

A Study on the Customs and Connotations of Qixi Festival

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Abstract: As a part of the traditional Chinese festival culture, Qixi not only contains the values of yearning for love and family happiness, but also embodies the desire for wisdom, the pursuit of skills, and the incentive to create. To explore its customs in history and at present is of vital significance to interpret its connotations and inherit the spirit behind it. Furthermore, it also serves as an effective channel to know the fine traditional Chinese culture and the Chinese nation.

Keywords: Qixi Festival; Customs; Connotations

1. Introduction

Falling on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, Qixi is a festival dedicated to love and romance. Gazing at the starry sky on a clear autumn night, one can see a vast white Milky Way across the north and south. On each bank of the river, there is a star shining in the distance. They are the Altair and the Vega. It is a folk custom for people to sit in the yard staring upon the two stars.

Legend has it that every year on this night, Niulang (the Cowherd) and Zhinv (the Weaver Maid) meet on the magpie bridge. Zhinv, skilled in handcrafting, is a beautiful and intelligent fairy in the heaven, so women on the earth beg her for wisdom and skills along with a good marriage at midnight, thus bringing this festival another name: the Begging Festival. Besides, as the most important festival for girls in the past, it is also called the Daughter's Festival.

2. Traditional Customs in History

Qixi is the only female-centered traditional Chinese festival survived to today. Customs to celebrate Qixi generally included sunning books and clothes, holding begging activities, making medicinal pills, and exchanging love tokens between sweethearts.

2.1 Sunning Books and Clothes

The custom of sunning clothes could be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty. The double seventh always falls in late summer and early autumn with the heat receding and the weather turning dry, which is suitable for sunning books and clothes. Exposure to the sun was to protect the clothes against moisture and insects. Sunning books was much more elegant than sunning clothes. Books should be moved out from the indoor, spread out one by one and moved back to the indoor only after each piece of paper was dried out. It was an exquisite thing for scholars in the Wei and Jin Dynasties to sun books, and some of them even sunned the "books" inside their mind instead of the books on the shelf. In *A New Account of the Tales of the World*, a person named Hao Long lied on his back in the midday heat on the double seventh to sun "books" (Yang Xuming, 2012). So it seemed that even without large volumes of books in the house, people could still have alternative pleasures to sun "books" in creative ways.

2.2 Holding Begging Activities

What people begged for on the double seventh varied with each individual. In ancient China, girls desired to be a fair lady skilled in needlecraft and hoped to find the perfect match in their life, so they begged Zhinnv for weaving skills and love. Activities included throwing needles in a bowl of water (if the needle floated on the water, then the thrower was bestowed with skills), presenting melons and fruits as offerings to Zhinv and threading needles under the moon.

Besides, they also begged for wealth, longevity and children. But people could only make one wish at a time and could not tell anyone, otherwise, it wouldn't work (Zhang Chengzong, 2003). In fact, all the begging activities bore the beautiful aspirations and expectations of the ancient women who longed for everlasting love and marriage as well as the secular happy life.

The spider also played an essential role in the festival. Zong Lin recorded in his book that “if a spider spins a web on the melons, it means the offerer’s begging will come true soon” (Huang Tao, 2019).

2.3 Making Medicinal Pills

Most of the festivals in ancient China were somewhat related to praying for good luck, eliminating evils and preventing epidemics. Definitely, Qixi was no exception. Shuqiwan was a kind of traditional Chinese medicinal pill made from honey and other Chinese herbs used to heal diseases and prevent epidemics.

Moreover, in ancient books, there were records about young women picking melon leaves to wipe their faces on Qixi. Also, in *The Book of Odes*, it said people should eat melons in July (Wu Haiqi, 2016). Our ancestors paid close attention to their diet and they advocated eating seasonal foods. In this sense, women wiping faces with melon leaves to keep their skin in good condition perhaps was out of similar philosophy.

2.4 Exchanging Love Tokens

Exchanging gifts between sweethearts as a promise of eternal love was quite a common custom on Qixi. “You sent me peaches, and I rewarded you with jade. This is not courtesy, but my assertion of eternal sincerity and fidelity.” These lines, loosely translated from *The Book of Odes*, showed us a general picture of the unique Chinese love tokens preferred by the ancient people (Luo Cuimei, Liang Junxian, 2012). In addition, representative love tokens in ancient time included: comb, hairpin, sachet, jade and gifts made of red beans, etc.

2.4.1 Comb and Hairpin

Sending a comb to someone meant a promise for everlasting love and the will to remain a devoted couple to the end of life. The hairpin was often used as a love token implying the legal wife. In ancient China, men always had more than one wife. With only one legal wife, all the other wives were known as concubines. So if a man gave the hairpin to his sweetheart, it denoted that he wanted her to be his only love.

2.4.2 Sachet and Jade

Sachet was made of silk with fragrant flowers and powdered herbs inside, keeping the wearer sweet-smelling as well as driving away the mosquitoes and insects. Later, when people began to tuck a lock of hair or a personal keepsake inside the sachet, it developed into an intimate engagement token exchanged between people in love.

A gentle man is always compared to the warm jade in Chinese culture, so jade is more a symbol of one’s noble morality than a piece of expensive jewelry. In times past, if a man gave his jade pendant to a woman, it indicated that his love toward her was tender and courteous.

2.4.3 Gifts Made of Red Beans

“The red bean grows in southern lands, With spring its slender tendrils twine, Gather for me some more, I pray, Of fond remembrance 'tis the sign.” Originally written for friendship, the poem *Red Bean* (translated by W. J. Fletcher in 1918) composed by Wang Wei of the Tang Dynasty was then widely chanted by numerous couples, thus making the “red bean of lovesickness” a typical love token for the ancient Chinese.

3. Innovative Celebrations at Present

Qixi is a traditional festival about love and warmth. This thousand-year festival is the most tender and romantic page in the book of Chinese farming culture. With time changing, Qixi manifests itself to the world in many innovative ways at present.

3.1 Sunning Style on Qixi

In ancient China, people sunned books on Qixi. However, “sun” gains new meaning today. People sun books not for preventing mold, dampness or bookworms, but for sharing. Book sharing conferences are held to bring classics back to life and enable people to feel the warmth of the cultural relics. The ancient custom of sunning books on Qixi is injected with new vitality in modern times.

Shai in Chinese, meaning “bask in the sunshine”, also denotes “showing off” in modern times. So on Qixi, modern people are glad to sun their marriage certificate, love stories, or even Wechat red envelope given by their sweethearts. They are not really showing off arrogantly, rather they are celebrating this traditional festival in innovative ways. They are showing off their love for tradition and their love for life.

3.2 Hitting the Road on Qixi

Today a growing number of Chinese people choose to travel with their beloved to celebrate Qixi. Accordingly, more cultural activities catering to their needs are being held during the festival. Attracted by the rich and colorful activities, more people are hitting the road on Qixi, making travel a new trend to celebrate this romantic festival. Some even choose to attend a music concert or visit the cinema, flower market or shopping malls to feel the sweet romance in the air.

3.3 Tying the Knot on Qixi

As a day to celebrate love and marriage, many young couples choose to tie the knot on Qixi, believing it will bring them good luck and blessing. Some couples put on traditional Han costumes to take part in a grand traditional wedding ceremony, raising a throwback trend with new and fresh feeling in this modern society. Some couples get hitched in a modern group wedding ceremony, and some newlyweds celebrate their wedding on a roller coaster at theme park. All these innovative wedding ceremonies, no matter it is retro or modern, indicate that people at present still show great interest in the Qixi Festival.

4. Connotations of Qixi

Qixi is a representation of the most honest and sincere love view of the Chinese nation. The story of Niulang and Zhinv is about loyalty and perseverance. For thousands of years, this has been the central element of family values of marriage and love in China. Qiqiao or the begging activities, the core custom of celebrating Qixi, still retains in most places of China. Its original intention is to create and innovate, so needlework contests are still held for people to experience the traditional customs and regain a cultural atmosphere. The festival culture created by the diligent and unremitting Chinese nation is permeated with beauty of promoting productivity and social progress.

Besides, tea, embroidery and TCM are vital elements of the Qixi Festival. Gazing up at the sky and looking for the two stars of Altair and Vega on the night of the Qixi Festival, young men and women in love are connected in the scent of a cup of tea. The embroidery skill, deftly mastered by Zhinv, has a history of more than 2,000 years in China and is often used as a gift on important occasions. Furthermore, the customs of washing hair and prescribing herbs to prevent and cure diseases on Qixi show the philosophy of “cultivating life in four seasons” in TCM, which is the treasure of ancient Chinese science.

Bearing the cultural connotation and tradition, Qixi evolves as a part of national psychological identity. What’s more, Qixi inherits the essence of “completeness” and “harmony”. These are the values and world views of the Chinese nation, which run through all areas and processes of traditional Chinese culture: the cosmology of “unity of heaven and man” in worship and blessing, the social concept of “harmony without uniformity” in love tragedy, and the moral concept of “kindness of people” in folk activities... They precipitate as the “original aspiration” of Chinese culture and become the solid foundation of the nation.

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