

COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL LIGHTING FESTIVALS BETWEEN CHINA AND MYANMAR

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Abstract: Every country possesses its cultural festivals. These festivals derived aboriginals' customs and perceptions. We can find some studies on how people spend their holidays is a vital part of understanding the national characteristic of a society. In this study, we decided to conduct a comparative study between China and Myanmar because these two Asian countries have different customs and cultures. On this background of cultural differences, the paper is going to study the lighting festival of each country, and describe the differences in their celebration of the festival. The expected outcome of this study is to understand the different national characteristics, societal norms, and values by means of inference.

Keywords: Traditional lighting Festivals, comparative study, China, Myanmar.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar situated on the Indochina Peninsula of South East Asia, which is well-known as "the Golden Land" because of its glittering pagodas, a vast tract of timber forests, massive mineral resources, wonderful historical sites and monuments, and the hospitality of Myanmar People. Myanmar is a country that has a collection of the most beautiful spots in South East Asia.

The People's Republic of China is a country in East Asia. It is the world's most populous country. Though China is known as a developing country, it has already grown as the world's largest economy. China is a country with a great diversity of religious beliefs. The main religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. China people can freely choose and express their beliefs, religions, and religious affiliations.

Every society is developed passing through the history and social situations they are belonged to. The history of civilization always describes the characteristics of its society. The past events are always talking about the valuable traces of their cultures and customs to the historians or researchers. Similarly, their traditional festivals can be seen as a magic window through which we can see the past civilizations of our ancestors.

This paper intends to make a comparative study on lighting festivals in China and Myanmar. The paper, we expect, may bring readers not only traditional customs of the past but also the historical legacies of both societies.

2. TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS AND CULTURE

Tradition is a part of a culture that is passed from person to person or generation to generation to generation, possibly differing in detail from family to family, such as the way to celebrate holidays.¹

Tradition is an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom.) It is a belief or a story which are relating to the past and is commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable. It is like a catalyst of cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutes.²

¹ Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University Press.

Culture is the social behavior and norms that define a particular society. The arts, customs, habits that characterize a particular society or nation. The beliefs, values, behavior, and material objects constitute a people's life. Culture is the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.

Traditional festivals in different countries are closely related to their own culture. Festival is a specific manifestation of culture in the field of life and a form of culture. As the representation of traditional culture at the level of national behavior, traditional festivals in various countries are deeply rooted in their original cultural connotations. It is a unique cultural symbol formed in long-term development and evolution. In the memory of their people, traditional festivals always reflect the high status and occupied as a broad foundation.

Both Chinese and Myanmar traditional festivals reveal the national cultural spirit. The cultural spirit of Chinese traditional festivals mainly contains patriotic thoughts, striving for self-improvement, and the nature of unity. On the other hand, traditional Myanmar festivals are related to Buddhism.

3. HISTORY OF THE THADINGYUT FESTIVAL OR FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS IN MYANMAR

On the full-moon day of Waso in the seventh year of His sovereignty, the Buddha was compelled to perform Yamaka Pāṭihāriya. This is also known as "Twin Miracle", which is performed at the foot of a tree in the kingdom of Sāvatti ruled by Kosala. He created a jeweled walk and, standing on it, produced flames and steams of water simultaneously from his body. The massive number of people who had gathered to watch this miracle(s) were immensely amazed and delighted. During the intervals of these miracles, the Buddha preached the Four Truths to the people which resulted in the realization at the end of the great event.

After the performance of the miracles the Buddha ascended to Tāvatiṃsā, the abode of 33 Gods, to teach the Abhidhamma to his mother, who was reborn as a Deva, and many other Gods. Each day he created a Buddha of his likeness and left him to continue the teaching on his behalf and came down to earth. First, he washed at the Anotatta lake and collected food in the land of Uttarakura. After finishing his meal he proceeded to a sandalwood forest where he taught Sāriputta in brief the portions of the Dhamma that he had taught to celestial beings. After that, the Buddha ascended back to the celestial world to carry on the teaching by himself there. In this way, he spent the seventh Vassa in Tāvatiṃsā.

Meanwhile, the people remained at Sāvatti for three months awaiting the Buddha's return. To them, the Dhamma was taught by Moggallāna and food provided by a lay devotee called Cūḷa Anāthapiṇḍika. At their request Moggallāna visited the Buddha and brought back the information that the latter would come down to Saṅkassa town 30 leagues away from Sāvatti. The people accordingly moved on to the city to receive the Buddha.

At the end of Vassa, the Buddha's teaching of the Abhidhamma was also concluded. As a preparation for the Buddha's descent to earth Sakka created three staircases, the ruby one in the middle, the gold on the right, and the silver on the left. The Buddha took the ruby staircase, Devas the gold, and the Bahamas the silver. Pañcaśikha rendered honor to the Buddha by playing on a harp, Suyāma, and Santusita by fanning him with fans, Sakka by blowing a conch-shell and Mahā-Brahmā by holding a white umbrella over him. The splendor and glory of the Buddha were so impressive that none in the audience aspired to Buddhahood. When the Buddha got onto the ground Sāriputta was the first to welcome him with obeisance. Then followed obeisance of the people. Thus took place a great joyous reunion of the Buddha with his multitude of lay followers.

4. HISTORY OF LANTERN FESTIVAL IN CHINA

During the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), Buddhism became flourished in China. So to popularize Buddhism, one of the emperors gave an order to light lanterns in the imperial palace to worship and show respect for Buddha on the 15th day of the first lunar month. During the Tang (618 - 907), Song (960 - 1279), Ming (1368 - 1644), and Qing (1644 - 1911) dynasties, lighting lanterns became a tradition for Chinese people.

The 15th day of the 1st lunar month is the Chinese Lantern Festival because the first lunar month is called yuan-month and in ancient times people called night Xiao. The 15th day is the first night to see a full moon. So the day is also called Yuan Xiao Festival in China. According to the Chinese tradition, at the beginning of a new year, once a bright full moon is hanging in the sky, thousands of colorful lanterns should be hanging out to appreciate. At this time, people will try to solve the puzzles on the lanterns, eat yuan xiao (glutinous rice ball) and get all their families united in a joyful atmosphere.

² Merriam-Webster.com, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>

The Lantern Festival took on a religious connotation from the Taoist concept of three worlds (which was, in turn, rooted in Buddhist thought). The Lantern Festival celebrated the heavenly realm, while the later Double Seventh Festival celebrated the earth realm and the Double Ninth Festival the human realm. Another account, from the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220CE) tied the festival to the North Star. The Lantern Festival honored Ti Yin, the god of the North Star, who was seen as the balanced embodiment of the two opposing universal principles of yin and yang. He never changes his position in the sky. Over time, this festival has been influenced by other customs and practices such as Buddhism and Daoism. It has since become a unique celebration for all Chinese people worldwide.

5. TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL OF LIGHT IN CHINESE AND MYANMAR

The festival of Light in their own cultural systems. The Lantern Festival is the first full moon night in the Chinese calendar, marking the return of spring and symbolizing the reunion of family. The Lantern Festival aims to promote reconciliation, peace, and forgiveness.

The Thadingyut festival, also known as the Lighting Festival of Myanmar is held on the full moon day of the Burmese lunar month of Thadingyut. As a custom, it is held at the end of the Buddhist (Vassa) and is the second most popular festival in Myanmar. People attach great importance to the celebration of the festival.

The Lantern Festival is a Chinese festival celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first month in the lunar year in the Chinese calendar. It is not to be confused with the Mid-Autumn Festival, which is also sometimes known as the "Lantern Festival". During the Lantern Festival, children go out at night to temples carrying paper lanterns (兔子燈 Tu Zi Deng) and solve riddles on the lanterns (猜燈謎 Cai Deng Mi). It officially ends Chinese New Year. In ancient times, the lanterns were fairly simple, for only the emperor and noblemen had large ornate ones; in modern times, lanterns have been embellished with many complex designs. For example, lanterns are now often made in the shapes of animals. The Lantern Festival is also known as the Little New Year since it marks the end of the series of celebrations starting from the Chinese New Year.

The Thadingyut Festival, commemorating these happy events, is celebrated in Burma for three days beginning from the day before the Full-moon. When night falls lights are offered in memory of the Buddha. It is therefore also called The Festival of Lights. In the old days, however, it was known as "Myinmo Festival", which is the Burmese word for Mount Meru on which Tāvātimsā is supposed to stand. The Full-moon day of Thadingyut is now sometimes referred to as Abhidhamma Day in Burmese people, denoted as a day of Buddha's particular branch of teaching.

6. THE CELEBRATION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND MYANMAR TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS OF LIGHT

Through the introduction on the typical festivals of the two cultural systems in pairs, this paper will make a specific comparison on them in the following.

6.1 Celebration of Festival of Light in Myanmar

People celebrated three days of light festival, namely the day before the full moon, the full moon day, and the day after of full moon day, by playing music, dancing, and many entertainment events. Illuminations are there to celebrate the anniversary of the Buddha's return from the celestial abode where he had spent forty days teaching His Dhamma to the gods.

It was on the full moon day of Thadingyut month that the Buddha descended back to the abode of humans. He and His disciples were attended by a heavenly host of celestials who created a pathway of stars. Humans on earth illuminated the homes and streets to welcome the Buddha and His disciples.

Although the anniversary is on the full moon day the Myanmar way of celebrating such an event is to have three days festival on the eve, as a welcome-day and the actual-day, and then the post-day of grand send-off. So, the festival is three days holding instead of one.

6.2 Illumination

Streets, houses, and public buildings are illuminated and festooned with colored electric bulbs. One feature of the festival in small towns and villages is see-mee lighting; small earthen bowls are filled with sesame oil and a piece of cotton is soaked in each bowl and lighted.

These lighted oil bowls are placed on the terraces of pagodas. The lights last longer than candles and the little tongue of flame quivering in the breeze lend an uncanny beauty to the scene steeped in silvery moonlight.

The scene of the Buddha's descending from the celestial regions is often recreated in the streets or pagoda precincts, all done up on paper mache and poster paintings and of course, lights. The festival is often called the Tāvatiṃsā feast: Tāvatiṃsā, being the name of the celestial abode where the Buddha spent the lantern season.

6.3 Paying Respects

Thadingyut is not only a season of festivals and rejoicings but also a time for remembering those to whom we owe respect and gratitude. According to the Buddhist teaching, there are Five Revered Ones, namely the Buddha, Dhamma, Monks, Parents, and Teachers. During the Thadingyut season, Myanmar Buddhists go round paying respects to parents, teachers, elder relatives, and friends. People pay homage to Parents, Teachers, and Elders, asking for pardon for whatever misdeeds through words or behavior they might have committed during the year.

When Buddhists do the act of bowing down to anyone, their parents, teachers, or elder, they not only pay respects as a gesture of gratitude, but they also ask forgiveness for any wrongful action they might have done in this life and many lives before.

6.4 Celebration of Festival of Lanterns in Chinese

Lighting lanterns is probably the most widely known tradition for celebrating the Lantern Festival. When darkness falls, people place candles inside the lanterns and carry them outside. Every year, lantern carnivals and exhibitions are held in parks and other public places, during which lanterns of various colors, patterns, and styles are on display. The entire area is decorated with beautiful lighting.

The festival is peppered with colorful red lanterns meant to bring good fortune. Various Chinese customs, such as lantern riddles from the Song Dynasty, add to the festival's charm. Attendees continue their celebrations by eating sticky rice and performing Lion and Dragon dances. These dances are believed to deter evil spirits and harness good luck.

Ultimately, this festival reflects the complex cultural elements indicative of the exchanges between different cultures along the Silk Roads. The festival continues to be celebrated in China every year.

6.5 Enjoying Time with Families and Lovers

As the Lantern Festival is a part of the Spring Festival, it is still a time reserved for families. Gathering with families and eating Tang Yuan, the Lantern Festival has an important significant meaning of reunion. Beyond that, the Lantern Festival is also known as Chinese Valentine's Day, a day to celebrate love and affection between lovers.

In ancient China, young ladies were not allowed to go out freely except at the time of the Lantern Festival. It was once customary for single people to carry lit lanterns on the streets in hopes of finding their true love. With the beautiful full moon and fancy lanterns, the Lantern Festival was romantic enough to be an occasion for young ladies to meet their lovers. As time passed, however, the festival no longer had such an emphasis on romance.

6.6 Guessing Lantern Riddles

Guessing lantern riddles is an incredibly popular activity during the Lantern Festival. The riddles often contain messages of good fortune, family reunion, abundant harvests, and love. In ancient times, single people can attract the attention of their crush through this guessing game.

Right up until today, Chinese people convene delightful riddle competitions to celebrate the Lantern Festival. Lantern riddles are popular with people of all ages and walks of life as many of them are inspiring and fascinating.

6.7 Eating Tang Yuan

Tang yuan (汤圆 tāng yuán), also called as Yuan Xiao (元宵 yuán xiāo), is a must-eat food for the Lantern Festival. Shaped like a round ball, Tang Yuan symbolizes the full moon and people's desires for happiness and family reunions.

Tang Yuan is made of glutinous rice flour and usually stuffed with sesame, peanut, bean paste inside served in soup. However, ways of making them are different in the north and south of China. Read Chinese New Year Food for more details.

The different celebrations of those lighting festivals show that Chinese and Myanmar people have different views of value. Chinese people pay attention to peace, union, and harmony, while Myanmar people pay attention to welcome the Buddha's descent from heaven after he preached the Abhidhamma.

7. COMMENTS ON THE STUDIES

Festival has religious origins and intertwine cultural and religious significance in traditional activities. Therefore, we found different rituals and beliefs which are reflected in festivals of these two countries.

Differences between Chinese and Myanmar traditional Lighting festival is complementary to the world culture, which adds to the richness and color of world culture exchange. Currently, we should confess the recognition of our traditional festival, and then exert ourselves to expand our traditional festival culture to the world.

8. CONCLUSION

A culture is gradually developed based on some kind of system of aboriginals or tribes living collectively. Therefore, any culture does not survive without the participation of people. This makes sense of the quote by Mahatma Gandhi, which says, "No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive."

Every civilization or culture was developed based on the social system of a community. So cultures and traditions never exist without humanities. Similarly, the existence of communities depends on the survival of their cultures. Therefore, communities need to protect the survival of their cultures and traditions for the sake of their existence and identities.

China and Myanmar communities have their specific characteristics, especially on their identities. The differences we found out in the lighting festivals of our comparative study are mostly originated in the community norms, traditional backgrounds, and ritual procedures. We can get a deeper insight into the differences if future studies explore the different pieces of literature of both communities focusing on the other festivals and aspects of traditions.

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