

Research on the Contemporary Regional Customs of Qixi Festival

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Abstract: Qixi, as one of the traditional Chinese Festivals, has a time-honored history, stretching for thousands of years. Customs to celebrate it vary in different places and groups, integrating into diverse areas of social life. Therefore, to know and protect the regional customs of Qixi will help facilitate cultural exchanges and integration, strengthen cohesion of the Chinese nation, and build a harmonious community.

1. Introduction

“Autumn has chilled the painted screen in candlelight; A palace maid uses a fan to catch fireflies. The steps seem steeped in water when cold grows the night; She sits to watch two stars in love meet in the skies.” *An Autumn Night* written by Du Mu of the Tang Dynasty depicts a lonely palace maid watching “two stars” in the skies on a chilling autumn night. The “two stars” refer to a legendary couple Niulang (the Cowherd) and Zhinv (the Weaver Maid), who could only meet each other on the Magpie Bridge once a year on the day of Qixi. Its origin can be dated back to a folk tale handed down through generations for more than 2,000 years. People usually sit outdoors to look up at the sky, observing the two stars on both sides of the Milky Way (or Heavenly River) and hoping to see their annual meeting.

2. Regional Customs to Celebrate Qixi

The customs to celebrate Qixi were formed gradually in history and evolve naturally in social life. Nowadays when it comes to Qixi, different regions have different ways to celebrate it, each with great delight.

2.1 Customs in Shandong Province

In east and southeast Shandong areas, there’s a saying that few magpies can be seen on Qixi, since they all fly to the sky to help build the bridge. If it happens to rain, people in Zhucheng, Tengzhou and Zoucheng call it the “rain of lovesickness” or “tears of lovesickness”, believing Niulang and Zhinv are crying in the sky. Besides, cowboys will pick wild flowers to decorate the horns of their cows because Qixi is deemed as the birthday of cows [1-2].

Among various festive foods of Qixi, *qiaoguo* is the most popular one. It is made into all sorts of

patterns and shapes with the main ingredients of oil, flour, sugar and honey. Generally, on the first day of July, people also soak some grains in water for germination. The sprouts are cut off on Qixi to make *qiaoya* soup for children, implying cleverness. In some places of Shandong Province, like Juancheng, Caoxian and Pingyuan, an interesting custom is prevalent: having a special meal for begging, which needs seven girls to make dumplings together. They put a copper coin, a thimble and a red jujube into three dumplings respectively. It is said that the one who gets the coin inside the dumpling will be bestowed good fortune. The one who gets the thimble is going to be clever and deft while the one who gets the jujube will get married at a young age because “jujube”, “*zao*” in Chinese, is a homophone for “early”.

2.2 Customs in Zhejiang Province

In places like Hangzhou, Ningbo and Wenzhou of Zhejiang Province, people display *qiaoguo*, lotus seedpod, lotus root, and red water chestnuts in the courtyard to worship Zhinv on the night of Qixi. In the countryside of Shaoxing, there will be many girls secretly hiding under the lush pumpkin shed at dead of night. If the girl can hear the whispering of Niulang and Zhinv, then she will get enduring love. With the hope that Niulang and Zhinv can live a happy life, people in Jinhua area will slaughter a rooster on the double seventh day which means the couple will never separate if there's no rooster crowing in the morning.

In terms of begging for beauty, the main activities of traditional Qixi customs include dyeing nails with impatienses, washing hair with leaves and bathing with dewdrops[3]. Today, it is also a special custom for women to pick up and decoct cypress leaves as well as peach branches to wash hair on this day. People believe that drawing water from the spring or river is like taking water from the Heavenly River which has the holy power of cleansing. Hence, women who wash their hair with holy water on this day are believed to get blessing from Zhinv. Furthermore, dew also plays an interesting role during the festival. People in Zhejiang Province believe that dewdrops are the tears of Niulang and Zhinv, so they collect dewdrops to wash eyes and hands, considering that this makes them sharp-eyed and quick-handed. In traditional Chinese medicine, dew can be used to decoct the Chinese herbs, thus enhancing the curative effect. These festival activities can help people get close to nature, feel the “Unity of Nature and Man”, and lay more emphasis on establishing a harmonious relationship between nature and themselves[4].

2.3 Customs in Guangdong Province

The begging activities in Guangdong are of its own features. Before the arrival of the festival, girls will prepare colored paper, ricepaper pith and strings to make various kinds of small handiworks. From the night of the sixth day to that of the seventh day of the seventh month, girls wearing new clothes and new jewelry will burn the incense, light the candles and bow down to the stars to worship Zhinv. After the ritual, girls compete to thread the needle against the shadow of light. If one can thread seven needle holes continuously, then she is thought to have a pair of deft hands. Otherwise, if the girl cannot do that at a stretch, she loses the game. After Qixi, girls will give out their small crafts and toys to each other as a token of friendship. People also put grains and mung beans in water to make sprouts which later serve as sacrifice at the worshipping ceremony.

Since Qixi is “daughter's” day, so it's natural to have customs related to beauty. Dyeing fingernails, prevalent in Guangdong Province, as well as Guizhou and Sichuan, is exactly such an activity for young women in search of beauty. Zhou Mi of the Southern Song Dynasty recorded the method of dyeing red nails in his book. Girls used mashed red impatienses which were mixed with alum to dye their fingers and then wrapped them with cloth strips overnight for three or four times, so the color would turn into dark red and wouldn't fade away easily [5].

2.4 Customs in Guangxi Province

In places like Baise and Jingxi, Guangxi Province, it is said that on the morning of July 7, the seven celestial princesses will come down to earth and bathe in the river, thus leaving the river covered with celestial spirit. So the locals believe that whoever drinks the river water will get lucky in love and get rid of diseases. This custom has been handed down from mouth to mouth for generations. At dawn on the morning of Qixi, people will fall over each other to fetch water at the riverside, saving it in a bottle or pouring it into an urn for future use. The grand occasion is like a huge water carnival carrying people's expectation that the "double seventh water" will help exorcise evil, cure diseases and promote their longevity.

2.5 Customs in Fujian Province

In Fujian Province, the Qixi Festival is considered as the time for Zhinv to enjoy and taste the fruits so that she can bless good harvest in the coming year. The offerings include tea, wine, fresh fruits, five kinds of nuts (longan, red dates, hazelnuts, peanuts, and melon seeds), flowers and an incense burner. Usually, after fasting and bathing, people take turns to burn incense and pray silently before the altar. Women beg not only for skills, but also for children, longevity, beauty and love. Then people chat over a cup of tea while engaging in the begging activities.

In Southern Fujian Province, the local people address Zhinv as "*Qiniangma*", the Goddess who keeps children safe and sound. On Qixi, they always hold a ceremony to worship Zhinv and eat meat, pomegranates, boiled eggs and brown sugar sticky rice to ward off insects and prevent plague. In Shaxian County, every year children who are going to school will receive a *tangta* (sugar tower) to spend a special Qixi, which is called "*Zuo Qixi*" by the Shaxian people. With the sugar tower, children in this county will sweetly begin their schooling.

2.6 Customs of Ethnic Groups

For long stretches of history of China, the diverse cultures of the 56 ethnic groups have continuously exchanged and blended, forming the pluralistic and unified Chinese nation. Though originated from and celebrated mainly by the Han nationality, the Qixi Festival becomes more and more popular among the ethnic minorities and is celebrated with different unique styles on their own.

Guangdong Lianshan Zhuang and Yao Autonomous County is home to the Zhuang ethnic minority with a population of nearly 50,000. On the day of Qixi, the Zhuang people will neither invite guests nor cook dishes, instead, they dive into the river for fun. Water symbolizes happiness and joy for the Zhuang people, bringing them luck and felicity. On the bridge, beautiful Zhuang girls throw *xiuqiu*, an embroidered ball made of strips of silk, to the center of the river. Dozens of Zhuang boys swim from all directions, hoping to grab the embroidered ball which represents love from the girls. In addition, dance performances on the water and folk song duets are also included during the festival with typical Zhuang characteristics. Young men and women sing songs by the river and make friends through songs. The intoxicating laughter and boundless happiness constitute a river scene of joy shared by all.

Li ethnic minority, residing in Baoting, Hainan Province, celebrate Qixi in their own way. Li people regard water with reverence, so water worship activities are held annually on the double seventh. On the morning of Qixi, people get up early to greet the "holy water" fetched from the hot spring. They sprinkle the "holy water" on the body and pray for good luck and health. Then with pigs and sheep slaughtered and a banquet laid out, people get together to drink and eat, accompanied by songs and bamboo pole dance.

3. Conclusion

To protect traditional festivals will help enhance harmony of personal relationship, promote harmony between man and nature, and accelerate harmony between heart and spirit, thus creating a strong drive for the harmony of society. Qixi Festival, with its rich and varied customs in different regions, is one of China's unique cultural resources. The loyal love, beautiful ideal and simple virtue manifested by Qixi are still of contemporary significance and have great vitality in establishing a modern society. Besides, it generates a huge force for the Chinese to foster confidence and pride in their culture, which is conducive to consolidating unity of different groups and strengthening cohesion of the Chinese nation.

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