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Analysis of Cultural Differences Between Chinese and Japanese Festivals

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Abstract: Many traditional Japanese festivals originated in ancient China. During the Nara and Heian periods, Japan extensively absorbed Tang Dynasty culture, adopting Chinese characters, Buddhism, and the lunar calendar, alongside numerous seasonal festivities that took root and evolved locally. Throughout this assimilation, Japan integrated indigenous beliefs-notably Shinto-and societal needs, adapting these traditions into a distinctive festival culture that reflects both Chinese influence and unique Japanese characteristics. Consequently, despite sharing common origins, the festival cultures of the two countries exhibit significant divergences. Focusing on representative celebrations such as the New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival, this paper examines the cultural differences and transformations between Chinese and Japanese traditional festivals.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese and Japanese festivals; New Year; Dragon Boat Festival; Common origins; Cultural differences

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1. Introduction

Major traditional festivals in China—such as the Spring Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Dragon Boat Festival—are observed according to the lunar calendar. In contrast, with the exception of certain customs like Obon that remain tied to the lunar cycle in specific regions, most statutory holidays in Japan follow the solar (Gregorian) calendar. Furthermore, while holidays like China's Spring Festival and National Day are characterized by extended statutory breaks and nationwide mass travel, Japanese holidays rely largely on the "Happy Monday" system to create recurring three-day weekends, with Golden Week in late April and early May serving as the primary extended vacation. Beyond these calendar and structural distinctions, substantial differences define Chinese and Japanese festival cultures. The following sections examine these cultural divergences in detail, focusing on representative celebrations such as the New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival.

2. The New Year

The Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) begins on the first day of the first lunar month. Since ancient times, Chinese households have observed customs to dispel evil spirits and invoke prosperity, such as pasting red couplets, displaying the character Fu (signifying fortune), putting up images of door gods, and hanging red lanterns. In contrast, the modern Japanese New Year is celebrated on January 1st of the Gregorian calendar. Rather than hanging couplets, Japanese families place pine and bamboo arrangements (kadomatsu) at their entrances to welcome the New Year deity (Toshigami), alongside sacred straw ropes (shimenawa) hung across doorways to demarcate sacred space and ward off malevolent spirits.

Interpersonal traditions also diverge significantly. Chinese people routinely visit relatives and friends for New Year greetings (bainian), a custom traditionally accompanied by firecrackers and elders distributing red envelopes (hongbao) containing money to the younger generation. In Japan, while personal visits occur, the predominant practices involve visiting shrines or temples (hatsumode) and exchanging written New Year postcards (nengajo), reflecting a structured social etiquette extending into professional networks.

Dietary traditions reflect these distinct cultural focuses. China emphasizes the New Year's Eve reunion feast (nian yefan), an exuberant and lively banquet. In Japan, New Year's Eve is traditionally marked by eating buckwheat noodles (toshikoshi soba) to symbolize longevity, followed on New Year's Day by osechi-ryori (assorted multi-tiered traditional dishes) and ozoni (rice cake soup).

At the core of these celebrations, the Chinese New Year is primarily defined by the pursuit of good fortune, bustling communal festivity (renao), and blood-tie kinship reunions [1]. Conversely, Japanese New Year practices blend Shinto purification rituals with Buddhist traditions, prioritizing ritual purity, quiet reflection, and spiritual reverence [2]. Consequently, while Chinese celebrations are visibly communal and vibrant, Japanese cities often become quiet and tranquil, with celebrations focusing on subdued family rituals and formal workplace relationships.

3. The Dragon Boat Festival (Tango no Sekku)

China's Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu) falls on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. Commemorating the ancient patriotic poet Qu Yuan, the occasion is centered on dragon boat racing and eating zongzi (glutinous rice dumplings), symbolizing patriotism, sacrifice, and the dispelling of malevolent spirits. Dragon boat racing serves as a highly communal and competitive aquatic event, while households traditionally hang mugwort and calamus outside their doors to ward off disease and pestilence [3]. Regional variations in zongzi reflect China's broad culinary diversity: southern recipes predominantly feature savory fillings such as pork belly and salted egg yolk, whereas northern variants tend to be sweet, incorporating red dates or red bean paste.

In Japan, the festival—traditionally called Tango no Sekku—was fixed to May 5 of the Gregorian calendar and designated after World War II as Children's Day (Kodomo no Hi), marking the final statutory holiday of Golden Week. While sharing historical origins with Duanwu, the festival in Japan diverged significantly, shifting from an exorcism ritual to a celebration dedicated to the health, strength, and success of young boys. Families display miniature samurai armor, helmets, or warrior dolls (musha ningyo) indoors, and fly carp-shaped windsocks (koinobori) outside—a practice derived from the Chinese legend of the carp leaping over the Dragon Gate.

Dietary customs also transformed in Japan. While chimaki (conical rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo or wild rice leaves) are consumed, particularly in western Japan, another distinctive delicacy is kashiwamochi—rice cakes filled with sweet bean paste or miso paste and wrapped in oak leaves, which

symbolize family prosperity and lineage continuity, as oak leaves do not fall until new shoots emerge.

4. The Qixi Festival (Tanabata)

In China, the Qixi Festival falls on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. Historically known as the Qiqiao Festival (Festival to Plead for Skills) or Daughters' Day, it was originally an observance exclusively for women. The core ritual, qiqiao, involved young women praying to the Weaver Girl star (Zhinü) for dexterity in needlework and domestic crafts, famously symbolized during the Han Dynasty by threading needles under the moonlight. Over the Tang and Song dynasties, the festival absorbed the romantic mythology of the Cowherd (Niulang) and the Weaver Girl, shifting its focus toward prayers for a happy marriage and inspiring extensive literati poetry on mortal separation and reunion. In contemporary times, Qixi has largely been reinterpreted as the "Chinese Valentine's Day."

In contrast, Japan's Tanabata is primarily observed on July 7 of the Gregorian calendar (or in August according to the delayed "one-month-later" calendar in certain regions). Rather than evolving into a romantic holiday, the Japanese adaptation emphasizes diligence, craftsmanship, and personal aspirations [4]. Originating from the moral that the celestial couple must work diligently to earn their annual reunion, the modern celebration centers on individuals writing wishes on colorful paper strips (tanzaku) and hanging them on bamboo branches. These displays are often accompanied by other symbolic paper crafts, such as origami cranes (senbazuru) representing longevity and the warding off of misfortune. Notably, the Sendai Tanabata Matsuri, held annually from August 6 to 8, exemplifies this communal tradition through grand, elaborate paper streamers, vibrant street performances, and festive ceremonies.

5. Profession-related commemorative days

To raise public awareness of the contributions and sacrifices made by specific sectors, and to foster social recognition for their workers, China has established several official, industry-specific commemorative days [5]. These include Teachers' Day, Nurses' Day, Journalists' Day, Chinese Medical Doctors' Day, the Chinese Farmers' Harvest Festival, and the Chinese People's Police Day. While these observances are not nationwide public holidays with mandatory time off, they involve state-sponsored celebrations and institutional recognition tailored to each professional group.

In contrast, Japan does not establish specific commemorative days dedicated to individual professions. This absence reflects an underlying cultural emphasis on occupational egalitarianism—the belief that designating official holidays for specific vocations could compromise professional impartiality and perceived fairness across industries. Consequently, individual observances such as Teachers' Day or Nurses' Day do not exist in Japan. Instead, recognition of labor is unified under Labor Thanksgiving Day (Kinro Kansha no Hi), a broad national public holiday that celebrates all forms of work and mutual societal contribution equally.

6. Conclusion

The comparative analysis presented above demonstrates that while traditional Chinese and Japanese festivals share a common historical foundation, their manifestations have diverged substantially. This divergence illustrates the dynamic interplay between cultural universality and local particularity, affirming both the

profound cultural reach of ancient Chinese civilization throughout East Asia and the enduring cultural agency of Japanese society. When shared cultural archetypes interact with differing geographic, religious, and socio-political environments, selective assimilation and creative transformation give rise to an evolutionary path defined by "harmony in diversity" (he er bu tong). Rather than a passive transmission of traditions, this process represents an active cultural dialogue. Ultimately, recognizing and respecting these divergences is essential to moving beyond cultural hegemony and realizing the ideal of "appreciating one's own culture while celebrating that of others," thereby fostering mutual enrichment within a shared cultural landscape.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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