

Despite the decline in the observance of traditional Chinese cultural holidays, the Comrade still wants his foreign friends to be able to answer redundant and boring questions about them. Chinese kids only get off from school for nine officially recognized 国家节日 guó jia jì rì (National holidays) every year, but there are many more 民间 mǐn jiān (folk) holidays that are taken with varying degrees of seriousness throughout China. China is an agricultural society (hence all the peasants), so it should be no surprise that most traditional Chinese folk holidays revolve around the 农历 nóng lì (Lunar Calendar). Many of these holidays had been observed annually for thousands of years until they mysteriously and suddenly ceased to be observed about 30 years ago. Hey, what a coincidence! That was right around the time of the 文化大革命 Wén huà dà gé mìng (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution).

Despite the decline in the observance of traditional Chinese cultural holidays, the Comrade still wants his foreign friends to be able to answer redundant and boring questions about them. After all, 99 percent of the conversations you have with Chinese people are like a game of Trivial Pursuit, and what could be more trivial than the topic of traditional Chinese holidays?

春节 Chūn jié (Spring Festival)

If you don't know that 春节 Chūn jié is the Chinese New

Year, then you may also be surprised to learn that the Chinese flag is red with yellow stars and the national language is Mandarin. Now why not take a walk outside your garden villa home or five-star hotel room and have a look at China with your own two round eyes instead of through a CNN camera lens?

During Spring Festival, Chinese families get together to eat 年夜饭 nián yè fàn (the mandatory New Year's Eve meal). The meal consists of 饺子 jiǎo zi (dumplings) in the North and 黏糕 nián gāo (an indescribable sticky substance) in the South. Each family must eat a 全鱼 quán yú (whole fish) because the word 渔 yú (fish) sounds like 余 yú (surplus), as in the expression 年年有余 nián nián yǒu yú (here is a surplus year after year), which was the most-favored slogan of the 大跃进 Dà Yuè Jìn (Great Leap Forward).

Another tradition is for 长辈 zhǎng bèi (older generations) to give gifts of money to 晚辈 wǎn bèi (younger generations). This money is called 压岁钱 yā suì qián (lit. "money to hold back the years"). The word 岁 suì (year of age) sounds like 祟 suì (evil spirit or ghost), implying that the money is also supposed to protect children from evil. Actually the money is a cleverly disguised form of investment, since the child is expected to fulfill his or her filial obligations and return the money to the parents when they're old and feeble.

元宵节 Yuán Xiāo Jié

灯节 Dēng jié or Lantern Festival

The name 元宵 yuán xiāo consists of 元 yuán, meaning the first month of the Lunar Calendar, and 宵 xiāo, from the word 元宵 yè xiāo meaning "night." The chief activity on 元宵节 yuán xiāo jié is to eat 汤圆儿 tāng yuán'r, which are sticky balls made of (guess what?) rice and filled with bean paste.

As for the 来源 lái yuán (origins) of the holiday, there are many ludicrous stories. The most plausible one contends that a 宫官儿 gōng guān'r (servant in the 皇宫 Huáng gōng, or Imperial Palace) cooked up a batch of 汤圆儿 tāng yuán'r that were so 可口美味 kǒu kǒu měi wèi (delicious) that the Emperor decided to commemorate her culinary skills by declaring a holiday.

People (such as Emperors) had nothing better to do than make or buy paper lanterns and wander the streets with them. Hence the holiday is also called 灯节 Dēng Jié (Lantern Festival).

清明节 Qīng Míng Jié or

扫墓节 Sǎo Mù Jié (Grave Sweeping Day)

A line from an ancient Chinese poem reads 清明时节 qīng míng shí jié yǔ fēn fēn ("during Qingming Festival it rains cats and dogs"). By April 5, the rain has finally abated long enough for dust to settle on the graves. That's when everyone from the 天子 tiān zǐ (lit. "Son of Heaven," or Emperor) to the 庶民 shù mín (destitute masses) must come out and 扫墓 sǎo mù (sweep the graves of their ancestors).

泼水节 PǎShuǐ Jié (Water-Splashing Festival)

This festival, which occurs between April 13-15, is popular in 云南省 Yúnnán Shěng (Yunnan Province). The idea is to wash away the dirt, sorrow and demons of the old year and ring in the New Year. People resume throwing garbage in the street the following day.

端午节 Duan Wǔ Jié

During the 明 Míng and 清 Qīng Dynasties, 端午节 Duan Wǔ Jié was called 女儿节 Nǚèr Jié (Daughter's Day) and 五月 Wǔ Yuè Jié (May Day). There are many preposterous tales as to the origins of the holiday. The story that most Chinese buy into is about a poet named 屈原 Qū Yuán who killed himself during the 战国 Zhàn Guó (Warring States period). He jumped in the lake on May 5, the supposed day the 楚 Chǔ Dynasty got overthrown by the 秦 Qín Dynasty. Now, every May 5, Chinese people eat 粽子 zòng zi to commemorate the suicidal minstrel. 粽子 zòng zi consist of (what else?) rice and (guess what?) pork wrapped in a leaf and boiled.

中元节 Zhōng Yuán Jié

Almost as silly as 鬼节 Guǐ Jié (Halloween) in the West, 中元节 Zhōng Yuán Jié is also known as 鬼月 Guǐ Yuè ("Ghost Month") and has its roots in religion. According to 迷信 mí xìn (superstition), between late August and late September ghosts from hell are supposed to walk the earth making it dangerous to travel, go swimming, get married or move to a new house.

中秋节 Zhōng Qiū Jié (also called 团圆节 Tuán Yuán Jié)

This Holiday, like line-cutting, has 2,000 years of history in China. The 15th day of the eighth month of the Lunar Calendar marks the middle of Spring. The traditional food of 中秋节 Zhōng Qiū Jié is 月饼 yuè bǐng (mooncakes). Give them as gifts or use them as bricks to build a house. 祭月 jì yuè (worshipping the moon) is also customary, as is 祭奠 jì diàn (ceremonially sacrificing fruit to the moon). Women also stand in the moonlight in the desperate and deluded hope that they'll get pregnant. Lycanthropes especially enjoy this holiday.

Now you're ready to get out there and astound proletariats old and young with your extensive knowledge of insignificant facts about obscure Chinese holidays. Happy 端午节 Duan Wǔ Jié!