Religious Aspects of Chinese New Year Celebration

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Chinese New Year, also known as Spring Festival, is a traditional typical Chinese festival which has been celebrated for over 4000 years. There are many versions of its origin among which is the commonly accepted version that it originated from the time of Yu and Shun (21 BC). Usually, Spring Festival falls on the 1st day of January in the lunar calendar and also called “passing the year.” However, traditionally in the folk, Spring Festival extends from offering sacrifices to ancestors or kitchen god worshiping (the 23rd day or 24th day of the 12th lunar month) to the 19th day of the first month of lunar year and culminates in New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day in the Chinese lunar calendar.

The Spring Festival has been influenced, to some degree, by varieties of religious cultures during the period of its formation and evolution. New Year Celebration originated in the totem worship with the original form—offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors. The celebration of worship mainly manifests that humankind show their respect, worship and fear of the supernatural powers which have the ability to dominate human’s destiny and all kinds of natural phenomena.

Laba Festival

Laba Festival is the prelude to the Spring Festival with the popular name “Lari Festival.” In ancient China, the sacrifice offering to gods at the end of the year is called “腊” (la) while the sacrifice offering to ancestors is called “臘” (la). In Chinese culture, people attach importance to the sacrifice offering to gods
and ancestors, which is manifested in the grand celebration at the end of the harvest year.

**A Lunar Year (Xiao nian)**

*Xiao nian* is a festival that falls on the 23rd or 24th day of the twelfth month of the lunar year with the celebration of kitchen god worship. A lunar year is the beginning and foreshadowing of the whole Spring Festival celebration, mainly consisting of two activities: sweeping for the New Year and Kitchen God worship. People also write spring couplet and stick door gods to prepare for the New Year celebration.

1. **Sweeping for the New Year**

   According to the record of *The Annals of Lv Buwei* (*Lv Shi Chun Qiu*), the custom of sweeping dust for the Spring Festival started from the period of Yu and Shun. According to the legend, people believe that at the end of the year, all the gods and spirits will disappear from the earth and some of them will go to heaven while others will go to hell. If people do not thoroughly clean the house, the gods and spirits will have a place to stay. Besides, the day of sweeping must be best selected according to the lunar calendar in case of encountering with evil spirits. This kind of religious ceremony, which originated from ancient people’s driving out ghosts and monsters, gradually evolved into the thorough clean up at the end of the year.

2. **Kitchen God Worship**

   This is a popular custom with far-reaching influence among Chinese people. In ancient times, almost every family has set up a memorial tablet of the kitchen god. People regard this god as the one who masters the destiny of human life. According to the legend, the Emperor of Heaven assigned him to manage every house’s kitchen so that he is to be worshiped as patron by the people. The shrine of the kitchen god was often set up in the northern or eastern side of the kitchen with its statue at the center. For those who have no shrine, they just put an image of the kitchen god on the wall instead. In some pictures of the kitchen god, it is alone but in some pictures it is accompanied by the kitchen goddess. Kitchen god worship on the 23rd day of the twelfth month has an influential meaning to the New Year because one week later, on New Year’s eve, the kitchen god will bring all the blessings and adversities which will be granted to families on earth together with other gods, but the kitchen god is considered as the pathfinder. After the New Year celebration, all gods will go to heaven again except for the kitchen god who will remain in the kitchens of the families.

   During the feast of the kitchen god, people prefer to eat dumplings. In the mountainous areas, people choose to eat pudding and buckwheat while in the southeast area of Shanxi, people are fond of consuming fried corn with malt sugar.

3. **Eating Oven Sugar**

   It is said that on that day, the kitchen god will go to heaven to give a performance report. With that each family offer candies made of malt sugar to the kitchen god so that it will share with the Emperor of Heaven the good words about the family and that they might be granted a good fortune in the coming year. In some places, people put candies around the mouth of the kitchen god in the picture and saying, “Speak more good words and avoid worse words.” After putting candies into the mouth of the kitchen god, people will burn its picture so that the ash and smoke will go to heaven together.

4. **Writing Spring Couplets**

   After the 23rd day of the twelfth month of the lunar year, it is customary for each family to write spring couplets. Traditionally, people paste spring couplets on every door and every tangible thing. According to their belief, wherever gods reside or pass by, the spring couplets should be placed there. The contents of the couplets are differentiated according to the respected gods of the places. The common couplets about gods are like: “Graces from heaven as deep as the sea, virtues on earth as heavy as the mountain.” While another couplets about gods are regarding the earth, such as “Soil brings out white jade; land brings out the gold.” Couplets of financial gods are like “Heaven as the source of wealth, earth as the blessings of gods.”

5. **Sticking Door God**

   The door god’s picture is placed on the door during the Lunar New Year. In Daoism and during the Han dynasty, it was the custom to stick the picture of the door god during the New Year in all Chinese family homes. It is said that by sticking the picture of the door god on the entrance door, all ghosts and monsters will be kept at bay. Among the Han people, the door god is the symbol of a healthy atmosphere and military force, so the image of the door god in China is always the picture of a person with big eyes in anger, hands holding various traditional
Chinese New Year’s Eve

New Year’s Eve falls on the evening of the last day of the twelfth month of the lunar year. It is followed by the Spring Festival, which is the time for people to bid farewell to the old days while welcoming the new ones. Due to the lunar month’s distinction between the Small Month (29 days) and the Big Month (30 days), the date of New Year’s Eve is on the 29th of the twelfth month or on the 30th of the twelfth month. At New Year’s Eve, the whole family gather together to have dinner in accordance with their custom. The process of the New Year’s Eve are the following:

Setting up tables for worship

According to legend, it is on New Year’s Eve when all gods descend on earth, so people conventionally welcome them. A table for worship is temporarily set up and especially used to welcome the gods. Usually, the family which has no ancestral temple pay much attention on setting up the table because on ordinary days, they do not worship gods and ancestors so they would like to remunerate gods and ancestors at the end of the year. Different from the things offered during the whole year in the ancestral temple, what is offered on the table for worship includes portrait, fake money, incense, candles, etc., which conveys their worship and respect to the gods and ancestors which is distinct from idolatry. The place to set the tables is not fixed. If the central room is big enough, the table will be set there; if not, it will be set up at the center of the yard.

Having dinner on New Year’s Eve

On New Year’s Eve, when children are playing with firecrackers, housewives, meanwhile, are busy cooking in the kitchen. All the vegetables, meat and other ingredients and materials for cooking have been prepared already days before. The dishes for New Year’ Eve dinner must be ready during the daytime. In the northern part of China, dumplings for Spring Festival must be ready on the New Year’s Eve. To have New Year’s Eve dinner is the most joyful and lively time. The whole family gather together and sit around the table and enjoy the hearty meal which makes people have a sense of fulfillment. Among the dishes and dessert on the table, there are two which have to be present: hotpot and fish. Hotpot, boiling out of steaming hot, symbolizes booming and flourishing. Since the pronunciation of Yu (鱼)-fish is the same with that of Yu (余) - the leftovers, the fish dish symbolizes continuous lucky celebration and having more than what they need every year. At the end, the dessert, which symbolizes sweet life, will be served. That day, those who cannot drink wine will drink it more or less.

Wishing god

Welcoming god is the division between the old year and the new year. The time of holding the activity varies according to the local tradition: some before midnight, some at the midnight, some after midnight. The ceremony of welcoming god is led by the fist-born son of the family. Concerning the name of the god and the time and the direction to welcome it, the host must check the constitution of books. Facing the proper direction, the whole family will silently wait for the incense to burn out and kowtow towards the statue of the god. After that, all the offerings are put into fire together with pine and sesame stems. Together with the sound of the firecrackers, the atmosphere is so strong.

Stepping “Sui”

After welcoming god, people put sesame stems on the road that they can walk on followed with the sound of the horn called “Stepping Sui.” Since “岁” (year) and “碎” (broken) have the same pronunciation, stepping Sui during the New Year symbolizes the driving out of ghosts.

Staying-up during New Year’s Eve

It is also customary to stay up late at night in order to welcoming the coming year. The origin of this custom is from this story:
In ancient times, there was a ferocious monster called “Nian” (Year) which roams in the dense forest in the high mountain. This monster specially ate birds and animals—even humans. Some years later, people gradually mastered the regularity of the monster’s activity: every 365th day of the year, it comes to the residence of people to eat during the night and when the dawn comes, it goes back to its place in the mountain. After knowing the time of the monster’s coming, people made efforts to think of ways to deal with it: every New Year’s Eve people prepare dinner in advance and put their poultry inside the shelter, closing all the gates. The whole family gather together to eat a hearty dinner because people might encounter one disaster as a result of the monster’s coming. Beside the meaning of reunion, before dinner, people also worship god and ancestors and to pray for the peace of the family. After dinner, nobody would dare go to sleep. Instead, people sit together and chat to conquer their fear. This is the formation of the custom of staying up late during New Year’s Eve.

New Year’s Day

The original name of New Year’s Day is “Yuan Dan” (元旦). The literal meaning of Yuan is “head,” extending to the meaning of “beginning.” That day is the first day of the year, the first day of spring and the first day of the lunar month of January — this is called “Three Yuan.”

(1) Firecrackers after opening doors

In the morning of the Spring Festival, it is believed that it is lucky to open the doors followed by setting off firecrackers. After setting off the firecrackers, there are plenty of crushed red papers on the ground with the appearance of brocade, which is called “yard full of red.” Then the bling full of the streets and it is bustling with happiness.

(2) Paying New Year’s call to the elders

On the first day of the New Year, all men must get up very early to pay New Year’s call to the elders and wish them long life and good health. In return, the elderly will distribute Hong Bao (money inside a red paper envelope) to young people. It is said that when young are given Hong Bao, they will spend the whole year in peace. There are two kinds of Hong Bao: one is made of colorful strings weaved into the figure of a dragon and is placed beside the foot of the bed; the other is the common one, which is money inside a red paper envelope. Hong Bao could be distributed after paying New Year’s call to the elders or while children are sleeping, parents quietly put the Hong Bao under their pillow.

(3) Collecting treasure

According to custom, New Year’s Day is the birthday of the broom. That is why on that day, people are not allowed to use brooms otherwise good luck will be swept away from the family and the star of the broom will bring bad luck. Additionally, it is better not to sprinkle water and take out the trash because it will break treasure. In many places, there are traditions observed like sweeping the house thoroughly a day before the New Year and reserving one big bottle where waste water is placed.

The 2nd Day of the Lunar Month

On the second day of the New Year, married daughters together with their husband and children go and pay New Year’s call to their parents, bringing with them big bags of crackers and candies which are distributed by the mother to the villagers. This conveys the married women’s feeling of missing the village. After lunch, they have to return to the husband’s family.

The 3rd Day

The third day of the lunar month was the day when Nv Wa made the sheep, so on that day people are not allowed to kill sheep. In the southern part of China, in the early morning of the third day of the lunar month, people stick the red paper written with lucky words on the roof of the front gate and back gate in order to avoid quarrels during the whole year and wish that everything goes well. In the olden times, at the night of the third day of the New Year, people collect pine branches and light it together with paper statues of gods. It signals that New Year’s celebration has come to an end and making a living will start again. In the evening, the ceremony of sending year will be held where people send all gods and ancestors to heaven.

The 4th Day

The fourth day of the Chinese New Year is quite an auspicious day which is commonly referred to as “Yang Ri” (the Day of Goat). In Chinese culture, the goat is a symbol of good luck. This is the day to welcome the kitchen god,
the god of fortune and other gods. Families stay at home to prepare abundant
fruits, burn incense and light candles to welcome the gods. The sacrifices
provided to the god of fortune should include goat head and carp. On this
day, families can finally clean their house. They collect all the rubbish and put
them in one place and throw them all which symbolize that they throw away
all the bad luck and possible poverty of the present year. This day is the last
day that shops are closed. During the midnight and before the dawn of the fifth
day of the Chinese New Year, all businesses will operate as usual.

The 5th Day

On the fifth day of the New Year, people usually eat dumplings for five
days which symbolizes their felicitous wish of making money. On this day,
women can visit friends or relatives. Starting this day, all that was forbidden
in the beginning of New Year will be now allowed, so this day is also called
“po” (破) “wu” (五). It also means warding off poverty and welcoming the
god of wealth.

On this day, in the southern part of China, people worship the god of
wealth. It is said that it comes through four directions: east, west, south and
north, so at midnight people get up and open all the windows and doors, set
off firecrackers to welcome the god of wealth into their house. People are full
of hope waiting for the god to come so that they will earn much money in the
whole year. From the first to the fifth day of the New Year, all kinds of stores
and malls are closed. Since the fifth day of New Year, as it is said, is the God
of Wealth Day, people usually open business on that day so that they have
opportunity to be granted more wealth from the said god.

The 6th Day

On the sixth day of the lunar month in ancient China, people hold the
ceremony of warding off poverty, which is a special custom. The custom
symbolizes that through sending off the god of poverty, people could be free
from poverty. The god of poverty is also called “the son of poverty” who is
short and weak, fond of wearing dirty clothes and rags and eating rice porridge.

The 7th day of the lunar month

The seventh day of the lunar month is the day of humankind. According to
the legend, it is on this day that Nv Wa created humankind after creating all the
animals such as pigs, dogs, sheep and cows etc. The symbol of the celebration is
that people wrap their heads with strips of linen cloth. Besides, there is also the
tradition that some people climb the mountain and create poems. Until the Tang
dynasty, this ceremony has been attached importance on. The Emperor brought
people and officers to go to mountain in order to hold the grand celebration. If
on that day the weather is sunny, people will enjoy a peaceful life the whole
year.

The 8th Day

In the evening of the eighth day of the New Year celebration, whether people
go to the temple to worship the god of star or not, it is a must for them to
have the ceremony of the stars. When all stars appear in the sky, people gather
together and light up the golden lamps which are put on the desk, threshold
and kitchen. The lamps scattered in different places are called “scattered light
flower” which implies avoidance of bad luck.

On the 8th day of the lunar month, there is the custom of setting free
domesticated animals such as fish, birds etc. back to the wild. This activity not
only embodies the ancient people’s respect for nature and the moral character of
harmony, but also conveys that, in the beginning of the lunar New Year, people
have good wishes for the prosperity of various kinds of thing in the world.

The 9th Day

It is said that on the ninth day of the lunar month is the birthday of the
Emperor of Heaven, so it is called “the Day of Heaven.” The Emperor of
Heaven is the origin of heavenly dignity according to Daoism. He is also the
superior in heaven who rules the universe and all gods and is respected as the
almighty God.

On this day, the main custom celebrated is the worship of the Emperor of
Heaven. On this day, women in the family will have to prepare the fragrance
and put them on the ground in the yard and pray for the blessing from
heaven. This grand ceremony is usually held in the main hall where the altar
for worship is prepared. The altar is composed of two tables: the top table and
the bottom table. On the top table, the seat for god made of colorful paper is
offered; in front of the center there is an incense burner; on the bottom table, five
animals such as chicken, duck, fish, and pig which represents the subordinate
gods, are offered.
The 10th Day

Since the pronunciation of “十” (ten) and “石” (stone) in Mandarin are the same, so the tenth day of the lunar month is considered as the birthday of the stone. On that day, tools made of stones are not allowed to be touched. Even people worship the stone in order to avoid the ruin of crops. For lunch, people eat steamed buns in order to obtain many fortunes in the whole year.

The 11th Day

On the eleventh day, the father-in-law is accustomed to invite his son-in-law for dinner. Since there are a lot of food left during the celebration of the birthday of the Jade Emperor on the ninth day of the Chinese New Year, these food are served.

The 12th, 13th, and 14th Day

From this day on, people start to prepare for the celebration of the Lantern Festival. They choose and buy lanterns and build the lantern shed. There is one nursery rhyme: “on the eleventh day, people are buying lantern; twelfth, build the lantern shed; thirteenth, turn on the lights; fourteenth, all lights are bright; fifteenth half of the lunar new year; sixteenth, finish the celebration of the Lantern Festival.”

The 15th Day, the Lantern Festival

The fifteenth day is the Lantern Festival which is one of the traditional festivals for Chinese Han people and some of the ethnic minorities. It is the first night after New Year with the full moon. And it is also the first important festival after the Spring Festival.

Since the custom of lights decorating was practiced, to light and view the lights decoration has become one grand occasion from dynasty to dynasty. People participate in the guess riddle on the lantern is one of the main activities on the Lantern Festival. It was one kind of word game full of humor, and could enrich thinking and increase wisdom. This festival embodies the characteristic of the Chinese people’s spirit of carnival but its vulgar function has been carried to the daily life, people gradually lost the spirit of common interest, instead, the complex ceremony has been simplified to custom of eating “Yuan Xiao” (rice ball with sweet filling). The Lantern Festival is also marked with the dragon dance and the lion dance. Both the dragon and the lion are considered as symbols of good luck.

Summary

What are described above are the main activities of Chinese New Year and its cultural background from which we can conclude the following points:

Worshiping and asking for blessing are the main concern from the beginning to the end of the essay. There are two kinds of worshiping: firstly, worshiping God; secondly, worshiping ancestors.

The important influence of religion to Chinese New Year mainly is embodied in the three following aspects: (1) the integration of religion in Chinese cultural festival; (2) the religious characters are relevant to the Spring Festival; (3) expanse of New Year’s significance. With traditional Chinese New Year as the carrier, the dharma, teachings and ideas have been transmitted and penetrated into all fields of social life, so that it occurs the fusion of two cultures.

The characters of the influence of religion to Chinese New Year are the three following points: firstly, the time of the integration of religion and Chinese New Year plays a vital role; secondly, the effect of local religion is deeper than that of foreign religion; lastly, the influence of the religion earlier introduced into China is more significant than that which is later introduced.

The factors of religion have the tendency of becoming secular and national. As time goes on, many of the traditional New Year’s ritual and content have been abolished, transformed and sublimated. In the end, it has been combined with the New Year. Actually, Traditional Chinese New Year is the direct product of religion.
New Media to Promote Religious Communication in Jainism: An Exploratory Study

Komal Shah

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to discuss the prevailing communication trends in Jainism and the methods used in new media for religious communication. The paper will also highlight use of new media communication for spreading social as well as religious messages. In addition, the paper will attempt to examine as to how new media communication could be beneficial for the Jain youth in the present context. The paper is based on the analysis of selected websites which propagate Jainism through new media since its inception up to the present time.

According to Binod C. Agrawal,

There are three communication technology perspectives of new media in the context of Indian democracy. First, the notion of ‘new media’ has been referred to as by several names, depending upon the context and professional background. New Media has often been referred to as ‘digital media’ and ‘social media’ though all have accepted that at the core of new media is a rapid growth of digital technology communication innovations and new technology applications accelerated by global market forces. Today, the rate of obsolescence of digital technology is astronomical. I think soon the new media will become ‘traditional media’ and will be transformed into something new ‘biometric media’. Further, expansion of New Media has crossed

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