



## The Comparison Between Chinese and American Festivals

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### Abstract

Every country has its own traditional festivals, celebrated by all kinds of activities. In China, the most important festival is the Spring Festival, while in America, the most important festival is Christmas. Festival differences exist between China and America. With time elapsing, festival culture changes gradually and some new cultural phenomenon occurs.

**Key words:** Festival; Custom; Difference; Culture

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### INTRODUCTION

Festival—an occasion when people come together to enjoy themselves, especially to mark a special religious event—is a happy time for all of the people. It was not only the window to show social life of every nation, every country, but also the conclusion and extension of politics, economy, culture and religion of every nation, every country. In festivals, people can have a good rest to relax themselves from the tired working days, no work, no study; taste delicious food; take part in different activities; make a short journey; visit relatives and friends; go shopping; enjoy themselves, enjoy life, and do whatever they want to do. Festival, indeed, is a charming and exciting time.

### 1. MAIN FESTIVALS IN CHINA AND AMERICA

There are so many various festivals celebrated in every minority ethnic group in every country, also lots of festivals celebrated by the whole world together, like New Year's Day, International Labor Day.

In China, the main festivals are as follows. The most important festival is Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year in the lunar calendar on January 1<sup>st</sup>. Besides, some traditional festivals are still attached great importance to nowadays. For example, Tomb-sweeping Day, offering sacrifices to ancestors and sweeping the grave, around April 5<sup>th</sup>; Dragon Boat Festival, May 5<sup>th</sup> in lunar calendar, commemorating the famous patriotic poet Qu Yuan in ancient times of China; Chinese Valentine's Day, July 7<sup>th</sup> in lunar calendar, coming from the old legend of the cowboy and the weaving girl; Mid-autumn Day, a festival for reunion on August 15<sup>th</sup> in lunar calendar; Double Nine festival, celebrating by the senior citizens on September 9<sup>th</sup> in lunar calendar.

In America, there are also a lot of festivals. Saint Valentine's Day, a festival especially for lovers on February 14<sup>th</sup>; Good Friday, the day before Easter that Jesus was in distress; Easter, March 12<sup>th</sup>, commemorating Christ's death and his return to life by Christians; April 1<sup>st</sup>, All Fool's Day, cracking a joke with each other; Mother's Day, the second Sunday on May and Father's Day, the third Sunday on June, expressing the respect to parents; Halloween, October 31<sup>st</sup>, the eve of All Saints' Day; Thanksgiving Day, the fourth Thursday on November, a holiday to pray and to thank the god; Christmas Day, the most important festival in America, celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

## 2. THE MAIN FESTIVAL IN CHINA AND AMERICA

There are so many differences between Chinese and American festivals, from the origins, ways of celebration, customs to food. Here will cite the example of the most important festival in both China and America.

### 2.1 Spring Festival

#### 2.1.1 The Origin of Spring Festival

Far and away, the most important traditional holiday in China is Spring Festival, also known as the Chinese New Year, starts at the beginning of spring. It occurs somewhere between January 30 and February 20. Each Chinese year is represented by a repeated cycle of 12 animals, the rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog and pig.

The origin of Chinese New Year is too old to be traced. It is said that a monster beast named Nian, ferocious and terrible, swallowed up people and animals on the New Year's Eve, people all scared of him and run away to the remote mountains to avoid him.

One year, when people in peach blossom village were busy in escaping, an old man came to beg. No one had the mood to care for the elder, only an old woman gave him some food. The old man said to her: "If you let me stay at your home, I can drive the monster Nian out." The old woman stared at the old man carefully, who had white hair and ruddy complexion, hale and hearty, not like a common man, but she still persuaded him to leave. The old man remained unmoved. Finally, the old woman escaped alone.

In the midnight, Nian burst into the peach blossom village, he found the atmosphere seemed different from the other years. On the east of the village, red paper put on the gate of the old woman's house, candles lighted the whole house bright. Nian shouted and threw himself on this house, but the crackling from the house made him a shudder and stop him going ahead. At this time, the old man with red clothes opened the door, laughed heartily. Nian was frightened and fled in panic. Originally, Nian was most afraid of the color red, the fire and the sound of crackling.

On the New Year's Day, villagers came back, they were very surprised that everywhere was so clam. The old woman realized what had happened suddenly and told them. People crowded into the woman's house, found the things that the old man used to subdue Nian and knew the way to drive out Nian. The custom of putting on Red Spring Festival couplets and burning fireworks to scare away Nian continues today and the term "guonian", which may mean "survive the Nian" becomes "celebrate the year" today.

#### 2.1.2 The Simple Introduction of Spring Festival

To the ordinary people, the Spring Festival actually begins on the eve of the lunar New Year's Day and ends on the

fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar, celebrated nationwide. The 15<sup>th</sup> of the first month, which is normally called the Lantern Festival, means the official end of the Spring Festival, celebrated at night with lantern displays and children carrying lanterns in a parade.

In the morning of the New Year's Day, the younger generations pay New Year calls to their senior generation, and get lucky red envelopes with money inside from the elders. The rest of the first day is spent visiting relatives, friends and neighbors.

The second day of the New Year is the day to pray to the God and the ancestors, and people are extra kind to dogs on this day. So it is also believed that the second day is the birthday for all dogs.

The third and fourth days are for the sons-in-law to pay respect to their parents-in-law.

The fifth day is called Po Woo. It is a day to honor the God of Wealth. People believed that under the protection of this God, they can have a well-fed life. On this day, Chinese families are all staying at home. It is said that bad luck will follow people when they go out.

Now that welcomes the God of Wealth on the fifth day, the sixth day is the day to kick the poor devil out.

The seventh day is a time for farmers to show off their produce. These farmers make a drink from seven types of vegetables to celebrate this occasion. This day is also considered the birthday of all human beings.

#### 2.1.3 The Customs of Spring Festival

Around the Spring Festival, many customs are formed during the past thousand of years. For the development of society and the improvement of science and technology, some customs with superstition have weakened, but some are still followed from generation to generation.

The custom of sweeping the dust means the thorough cleaning at the end of one year, starts on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month and ends on the eve of the Chinese New Year. When Spring Festival is coming, the Chinese people completely clean the indoors and outdoors of their homes as well as their clothes, bedclothes and all their utensils. In Yao and Shun period of ancient China, this custom has already existed. It is believed that the cleaning sweeps away bad luck and makes the house ready for good luck to enter.

Another custom is to put up the Spring Festival couplets on both sides of the front gates. It also called for the antithetical couplets, coming from the peach wood charms. The peach wood decorated people's gates first was carved deity figures against evils and ghosts. Because of complicated and troublesome, later on, people began to write some auspicious words or drew charms on two pieces of paper and put them on their gates instead of it. During the Five Dynasties, people have already started to write antithetical couplets as their peach wood charms. This custom was popular in Ming Dynasty. Not only the city but also the countryside, every Chinese family

carefully chooses the Red Spring Festival couplets putting on their gates in Chinese New Year. At the same time, some families put the Chinese character “fu” on the gates or walls. “Fu” means happiness and good fortune, expresses looking forward to a happy life. A lot of people put the character “fu” upside down, for in Chinese the “reversed fu” is homophonic with “fu comes”, both being pronounced as “fudaole”.

In addition, one of the most important customs in Spring Festival is all night on New Year’s Eve, which called “shousui”. In ancient times, after eating the family reunion dinner, the whole family was sitting together, lighting the candles or oil lamps, chatting around the stove, waiting for the moment to bid farewell to the outgoing year and staying up all night. It symbolizes to expel all the illness and pestilence and expects the good fortune in the new year. Nowadays, people are still accustomed to stay up late to welcome the New Year.

#### **2.1.4 Food in Spring Festival**

There are a lot of special foods people eat during Spring Festival.

Niangao, a sticky sweet glutinous rice pudding, eat in Spring Festival, because as a homophone, niangao means “higher and higher, one year after another.”

Jiaozi, which are dumplings boiled in water. On the eve of Chinese New Year, the whole family is sitting around the table, making dumplings. People think “jiaozi” symbolizes family reunion, besides, the shape of the dumpling is like gold ingot from ancient China, so people eat them and wish for money and treasure.

Tangyuan, stuffed dumplings made of glutinous rice flour served in soup. People eat it in the Lantern Festival, because it means reunion and happiness of the whole family and all the luck.

Besides, in Spring Festival, dishes such as chicken, fish and bean curd cannot be excluded, for in Chinese, their pronunciations, respectively “ji”, “yu” and “doufu”, mean auspiciousness, abundance and richness.

#### **2.1.5 Superstition in Spring Festival**

There are many ancient superstitions during the Spring Festival, some are still practiced today. For example, People can not use knife and scissor in the Chinese New Year, otherwise, they will break off the road for gaining money, even die without sons. Next, people are banned to sweep the floor and pour water, which will sweep their fortune away. Besides, breaking the cups and bowls is also a taboo during the New Year, it is believed that this will make people bankrupt. If people do this careless, they should say “peace all year round” to change the portentous into the propitious. Also some believe it is bad luck to wash hair on this day, for people would wash away the good luck in the New Year. In addition, it is believed that if people cry on this day, they will cry all through the year, therefore, children are indulged by their parents on New Year’s Day.

Most of these taboos lift a ban on the fifth day of the New Year. After that day, people can use knife and scissor, tip rubbish and so on.

## **2.2 Christmas**

### **2.2.1 The Origin of Christmas**

Christmas Day, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, is the most important holiday in America, as well as the Spring Festival in China. It is the day to celebrate the birth of Christ Jesus by Christians.

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 God and each other more. “Christmas”, meaning “celebration of Christ”, honors the time when Jesus was born to a young Jewish woman in Mary.

Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, a carpenter, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child. Joseph was an honest man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, so he had in mind to divorce her in secret. However, when he was considering this thing, an angel of lord appeared in his dream and said:

Don’t hesitate, take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

The exact date of the birth of Jesus is not clearly, but finally, in the year 354 A.D., church leaders chose December 25<sup>th</sup> as his birthday.

### **2.2.2 The Customs of Christmas**

From December 24<sup>th</sup> to January 6<sup>th</sup> in the next year is Christmas. During Christmas holiday, Christians celebrate it grandly. It originally is the holiday only for Christians, but because people attach unusual importance to it, later on, it becomes the holiday for all the common people. There are many customs in Christmas.

First, Christmas tree is the necessity of Christmas, made of pine tree, decorated by all kinds of toys, presents, multicolored balls, gorgeous bulbs, and at the top of the Christmas tree, there is a bright star. This custom maybe originate from Germany in 16<sup>th</sup> century. The German thought taking the branch of pine tree to their home can protect them from the hurt of Azrael, the god of death. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it spreads over the whole Europe and America. Now nearly two thirds of the American families will decorate Christmas tree during Christmas.

Another important element in Christmas is Santa Claus. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, in the area of Asia Minor, the Bishop Nichola was kind, generous, and famous for sending gifts to the poor in the evening. The east addressed him St. Nichola respectfully in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Because the legend about St. Nichola from the folk always connected with children and presents, from now on, the image of Santa Claus became the kind old man who sent presents to children especially in Christmas Day.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through the literature and painting, an old man with red clothes and red trousers, white eyebrow and white beard, a benignant look and a short and fat figure became the typical image of Santa Claus. People all believed that Santa Claus will come into their house from the chimney, and put the presents into the socks of their children on Christmas Eve.

The Christmas meal is just like the family reunion dinner in Chinese New Year. The main course is poultry, like chicken, beef, duck, and turkey. All kinds of desserts are the most characteristic food of Christmas meal, they are usually fruit biscuits, puddings, pies and ice-cream. Christmas Eve is the night for reunion, people always sit together, taste the delicious food and chat freely.

And everyone will prepare Christmas gifts. The first Christmas gifts were sent to Jesus who was just born by three saints. Nowadays, it is popular to send presents to family members and friends. Every family prepares plenty of gifts before the Christmas. Not only the children, but the adults can receive many Christmas gifts, children always can get more. Friends and colleagues usually send Christmas cards with blessing words to each other.

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### 3. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINESE AND AMERICAN FESTIVALS

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#### 3.1 Differences

There are many festival differences between China and America.

First, the typical characteristic of the traditional Chinese festivals is the strong secular nature, namely non-religious. It advocates the harmony and balance between the God and the human beings, focus on humanism. Besides, the traditional Chinese festivals are named according to the climate and other natural phenomena of a season, and each has their own specific custom activities, such as Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-autumn Festival and so on. But in America, most of the festivals, like Christmas, Easter, are strongly linked with the religion. In fact, holiday itself has the meaning “holy day” in English. It is thus clear that the American people have their spiritual sustenance in their belief to the God. Festivals in America are god-oriented in essence.

Next, every festival has some particular celebrations and some taboos. The specific food culture is characteristic of Chinese traditional festivals, like tangyuan in the Lantern Festival, zongzi in Dragon Boat Festival and moon cake in Mid-autumn Day, while in America, presents, greeting cards and entertainments are characteristics of American Festivals. Therefore, the Chinese traditional festivals are most within the limits of family and center on food, just like the Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, which with obvious collective recreation, people are always join the activities with

family members together but not in individual. All this indicates that Chinese take family reunion seriously. But festivals in America are most within the limits of community, and weaken the family colors. For example, the large-scale festival parade, this reveals Americans pay more attention to individual.

Finally, China is a large agricultural country, the traditional festivals reflect the agricultural life style. In production, ancestors conclude many regulars about the season replacement and the weather change, so many Chinese festivals are the record to these regulars, like the Spring Festival, Tomb-sweeping Day. Besides, these festivals embody people’s desire to harvest, and these festival customs embody the characteristic of agricultural life. However, in America, festivals have fewer links with agriculture. Because of a country of immigration, festivals in America reflect the peculiarity of immigration like Thanksgiving Day.

#### 3.2 Similarities

Though there are many differences between Chinese and American festivals, similarities also exist.

First, all these festivals appear according to the development of the culture, religion, and society of their own country. China is an agricultural country from the ancient time. People focus on the influence of the climate to the crops. During the farming, they conclude the 24 solar terms, and on this foundation, formed the system of traditional Chinese festival. In America, people lay stress on Christianity, so most of the festivals are related to religion, like Valentine’s Day, Easter, Thanksgiving Day and so on. Thus it can be seen, all these festivals strongly connect with their own culture, religion and society.

Second, all these festivals pursue peace and harmony, seek love and embody the humanism. For example, nowadays, Spring Festival and Christmas Day all emphasize on reunion and happiness. In these days, people always would like to visit relatives and friends, enjoy delicious food. Besides, people who are outside are hurriedly to come back to share the beautiful time with their family members. Humanism is strengthened day by day.

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### 4. THE BLEND OF FESTIVAL CULTURE BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

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As times going by, festival culture changes gradually. In China, it is with distinctive traditional color, and spreads humanism all over the place, meanwhile, traditional festival mixes with modernization together. In America, the festival culture is the combination between religion and modernization. Besides, the religious color is weakened by degrees and the humanism is strengthened.

Nowadays, both in China and America, the business air of festivals become strongly. In China, three things must

be done better by every family at least before the Spring Festival. First, do Spring Festival shopping, second, brush off dust, third, buy new clothes. For these reasons, many people are hardworking and thrifty in daily time. Catching this psychology of the common people, businessmen all hoped that they can earn lots of money during the festival. So Spring Festival becomes the best sale chance.

Also, in America, business gradually reduces the religious meaning of Christmas. From November, commercial activities have already begun. At the shop gate, staff member dresses up as Santa Claus, waving his hands to people with a big smile. When close to Christmas, all the shops prolong their business hours and all the people are crazy for shopping. Merchants catch this golden opportunity and make their turnover increase doubled and redoubled.

With the policy of reform and opening, China develops quickly. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the national power of China strengthens day by day. In China, most people, especially the young generation, would like to celebrate the western festivals, such as Valentine's Day, Halloween, Christmas Day and so on. Someone even said that, Christmas is so hot in China that maybe one day it can have equal shares with the Spring Festival. This is the result of the interchange and fusing between the Chinese culture and Western culture. People worry about that some Chinese are keen on western festivals that they forget how to celebrate their own traditional festivals. In fact, celebrating western holidays is only for expressing emotion to family members, friends and lovers. All Chinese still remember the origin and customs of their own festivals.

Similarly, the Chinese culture has already spread all over the world. Every year, through the satellites, many foreigners appreciate the Spring Festival Party, and in the USA, during the Chinese New Year, Americans celebrate the Spring Festival with the Chinese together in Chinese city.

The blend of festival culture makes people know more about the other country, understand each other better and keep the world peace and prosperity.

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