

Introduction

Chinese culture has a history of some five thousand years. During this time, a great variety of unique, traditional festivals has evolved. Chinese festivals are rooted deeply in popular tradition, and despite China's many changes they remain firmly established as part of its colorful culture.

Over time, increasing productivity, improved standards of living and the establishment and growth of religion have all contributed to the emergence and development of festivals.

Most of the festivals in ancient China were connected with the development of astronomy, the calendar and mathematics. Many developed from what became twenty-four seasonal division points under the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, all of which had been more or less established by the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220). People developed different customs in their work and daily lives to express their hopes and fears in connection with the yearly change of seasons and natural



“Joyful Peasants.” Many different festivals and customs have been formed on the basis of traditional agriculture.



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Twenty-Four Seasonal Division Points					
Season	Division Points	Solar calendar	Lunar calendar	Ecliptic (degree)	Significance
Spring	Beginning of Spring	4–5 Feb.	Early first lunar month	315	Spring begins
	Rain Water	19–20 Feb.	Middle first lunar month	330	The amount of rain increases
	Waking of Insects	4–5 Mar.	Early second lunar month	345	Hibernating animals are woken by the spring thunder
	Vernal Equinox	20–21 Mar.	Middle second lunar month	0	The sun shines above the Equator and the day and night are of equal length
	Pure Brightness	5–6 Apr.	Early third lunar month	15	Pure and bright; trees and grass flourishing
	Grain Rain	20–21 Apr.	Middle third lunar month	30	The rainfall begins to increase and crops grow well
Summer	Beginning of Summer	5–6 May	Early fourth lunar month	45	Summer begins
	Grain Budding	21–22 May	Middle fourth lunar month	60	Grains begin to form
	Grain in Ear	6–7 Jun.	Early fifth lunar month	75	Crops such as wheat begin to ripen
	Summer Solstice	21–22 Jun.	Middle fifth lunar month	90	The sun shines above the Tropic of Cancer and the day is at its longest
	Slight Heat	7–8 Jul.	Early sixth lunar month	105	Hot
	Great Heat	23–24 Jul.	Middle sixth lunar month	120	The hottest time
Autumn	Beginning of Autumn	7–8 Aug.	Early seventh lunar month	135	Autumn begins
	Limit of Heat	23–24 Aug.	Middle seventh lunar month	150	The summer heat begins to cool
	White Dew	7–8 Sep.	Early eighth lunar month	165	Colder and morning dew begins to appear
	Autumnal Equinox	23–24 Sep.	Middle eighth lunar month	180	The sun shines above the Equator and the day and night are equal
	Cold Dew	8–9 Oct.	Early ninth lunar month	195	Getting colder and the morning dew is very cool
	Frost begins	23–24 Oct.	Middle ninth lunar month	210	Getting colder and frost begins to appear



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Season	Division Points	Solar calendar	Lunar calendar	Ecliptic (degree)	Significance
Winter	Beginning of Winter	7–8 Nov.	Early tenth lunar month	225	Winter begins
	Slight Snow	22–23 Nov.	Middle tenth lunar month	240	Light snowfall
	Heavy Snow	7–8 Dec.	Early eleventh lunar month	255	Heavy snowfall
	Winter Solstice	22–23 Dec.	Middle eleventh lunar month	270	The sun shines above the Tropic of Capricorn and the day is at its shortest
	Slight Cold	5–6 Jan.	Early twelfth lunar month	285	Cold
	Severe cold	20–21 Jan.	Middle twelfth lunar month	300	Extremely cold

phenomena. Based on these customs and activities, Chinese festivals began to take shape.

It is thought that many Chinese festivals originated in the pre-Qin Dynasty (before 221 BC), such as New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day, Lantern Festival, *Shangsi* Festival, *Hanshi* Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Double Seventh Festival and Double Ninth Festival, but they developed and spread over the centuries. The original customs were related to primitive worship and superstitions and often involved colorful legends and stories. Religion was another influence, as were certain historical figures.

By the time of the Han Dynasty, the major traditional Chinese festivals had been established. The Han Dynasty was the first golden period after the unification of China when the nation enjoyed political and economic stability, and science and



Yangjiabu New Year prints, late Qing Dynasty.



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technology were developing rapidly. Regional cultures such as the Qin, Chu and Qi-Lu, which had had a long history, integrated over time and emerged as the cultural community of the Han. All these factors favored the establishment of festivals.

The Tang Dynasty (618–907) saw festivals evolving from primitive sacrifices and superstitions and becoming increasingly like a kind of entertainment. Festivals became more joyful events. Increased communication between different nationalities and the development of religion added new vigor to the culture of festivals, and ensured that they would last to the present day.

Traditional Chinese festivals are not only an important part of the cultural life of the Chinese people; they also play a special role in trade and communication. Almost every festival is an opportunity for trading and socializing. In these festivals, farmers exchange produce, townspeople buy goods, scholars share their work and the government stages grand events to establish or reaffirm moral principles.

The development of festivals happens over a long period, and the nature of traditional Chinese festivals reflects the rich and vibrant history of the Chinese nation. The Han people have some important festivals, but the other fifty-five ethnic groups of China also have their own particular festivals and customs. Their ancient origins and customs, which have lasted to the present day, give an indication of how others lived in the past. Observing or even participating in these colorful festivals can give a sense of the essence of Chinese culture.

Society has developed, attitudes have changed, and the culture of Chinese festivals evolves continuously. Since the Revolution of 1911, China has seen different styles of festivals co-existing with each other. Some have flourished and others have dwindled. On the one hand, a few important festivals,



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A couple celebrating their golden wedding anniversary present each other with roses for Valentine's Day.

including the Spring Festival, Pure Brightness Festival, Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival, are still widely celebrated. They have inherited the essence of the traditional festivals, but have also developed and adopted some new features. Some less important festivals, on the other hand, were gradually forgotten over the years. Recently, some western festivals have been introduced into China, and these “foreign festivals” such as Valentine’s Day, April Fool’s Day, Mother’s Day and Christmas Day are becoming increasingly popular among Chinese people, especially among younger generations living in urban areas.

As people’s living conditions improve and their lifestyles change, ways of celebrating festivals change. Tradition and innovation combine and many people have abandoned traditional customs, celebrating the festivals in a more simple and casual way. For example, the internet and mobile phones have brought a new way for people to exchange good wishes.



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Chinese festivals and the way Chinese people enjoy them are becoming more diverse and exciting.

The festivals introduced in this book represent only a small number of the many and varied Chinese festivals, but it is hoped they will give a flavor of the charm of traditional Chinese culture.



A beautifully decorated Christmas tree.



Traditional Festivals

China covers a large area and has a number of ethnic groups. The various regions and ethnic groups have different customs concerning food, clothing, housing and transport, festivals and religion, all of which have lasted for hundreds of years and have become part of their culture. Some customs, however, are shared by all Chinese people and have merged into mainstream Chinese culture.



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Laba Festival

Name: *Laba Festival*

Date: the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month

In China, the twelfth month of the lunar year is called “*la* month,” and the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month is called “*Laba Festival*” (*ba* means “eight” in Chinese) or “*la* day.” *Laba Festival* is a tradition of the Han people. It is also regarded as the prelude to the Spring Festival.

The *Laba Festival* is thought to have originated from the ancient Chinese *la* ceremony. Agriculture has always been very important in China. Whenever there was a good harvest, the ancient people would consider it to be the blessing of the gods and would hold a grand ceremony to celebrate it, called a “*la* ceremony.” After



Two “Old Beijingers” enjoying *laba* porridge.



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the ceremony people would entertain their fellow villagers with the porridge they had made from their newly harvested broomcorn millet. Everybody would gather together to enjoy the celebrations. The *la* ceremony later developed into a festival mainly to commemorate ancestors. In the fifth century, the government set the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month as the *Laba* Festival.

After the spread of Buddhism into China, people developed another story based on the traditional custom of honoring the ancestors and eating porridge, saying that the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month was the day when Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, became a Buddha. The story goes that Sakyamuni had practiced Buddhism for many years and through his fasting he had become so thin that he resembled a bag of bones. He was about to abandon his fast when a shepherd girl gave him rice and porridge, which restored his strength and brought him back to the right train of thought. Contemplating under the Bodhi tree, he finally became a Buddha on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month. To commemorate this event, on this day every year Buddhists began to make porridge with rice and dried fruits to make offerings to the Buddha, and the porridge was called “*laba* porridge.”

The Chinese have been eating *laba* porridge since the time of the Song Dynasty (960–1279). In those days, the central and local government as well as the monasteries would make *laba* porridge on every *Laba* Festival. This custom became particularly popular during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The emperor, empress and princes would give *laba* porridge to their officials and servants and send rice and fruit to the monasteries. In addition, every family would make *laba* porridge to honor their ancestors. People got together to enjoy the food with their family members and shared it with other families to show their good wishes.



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There are many kinds of *laba* porridge. The traditional *laba* porridge should include eight main ingredients and eight extra ones, in accordance with the “*ba*” in “*laba* porridge” which suggests good luck (“*ba*,” in Chinese, is usually related to “*fa*,” which means prosperity). The main ingredients are usually beans such as red beans, mung beans, cowpeas, haricots, peas and broad beans and grains such as rice, millet, polished round-grained rice, sticky rice, wheat, oat, corn and broomcorn millet. The additional ingredients usually include preserved peaches, preserved apricots, walnuts, jujube paste, chestnuts, persimmons, melon seeds, lotus seeds, peanuts, hazelnuts, pine nuts, preserved pears and raisins.

The main ingredients are put into a pot of water and cooked on a low heat. When this has been done, sweet flavourings such as sugar, rosewater and sweet osmanthus will be added. *Laba* porridge varies in different areas in China, the most delicate one coming from Beijing. In this variant there are more than twenty additions to the rice, such as jujube, lotus seeds, nuts, chestnuts, almonds, pine nut kernels, longans, hazelnuts, raisins, water chestnuts, roses, red beans and peanuts.

People usually start to prepare the porridge on the night of the seventh day of the twelfth month. They wash the rice, soak the fruit in water, pick out the best fruits, peel them, remove the stones and finally begin to cook them from midnight. It will be kept on a low heat until the next morning when the *laba* porridge is finally ready.

If the family takes the festival seriously, they will pay special attention to the color of the porridge. Dark-colored beans will not be used. Only polished glutinous rice, “seeds of Job’s tears,” water chestnuts and lotus seeds are chosen as ingredients and made into porridge. The white porridge served in exquisite bowls is not only delicious but also an attractive sight. Moreover, it is

