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## A Comparative Study of Sino-US Festival Culture

### UNE ÉTUDE COMPARATIVE SUR LA CULTURE FESTIVAL SINO-AMÉRICAINNE

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**Abstract:** Festival culture is an important carrier of the emotion and spirit of a nation. The study of holiday culture is an indispensable part of the study of a national culture. Since both American culture and Chinese culture have the characteristics of diversity and pluralism, a comparative study of them is meaningful. This paper studies some of the major festivals in both China and the United States of America, compares the similarities and the differences in the festival practices and tries to reveal the national personality, cultural value orientation, and the national spirit of them for the purpose of a better understanding and harmonious development of the two cultures.

**Keywords:** festival culture; comparative study; Sino-US

**Résumé:** La culture festival EST un vecteur important de l'émotion et l'esprit d'une nation. L'étude de la culture de vacances est un élément indispensable de l'étude d'une culture nationale. Comme la culture américaine et la culture chinoises ont toutes les deux les caractéristiques de la diversité et du pluralisme, une étude comparative d'entre eux est significative. Cet article étudie plusieurs grands festivals en Chine et aux États-Unis, compare les similitudes et les différences dans les pratiques de festival et essaie de révéler la personnalité nationale, l'orientation des valeurs culturelles et l'esprit national pour une meilleure compréhension et un développement harmonieux de ces deux cultures.

**Mots-clés:** culture festival; étude comparative; sino-américain

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every culture is formed and developed under its own special historical and social condition. The cultural content of a nation often embodies the content of common character of human being; similarly, the cultural content of a time often has something of immutability in history.

As an intriguing window reflecting their respective culture, festivals are precious cultural heritage of each nationality. Festival culture is an important carrier of the emotion and spirit of a nation. The study

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of holiday culture is an indispensable part of the study of a national culture. Since both American culture and Chinese culture have the characteristics of diversity and pluralism, a comparative study of them is meaningful.

In history, people from different countries in the world rushed to America three times. They brought their own culture to America and later different cultural customs were mixed together. Thus the unique American culture is formed. Among the major factors that contribute to the making of American culture, ethnic diversity and religious pluralism are typical. The population of the United States includes a large variety of ethnic groups coming from many races, nationalities, and religions. People refer to the United States as “melting pot” and the American culture “a collage-like culture”. The great diversity of ethnic backgrounds has produced religious pluralism. Almost all of the religions of the world are now practiced in the United States, among which Christianity is dominant.

The richness of Chinese culture also finds expression in its diversity and pluralism. China is a multinational country with 56 ethnic groups. All these peoples have their own legacies, but they share the same legacy as well. No matter which ethnic group was dominant, be it Hans, Mongols, or Manchus, her various peoples always could live under the same roof, worshipped the same emperor. China has a 5000-year history of civilization. During each period of time, there were some cultural traditions formed and handed down to generations. China has been a big country of agriculture since a long time ago, and Chinese people tend to attach great importance to agriculture. Many of Chinese festivals are connected with seasons which have great influence on agriculture. The whole structure of the Chinese culture is typical of integrated pluralism. Here “pluralism” refers to the fact that the Chinese culture is a blending of so many different cultures and it displays strong tolerance to embrace the cultures of ethnic groups and those from extraneous places. “Integrated” means various cultures melt into a unity, forming a distinctly Chinese culture with common values. The diversity and pluralism of Chinese culture is a tremendous asset.

The description and comparison of the festival culture of the two countries can be very helpful for people to know more about their festivals, lives, cultures and ideologies.

## 2. THE MOST IMPORTANT FESTIVALS OF CHINA AND AMERICA

### 2.1 The most important festival of China – Spring Festival

The Spring Festival falls on the first day of the first month according to the Chinese lunar calendar. It is the New Year’s Day of this system.

In the history of the Chinese nation, agriculture was the base of its economy. The effects of climate change on agriculture were carefully watched and studied, so that 24 *jieqi* (24 seasonal periods indicating the obvious changes of weather when they come around) were designed to guide agricultural activities, therefore the system is also commonly known as the agricultural calendar.

Most Chinese festivals are related to *jieqi*. Spring Festival (春節) has evolved from the Beginning of Spring (立春), the first *jieqi* of the 24, which is typically a festival related to agricultural activities; It marks the end of winter season and the beginning of spring, and a new year. The weather is getting warmer and the land begins to recover.

Besides the representation of time and date of lunar calendar, there is a legend concerning the celebration of the Spring Festival. After a whole year’s hard work, people wanted to have a good time during the Spring Festival period. Unfortunately, on the eve of the Spring Festival, *nian*, a frightening monster, would invariably come out on the eve of New Year. Later people learned that the monster *nian* was afraid of people, the sight of fire and the sound of cracks. So on the eve of Spring Festival, many people would get together and sit around a fire; they would throw pieces of bamboo into the fire to make the desired sound so as to keep the monster away. When the Spring Festival came next day, they would congratulate each other on successfully going through an “ordeal”.

Nowadays people still follow this practice. They decorate their houses with red lanterns (fire) in advance; they fire firecrackers before midnight (sound); they sit together (a family reunion) to eat *jiaozi* along with the ringing of new year bell; they pay New Year calls on relatives and friends, wishing each other good luck (congratulations) next morning..

Family members sitting together to eat *jiaozi* is a very important part of Chinese New Year's eve. It represents family reunion and hope for prosperity (*jiaozi* is shaped like the ancient silver ingot, the Chinese money of old times).

Behind the celebration of Spring Festival is Chinese people's spiritual demand for blessings and harmonious human relationships. Its cultural value orientation is based on the combination of naturism and humanistic spirit of unity of heaven and man in their mind.

## **2.2 The most important holiday of America – Christmas Day**

December 25<sup>th</sup> is Christmas Day, which celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ (the founder of the Christian religion). It is the biggest and best-loved holiday in the United States.

According to the Bible, God decided to allow his only son, Jesus Christ, to be born to a human mother and live on earth so that people could understand God better and learn to love each other more. Later to save mankind on earth, Jesus had his body nailed to the cross, to wash off the human sin with his blood. In this way, he sowed the seeds of humanity and tolerance in the world.

The American society believes the creed of the Bible to such a degree that even the president of the United States must keep his hand touching the Bible to take the oath at his inauguration ceremony.

Christianity promotes equality, forgiveness, and fraternity, "love all men, love our enemies". Under the influence of Christianity came the characteristics of American culture. His democracy, rule of law, freedom and many ideas of the American society all have a religious basis.

Today, the holiday of Christmas has absorbed various customs and traditions of the world and December 25<sup>th</sup> emerges as the most important day for Christians, irrespective of the roots. Christmas has turned out to be one of the most popular festivals that fill with joy, happiness and love. It is also a time for family reunion of American people.

## **3. THE MOST SPECIAL FESTIVALS OF CHINA AND AMERICA**

### **3.1 The most special festival of China —The Mid-Autumn Festival**

The Mid-Autumn Festival is on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the eighth lunar month. According to Chinese lunar calendar, the day is the exact midst of autumn, so it's called the Mid-Autumn Festival.

The reasons for the day to be made a traditional Chinese festival can be summarized as follows. First, the moon appears to be at its roundest and brightest of the year at that time. Second, mid-autumn is at the end of the harvest season. Farmers have just finished gathering in their crops and bringing in fruits from the orchards. It is a time for people to see their harvest and to relax from busy farming work.

For thousands of years, the Chinese people have related the vicissitudes of life — ups and downs, separations and reunions, etc. to the changes of the moon as it waxes and wanes. There are many fine lines and fairy tales left from the ancient time to the modern time. The full moon symbolizes reunion and happy life.

To celebrate the festival, people send moon cakes to their relatives and friends as gifts in expression of their best wishes to them. Family members get together to taste moon cakes, fruits of the season and wine fermented with osmanthus flowers, etc., or have a picnic in the silver moonlight. It is a time for reunion, thinking of distant relatives and expecting the coming harvest.

A moon cake is a round flat cake with ingredients inside. The roundedness of the cake symbolizes the full moon, which gives rise to the person who is far away from home a desire of reunion, especially the reunion with one's sweetheart. "Being together with the beloved ones when the moon is full, at least sharing the moment of appreciating the moon on the festival day" is the hope of those who are away from home. That is why the festival is also known as the Festival of Reunion.

The Mid-Autumn Festival is a typical sign of Chinese reunion culture.

### **3.2 The most special holiday of America –Thanksgiving Day**

Thanksgiving Day is a special holiday originated on American soil. It began in 1621, celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, when Puritans, who had just enjoyed a bountiful harvest after they arrived in the new land, showed their gratitude to the native Americans who had helped them to past the hard time by hosting a feast to give thanks. Thanksgiving feast is a national tradition of America and almost always includes some of the foods served at the first feast: roast turkey, cranberry sauce, potatoes, and pumpkin pie.

Thanksgiving Day is a time for gratitude and sharing. Giving thanks is a typical culture of America. It can be found in all aspects of their life. Americans feel thankful for god, for the world and for the people. They believe that it is God who gives them the food, the chance and the happy life. "Thank you" is a phrase most widely used there, even between husband and wife. This culture is rooted in Christianity which emphasizes the idea that happiness comes from god's grace.

In the spirit of sharing, civic groups and charitable organizations offer a traditional meal to those in need, particularly the homeless.

Following the spirit of giving thanks, the family circle is extended to cover single friends, foreign visitors, the elderly and the homeless. The district units or church groups provide the customary turkey dinner on this day.

## **4. SOME SIMILAR FESTIVALS CELEBRATED RESPECTIVELY IN TWO COUNTRIES**

### **4.1 China's Tomb Sweeping Day and America's Memorial Day**

April the fourth or fifth of the Gregorian calendar is a traditional day for Chinese people —Tomb Sweeping Day or Qingming (meaning clear and bright) Festival. The Festival is spent by honoring the dead, which is one of the many ways good Confucians demonstrate filial piety. On that day, people visit the gravesites of their ancestors, and sweep the tombs and burn imitation money to wish their ancestors a good rest. Qingming is not just a day of remembrance; it is also a day to celebrate the coming of spring. In modern times, Tomb Sweeping Day has a new meaning of missing revolutionary martyrs and showing respect to them.

Memorial Day is observed the last Monday of May in America. Originally it honored those who were killed in the American Civil War. On Memorial Day, many soldiers, on active duty and veterans, would line to the cemetery to give their honor to the dead by firing a call. Later it became a day for remembrance of those who came from the armed forces and of ordinary people as well. It is a day of reflection now. Families and individuals honor the memories of their loved ones who have died. However, to many Americans, the day also signals the beginning of summer with a three-day weekend to spend at the beach, in the mountains or at home relaxing.

### **4.2 China's Double Ninth Day and America's Mother's Day**

Respecting the aged is a traditional virtue of the Chinese. Double Ninth Festival refers to the ninth day of

the ninth lunar month. Since nine is the highest odd digit, Chinese people take two of them together to signify longevity. According to traditional Chinese *yin* and *yang* theory, nine is a *yang* number, therefore it is also called Double Yang Festival. The festival used to be called Mountain-Climbing Festival and Zhuyu Festival, as there was a custom of climbing mountains and wearing zhuyu (a herb) with the allegory of rising up in life and driving away sickness.

Mother's Day celebrates mothers every second Sunday of May in America. President Woodrow Wilson, who issued a proclamation in 1914, asked Americans to give a public expression of reverence to mothers on this day. Carnations have come to represent Mother's Day, following President William McKinley's habit of always wearing a white carnation, his mother's favorite flower.

Besides Mother's Day, there are also Father's Day and Maternal Grand Father and Mother Day in the USA. All these holidays show that elderly are respected in American culture.

### **4.3 China's Qixi Festival and America's Valentine's Day**

On the evening of the seventh day of the seventh month on the Chinese lunar calendar, you'll find the Cowherd (a bright star in the constellation Aquila, west of the Milky Way) and the Weaving Maid (the star Vega, east of the Milky Way) appear closer together than at any other time of the year. Chinese people believe that the two stars are lovers who were separated by the Milk Way and were permitted to meet once a year by the Queen of Heaven. That day is called Qixi(七夕) in Chinese, which is considered as China's Valentine's Day.

The legend related to this festival goes like this: the Weaving Maid, a fairy in heaven, fell in love with the Cowherd on earth. They secretly married and lived happily on earth. But the Queen of Heaven would not allow that after she found out the fact, so she took the Weaving Maid back to heaven by force. To prevent the Cowherd from catching up with them, she took out her hairpin and drew a river (the Milky Way) behind her on their way back to the heaven. Therefore, the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid were separated by the Milky Way. Out of sympathy to their true love, thousands of magpies came to help. They formed a bridge across the river. Finally, the Queen of Heaven agreed that on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month they could meet each other once a year. Such is the beautiful story of love and Chinese grannies would remind their children that they would not see any magpies on that evening because all the magpies have left to the heavens to help the couple with their wings spread.

With the similar romantic feeling, there is a story of love in America. Every February 14, across the United States and in some other places around the world, candy, flowers and gifts are exchanged between loved ones, all in the name of St. Valentine. The history of Valentine's Day is shrouded in mystery. But people do know that February has long been a month of romance.

According to one legend, Valentine, an early Christian martyr, was put into death by Emperor Claudius II, the ruler of the country at that time because he defied Claudius' order of not-allowing-the-young-army-men-to-get-married, and to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. While in prison, it is believed, that Valentine fell in love with a young girl who visited him during his confinement (it is said that the girl is the daughter of his jailor). Before his death, he wrote her a letter, which he signed "From your Valentine", an expression that is still in use by lovers today. Although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky, the stories certainly emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and, most importantly, romantic figure.

In the United States, nowadays, Valentine's Day is not only a day for young lovers, but also a day for friends and relatives to improve feelings of friendship by sending small gifts.

These similar festivals embody the common characters of human being and we can find something of immutability of human society in them.

## **5. SOME OTHER FESTIVALS UNIQUE TO EACH COUNTRY**

Apart from what has been discussed above, there are many other holidays celebrated in two countries, which reveal some aspects of the cultural features of each country.

Martin Luther King Day, Lincoln's Birthday, Washington's Birthday, Columbus Day, Saint Patrick's Day are all special days to honor heroes, which shows that American people emphasize on achievements and respect heroes. They have great sense in their hearts to praise success and heroes.

April Fools' Day, Halloween etc. are the time for American people to amuse themselves, which reveal to us that American people are optimistic, open, and humorous. They love life and know how to make their life happy.

Veterans Day, Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day let us see that American people are eager about peace, freedom and happiness. They give their honor to those who served the country in the army and those died in defending their sovereignty.

Independence Day, National Flag Day together with the above mentioned Memorial Day reflects the patriotic sentiments of American people.

Easter is another important Christian holiday besides Christmas Day, which is of a thick religious sense of their culture.

China doesn't have as many festivals as that of America's and Chinese culture has something quite different from that of American's in personal cult. He has no such festivals as are named after a person, although there is a festival related to a historical figure - Qu Yuan and the festival is Dragon Boat Festival.

Dragon Boat Festival is also called Duanwu Festival or Double Fifth Day or Summer Festival. It is traditionally celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth month on the Chinese lunar calendar. There are three most widespread activities for Duanwu Festival: preparing zongzi, racing dragon boats, and drinking realgar wine.

The most popular story about the origin of Dragon Boat Festival is that it is a time for people to remember Qu Yuan, a loyal minister and a patriotic poet served the King of Chu during the Warring States Period in the third centuries BC, who, according to the legend, drowned himself in the Miluo River in Hunan Province to protest the then corrupt kingdom. Knowing that Qu Yuan was a righteous man, the people of Chu rushed to the river to save him. They desperately searched for Qu Yuan in water by their boats, but were unsuccessful. The Dragon Boat Racing held at festival time is to commemorate this attempt to rescue Qu Yuan.

It is said that the local people, who admired him, threw food into the river to feed the fish so that they would not eat Qu Yuan's body. This is believed to be the origin of zongzi.

Many other traditional rituals of the Duanwu Festival emphasize the idea of avoidance of disease. The desire to prevent health hazards associated with the mid-summer months (when diseases and evil things will thrive with the warming of the weather) may have been the primary original motive behind the holiday. Wearing small bags, usually with cinnabar, medicinal herbs or aromatic materials inside, is one of the traditions. Drinking realgar wine to disinfectant is another.

But now its celebration has gone far beyond its origins. Many people have already regarded it merely as a time for amusement. You may see zongzi in different shapes and with a variety of fillings. The most popular shapes are triangular and pyramidal. The fillings include dates, meat, yolk of egg, etc. The most popular fillings are dates.

More importantly this is also a national patriot festival. Through commemorating the great patriot poet in the festival, people are reminded the importance of loyalty and commitment to the community.

Lantern Festival or Yuan Xiao Festival is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first month on the Chinese lunar calendar. It is the last day of the Chinese Lunar New Year celebration. According to the Chinese tradition, when the first bright full moon hangs in the sky of a new year, there should be thousands of colorful lanterns hung out for people to appreciate. At this time, people will try to solve the puzzles on the lanterns and eat yuanxiao (元宵) (glutinous rice ball) and get all their families united in the joyful atmosphere.

There are many different beliefs about the origin of the Lantern Festival. But one thing for sure is that it had something to do with celebrating and cultivating positive relationship between people, families, nature and the higher beings they believed were responsible for bringing/returning the light each year. It is one of the few festivals in China that have something to do with religions.

One legend tells us that it was a time to worship Taiyi, the God of Heaven in ancient times. The belief was that the God of Heaven controlled the destiny of the human world. The sacrifices should be offered to the god annually on the day to please him. So the emperors of ancient times held splendid ceremonies this time each year in order to request Taiyi to bring favorable weather and good health to them and their people.

Another legend associates the Lantern Festival with Taoism. The Tianguan(天官) is the Taoist god responsible for good fortune. His birthday falls on the 15th day of the first lunar month. It is said that Tianguan likes all types of entertainment, so his followers prepare various kinds of activities during which they pray for good fortune.

Still another common legend connects the origins of the Lantern Festival with Buddhism. Buddhism first entered China during the reign of Emperor Mingdi of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Emperor Mingdi believed in Buddhism. He learned that Buddhism has the tradition of viewing the Buddhist relics on that day each year. So he ordered his subjects to display lighted lanterns, showing their respect to the Buddha. Later this Buddhist ritual gradually became a great folk festival.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Because of the participation of the whole people, holidays can be an important landmark of cultural identity and national identity of a country. The comparison of holiday cultures can help us have deeper insight into different nations and their systems, understand their aesthetic values, ethics and the inner spirit derived from the culture.

Chinese traditional festivals are the essence of Chinese culture. Most of them were half formed in pre-Qin times (先秦時代). The first custom activities were closely related to original worship, superstitious taboo, and rich fairy stories as well, so the festive seasons always had something of romantics. When celebrating the festivals, Chinese people pursue health, union, and harmony and value freedom, kinship and friendship. Chinese culture contains the elements of: ancestor worship, filial piety, unity, give, duty and carrying forward the cause pioneered by their predecessors and forging ahead into the future. The spirits of respecting the aged and the learned embodied in the celebration of Double Ninth Day and Double Fifth Day reveal the virtues of the Chinese nation. *Jieqi* has provided a prerequisite for the festivals of a year. As the season changes, a variety of sacrificial ceremonies are held to represent the wishes of harvest and good luck.

In the United States, many holidays express the feelings of giving thanks and are of religious spirits. They tend to pay more attention to the seeking for pleasure and entertainments. Individual contributions are recognized. These spirits are closely related to mainstream American culture. But the main characteristic of America, the first and most enduring impression, is dynamism, energy, aggressiveness and forward movement.

Historically speaking, American culture is more Euro-centered. But in modern times, it becomes more and more fusing with the Pacific culture to create a kind of vast Pacific collage, a mix of Hispanic and Asian cultures linked through the most modern communication technologies.

We can find more and more culture mixing trend in other countries. Here in China the celebration of Christmas Day and Valentine's Day has become common, especially among young people.

From the point of view of world culture, in this open, competing and cooperating time, the multiple cultural situation is expected to form gradually. At the same time, the ethnic characteristics of culture will be further confirmed. So, better communication and enhanced exchanges of culture are necessary and essential in order to know more about other peoples and countries and promote the national and

regional understanding. Therefore, the study of holiday culture plays an important role in the study of national culture, which is indispensable for the harmony and development of the 21st century world.

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