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Chinese Folk Art

(Han Ethnic Group)

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1. Solar Terms and Festivals

China's 24 solar terms and various festive customs date back to ancient times. Their origins are closely related to ancient people's farming activities and their observation of climatic and phenological changes. Ancient China was an agrarian society, so Chinese people attached great importance to meteorological observation. More than 2,000 years ago, they designated 24 solar terms and set a calendar, which is currently known as the lunar calendar, firmly establishing order in agrarian production and people's lives.



Based on the 24 solar terms, various festive customs were formed in line with seasonal, climatic and phenological changes in a year.

Although various festive customs came into being to meet ancient Chinese people's practical needs at different times of the year, they also exhibit people's active pursuit of cultural enrichment.

The Spring Festival, or Lunar New Year, is the most important festival for the Han ethnic group. According to old customs, it marked the beginning of a year. As an old saying goes, "All festivals come after New Year's Day." Setting New Year's Day is the key to determining the dates of other festivals of the year. In more primitive times, when the calendar was not well developed, people had to calculate a year by observing the cycle of phenological changes, especially that of the growth of crops. About 4,000 years ago, Chinese people invented the *guibiao* (a tablet-with-gnomon that functioned like a sundial) to measure the shadow of the sun. The day when the sun would cast the longest shadow was named *Dongzhi* (Winter Solstice). Based on this day, they could determine the start of the coming year. The Xia Calendar is said to have been adopted during the Xia Dynasty (2070 BC – 1600 BC). It stipulated that the first day of the *Jianyin* Month (the second month after the Winter Solstice) is the start of a new year. In the following dynasties, there emerged many other methods to calculate New Year's Day. In 104 BC, Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 25) issued the Taichu Calendar (Taichu was a reign title of Emperor Wudi), resuming the Xia Calendar's method of calculating a year's start, and including the 24 solar terms officially into the lunar calendar. This became the framework that has been used by Chinese people even into the present era.

In ancient times, worshipping based on primitive beliefs often developed into events that would involve an entire community. Whenever a special occasion would come, there would be rituals to mark it. For instance, every year when crops grew ripe, people would hold rituals to celebrate and pray for a bumper harvest the next year. To this day, the hope for a bumper harvest and auspiciousness remains a major theme of Chinese festivals. When society entered the civilized era, some rituals related to primitive beliefs were preserved and handed down from generation to generation. Meanwhile, many new ideas were incorporated into old practices. Eventually, China's rich and colorful festive customs came into being.

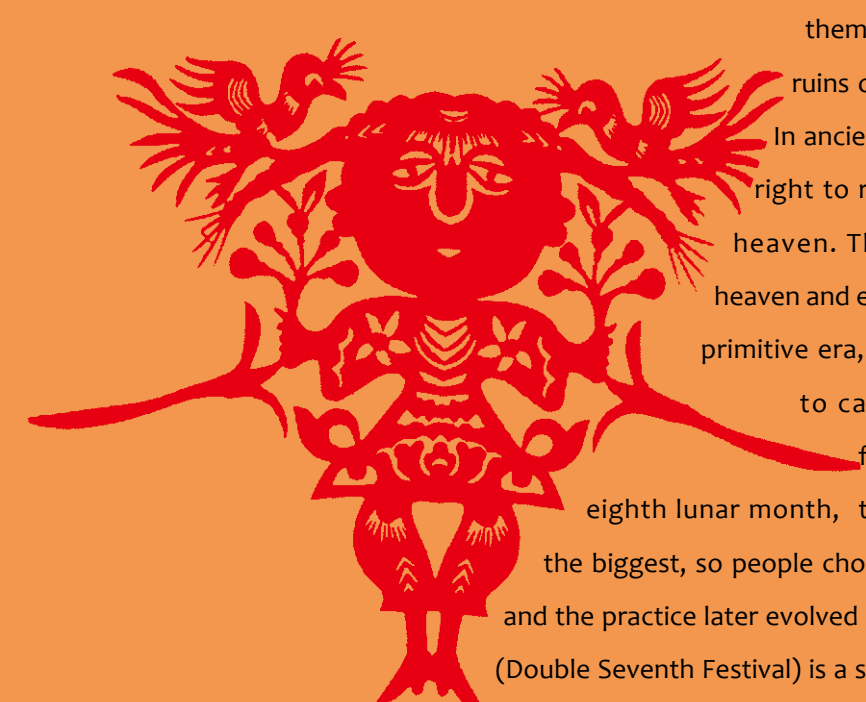
Ancient people worshipped heaven and earth. In the primitive era, various rituals were enacted to pay respect to

them. Archeologists have found many ruins of altars used to hold such rituals.

In ancient China, rulers claimed that their right to rule the country was granted by heaven. Therefore, the right to worship heaven and earth was exclusive to them. In the primitive era, people used the moon's phases to calculate the dates of different festivals. On the 15th day of the eighth lunar month, the moon was the brightest and the biggest, so people chose this day to worship the moon, and the practice later evolved into the Mid-autumn Festival. *Qixi* (Double Seventh Festival) is a special occasion for young women and girls. Many people believe the festival has its origin in a folk tale about a cowherd and a weaver girl who love each other deeply, but who can only meet once a year in heaven. However, this actually goes back to the primitive worship of the stars. The primitive worship of the earth later evolved into the worship of the *Sheshen* (Community God of Land), which is more popularly known as the *Tudi Shen* (Local God of Land). In olden days, the worship of *Sheshen* was mandated. Rituals were held in spring and autumn separately to pray for a good harvest and thank the god for his blessings. The second day of the second lunar month is the *Chunlong* Festival (Spring Dragon Festival), which is better known as the day on which the dragons raise their heads. Ancient people believed that rain was controlled by dragons, so they offered sacrifices to the spring dragon and the local god of land to pray for favorable weather.

Showing respect to ancestors is also an essential part of various worshipping activities. Such rituals can be seen as an element of many festivals. For instance, sacrifices should be offered to ancestors during the Spring Festival; ancestors' tombs need to be swept on *Qingming* Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day); around the Winter Solstice, new soil should be added onto ancestors' tombs, and *hanyi* (joss paper clothes) should be burnt to commemorate the deceased. The *Zhongyuan* Festival (Ghost Festival), which falls on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month, is a bit special, because apart from ancestors, sacrifices should also be offered to lonely ghosts to soothe their souls, so that the living won't be haunted.

Most of the festivals of the Han people fall on odd days on the lunar calendar. This is because ancient Chinese believed that odd days of odd months were inauspicious. Consequently, they held all sorts of shamanic rituals in a bid to drive away bad luck on these days. The fifth day of the fifth lunar month is



Solar Terms and Festivals



Solar Terms and Festivals

Busy Preparations in Layue (Twelfth Lunar Month)

Spring Festival

In China's rural areas, preparations and celebrations for the Spring Festival usually last more than a month. To ensure everything goes well, people start to prepare on the eighth day of the 12th lunar month. Since this month is also known as *Layue* (the month for hunting animals as sacrifices to gods), the custom is called "busy preparations in Layue."

On the eighth day of the 12th lunar month, it is customary for farmers in northern China to eat *Laba* porridge. The porridge is made of millet, husked rice, glutinous rice, coarse rice, beans, jujubes, chestnuts, peanuts, walnuts, dried fruit, and brown sugar. Originally, the custom was practiced to worship gods and pray for a bumper harvest. In later eras, the day was known as the enlightenment day of the Shakyamuni Buddha.

In villages, the porridge should also be given to draught animals, chickens and dogs, and be smeared onto fruit trees, courtyard walls and doors, so as to pray for a bumper harvest and a peaceful life in the coming year.

After the eighth day, people start to slaughter pigs for New Year dinners. Pork is stored in icehouses or made into cured meat or sausages. As the New Year is around the corner, people commence various preparations. Women make new clothes for their family members, make *chuanghua* (paper-cuts of flower patterns to decorate windows) and lanterns, steam New-Year cakes, and prepare deep-fried foods for offerings. Men clean the courtyards and houses, seal up cracks in windows, re-paint walls, and paste decorative artworks around the house, including pictures of door gods, *chunlian* (spring couplets) and *nianhua* (New-Year pictures). They also butcher chickens, scale fish and do Spring Festival shopping.

Young people who are good at singing and dancing gather at an open space in their village to practice performances, such as beating the drum and the gong, walking on stilts, doing the *Yangge* Dance, and performing lion and dragon dances. They give these performances during the Spring Festival as greetings to fellow villagers and as part of the festive *Shehuo* activities at the ensuing Lantern Festival.



Lanterns are hung up in every home in a small mountain village in Dongliao County, Jilin Province in northeast China on New Year's Eve. According to a Chinese myth, Jiang Ziya, a strategist and military mastermind who was key to establishing the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC – 221 BC), was entrusted with the task of deifying the worthy deceased and granting official titles to them. However, he forgot to keep a heavenly position to himself. Hence, rural families have the custom of setting up lantern poles to invite him to their homes so that he can repel evil spirits and bring good luck. (Photo taken in 1983)



It is a tradition for rural families in northeast China to use glutinous millet flour to make steamed buns and stuff them with sweetened bean paste. The food will be offered to guests or eaten by family members during the festival. (Photo taken in 1983)

Spring Festival

Worshipping the *Men Shen* (Door God) used to be among the five mandated worshipping rituals in ancient China. In the book *Shanhaijing* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) written during the Warring States Period (475 BC – 221 BC), there is a tale about a pair of gods, Shen Tu and Yu Lei, capturing evil spirits with reed strings under a large peach tree on Dushuo Mountain. The book also contains records of people hanging the pictures of the two gods on doors to ward off evil spirits. In the remains of murals made during the Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220), drawings of the two gods guarding doors can be seen. After the Three Kingdoms and the Jin Dynasty (265–420), door gods were portrayed more like generals, as the images of Buddhist warrior deities had had a strong influence on folk art. During the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, the invention and wide use of woodblock printing techniques helped extend the custom far and wide. In that period, door gods gradually got rid of the role of expelling evil spirits, with more emphasis on praying for good luck. These kinds of door gods are known as civil door gods. During the Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming dynasties, with the flourishing of literature and opera, more door-god figures emerged. In the classic novel *Journey to the West*, written during the Ming Dynasty, there is an account of how Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong, two generals of the Tang Dynasty, became enshrined as door gods. In the story, the two generals volunteered to guard the imperial palace's front gates to protect Emperor Taizong from the haunting of a ghost dragon. In later times, the two generals became the most popular martial door gods. With the passage of time, more subjects were included into the pictures of door gods. Besides the above-mentioned gods, there are other mythical figures, such as the three gods of happiness, prosperity and longevity, and Magu, a goddess of longevity. There are also happy scenes, such as a scholar parading after coming first in the highest imperial civil examination, and a mother and son riding on a qilin, a mythical creature that can bring good luck. Patterns associated with auspiciousness can also be found on pictures of door gods. Bright schemes are often used to make the pictures vibrant and vivid. Door-god pictures can be bought in New-Year picture workshops and stores selling ritual supplies such as joss sticks, candles and paper horses all across the country. They are indispensable folk artworks used to decorate homes, pray for good luck, and drive away evil spirits during the Spring Festival.

Door Gods Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong, woodblock color print from Wuqiang County, Hebei Province
Qin Qiong (also called Qin Shubao) and Yuchi Gong (also called Yuchi Jingde) were two generals who lived during the Tang Dynasty. According to folk tales, Emperor Taizong's palace was once haunted by a ghost dragon, making the emperor unable to sleep at night. Hearing the news, Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong volunteered to guard the palace's front gate. When night fell, they brandished their weapons and stood guard outside the palace, but the ghost dragon never showed up. The delighted emperor then told painters to make pictures of the two generals to paste them on the palace's front gates. No ghost appeared from that point on. Because of this story, ancient people were convinced that the two generals' pictures could keep away ghosts, so they pasted their pictures on their own doors. This practice gradually became a custom, one that is followed to this day. Wuqiang County is one of the production centers of woodblock New-Year pictures in northern China. The genre is famous for unrestrained lines that showcase local characteristics. The faces of the two generals are drawn in the style of traditional Chinese opera's facial makeup. Holding their weapons high, the two generals stand face to face in a magnificent pose. The exaggerated images and contrasting colors of the pictures produce very distinctive decorative effects.



Door Gods Shen Tu and Yu Lei, hand-decorated woodblock print from Yangliuqing Town, Tianjin City

According to historical records, in ancient times, Chinese people had the custom of painting Shen Tu and Yu Lei, together with a heavenly tiger and a golden rooster, on doors to fend off evil spirits. In Chinese myths, Shen Tu and Yu Lei were the leaders of all demons and monsters. Originally, they belonged to the tribe of Chiyou (a mythical king). But in the war between Chiyou and the Huangdi (Yellow Emperor, a legendary Chinese sovereign), they were captured and surrendered to the Yellow Emperor. After the war, Shen Tu and Yu Lei were made deities in charge of the netherworld. In folk art, they are often portrayed as guards of honor, wearing shiny armor and holding long clubs with one end shaped like a long golden melon. One of them has a pale face with a long beard, while the other has a full-bearded red face. The two generals look quite different from one another, but both have a solemn appearance. Their pictures, pasted on two door panels separately, are the most typical door-god pictures. Some of their pictures are decorated with auspicious clouds and other patterns associated with good luck. The color scheme is usually bright and colorful.

A Mouse Marrying off Its Daughter

Spring Festival

The mouse marrying off its daughter, also known as the wedding of the mouse bride, is a popular subject of New-Year pictures and paper-cuts. Artworks with this theme vividly portray the ridiculous wedding of two mice, which is as grand as a wedding in the human world. In the artwork, the mouse bride's sedan chair is followed by a procession of mouse attendants holding banners and lanterns, musicians performing with horns and drums, and servants carrying all kinds of ceremonial items. In some recent artworks depicting this subject, a large cat is lurking by the roadside waiting to feast. The subject is humorous and imaginative, and thus very popular with children.

The tale is told all over China. Many customs practiced during the Spring Festival are related to it. In Shanxi Province in northern China, it is said that from the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month, the day when all gods living on earth ascend to heaven, the mice begin to prepare for the wedding, which is scheduled to take place on the first day of the first lunar month. When Chinese New Year's Eve comes, parents use the tale to coax children to go to bed early, so as to wake up in time to see the wedding. In Taiwan Province in southeast China, the wedding is said to take place on the third day of the New Year. A children's song goes, "People throw big parties on the first day and the second day of the Lunar New Year, while the third day is for the mice to marry off their daughters." In Shandong Province in eastern China, the seventh day of the Lunar New Year, also known as the Day of Humans, is the day for both humans and mice to hold weddings. When night falls, grandparents tell kids to hide their shoes or else the mice will steal them to make a bridal sedan chair. In northern Shaanxi Province, it is said that the mouse marries off its daughter on the eighth day of the first lunar month. In the local version of the tale, when the mouse bride is sitting on her sedan chair, with mouse musicians performing cheerfully, her groom is suddenly attacked and eaten by a cat, because it stole some grain. The mouse bride takes the cat to court. At first, the judge feels sorry for the mice, because the wedding is their only chance for celebration for a whole year. Whatever the mouse groom has done, the judge says, it shouldn't have been eaten by the cat on that day. However, just as the judge is about to sentence the cat, he finds the mice gnawing on his tablecloth. The story ends with the angry judge shouting, "Mice will never change their nature. Death serves them right!"

The customs related to the tale differ widely in China. In different regions, people give different offerings to the mice, such as a bowl of cold rice meal, rice and salt, and sesame candies. They also practice different customs on the night in question. In some regions, people keep the light off and avoid touching kitchen knives. In others, people go to bed early to avoid

disturbing the mice's celebrations. In still others, people drum pan covers and shout out loudly to urge the mice to send away their daughters as quickly as possible. Whatever people do, their aim is to get the mice to leave their houses quickly. As a popular subject of folk art, the tale expresses people's strong desire to rid their homes of vermin in a humorous way.



The Wedding of Mice from Tantou Town, Hunan Province



1



1. The Mice of Bottomless Hole Marry off a Daughter, woodblock New-Year picture from Taohuawu, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province

2. The Wedding of Mice, woodblock New-Year picture from Linfen City, Shanxi Province

New-Year Pictures

Spring Festival



The Yangliuqing New-Year picture is a kind of woodblock print. It is named after the town where it is produced, Yangliuqing, which is a famous New-Year picture production center in northern China. Yangliuqing New-Year pictures have a long history, and the earliest ones date back to the late Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368) and the early Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The genre is famous for its large output and sophisticated craftsmanship. The New-Year pictures are partly printed and partly hand-decorated. Artists first carve lines on woodblocks and print them using different-colored inks. Then they fill the space between lines with colorful paints. This photo shows an artist in Yangliuqing working on a New-Year picture.

As far back as the Han Dynasty and long before that, people drew figures on door panels to ward off evil spirits and pray for a safe and stable life for their families at festivals. The door-god pictures were the earliest forms of New-Year pictures. After the Song Dynasty, New-Year customs became more diverse and rural and urban people's demand for New-Year pictures increased. Meanwhile, a woodblock printing technique became widely used. All this made New-Year pictures more popular. The content of New-Year pictures was also expanded. Apart from serving a shamanic purpose, with images used to drive away ghosts, they also portrayed the social activities of common people in order to satisfy people's desire for an auspicious atmosphere and artistic and aesthetic enjoyment. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, New-Year pictures gradually became an indispensable form of artwork for festive celebrations. As an old saying goes, "Rich or not, one has to buy a picture to celebrate the New Year." From princes, dukes and ministers in the court, down to peddlers and porters at the bottom of society, all people would buy New-Year pictures to decorate their homes when the Lunar New Year would come.

New-Year pictures come in different sizes and forms, including the *zhongtang* (large vertical scrolls), *dantiao* (a single vertical or horizontal scroll), *doufang* (square- or diamond-shaped poster), *sitiaoping* (four scrolls), *lianhuanhua* (story-related serial pictures), *kangweihua* (bedside picture) and *zhuoweihua* (tableside picture). They can be hung on the walls of living rooms or bedrooms, or off the sides of beds or windows. The pictures are eye-catching with bright colors.

Most New-Year pictures are made by folk artists, who are familiar with common people's lives and emotions. Their works demonstrate distinctive local features. The pictures made in Yangliuqing Town, Tianjin City in northern China are known for their exquisite lines and elegant color schemes. While the main shapes are printed using color plates, the details of faces in the pictures are painted by hand. On Taohuawu Street in Suzhou, a city in eastern China's Jiangsu Province, folk artists like to use a watercolor woodblock printing technique to portray amusing subjects with bright and delicate color schemes. In Wuqiang County in northern China's Hebei Province and Zhuxian Town in central China's Henan Province, folk artists often use large color plates to print New-Year pictures. Their works feature unrestrained lines, which reflect the straightforward and bold character of people in northern China. In Mianzhu City, southwest China's Sichuan Province, New-Year pictures combine watercolor woodblock printing with freehand painting. The gay colors and free lines make the pictures vivid and vibrant. The subjects of New-Year pictures are also diverse. Some depict historical stories in a series of pictures, while others show scenes of local operas and look like illustrations fit for a novel.

With auspicious subjects and bright color schemes, New-Year pictures suit people's festive mood and reflect their strong desire for a happy life. They remain popular among Chinese people

to this day.



The tools used to make woodblock New-Year pictures

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Goldfish and Double Blessings from Yangliuqing Town, Tianjin City. A chubby baby holding a big goldfish with lotuses in the background symbolizes superabundance and many sons, hence the title "double blessings." The picture is usually pasted on a bedroom wall.



Endless Happiness and Longevity from Linfen City, Shanxi Province

This picture is usually pasted on a cupboard to keep away dust. Melons and fruits commonly symbolize good luck and happiness in New-Year pictures. "Fingered citron" and "good luck" are homophones in Chinese; peaches are usually associated with longevity; melons and pomegranates are symbols of fertility. Because of these auspicious elements, this picture is named *Endless Happiness and Longevity*.



1



2

1. A Bull, paper-cut from Yan'an City, northern Shaanxi Province

2. Deer and Cranes in Spring, paper-cut from Qingyang City, Gansu Province

3. Qilin Sending a Boy, window paper-cut from Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province

4. A Lion with a Flat Head, wall paper-cut from Zhenyuan County, Gansu Province

5. Monkeys Born from a Treasure Jar, wall paper-cut from Lingbao City, Henan Province



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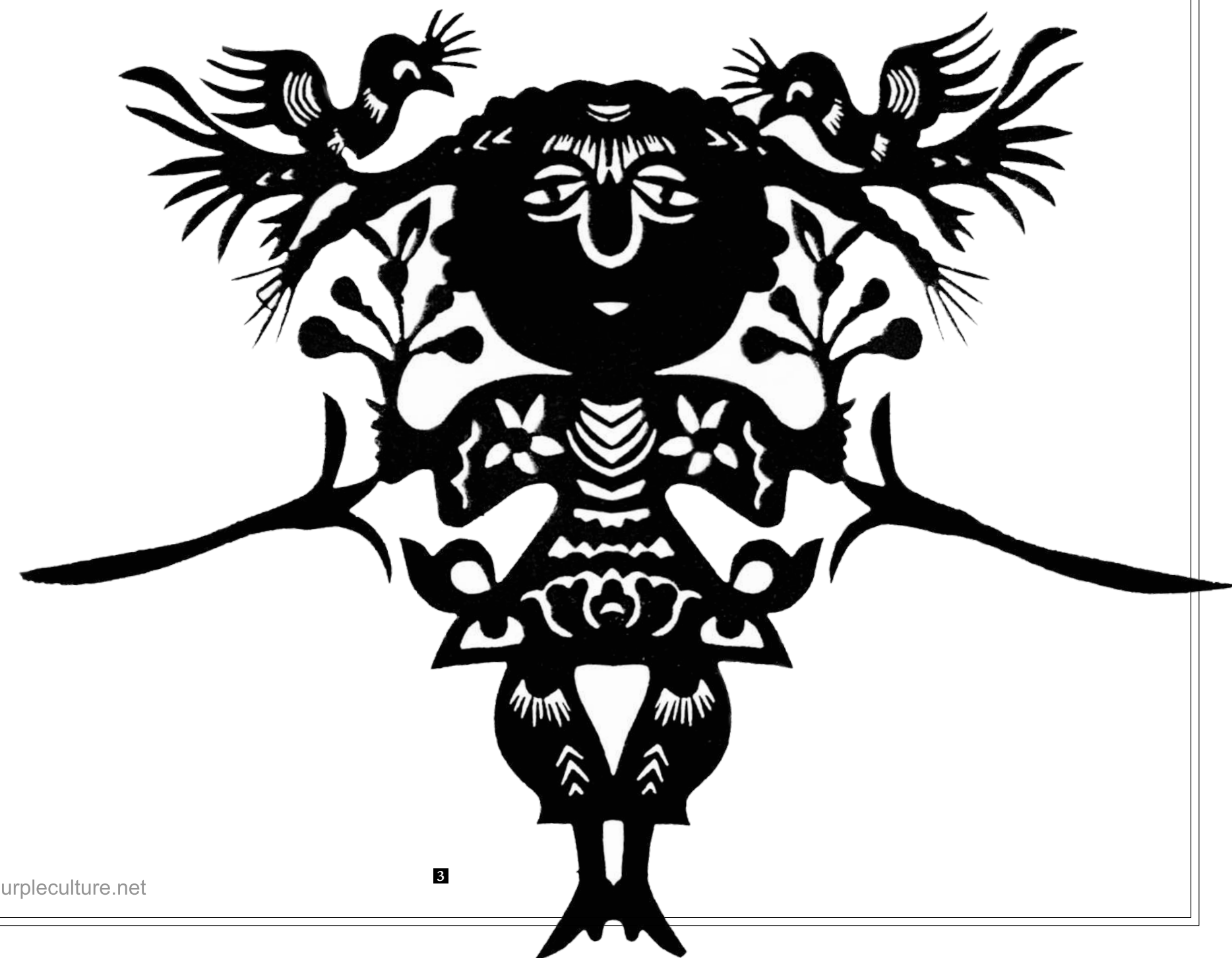


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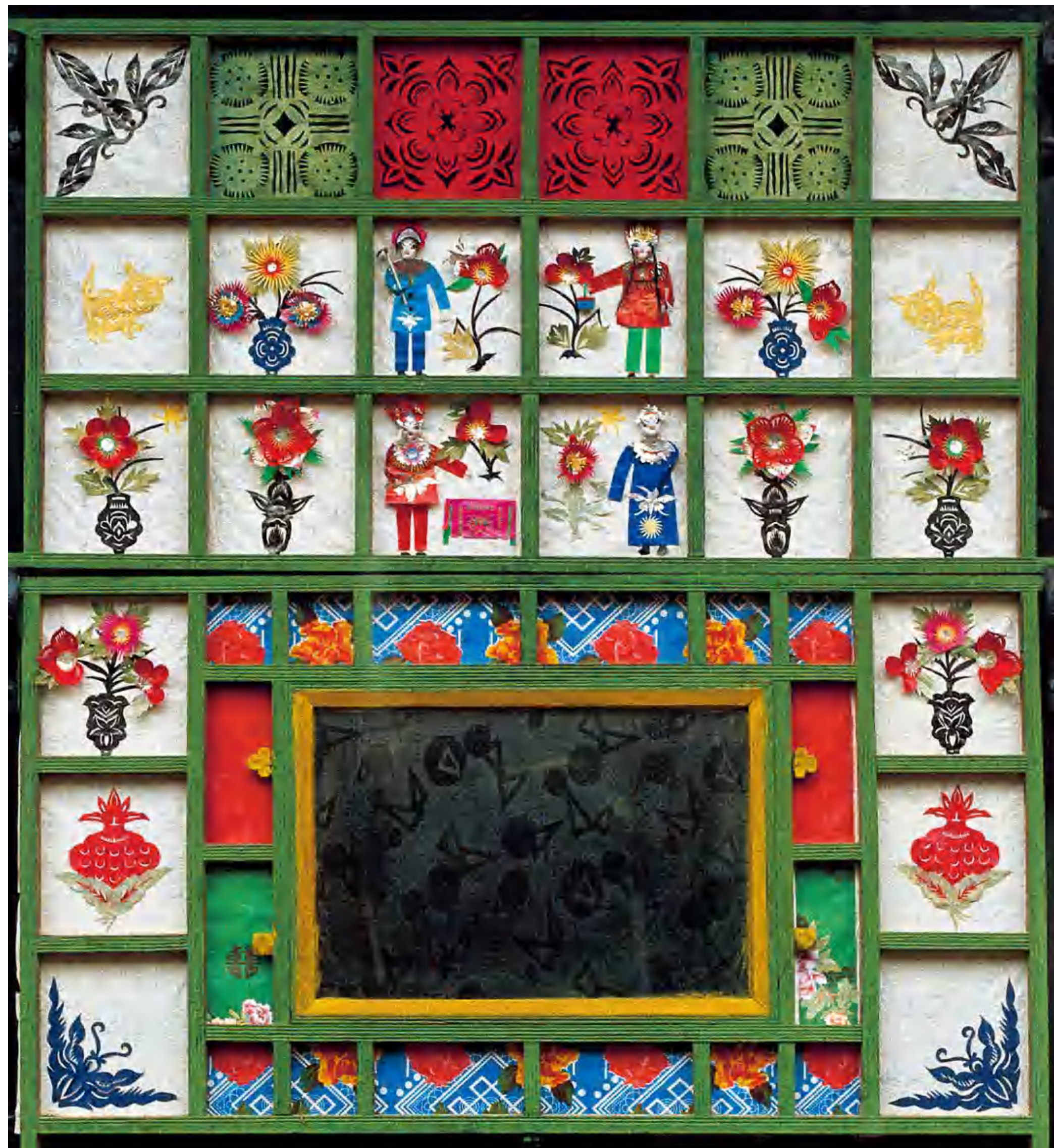
1. Rendezvous of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, window paper-cut of opera figures from Chaozhou City, Guangdong Province

2. A General on a Horse, paper-cut from Henan Province

3. Baby with Two Braids, wall paper-cut from Fuyang City, Anhui Province



3



Embossed window paper-cut from Heyang County, Shaanxi Province. Embossed window paper-cuts are cut-outs with raised patterns. They are made by paper folding, color painting and paper-cutting techniques. Apart from color paper, materials like cloth, silk and gauze are also used. Being colorful and three-dimensional, embossed window paper-cuts are mainly used as ornaments in rooms during the Spring Festival or in a bride's bedroom. Opera stories and flowers are common subjects of the artwork.

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Emperor of the Song Dynasty

Second son of the Yang family, a family of generals loyal to the Song Dynasty

Pan Hong, the traitor of the Song Dynasty who conspired with King Tianqing

Yang Jiye, father of the Yang family



Han Chang, Commanding General of the Liao Army

A Battle on the Golden Beach, window paper-cut of opera figures from Yuxian County, Hebei Province. The paper-cuts of Yuxian County are made using knives. Artists first engrave exquisite patterns on paper and then dye the cut-outs with different colors. This kind of paper-cut often appears in sets, each containing eight or 12 pieces. The subjects include figures from operas and auspicious flowers and birds. A famous folk artist of this genre is Wang Laoshang (1890-1951), who was excellent at illustrating opera stories. *A Battle on the Golden Beach* comes from the opera *Generals of the Yang Family*, which is set in the Song Dynasty. King Tianqing of the Liao Dynasty invites the Song emperor to a banquet with the intention of killing the emperor there. Being aware of the scheme, the eldest son of the Yang family dresses as the emperor to attend the banquet with the other generals of his family. They kill King Tianqing on site, but the fight also takes a heavy toll on them. This set of 12 paper-cuts vividly shows the figures of the two countries on stage.

Eighth son of the Yang family



Ascending gong and drum performance
in Donglei Village, Heyang County,
Shaanxi Province





Dou'e, heroine in the play *Snow in Midsummer*, shadow play of the Eastern School of Beijing

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1

1. Wuchou (acrobatic clown), shadow play puppet from Laoting County, Hebei Province



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2. General Yue Fei in the play *Zhuxian Town*, shadow play puppet from northeast China's Liaoning Province



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3. Zhao Gao, a character in *Yuzhoufeng the Sword*, shadow play puppet from the Western School of Beijing

4. Actress performing acrobatic fighting, shadow play puppet from Gaiping County, Liaoning Province



3

5. Wenchou (civil clown), shadow play puppet from the Western school of Beijing



5



Dragon boat racing held in Shunde District, Foshan City, Guangdong Province during the Dragon Boat Festival. Dragon boat racing here enjoys an age-old reputation for its grand spectacle. Paddlers here are all highly skillful and have won many championships in national and international dragon boat racing events. In 2005, Shunde won the title of the "Home of the Dragon Boat" in China. Dragon boats here are divided into two types. One is the "floating dragon," also called "dragon boat", which is large in size and used mostly for performance and display. They are usually splendidly decorated with numerous ceremonial umbrellas and flags. The other is the "racing dragon," also called the "dragon yacht" or the "battle dragon boat," which is smaller in size and focuses on speed racing. (Photo taken in the 1980s)



Zhongyuan Festival (Ghost Festival)



The *Zhongyuan* Festival, better known as the Ghost Festival, falls on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month and is often referred to as “Mid-Seventh Month.” It was originally observed for religious purposes. It is known as the *Zhongyuan* Festival by Daoists. It is said that the Earthly Official descends to the human world on this day to determine good and evil, so Daoist temples set up altars for rites to pray for blessings. The festival is known as the *Yulanpen* Festival by Buddhists, when people pay respects to their ancestors and expiate the sins of the dead. According to old customs, on this day people would ask Buddhist monks or Daoist priests to perform a *Shuilu Daochang* (Water and Land Service) which involves chanting scriptures and practicing ceremonial food offerings to expiate the sins of the deceased. Altars would be set up in front of doors with abundant food prepared for the solitary ghosts. Another important custom is floating a lantern on the river. People burn paper boats by the riverbank and float lanterns on the river, indicating that the road to salvation delivers all living creatures from worldly sufferings. The lanterns are usually lotus-shaped and made of red and green paper.

The custom of floating lanterns on the river is observed on the 15th day of the sixth lunar month in Chayu Village, Heyang County, Shaanxi Province. On this day, every household presents a tray of offerings and flower-shaped buns by the riverside. Led by the elderly people, villagers burn incense and pay respects to the God of the Yellow River. The first three lanterns set afloat are intended for those who died from injustices or were drowned. People hope that the lost ghosts will flow away with the lanterns and stop wandering around and haunting villagers. Those people praying for fertility rush to catch the lanterns on the river from the fourth one onwards. After they catch lanterns, they put out the candlelight and take them home in bamboo baskets. They kowtow in front of the shrine of the Land God in their courtyards, asking the god to accept the lanterns. Then, the lanterns are placed on the cupboards of the heatable brick beds in the bedrooms of the couples who wish to have babies. The lanterns are regarded as the kindling of new lives.



Zhongqiu (Mid-autumn) Festival

The *Zhongqiu* Festival, known as the Mid-autumn Festival, falls on the 15th day of the eighth month on the lunar calendar. In ancient times, people worshipped the moon and offered sacrifices to it. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the ritual evolved into a custom of enjoying the moonlight. As the full moon is also associated with reunion and good luck, the Mid-autumn Festival is also known as an occasion for family reunion.

On the night of the Mid-autumn Festival, all family members gather together. An altar is placed in the courtyard, with moon cakes and fruit displayed on top of it. When the bright moon is in the sky, people burn pagoda-like incense to pay homage to the moon. In olden days, the ceremony was performed by women only, as there was a saying that it was inappropriate for men to worship the moon, or for women to worship the God of the Kitchen. On the incense altar, a picture of Candraprabha (the Moonlight Bodhisattva), moon palace and the Jade Rabbit pounding the elixir of life in a mortar is enshrined and worshipped. According to legend, Chang'e, the goddess of the moon, drank the elixir of life and ascended to the moon, where a rabbit kept her company and continually ground the elixir of life for her. The integration of the legend and festive customs adds to the happy and harmonious atmosphere of the Mid-autumn Festival.

On the Mid-autumn Festival, it's customary for families in northern China to display a clay sculpture of the Rabbit God. Traditionally, the sculpture was in a standing position with paws held together as if grinding the elixir of life. More recently, under the influence of traditional operas, the Rabbit God became a marshal wearing armor and a colorful gown, riding a lion or a tiger. The cleft lip and the long ears of the rabbit pointing to the sky make the sculpture very funny and adorable, showcasing the humor of folk art.

After worshipping the moon, the picture of Candraprabha is burnt. Then, people sit down to enjoy family bliss, watch the moonlight and enjoy delicious food, such as moon cakes, fruit, and osmanthus wine.

The moon cake is a traditional food of the Mid-autumn Festival. The custom of eating moon cakes started during the Tang Dynasty and became popular in the Song Dynasty. The cake resembles the full moon in the sky. It symbolizes the good wish that "flowers in blossom and the moon at its roundest bring a long and affluent life to each and every one." There are hundreds of kinds of moon cakes. Their tastes differ distinctly as their ingredients and preparation methods vary from place to place.

To celebrate the Mid-autumn Festival, recreational activities are held all over China. In Foshan City in south China's Guangdong Province, local people hold a large fair for several days, at which they watch folk music performances and dances, participate in contests, and enjoy a show of various folk handicrafts. In China's Hong Kong, people perform a grand fire dragon dance. In Haining City, east China's Zhejiang Province, it's customary for people to watch the magnificent tidal bore of the Qiantang River.

In some localities, there used to be a custom of stealing a melon or giving a melon as a gift on the night of the Mid-autumn Festival. By nightfall, those people who had no children after marriage would go to others' fields to pick a melon. Sometimes, the relatives or friends of the childless couple would secretly send a melon to the couple at night. Cutting a melon and getting the seeds inside symbolized having many children. Today, childless families take a more scientific approach to fertility by going to hospitals for treatment if they want to conceive, so the custom is seldom seen.





Villagers living on the edge of the Minqin Desert in Gansu Province are making moon cakes. They use local ingredients and seasonings, such as cumin, to prepare moon cakes of various sizes. The biggest ones can weigh about five kilograms. The moon cake surface is often decorated with colorful patterns, so that the cakes can be used as festival gifts and sacrificial offerings to the moon.

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Moon cake molds with the pattern of the Guanghan Palace, home of Goddess Chang'e on the moon



A moon cake

A time-honored moon cake shop's sign





II. Rites of Passage

Rites of passage refer to ceremonial activities for important events in a person's life such as birth, coming of age, marriage, childbirth, and death. Major rites of passage in China are performed to celebrate all these important occasions. Annual birthday celebrations and birthdays at milestone ages are also considered rites of passage.

