is clean and bright, and this festival is similar to other festivals used to celebrating spring in other culture – celebrating sprouting of all things, and people start busy family and spring outing. In ancient China, people celebrated Tomb-sweeping Day through singing, dancing, and flying kites, etc.; they stripped off the cooked colorful eggs to symbolize the starting of life. The emperors would plant trees in imperial palace to show that the spring had come back to the earth. As the time goes by, Tomb-sweeping Day gradually evolves as a day to make sacrifices to ancestors.

In western countries, not all countries and religions celebrate Halloween. However, in countries with celebration tradition of Halloween, the celebration ways are also different. Take America as an example: the influence of Halloween on business has been expanded to South America, Europe, and other regions. Halloween activities include “making troubles without candies”, wearing prop cloths to participate in mask party, carving pumpkin lamps, telling ghost stories, and watching horror films, etc.

The different celebration ways of those two festivals show that Chinese and American people have different view of value. Chinese people pay attention to health, union, and harmony, while American people prefer to walk on the streets to have fun rather than stay at home.

Superstition and taboos of Chinese and western traditional festivals

Superstition and taboos of Chinese traditional festivals

Both origin and celebration of festivals can't be separated from legends which include superstition elements, thus there are some taboos. Because the Spring Festival plays an important role in Chinese traditional festivals, there are many taboos about Spring Festivals. The fish is an indispensable dish in New Year's Eve dinner, and it can't be eaten up, which conforms to Chinese saying “年年有余” (there are enough things to be spent every year), for “鱼” and “余” are homophonous character. Chinese people think that new year is the symbol of good luck in one year; in the 1st day of new year, the sweeping is forbidden, for people think that the good luck and luck in making money will be swept out. In this day, parents shall not scold children, ask for a light from other families, sprinkle water outwards, and use needle or scissors.

Superstition and taboos of western traditional festivals

Because most of western traditional festivals are related with Christianity, there are not many taboos; it is not allowed to desecrate Jesus Christ, or curse at others.

The cultural difference reflected in Chinese and western traditional festivals is closely related with respective history and social system. The traditional festivals are historic products of national development; in both China and western countries, most of traditional festivals originate from people's expectation on harvest in agricultural life, worship to gods and nature, and sacrifice to historic figures, etc. Through traditional festivals, it is able to reflect cultural features and national spirit of one country. China and western countries all have their outstanding excellent culture. Under the great environment of globalization, we shall pay attention to culture erosion in cross-cultural communication, effectively depend on mutual understanding in communication, avoid misunderstanding, actively affirm respective culture, discard the dross and select the essence. We can smoothly implement effective cross-cultural communication only when we are fully aware of cultural difference.

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