CHAPTER 10

The Festival Year

Cutting across social groups and voluntary institutions is the series of annual festivals observed by the entire nation. Although many of these have in the course of time become drained of religious meaning (just as few of our present holidays are still holy days), almost all of them derived from religious origins, and the majority continued to carry at least some religious significance.

The almanac told the people when the festival days were to occur each year, and the traditions of ages prescribed how they were to be celebrated. Still, there were any number of customs that varied from place to place. For this reason every gazetteer or local history had a section in which the festival calendar (*sui-shih*) of the particular locality was described in detail. Here we shall list only a few of the outstanding festivals that were universally observed and some of the typical ways in which they were celebrated.

NEW YEAR

The concept of the New Year is, of course, of great symbolic meaning among every people. In China it was by far the most important and elaborate of all the universal festivals. It actually began in the twelfth month when, about ten days before the end of the year, government offices (*yamen*) throughout the country closed down (literally, "sealed up their seals," *fêng-yin*), not to reopen for business until about a month later. Then, on the twenty-third day of the twelfth month, in every home the God of the Cooking Stove (Tsao Chün or Tsao Wang) was sent off to heaven to report to the Supreme Emperor of Jadelike Augustness (Yü-huang Shang-ti), celestial ruler in the Taoist and popular pantheons.

Tsao Chün, like the local earth god, has an importance in the lives of the people out of all proportion to the humbleness of his icons. He is ordinarily represented by a cheap and gaudy print that is pasted on the wall

above the stove. This deity, whose worship dates back to the mid-second century BCE, is both guardian of the hearth and arbiter of longevity (in which role he is called Ssû-ming Fu-chün). His place behind the stove is strategically located for him to carry out the important function of keeping a daily record of the words and actions of the family, the sum of which it is his duty to report on his annual visit to Heaven. A detail that writers are fond of mentioning is the custom of smearing his mouth with some sugary substance before transmuting him to the ethereal realm by burning, so that he will have only "sweet" things to tell.

As arbiter of the length of life that will be enjoyed by each family member, his function naturally seems a more serious one. How seriously this function is actually taken no doubt varies according to individual belief. But it is in his role as deity of the kitchen range that he seems most significant. Because, whatever the "historical" background for this role, it is the stove that in fact stands for the unity of the Chinese family. As a number of recent studies have pointed out, "division of the stove" is both a symbolical and an actual event marking the splitting of the family, that is, the establishment of separate households by brothers after the death of their parents.

Tsao Chün returns to the home on New Year's Eve, when a new picture is pasted up over the stove. His is not the only symbol of renewal that goes up at this time: During the days preceding the New Year, every household puts up new "spring couplets" on either side of the gate and across the lintel. These are written on lucky red paper and consist of mottoes expressing the pious hope for blessings of all kinds to descend on the household during the coming year. And then on the leaves of the gates themselves are pasted bright pictures of fierce warriors who serve as guardians of the gate.

Rituals of New Year's Eve are for the family to observe within its own doors, which are sealed until the following morning. These rituals include the worship of Heaven and Earth, of the tutelary deities of the home, and of the ancestors. At the conclusion of these rites comes the family feast, which is attended by all members who can possibly be there—but by no outside guests. This ecumenical meal is another of the numerous practices by which family unity is reaffirmed. It is followed at midnight by an even more explicit ritual—all family members come forward in order of precedence to prostrate themselves and touch their foreheads to the floor (kowtow) to the family head and his wife.

The religious and familial rites having thus been performed, the first few days of the New Year are devoted to pleasure and relaxation and to paying courtesy calls on one's seniors and superiors. All business is at a standstill, even nowadays for as long as a week and in past times for almost the entire first month.

Two religious ceremonies of importance that occurred during the first two weeks were the family and communal worship of Ts'ai Shên, God of Wealth, and the official performance of the rituals connected with the beginning of spring (*li ch'un*, first of the twenty-four "seasons" of the lunar calendar). In imperial times the emperor himself opened the agricultural year by ceremonially plowing a special field in the capital, this being

emulated by the chief officials in every locality. Then came the religious procession headed by the "spring ox," an effigy whose color predicted the climatic conditions of the coming year (based on information contained in the newly published almanac). Many other symbolic items and actions connected with this procession had to do with hopes for a prosperous agricultural year.

The first (new moon) and fifteenth (full moon) are naturally to an agricultural people the most noticeable markers of time in the lunar months, and it is not surprising that many ritual observances fall on one or both of these days. In the case of the New Year, it is the first full moon that marks the end of the celebrations. This is the time for the lantern festival, originally of religious derivation, but in later centuries mostly a holiday in which enjoyment of the beauty and ingenuity of the lanterns is the principal feature, along with parades featuring the dancing of lions and dragons accompanied by a hubbub of music and drumming.

THIRD MONTH

The second of the great universal festivals falls 105 days after the winter solstice or, in recent times, on the third day of the third month. This is the fifth of the twenty-four lunar seasons, whose climatic character in north China gave it the name "clear and bright" (***ch'ing ming***). It is the most important of the three special occasions of the year for visiting the ancestral tombs, renovating them, and sacrificing to them. As such it is part and parcel of the complex of continuing sacrifices to the *manes,* which we have discussed in our chapter on the family. Here we should point out that in all these ancestral rites there are specific foci of interest. The vast majority of the ancestors inevitably pass into oblivion, or at least are only lumped together as the "common ancestors," while the attentions of the living center either on their immediate, rememberable generations or else on the most important figures of the past—notably the founding ancestor of the lineage. It is to these tombs that the family goes on *ch'ing ming* and other days of remembrance, as it is from these tombs that "good *fêng-shui*" may be sought.

The twenty-third day of the third month is the birthday of T'ien Hou, Imperial Consort of Heaven (see p. 57). Having been adopted into the official calendar of sacrifices, her birthday was marked everywhere in the empire. However, because she is primarily the protector of seafarers and her cult developed south of the Yangtze River, the great popular festivals are found in the southeastern coastal provinces.

FOURTH MONTH

The supposed birthday of the Buddha Śākyamuni occurs, according to Chinese calculations, on the eighth day of the fourth month. This is an occasion celebrated primarily by the Saṅgha. The principal rite is the "bathing of the Buddha," in which the Buddha image is laved with scented water.

The temples will be filled, and there may be elaborate processions with the Buddha image borne in state by the monks.

FIFTH MONTH

The third major universal celebration is that popularly known as the dragon boat festival, placed (in accordance with another Chinese propensity) on "double five," or the fifth day of the fifth month. The dragon boat races may very well represent the fighting of dragons in the skies and hence be related to abundance of rainfall, for which the dragon is responsible in Chinese lore. The festival is quite different in the north, which lacks the rivers and lakes on which such spectacles can be staged. The rationale of the boat races has long been understood as a reenactment of the search for the drowned poet Ch'ü Yüan, who committed suicide in ancient times because his honest counsel was spurned by his lord. The triangular-shaped dumplings traditionally eaten on this day are likewise supposed to stand for the food that the sorrowing people dropped into the water for Ch'ü Yüan's spirit.

But it would seem logical to seek the true origin of this important festival in the occurrence of the summer solstice, which falls at about the same time. This, of course, marks the highest expansion of the fructifying influence of *yang* and the beginning of its gradual displacement by *yin*, an event of great significance in the Chinese worldview. However, the double-five festival is one of those that has declined into a mostly secular occasion.

SEVENTH MONTH

The seventh month sees the second of the major periods in the annual round that focuses on the ancestors. During this entire month, the gates of purgatory stand open and the souls of those who have no ancestral sacrifices—the bereaved spirits—are free to wander about in the invisible dimension that impinges upon the mortal world. During this month, many special measures are taken by the living to placate these ghosts and avert harm. The fact that a whole month is involved in this problem of bereaved spirits is eloquent testimony to the profound importance of ancestral sacrifices.

But though this is, as we know, a native cult of the highest antiquity, it has, like most aspects of the mortuary rites, been largely taken over by Buddhism (and to a lesser extent Taoism). The bereaved spirits are identified with the Indian *preta*. The great services of sacrifice that take place in the middle of the month are called *yü-lan hui*, which is a Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit term *Avalambana*. The officiants are monks who recite from the canonical Chinese text that tells of the filial piety of Mu-lien (Maudgalyāyana), who rescued his mother from the torture of the hell in which souls cannot eat. This he was able to do by the grace of the Buddha, who instructed him to make offerings on the fifteenth day of the seventh

month to seven generations of ancestors. The ritual is called "ferrying across [to the other shore of salvation] all [souls in limbo or purgatory]" (*p'u tu*), a Buddhist term. The populace participates in the extensive ceremonies, particularly through their generous offerings.

EIGHTH MONTH

No festival is more common, throughout the world, than the celebration of the autumn harvest. In China this has been transformed into a celebration of the beauty of the harvest moon, at its most perfect on the fifteenth night of the eighth month. Although its religious element long ago faded, this festival is one of the most popular in the year. The traditional gift is circular "moon cakes," and the people feast outdoors, enjoying the glorious moon until late at night.

NINTH MONTH

If the moon festival celebrates the most conspicuous *yin* force in the heavens, the "double *yang*" (*ch'ung yang*) is, in name at least, the polar opposite. Alas for our hope to find some significant symbolism; the name simply reflects the fact that the unbroken lines in the diagrams of the *Yi Ching* are technically called nines, and this festival falls on the ninth day of the ninth month. No religious element seems to remain in what is a minor event in the festival calendar, marked only by picnics (preferably in the hills) and kite flying.

TENTH MONTH

On the first day of the tenth month, the ancestors are especially remembered for the third time, as the family pays ritual visits to their tombs. In addition to the usual sending of mock paper money, the family provide the dead with paper effigies of warm clothes for the winter and any other articles it is thought they might want. The ritual is called "sending cold weather clothes" (*sung han yi*).

TWELFTH MONTH

Various observances during the twelfth month are, as we have seen, a prelude to the great festival of the New Year. The winter solstice is marked by sacrifices as the day on which the potency of *yin* reaches its extreme, to be gradually replaced by the life-nurturing power of *yang*. On the eighth day of the month, it is the custom to serve friends with a special gruel made of

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