

# A Study on the Festive Customs of Women in the Western Han Palace- Centred on the Lady Qi's Servants Speaking of Things in the Palace

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**Abstract:** As an important part of traditional culture, festival customs contain rich social and cultural connotations. Based on the Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital - Lady Qi's Maiden Speaks of Things in the Palace, this paper delves into the major festival customs participated by women in the palace during the Western Han Dynasty, aiming to reveal the religious beliefs, women's living conditions and social and cultural psychology behind them. These materials not only provide valuable information for historical research, but also show the unique style of court culture at that time.

**Keywords:** Western Han Dynasty; Court ladies; Festival customs; Religious beliefs; Social culture

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## 1. Introduction

As an important document recording miscellaneous anecdotes of the Western Han Dynasty, the chapter of Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital, in which Lady Qi's Servant Speaks of the Palace, describes in detail the festivals in the palace as recalled by Lady Qi's Servant, Jia Peilan, after she left the palace. These events not only reflect the hedonistic life of the Western Han court, but also reveal certain features of the social culture of the time. This article will use these events as the core of an analysis of women's festive customs at the Western Han court.

## 2. Analysis of festival customs

According to the record of 'Lady Qi's Servant's Words in the Palace', there were six festivals that the women of the Western Han court attended within a year, including the Next Dollar Festival, Tanabata, the Fourth of August Chess Meeting, the Chongyang Festival, the Shangchen of the First Month Festival, and the Shangsi Festival, and so on. These festivals were not only entertaining, but also carried deep religious beliefs and social and cultural connotations.

The first festival mentioned in the article is the Xiayuan Festival: 'On the 15th day of the 10th lunar month, everyone goes to the Goddess Temple and entertains the goddess with pork and millet wine, plays the flute and zhu, and sings the song of 'Shang Ling'. Then everyone pulls on each other's arms and steps in time with their feet to sing the song 'Chifeng Huanglai'.'<sup>[1]</sup>

The Xiayuan Festival is rooted in Taoist beliefs and stems from the Taoist concept of the 'Three Officials'(三官), the three officials of heaven, earth and water who are responsible for granting blessings, forgiving sins and relieving misfortune. It is written in the Book of the Three Officials that 'the Heavenly Official(天官)gives blessings, the Earthly Official(地官) forgives sins, and the Water Official(水官) relieves misfortunes'.<sup>[2]</sup> The birthdays of the Three Officials correspond to the Shangyuan Festival on the 15th day of the first month of the lunar calendar, the Zhongyuan Festival on the 15th day of the seventh month, and the Xiayuan Festival on the 15th day of the tenth month. Water Official, who is worshipped at the Xiayuan Festival, is in charge of the affairs of rivers, lakes and seas, as well as the affairs of all souls.

According to legend, on the day of the Xiayuan Festival, the Water Official will report to the Heavenly Court on the basis of the public sentiments gained from his visits to earth, in order to relieve all people of their misfortunes. On this day, solemn Taoist ceremonies are held in Taoist temples, and it is common for people to make sacrifices to the spirits of the dead and pray to the Water Official for blessings and relief. As one of the most widespread beliefs in Taoism, the belief in the Three Officials still circulates in

folklore today. It is said that on the day of the Xiayuan Festival, women in the palace would go to the temple of the Wushan Goddess (the ancient Chinese goddess of love) to pray for a good marriage and divine blessings, reflecting the Taoist beliefs of society at the time.

The second festival is Tanabata: “On the 7th day of the 7th lunar month, they go to Baizi Pond and play Khotan music, and when the music is over, they tie each other’s hair with five-coloured silk ropes and call it ‘Xiang Lian Shou’.”<sup>[1]</sup>

On Tanabata, the women in the palace did not pray for embroidery skills as folk women, but concentrated on recreational activities. They gathered at Baizi Pond and played Khotan music, the melody from the West, which not only contains Buddhist colours, but with its unique rhythm, in sharp contrast to the Chu sound popular in the Central Plains, added a few points of exotic flavour to the Tanabata festival. The Chu sound, which originated in the hometown of Emperor Liu Bang, is “mostly a sad sound of Shang and Zheng”<sup>[3]</sup> with a strong colour of sadness, whereas the music of Khotan is very different, with a bright rhythm, refreshing, and has become an indispensable part of the Tanabata celebrations.

After the music, the women in the palace tie each other’s hair with five-coloured threads to pray for blessings, signifying good wishes for each other. The five colours of the silk thread - green, red, yellow, white and black - correspond to the five elements of wood, fire, earth, gold and water, and are also closely related to the five human organs - liver, heart, spleen, lungs and kidneys. Under the influence of the five elements of the Han Dynasty, the five-coloured threads are believed to have the magical power to renew life, drive away evil spirits and prevent illness. Therefore, this custom not only adds to the festive atmosphere of the festival, but also conveys the courtesans’ deep hope for health and happiness.

The third festival falls on the fourth day of the eighth lunar month: ‘On the 4th of August, go out of the north gate of your house and play Go in the bamboo forest; the winner will be blessed for a whole year, while the loser will be ill for a whole year. You must take a silk thread and pray to the North Star for a long life to be free from illness.’<sup>[1]</sup>

This festive custom reflects the ancient people’s desire for longevity and good health. In ancient Chinese mythology, the Big Dipper was given supreme power over the cycle of life and death. This belief was rooted in the ancient people’s reverence and exploration of the vastness of the starry sky, and they had long since realised that the Big Dipper was not only a sign for orientation at night, but also the cornerstone of the calendar. The Historical Records - Book of Heavenly Officials states: “The division of Yin and Yang, the establishment of the four seasons, the balancing of the five elements, the adjustment of the solar terms and the determination of the calendar are all connected with the North Star.”<sup>[4]</sup> The Book of Divination and Astrology even closely linked the Big Dipper to the rise and fall of nations, the fate of individuals and even the prosperity and failure of the year, giving it a wider social function. Early Taoism adopted this belief in the stars and honoured the Big Dipper as a deity responsible for life, death and longevity.

‘Taishang Xuanling Beidou Benming Xuanmiao Zhenjing’ says: ‘The Big Dipper rules life and death, nourishes all things and helps people to prosper. All sentient beings, influenced by the qi of heaven and earth and the laws of yin and yang, either become men or women, or live long or die early, all from the dominion of the Big Dipper.’<sup>[5]</sup> The seven stars of the Big Dipper, considered the centre of the dome of the sky, patrol the four directions and dominate the life and death of all things in the world. From the astrological point of view, the Big Dipper in autumn hanging high in the sky, and autumn five elements of gold, gold main kill, so the ancients have said “the Big Dipper is in charge of death”. Therefore, there is a mythological story in the Book of the Sou Shen Ji, in which the Southern and Northern Dipper met Yan Chao playing chess, Yan Chao entertained them with wine and meat, and finally the Southern Dipper begged the Northern Dipper to prolong his life.<sup>[6]</sup> This is not only a story of grace to prolong life, but also a vivid embodiment of ancient Chinese star worship and Taoist beliefs.

The fourth festival is the Chongyang Festival: ‘On the ninth day of the ninth month, wearing cornus, eating peng bait and drinking chrysanthemum wine can bring you a long life. When the chrysanthemum blossomed, the stems and leaves were collected and mixed with millet to make wine, which could only be brewed and drunk at the Chongyang Festival on the ninth day of the ninth month of the second year, hence the name ‘chrysanthemum wine’.’<sup>[1]</sup>

In the I Ching, ‘nine’ is the pole of the Yang number, and ‘the ninth day of the ninth month’ is the day when the double nine meets, which harmonises with ‘Jiu Jiu’, so it has a good meaning for health and longevity. Therefore, during the Chongyang Festival, Han Dynasty court women would wear cornelian cherries, eat peng bait (also known as Chongyang cake) and drink chrysanthemum wine to pray for longevity.

As a matter of fact, ‘Cornus’ is a kind of traditional Chinese medicine, which has the functions of killing insects and disinfecting, and expelling cold and wind; ‘Peng bait’, also known as Chongyang Cake, is a rice cake made from the crown daisy and millet, in which crown daisy has the connotation of purifying evil spirits; and chrysanthemum wine itself has the function of nourishing and sustaining people. Chrysanthemum wine itself has the effect of nourishing the liver, so these festive customs are all initiatives to pray

for good fortune and longevity. Later on, a mythological story was derived from these customs of the Chongyang Festival. According to the 'Continuation of the Record of Qi Harmony', Fei Zhangfang, one of the 'Eight Immortals', taught Taoism to Huan Jing, and taught him to 'make a red incense bag with a cornus inside, tie it on the arm, and drink chrysanthemum wine on the way up to the heights on the 9th day of the 9th month'<sup>[7]</sup> so that the whole family would be protected from calamities.

The fifth festival is the First Month Shangchen: 'On Shangchen of the First Month you go out and wash your hands by the pool and eat peng bait to get rid of evil spirits.'<sup>[1]</sup> The day is dedicated to removing misfortune and seeking blessings, and also reflects the ancient people's desire for a better life.

The sixth festival is Shangsi: 'On the day of the Shangsi in March, a feast is held by running water.'<sup>[1]</sup> At this time, the Festival in the first half of March in the lunar calendar on the first Si Day, so called 'Shangsi'. After the Wei Dynasty, it is fixed in the lunar calendar on the third of March. Jinshu - Rites of Passage' records: 'Han ritual, the last month of spring on the Si, officials and people are standing in the water flowing east, bathing to remove dirt and evil. But since the Wei Dynasty, fixed on the third day, not on the Si.'<sup>[8]</sup> This may be with the Han Wei people revere the philosophy of Laozhuang, Laozi advocated 'Dao produces one, the one produces two, the two produce three, and the three produce all things.'<sup>[9]</sup> which gave a special meaning to 'three'.

Historical records of officials and people about the main activities of the main festival is water bathing, and here in the palace the main activity of the women is the water goblet. Women sitting in the beautiful scenery next to the water, will be poured into the wine cup with wings (also known as "ear cup"), so that it floats along the current of tortuous, which stopped in front of the wine cup, which is drinking. The purpose of the festival was changed from the traditional blessing and purification of the cleansing ceremony to a celebration full of fun, showing the elegance and leisure of the ancient court culture.

### 3. Conclusions

First, half of the six festivals examined in this paper are explicitly linked to Taoist beliefs, a finding that highlights the centrality and pervasive influence of Taoist culture in the construction of traditional Chinese festival practices. Taoist elements not only permeate the origins and rituals of the festivals, but also profoundly shape the spiritual connotations of the festivals and the ways in which they are celebrated.

Second, these festivals were not only an embellishment of court life, but also an important stage on which court women could display themselves and enjoy their leisure time. During the festivals, they were able to temporarily detach themselves from their daily duties at court and actively participate in a variety of activities such as rituals, songs, dances and entertainment, which not only reflected the relative freedom of court women at certain moments, but also a certain status and autonomy of women in society and the court system at that time.

Furthermore, all the festivals focus on the theme of praying for the removal of misfortune and for a long and healthy life, which profoundly reveals the ancient Chinese people's simple but strong desire for good health, family harmony and social tranquillity. It is particularly noteworthy that two of the festivals focus directly on prayers for longevity, which to some extent reflects the relatively backward productivity and high mortality rate of the society at that time, as well as the people's deep awareness of the fragility of life and their general concern about issues of life and death.

In conclusion, the study of women's festive customs in the 'Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital - Lady Qi's Servants Speaking of Things in the Palace' not only deepens our understanding of the central role of Taoist beliefs in Chinese traditional festive customs, but also reveals the living conditions and social status of women in the palace in a specific cultural context. At the same time, these festive customs, as living fossils of history and culture, provide us with a valuable window into the court culture of the Western Han Dynasty, further enriching our knowledge of the ancient people's social culture psychology.

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