

I THE LEGEND OF “NIAN”

Introduction

In the Chinese language, the character *nian* (年) carries the meaning of the start of a year. Thus, the Nian Festival, also known as the Spring Festival, is a Chinese festival that celebrates the beginning of a new year.

Generally regarded as the most important traditional festival in China, the Spring Festival is celebrated by having family reunion dinners, exchanging greetings

and good wishes, giving *hongbao* (gift money in red envelopes) to children, setting off the firecrackers, performing the dragon dance and the lion dance, doing Chinese paper-cutting, putting up Chinese New Year pictures and Spring Festival couplets, etc.

The creature Nian has been imagined in various forms in different legends.



◉ Two scenes in the Chinese New Year picture *Embracing the New Year* by artist Huang Ruihu of the Qing Dynasty, depicting performances of the dragon dance (left) and the lion dance (right) during the Spring Festival



Driving off the plague evil



Worshipping the kitchen god



Setting off the firecrackers

◉ Three paintings from the Qing-dynasty artist Shen Zongqian's album of people on the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year, held by the Jiaxing Museum, Zhejiang Province

Story Time

There once was a beast called Xi (夕). When food became scarce in the harsh winter, it would come out looking for food in the nearby villages and attack or even eat the villagers.

The villagers were so scared of Xi that they begged the kitchen god, who was in charge of fire, to get rid of Xi. The kitchen god tried very hard but could do nothing with the ferocious beast. The Jade Emperor learned of the situation and sent a fairy child, Nian, to solve the problem.

Even though Nian made several attempts, Xi was still on the run. Fortunately, Nian was smart and good at observing. By

chance, he discovered that Xi was afraid of loud noises; therefore, he drove Xi off with the cracking sound of burning bamboo.

However, the peace only lasted for a few days, after which Xi returned.

This time, Nian found Xi was afraid of the color red, so he told the villagers to put red paper on their front door, hang red lanterns and then burn bamboo at midnight. As Nian had expected, Xi ran away that night and never showed up again. That day happened to be the last day of the year according to the Chinese lunar calendar.

Cultural Links

► The main traditional Chinese festivals

Deeply rooted in ancient Chinese farming culture, most of the traditional Chinese festivals are scheduled according to the Chinese lunar calendar.

The main traditional Chinese festivals	Date (Chinese lunar calendar)
The Spring Festival	the 1st day of the 1st lunar month
The Lantern Festival	the 15th day of the 1st lunar month
The Dragon Boat Festival	the 5th day of the 5th lunar month
The Qixi Festival	the 7th day of the 7th lunar month
The Mid-Autumn Festival	the 15th day of the 8th lunar month
The Double-Ninth Festival	the 9th day of the 9th lunar month



◉ A Chinese paper-cut

► Chinese folk arts in the Spring Festival customs

There are many customs for celebrating the Spring Festival in China, among which Chinese paper-cutting, Chinese New Year pictures and Spring Festival couplets are three well-known folk arts.

Boasting a history of over 1,000 years, Chinese paper-cutting has various uses in folk culture. It is mostly intended to benefit health, promote prosperity, or simply for decoration. In 2009, it was inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

Chinese New Year pictures mostly feature auspicious and joyous subjects, which range from plump babies to the Old God of Longevity, from landscapes to birds and flowers, from the plowing cattle in spring to rich harvests in autumn, to name but a few.

Spring Festival couplets are said to originate from *Taofu*, namely two peach boards with the names of door-gods, which people hung on the gate to pray for good luck and ward off evil spirits in ancient times. Nowadays, they are written with graceful calligraphy on red paper and affixed to both sides of the door frame. Adhering to certain lexical and tonal rules, the contents of the couplets are mostly about the Spring Festival, the beauty of nature and extending best wishes for a splendid future.



◉ A Chinese New Year picture



◉ A Spring Festival couplet

► Red in China

The ancient Chinese associated color with philosophy, etiquette, customs and so on. Therefore, each color has its own cultural connotation.

Red is the embodiment of ancient sun worship, representing brightness, warmth,

growth and prosperity. It is said that the color red gained increased popularity among the people during the Ming Dynasty, because the royal surname at that time was Zhu, literally meaning red. Today, red is still widely seen on festive occasions such as wedding ceremonies and the Spring Festival.



◦ Red in the Chinese wedding ceremony



◦ Red in the Spring Festival

▶ **The American family reunion day: Thanksgiving Day**

Thanksgiving Day is an important time for family reunions in the United States, which always falls on the fourth Thursday of November. Unlike Christmas, it is a

traditional festival that originated in the United States.

Legend has it that, aboard the ship *The Mayflower* in 1620, a group of English people sailed to America seeking a new life. That winter, the native people of America

offered them daily necessities and taught them the ways of planting, hunting and fishing. Thanks to the natives' help, they survived the harsh winter and had a great harvest the next year. To express their thankfulness, the English people invited the natives to share in a harvest feast, which would later become an annual tradition.



◉ Thanksgiving Day dinner, served with pumpkin pie, turkey, bread and so on

Discussion

1. What are the customs for celebrating the Spring Festival in your hometown?
2. As globalization continues to develop, what do you think the significance of celebrating traditional festivals is?

壹 “年” 的故事

引

在汉语中，“年” 这个字有“一年之始” 的意思。因此，年节，也就是春节，是中国人庆祝新年开始的节日。

在中国，人们一般认为春节是最重要的传统节日，庆祝方式有：吃团圆饭、

拜年、给孩子们发红包、放鞭炮、表演舞龙舞狮、剪纸、贴年画和春联等。

在不同的民间传说中，“年” 作为一种生物，被人们赋予了各式各样的形象。



◦ 清朝画家黄瑞鹤所绘年画《迎春图》中的两个场景，展现了春节时舞龙（左图）和舞狮（右图）的表演



逐除疫疠之气



祭拜灶神



燃放爆竹

◎ 清朝画家沈宗騫绘制的除夕人物图册中的三幅作品
浙江嘉兴博物馆藏品

故事

曾经有一种唤作“夕”的野兽。每到食物稀缺的严冬，夕就会到附近的村庄觅食，袭击村民，甚至把他们吃掉。

村民们非常害怕夕，便向火神灶王爷祈祷，希望他除掉夕。灶王爷百般尝试，但对这头凶猛的野兽毫无办法。玉皇大帝知道了这个情况后，便派仙童“年”来解决难题。

尽管年想了不少办法对付夕，夕仍然逍遥在外。好在年很聪明，并且善于观察。一次偶然的机会，他发现夕惧怕

响声。于是，他点燃竹子，用爆炸声去吓唬夕，夕果然被吓跑了。

但是好景不长，几天后，夕又回来了。

这次，年发现了夕惧怕红色，于是他叫村民们在门前贴上红纸，挂上红灯笼，半夜再点燃竹子。正如年料想的那样，夕在当夜逃跑后，就再也没有出来兴风作浪了。这天正好是农历中一年的最后一天。

文化链接

▶ 中国主要的传统节日

中国的传统节日深深植根于古代的农耕文化，大多数传统节日都是按农历计算确定的。

中国主要的传统节日	日期（农历）
春节	1月1日
元宵节	1月15日
端午节	5月5日
七夕节	7月7日
中秋节	8月15日
重阳节	9月9日



◦ 剪纸

▶ 春节习俗中的中国民间艺术

中国有很多庆祝春节的习俗，其中剪纸、年画和春联是其中知名的三种民间艺术。

中国剪纸有着一千多年的历史，在民俗文化中有多种用途，其中大多数都作保健康、求财富或者装饰之用。2009年，剪纸被列入联合国教科文组织非物质文化遗产名录。

中国年画大多以吉祥、喜庆为主题，从胖娃娃到老寿星，从风景到花鸟，从春天的耕牛到秋天的丰收，不一而足。

古时候，人们将两块写着门神名字的桃木板挂在大门两侧，意在祈福辟邪，这种桃木板被称作“桃符”，据说春联即源于此。如今，人们将春联以优美的书法写在红纸上，贴在门框两边。春联的内容需要遵循一定的文字和音韵规则，大多数与春节、自然美景和对未来的美好愿望有关。



。年画



。春联

► 中国红

中国古人将颜色同哲学、礼仪、习俗等相结合，因此，每种颜色都有其独有的文化内涵。

红色体现了古代的太阳崇拜，代表着光明、温暖、生长和繁荣。据传，明朝皇室姓“朱”，字面意思是红色，因此越来越多的百姓喜欢上了红色。如今，红色常见于婚礼和春节这类喜庆的场合。



◦ 中国婚礼中的红色



◦ 春节中的红色

► 美国的家庭团聚日：感恩节

在美国，感恩节是一个重要的家庭团聚日，通常在每年11月的第四个星期四。与圣诞节不同，感恩节是起源于美国的传统节日。

相传在1620年，一群英国人为了寻求新生活而乘坐“五月花”号轮船来到美洲。那年冬天，美洲的原住民给他们送来了生活必需品，并传授他们种植、狩猎和捕鱼的方法。多亏了原住民的帮助，他们熬过

了严冬，并在来年迎来了大丰收。为表达感恩之情，这些英国人邀请原住民共享丰收的盛宴，后来该活动成为了一项传统，一年举行一次。



◦ 感恩节大餐
有南瓜派、火鸡、面包等食物

讨论

1. 在你的家乡，庆祝春节的习俗是什么？
2. 随着全球化的发展，你认为庆祝传统节日的意义是什么？