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*Aunt Dawson*

LECTURES ON THINGS CHINESE

No. 2

*Chinese Festivals*

*by*

*Ellen Li*

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c. 1  
ROBARTS

Kong Young Women's Christian Association



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## THE AUTHOR

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Ellen Li (Mrs. Li Shu-Pui) J. P. is eminently well qualified to write about Chinese festivals, how they are observed, and the folk-lore surrounding them. She has lived in a village near Amoy, where from early childhood she had an opportunity to observe and participate in village festival activities. Since then she has travelled and lived in many parts of China and has had personal experience with a wide variety of both big city and small village life. This background coupled with a keen appreciation of the elements in Chinese life which are of interest to foreigners and a fine willingness to act as East-West interpreter, make her particularly adept at discussing this subject.

Mrs. Li is a graduate of St. Stephens Girl's School (Hong Kong) and the University of Shanghai. She is a member of the Hong Kong University Court, Ex-chairman of the Chinese Women's Club, Chairman of the Hong Kong Council of Women, and President of the Hong Kong Y.W.C.A.



# CHINESE FESTIVALS

by Ellen Li (Mrs. Li Shu Pui)

In China there is at least one festival each month. Most of these are seasonal, involving the planting of crops and they are mainly observed in rural districts. All these special days are listed in the Lunar Calendar which, is now generally referred to as the Agrarian Calendar.

Some of the more popular and important festivals are still observed in all parts of China, although customs vary greatly because of geographical influences. Many of these festivals are attached to, or spring from, some interesting and even romantic historical background. A brief description of these festivals, in chronological order, as observed in South China follows:

## NEW YEAR

On the 24th day of the 12th Moon (i.e. a week before New Year) both the household and kitchen gods are supposed to leave the house for Heaven to report on the fulfilment of their duties as guardians of each home and also to give accounts of the behaviour of each member of the family. Two different offerings are made to these gods, one in the living room, the other

in the kitchen. These offerings invariably include dishes of food, a pair of lighted red candles and the burning of paper-money and joss-sticks. Christian families do not observe these rites anymore.

The house is completely cleaned, all pieces of furniture and every nook and corner of the house being thoroughly swept. All kinds of cakes and puddings are steamed or baked. They are made with glutinous rice flour, sweetened with brown sugar or plain rice flour seasoned with meat and turnip, or meat and yams. Gifts of fowl, wine and cakes are sent to relatives and friends. All bills are settled. Good-Luck inscriptions, written on red paper (輝春), are pasted on doorways, down both sides and often across the top.

Members of the family gather round a little charcoal stove placed on a round table and food is heated or actually cooked in front of everyone. A whole fish must be included, but not eaten. Married daughters are not allowed around the family table; they must dine elsewhere.

In Hong Kong a visit to the flower market is made on New Year's Eve or a day or two earlier, to shop for flowers to decorate the house. The most sought-for and the most expensive being "Hanging Bell Flowers" and peach blossoms. The more blossoms there are on a spray, the higher is the price, because this symbolizes prosperity and



fecundity. Heavily laden branches are frequently sold, before midnight, for as high as a thousand dollars a spray. To welcome in the New Year, strings of crackers are set off. Members of the family usually stay up as late as possible, especially the younger ones, because they believe that the longer they stay up, the longer will their parents enjoy life. All dusters, brooms, knives and other sharp instruments are hidden for they signify ill luck and dissension.

On New Year's Day there is much visiting and well-wishing within the family. Children are on their best behaviour and daughters-in-law traditionally present their elders with two cups of sweetened tea containing hard-boiled eggs and lotus seeds, to show their desire to bear many children. New brides must wear their ceremonial robes on each New Year Day for at least three years. Red envelopes with money are distributed to junior members by relatives and friends. Many people abstain from meat to avoid killing on this day. People in mourning never go visiting.

Lion dances and dragon parades are held along the streets while fire-crackers are set off the whole day long. On the second day of the year, visits are again paid to members of the family and friends and invariably a banquet begins the new year. Giving "Mo Ching Gai" (Unfriendly Chicken) (無情鷄) is a custom which is still

observed in old-fashioned shops. The boss dismisses an employee by giving him a chicken wing during the feast, which signifies his wish to let him fly to a better job.

The Third day of the year is known as "Red Mouth Day" (赤口) and no visits are made as quarrels may result. The fourth day is the day the kitchen and household gods are supposed to return from heaven. Joss-sticks are burned, red candles are lit and food is offered to the gods in front of their respective altars.

The seventh day is everybody's birthday (人日). God created chickens, dogs, pigs, goats, cows, horses -one kind of animal on each day and on the seventh day, He created Men; therefore no killing of animals is permitted on their respective birthdays, and men are never punished or sentenced on the seventh day.

## LANTERN FESTIVAL

On the 15th day of First Moon, Lantern fairs are sometimes held with parades and floats. Formerly scholars created riddles in poetry which, written on slips of paper, were pasted on the lanterns. The competition of guessing the right answers frequently became the center of interest at the Fair. Lanterns are hung outside every door and carried by children. The custom of

having lanterns for this festival arose from the similarity of pronunciation of the word "Lantern (燈) and the word "Heir" (丁). A pair of new lanterns are hung every year on this day at the ancestral temple of each family which has a new heir. In Fukien, lanterns are hung also when there is a new bride in the family, and open-house is kept on this day. Dumplings made of glutinous rice flour are served, with or without stuffing, in pork and vegetable soup, or in brown sugar water, to celebrate the first full moon.

According to legend, during the 13th century, China was invaded and conquered by the Mongolians, who called their dynasty "Yuen", and ruled China with an iron hand. Spies were stationed in every home and had to be served as lords and masters of the house. Only one knife was allowed to every ten families. The people were oppressed beyond endurance and they thought of ways and means of communicating with one another to plot the inevitable revolution. The rites and customs of the then existing festivals were, therefore, utilized as a means of communicating information. On this festival day lanterns were hung to signify the number of able-bodied each family could contribute to the Cause. (The Moon Festival is also based on this legend.)

## SPRING FESTIVAL

"All Souls' Day" or the Spring festival comes somewhere about Easter. On this day it is the universal custom to visit ancestral tombs. People of all religions still travel for miles on foot, by train or boat to pay homage to their ancestors. People of Buddhist faith kow-tow in front of the tombstone offering food and wine and burn paper-money; while Christians only bow and place flowers on the grave. A feast consisting of food which has been offered to the ancestors, is served at home after these visits to the tombs. The Spring Festival is also called the "Tree planting Festival" (植樹節). In by-gone days the emperor planted trees in the palace grounds. Nowadays, the President plants trees in some public place, and students and officials do the same in schools and parks.

## DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

The 5th day of the 5th Moon is marked on the Calendar as the Mid-summer Festival for the worship of river gods, to prevent floods which bring famine and disease. Offerings are made near the water and willow branches are hung above door-ways to keep away bad spirits. Boats carved in the shape of dragons were launched to scare river demons away. These rites later developed into the dragon boat race, which is still held in Hong Kong and many parts of China.

This is also the first of three settlement days of the year, the other two being the Moon Festival and the Chinese New Year. Rice puddings wrapped in dried bamboo leaves in the form of a pyramid are served on this day. These puddings are sold in shops in the form of a cylinder in order that more stuffing may be put in.



Historically, the association of the rice-puddings and the dragon boat goes back to 400 B.C. when an upright statesman and poet by the name of Chu Yuen (屈原) drowned himself in protest against the Prince of Chu (楚), who had refused to listen to his advice in political reforms. People wept in admiration of his sacrifice and sent out boats to look for him for days; but since his body was never found, they threw rice wrapped in bamboo leaves to feed his spirit and the custom has been observed ever since.

## SEVENTH MOON FESTIVALS

I. The Festival of the Seven Maidens (The Romance of the Weaving Lady and the Cowherd) (牛郎織女) which falls on the 7th day of the 7th Moon, is essentially a woman's festival, mainly for unmarried girls who prepare an elaborate offering-table with fruits, cakes and choice pieces of their own needlework and embroidery. Years ago it was rather a contest of handcraft for the daughters of the house. Now, only paper trays, pasted with cuttings of scissors, needles, spools of thread, etc., are used and the custom is fast dying out except in very old-fashioned homes.



II. The Festival of Hungry Souls, lasts from the 15th to the 30th. People offer food, paper money and paper reproductions of useful articles such as: clothing, conveyances, furniture, etc. to the unhappy spirits who have no living descendants to care for them.

III. The Magnolia Festival (玉蘭節) is another festival of the dead. In temples, Buddhist priests hold

mass for the souls of those who died by misadventure. Candles in wooden bowls are placed on street corners or along rivers to guide wandering spirits to the feasts prepared for them.

## MOON FESTIVAL

The Moon or Harvest Festival which falls on the 15th of the 8th Moon is the second settlement day of the year. Gifts, consisting of moon-cakes, wine, chickens and fruits, are exchanged among friends.



The story of the moon-cakes, dates back to the Yuan Dynasty, when China was groaning under Mongolian rule. Patriots utilized the custom of exchanging gifts among friends to convey messages. Secret instructions were concealed in the cakes and sent out to urge people to rise en masse, on a certain date. Midnight on New Year's Eve was the time set by the leaders for the patriots to kill all the spies in their own homes, and subsequently the officials in their villages. The result of this well-planned revolution was the eventual down-fall of the Mongolians.

Two other interesting legends may be told in connection with this festival.

The Moon Goddess (嫦娥). About 4,000 years ago, an Imperial guard, a skilled archer, was given the Pill of Immortality by the Mother of the Western Heaven (西王母) for shooting down the nine false suns which were scorching the earth. His wife, out of curiosity, swallowed the pill and flew to the Moon. Seeing that his wife's beauty, reflected by the moon, enchanted the whole world he gave up his attempts to follow her, and instead, built himself a palace on the sun. They only meet once a month, on the 15th, therefore the moon is particularly bright and full at this time.

The Old Man of the Moon (月老) Yueh Lao, the match-maker, controls all marriages by tying a red string on the couple's ankles and pulling them together. This legend originated in the T'ang Dynasty. It is about a scholar, who met an old man reading a big red book in the moonlight. When asked what the book contained, the old man replied, "Every marriage in this world is predestined and recorded in this book. Would you like to look up your destiny?" Out of curiosity he acceded, and the old man flicked through the pages and finally pointed to a beggar woman with a baby in her arms, saying, "This is your wife". The scholar not only disbelieved him but took it as an insult. Angrily he picked



up a stone and threw it at the infant wounding her on the forehead. Then he went away and forgot the whole incident until 20 years later, after he had attained high officialdom, and he married a beautiful, talented girl. When he removed the bridal veil on his wedding night, he noticed a scar on his wife's forehead. Suddenly, all the words of the old man he had met in the moonlight, came back to him. His wife's story of her youth confirmed the old man's statement, and he sighed, "Now I believe in Destiny".

## MOUNTING THE HEIGHT

The festival of Mounting the Height (登高節) which falls on the 9th day of the 9th Moon, commemorates miraculous deliverance from death. The legend which dates back to the Han Dynasty tells of a virtuous scholar who was warned by a soothsayer of a terrible calamity, which could be avoided by going up the mountains for the day. He followed this advice and took his entire family high up on the hills. When he returned to the village he found that every person and every living creature had died. Nowadays, families either visit their ancestral tombs nearby, or go on foot to adjacent hills and picnic there to commemorate the above-mentioned deliverance, and, symbolically to avoid evils and sickness. Students climb mountains or fly kites, which again symbolizes rising to the height of scholastic careers.

## SYMBOLS OF LUCK

### A. FIGURES OF FORTUNE.

1. The God of Fortune and Happiness is usually represented by a man with a son in his arms. To a Chinese family, to have a son is to have a fortune.

2. The God of Prosperity is represented by a prosperous looking man wearing the official gown of High station.

3. The God of Longevity is represented by an old man with a long white beard holding a staff in one hand and a giant peach in the other.

### B. OTHER SYMBOLS

1. Bat: fortune or luck.

2. Doe or deer: prosperity and high officialdom.

3. Peach: longevity. Birthday feasts must include noodles and buns made in the shape of peaches tinted with red spots.

4. Crane, orchid, pine flower and bamboo: symbols of longevity.

5. Peony: prosperity and high officialdom, because they are rare and expensive.

6. Plum blossom: Fortune or happiness which usually means an abundance of sons because plum trees bloom in great abundance and bear an abundance of fruits.

7. Magpies: birds of luck which bring good news to a family i.e. the arrival of a son or good tidings.

8. Coins and silver ingots: wealth and prosperity.

### **SYMBOLS OF ROYALTY OR HIGH OFFICIALDOM**

1. Dragon: king or male head of state.

2. Phoenix (Bird of Paradise): queen or first lady.

3. Unicorn: heir to the throne or high officials.

4. Lion: high military officials.

### **SYMBOLIC COLORS**

1. Yellow for royalty only.

2. Purple for high officials.

3. Red is the official colour of good fortune and prosperity, used on birthdays, weddings, and New Year. A black jacket, with or without embroidery, and a red

skirt is the ceremonial dress for a married woman. According to Cantonese custom, a concubine wears a pink skirt. In Fukien, a concubine wears a black skirt with a red flower on her hair while a widow wears a black skirt.

4. White, grey, blue and black are colors of mourning in their respective order. The Chinese never attend a wedding or birthday party or go visiting while mourning until after one hundred days Mourning usually lasts three years.





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