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The Study of Chinese Nian Customs: Spring Festival Couplets

LES ÉTUDES SUR LES COUTUMES DE NIAN CHINOIS:

LES COUPLETS DE LA FÊTE DU PRINTEMPS

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the study of the unique art form of Chinese literature – Spring Festival couplets. It probes into the origin, evolution and history of the development of this typical Chinese Nian custom. It reveals the implications of Chinese culture and the connotations of the folklore contained in Spring Festival couplets. It shows the national psychology of optimism, positive attitude of life and the pursuit of happiness of Chinese people. Based on the study of many historical and modern literatures, the author approaches the subject from different angles and gives her understanding and opinions of the couplets in this paper.

Key words: Spring Festival couplets; Customs; History; Characteristics; Connotation

Résumé: Le présent document se concentre sur l'étude de la forme d'art unique de la littérature chinoise - les couplets de la Fête du Printemps. Il sonde dans l'origine, dans l'évolution et dans l'histoire du développement de cette coutume de Nian typiquement chinois. Il révèle les implications de la culture chinoise et les connotations du folklore figurant dans les couplets de la Fête du Printemps. Il montre la psychologie nationale de l'optimisme, l'attitude positive de la vie et la poursuite du bonheur du peuple chinois. Sur la base de l'étude de nombreuses littératures modernes et historiques, l'auteur aborde le sujet sous des angles différents et donne sa propre compréhension et ses opinions des couplets dans le présent document.

Mots-Clés: couplets de la Fête du Printemps; coutumes; histoire; caractéristiques; connotation

1. INTRODUCTION

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The Spring Festival falls on the first day of the first month according to Chinese lunar calendar. It is called Nian in Chinese. Nian is the beginning of a new year and the biggest and most exciting festival for Chinese people.

Like Christmas in the West, the Spring Festival is a time when all the family members get together. People living away from home would go back to have a family reunion, no matter how difficult it may be, whether you have money or not. But there is also something different.

During the Spring Festival season, a variety of particular activities are held to mark the occasion, in which traditional Chinese ethnic and folk culture are displayed and performed. There are the ceremonies to pay homage to their ancestors, usher in the new time, and pray for good luck with colorful ethnic characteristics. There are activities to celebrate the Nian with folk features, for example, holding the Spring Festival galas, doing the yangkos (a popular folk dance), playing lion(dragon in some places) dance, holding lantern festival, setting off firecrackers, etc.. It is these activities that carry forward China's civilization and maintain its long-standing tradition of culture. Among the many customs of the celebrations, pasting Spring Festival couplets is one of the most popular ones maintained today. This tradition has a long history and rich social and cultural connotations. In its way of evolution, typical Chinese ethical feelings, life consciousness and cultural pursuit are condensed.

2. THE EVOLUTIONAL HISTORY OF SPRING FESTIVAL COUPLETS

Spring Festival couplets are called Chunlian in Chinese. An early form of Spring Festival couplets is Tao Fu. According to *The Book of Yanjing Times*², "Chunlian is Tao Fu" (Fu Cha Dunchong, Qing dynasty).

Tao Fu refers to peach wood charms against evil, hung on the two sides of the gate on the lunar New Year's Eve. On two pieces of mahogany, the drawings or names of Gate Gods are carved or painted.

In ancient times, Chinese people believed that peach wood could ward off evil. The stories of peach branches or peach wood being used to ward off evils can be found in the early literatures, such as: *The Book of Rite*³, *The Biography of Zuo*⁴, and *Zhuangzi*⁵ etc.. This belief has its origin.

According to *Mountain and Sea Classics*⁶, a very long time ago, there was a mountain named Dusu in the East Sea. On the top of the mountain stood a huge peach tree whose crown stretched outward, covering an area of 3,000 square kilometers. A golden pheasant lived on the tree. He was in charge of the announcement of the arrival of dawn each day. An arc-shaped branch of the tree grew bending down to the ground of the northeast, forming a natural gate. Dusu Mountain was home to a variety of ghosts and goblins. To go out, they must go through this gate. In order to prevent them from disturbing the man's world, the Supreme Deity sent two divine generals to guard the branch gate and ordered that every ghost who went down the mountain during the night should go back through this branch gate before the pheasant crowed. The two divine generals were Shen Shu and Yu Lv⁷. They were to supervise those evil-doers. If any of the ghosts were found doing any harm to the man's world, he would be tied up with reed ropes and sent to feed the tiger by the two generals, so all the evil spirits were afraid of them.

The allegory that peach wood could avoid evil things derived from the story and the two divine generals became Gate Gods in people's mind. Thus the custom of decorating their gates with two peach wood carved deity figures handed down. With the passage of time, the carvings were simplified with the written names or/and the portraits of the Gate Gods drawn on the peach wood boards. Shen Shu was on

² 《燕京歲時記》，作者：（清）富察敦崇

³ 《禮記》

⁴ 《左傳》

⁵ 《莊子》

⁶ 《山海經》

⁷ 神荼 and 鬱壘

the left with a reed rope in his hand and Yu Lv was on the right with a fierce tiger in leash. This is the early Tao Fu.

Documented in history, the custom of hanging Tao Fu before lunar New Year can be dated back to the Warring States Period of China⁸. It lasted for more than 1000 years until the Five Dynasties period⁹, when Spring Festival couplets practices originated.

According to *The Later Han, Etiquettes*¹⁰, “Tao Fu are two pieces of cherry wood board, six-inch long and three-inch wide, with the names of Shen Shu and Yu Lv carved on them”. The story of Tao Fu and the two Gate Gods are quoted by Ying Shao of Eastern Han, from *the Huang Emperor Book*¹¹ in his book *The Customs*¹², in which the practice of hanging Tao Fu is mentioned to be performed by people of that time, from which we can infer that the custom had been widespread in Eastern Han Dynasty. Later the two God’s names or images evolved into writing auspicious words with antithetical parallelism.

The Chinese people used to believe that Meng Chang¹³, the last Emperor of Shu of the Five Dynasties was the earliest ancestor of the Spring Festival couplets. According to *The History of Song Dynasty, Shu Family*¹⁴, on the eve of the year of 964, Meng Chang who was unconventional in mind asked one of his scholars Xin Yingxun to inscribe an inspired couplet to celebrate the coming of the New Year. But he was not satisfied with Xin’s work and produced one himself on a peach slat. Meng Chang’s inscription¹⁵ changed the contents and the nature of the original Tao Fu. It was to celebrate but not to exorcize. On it, auspicious words in antithetical couplets were born instead of Gate Gods’ names and drawings, though it was still on the mahogany plate and called Tao Fu. Since then, scholars began to view writing celebrating couplets as something elegant. It was acknowledged that the inscription of Meng Chang was the first Spring Festival couplet.

By the time of Song dynasty, writing antithetical couplets for the Spring Festival occasion had become a fashion of the Nobles. We can find many proofs of this from the poems of the famous poets of the time, for example: Wang An-shi and Sushi¹⁶ etc.. Even today Wang An-shih’s poem¹⁷ remains popular and it reveals to us that replacing Tao Fu had become a necessity for the coming New Year at that time. But up to then, Tao Fu was still the name for the couplets in spite of the fact that not only mahogany plate, but also red paper and other materials were employed to write the couplets.

Although pasting couplets for the New Year began to become popular in Song dynasty, it was not universally practiced among people until the early days of Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Recorded in *Zanyun Lou Miscellaneous Words* by Chen Yunzhan¹⁸ of Ming dynasty, the first emperor Zhu Yuanzhang¹⁹, who came from a peasant family, liked ostentation and used to admire the Tao Fu pasted on the doors of the rich and noble people. After he came into power, he ordered that all his subjects should paste couplets on their doors before the New Year’s Eve to create a festive atmosphere with new vitality of the New Year time and he said he would go out of the palace to enjoy the couplets. On the very first day of the lunar New Year, he made a tour in disguise. Walking in the streets, he found a butcher’s house that did not put up any couplets. When he learned that the butcher couldn’t read and write, and was too busy to ask someone else to do it, the emperor wrote one for him. It was a great honor and the butcher worshipped the couplet at his home. The news was spread. Advocated by the emperor, Spring Festival couplets became increasingly prevalent, and finally formed an unabated fashion. It is said that the formal

⁸戰國時期

⁹五代十國時期

¹⁰《後漢書·禮儀志》

¹¹《黃帝書》

¹²《風俗通義》

¹³孟昶, (Meng Chang was on the throne during the period of 934~965, whose life time was from 919 to 965)

¹⁴《宋史·蜀世家》

¹⁵“新年納余慶, 嘉節號長春”

¹⁶王安石 and 蘇軾

¹⁷“千門萬戶曠曠日, 總把新桃換舊符”

¹⁸《簪雲樓雜話》, 作者: (明) 陳雲瞻

¹⁹朱元璋 (1328 -1398)

name of Chunlian²⁰ (Spring Festival couplets) was officially decided by Zhu Yuanzhang, too.

Coming into the Qing dynasty, Chunlian underwent a qualitative leap in ideology and the artistry, together with the development of the Chinese couplets. Up to that time, the Chinese couplets were already quite rich in numbers. They served different purposes according to different situations they were used.

Liang Zhangju, a scholar of late Qing dynasty, completed a series of books on Chinese couplets: *The Study of Yinglian*²¹, in which he made a detailed exposition on the origin and characteristics of Chinese couplets. Liang Zhangju is the first scholar who made a systemic study on Chinese couplets. *The Study of Yinglian* is the first literary works in China's couplet history and it initially established a classification system of the couplets. The works also touched upon the aesthetics and some aspects of the theory of couplets. Many other studies on Chinese couplets appeared around the period of time so that this form of art was finally recognized as something presentable and acceptable boarded the literature, but not as something "whispered" among the folk. Like the poems in the Tang dynasty, the Ci (a traditional Chinese lyrical form) in the Song dynasty, the plays in the Yuan dynasty, and the novels in Ming and Qing dynasties, the couplets became a kind of representational art style of Chinese literature of a time – Qing dynasty and entered into the heyday of creation in the times of Emperor Qianlong, Jiaqing, and Daoguang²². Among all the classes of Chinese couplets, the creation of Spring Festival couplets was practiced and well received the most widely.

In this modern time, the color of Spring Festival couplets has not faded, but becomes richer and even more distinctive.

Spring Festival couplets are popular. In China, people of all sectors of the society, from the learned scholars to the common people, from the old to the young, all can enjoy the unique charm of them. They are of the quality that can enter the ivory tower, and walk into the country cottage.

Spring Festival couplets are extensive. Almost every house pastes them when the Festival comes. Not only homes, but also restaurants, hair salons, hotels, grocery stores and some other businesses, enterprises, everywhere, will have New Year's scrolls to add the festival atmosphere.

Spring Festival couplets are relevant. Different people, industries, businesses have different wishes to express, and they have different concept of happiness as well. So the Spring Festival couplets are to be appropriate to different fields of life, from which we can learn about the special characteristics of different fields. Therefore, a careful study of the Spring Festival couplets can be a meaningful way to observe Chinese folk culture.

3. THE COMMON KNOWLEDGE OF SPRING FESTIVAL COUPLETS

Chunlian (Spring Festival couplets) is one of the many kinds of Duilian (Chinese couplets), which is written on vertical scrolls, etc., or a pair of scrolls containing a poetic couplet. Duilian is also known elegantly as Yinglian (pillar couplets) or commonly called Duizi²³ (antithetical couplets). It is a unique literary genre of China owing to the special Chinese character language system.

Duilian is widely used in China. It can be used to celebrate (Spring Festival couplets), to congratulate (birthday couplets, wedding couplets), to mourn (elegiac couplets), to describe (scenic spots couplets), to show talents (self-proposition couplets), and to appreciate wits (various technical couplets, facetious or humorous couplets, etc.), even to develop friendships (trade couplets, social couplets, etc.).

²⁰春聯

²¹《楹聯叢話》，《楹聯續話》，《楹聯三話》，作者：梁章鉅（1775-1849）

²²乾隆，嘉慶，道光

²³對聯，楹聯，對子

Duilian takes “pair” as quantifier. According to the tradition, the first line should always be on the right, the second on the left, not the other way round.

Duilian is metrical literature. There are all kinds of stresses, but no restrictions on the number of characters. A short Duilian can be as short as one character in each line, while a long one can have as many as a thousand characters.

Theoretically, a Chinese couplet should have following features.

One, each line has an equal number of characters, and the same number of sense groups.

Two, the characters in the two lines should adhere to the tonal patterns. Generally speaking, level tone of one line (平) versus oblique tone of the other (仄) (not necessary as strict as for every word, but the last word of first line must be a oblique tone and the last word of the second line must be a level tone) .

Three, characters in the same positions of both lines must be of the same part of speech. Strictly, it should be nouns versus nouns, verbs versus verbs, adjectives versus adjectives, numerals versus numerals, adverbs versus adverbs. Basically, it should be function words versus function words and content words versus content words at least.

Four, the meaning of the first line should be interrelated to that of the second, but not repeated.

The key of the stylistic characteristics of Chinese couplets is the neat parallelism in form and the delicate association in meaning of the two lines. To produce an excellent couplet in both content and language, full of aesthetic beauty, and thought-provoking, the writer is expected to be very good at summarization and proficient in Chinese.

The old name for Spring Festival couplets was Spring Paste because it was pasted in the Spring Festival season, highlighted the concept of “spring”.

In the old times, people in the countryside pasted the Spring Festival couplets on doorposts, door panels and lintel, so that it was also called “Door Couplets”.

Apart from the couplets, there are some other posters pasted in Spring Festival season, which can be sorted into Chunlian, or part of it.

Hengpi is a horizontal scroll bearing an inscription, or horizontal plaque. Except for elegiac couplets and birthday couplets, most of the couplets have Hengpi. It is put between the two lines and above them. The order of the characters of Hengpi is from right to left. The content of Hengpi has a close relationship with the couplet. It is in fact the title or theme of the couplet. A good Hengpi can play the role of icing on the cake. It can add the finishing touch to the couplet.

Chuntiao is a single-line scroll of the spring festival blessing, posted in the corresponding place depending on its content. “Stepping to a higher position”, “Safe trip wherever you go”, “Business flourishes”, “Harmony brings wealth” are the common ones we can find on the staircase, doorway, shop counter and in the restaurant etc..

Spring Quote was something that was pasted on the day of the beginning of spring²⁴. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties²⁵, Spring Quote had emerged. People used it to pray for good fortune for the coming year. They would cut or write characters with the meaning of “comfortable spring” or “a lot of money”, or “Everything goes well” and some other auspicious words on the doorpost or lintels, on the furniture or screen walls. As the day of the beginning of spring and the Spring Festival were very close to each other, and the Spring Quote was very similar to Hengpi in form, they were often mixed together.

Doujin or Menye is the square diamond, posted mostly on the furniture, the screen wall or the upper central part of a door. Among the many choices of characters to be pasted, such as “春” (spring), “壽” (longevity), “豐” (harvest), the character “Fu”(福 : blessing) is most favored and almost a must. Fu is posted everywhere, large or small: doors, walls and lintels. The interpretation of the character is

²⁴立春日

²⁵南北朝時期

“happiness” nowadays, while in the past, it referred to “good fortune”. No matter now or in the past, it expresses people’s yearning for a happy life and a better future. The character can be pasted normally or upside down, for in Chinese the “reversed Fu” is homophonic with “Fu has come/arrived”, being pronounced as “fudaole (福到了)”.

It is said that Emperor Kangxi rarely made inscription in his lifetime. In addition to documents, only three characters have been verified to be written personally by him on scrolls. Besides “無爲”, placed on Thai Temple of the National Palace, “福” is the only one, which was specially written for his deeply beloved grandmother, Empress Dowager Xiao Zhuang, for the purpose of blessing her from serious illness before her 60th birthday. And it is also the only plaque that bears Emperor Kangxi’s imperial seal, not even the scroll of “無爲”. It so happened that since the Empress Dowager Xiao Zhuang received the “blessing”, a handwritten “福” by Emperor Kangxi, she recovered. Fifteen years later, at the age of 75 (a rare age at her time), she died in peace.

This story can explain, to a certain degree, why the Chinese people are so persisted in the tradition of pasting auspicious words to pray for good luck.

4. THE CONNOTATIONS OF THE SPRING FESTIVAL COUPLETS

If we start the computation from the Qin and Han dynasties, Chunlian has been existed for more than two thousand years. What can we learn from this long-standing heritage?

Chinese people are optimistic. We can find that the ideological content of Chunlian is always positive, progressive and happy. This shows that the Chinese people are always hopeful about the coming future, no matter what happened in the past year, good or bad, happy or unhappy, proud or not. A new year is a new point of start, a start of new hope. They express their aspirations and expectations for future in the couplets.

Chinese people pay much attention to the beginning. They believe that “開門紅” (means “a flying start”) is a good omen. As is known to all the people in the world, “紅” (red color) is the favorite color of Chinese people. Red symbolizes joy, good fortune and success to them. Red lanterns, red paper-cuts and red Chinese knot, all shows this national sentiment of the Chinese people. Following their ancestors’ wisdom: “Plan your year in spring and your day at dawn”, they try to make the atmosphere of the Spring Festival the most auspicious, as if to make a necessary preparation for the coming “紅紅火火” (means: booming). Equipped with beautiful poetical language, red paper with golden or black characters, the Spring Festival couplets are brilliant and modest, and are an integral part of the spirit of the festival.

Enjoying Spring Festival couplets is a unique way for Chinese people to enjoy their life. We can find a Chinese delight of life in the Spring Festival couplets. With the advent of the Spring Festival, people not only begin to call on friends and relatives, and wish one another a happy new year, but also write Chunlian, paste Chunlian, present Chunlian and enjoy Chunlian. Being asked to write festival couplets for others and take part in the couplet contest or exhibition is a matter to be proud of. Well written couplets can really amuse people or encourage people. The contest or exhibition of the couplets is in fact a calligraphy appreciation and a talent contest. The concise and coherent of its language form, the happy and humorous of its content, the exquisite of its calligraphy, these are important elements to make Chunlian be loved by Chinese people. Although the busy modern life has made some changes in cities and suburban areas, and not many people write their own couplets in recent years, there are plenty of choices offered in shops and there are always those who love to have handwritten couplets, especially the folk people in the countryside. Spring Festival is not only a time to bring the whole family together, but also a time to show intelligence and wits, a time to express their wishes. So it is the best time to discover the wishes, the value set of Chinese people.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The thematic content of Spring Festival couplets is happy, auspicious, blessing; and cheerful, lively, intelligent, full of wit and humor are the artistic features of them. They not only have the characteristics of both general and specific, but also the spirit of the times. If there were no Spring Festival couplets pasted, there would certainly be much less flavor and implication of Nian, no matter when it is, past or now or in future. The Spring Festival of 2010 saw the regression of the handwriting Spring Festival couplets. People enjoy the pleasures of creating their own couplets and the breath of the tradition. The character “福” with Kangxi’s writing style became popular again. People treasured it because of the filial piety story behind it, because of the efficacy of it and because of the writing style of it, in which the two auspicious Chinese characters “福” and “壽” are combined skillfully together.

According to Baidu Wikipedia (or baidupedia), the earliest Spring Festival couplets were identified to be made by someone else, but not Meng Chang. The newly identified couplets were recorded in the testament unearthed in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes Cangjing Dong (Vol. No. Stein 0610). There are 12 pair couplets in the old testaments, written on the New Year’s day (the first day of lunar new year) and the day of the beginning of spring (the first of the 24 jichi in China’s lunar calendar). The first in order of these 12 pairs were identified as the earliest Spring Festival couplets by CHINA WORLD RECORDS ASSOCIATION (CWRA). The writer is Liu Qiuzi of Tong dynasty, and the couplets were written in the year of 723. CWRA is an agency specifically engaged in the review of a world record of non-sporting events of the Chinese people all over the world, whose establishment was approved by the Hong Kong Government of the People’s Republic of China, officially registered in 2009, Registration No. 51007998-001-08-09-2. Before this identification, there have been opinions from the scholars and common people, asking for the recognition of these couplets, for example, Tan Chanxue of Dunhuang Academy. She wrote an article published in the journal “Cultural and Historical Knowledge” in 1991, the fourth issue. The significance of this matter lies not only in the advancement that the earliest Spring Festival couplets were found to be 240 years earlier than that of the original acknowledgement, but also in the revelation of it that the Chinese people still have a strong interest in this custom maintained for thousands of years. We have every reason to believe that it will develop continuously forward and will bear the imprint of the new era along its development.

Chinese people like Spring Festival couplets, value the traditions and enjoy their life. Study this unique art form of the Chinese, and you will have a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.

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