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Festival and Visual Art in Ancient China: A Historical Review

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ABSTRACT

Festival visual art in ancient China, before 1912 (the end year of the last feudal dynasty), conveys rich culture connotations and aethetics attitude of the ancients. However, few historical reviews on this theme are being conducted currently. Based on the qualitative analysis from extensive literature, this paper provides a thorough understanding of it from three parts. The first part analyzes the origins of the festival art, which is summarized as natural rhythm, religion and myth, and ancestor worship. The second part discusses appropriate viewing times for festival art, in which artworks of twelve-a-set and festival patches in the late feudal dynasty are focused. In the third part, visual arts of four festivals including the New Year, the Lantern Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Qixi Festival are selected as representatives to catch a glimpse of the general characteristics of Chinese festival visual art. Overall, this paper provides a systematic understanding and a new perspective of festival visualart in ancient China for further research.

Keywords: *Visual Art, Festival, China, Art History*

1 ORIGINS OF CHINESE FESTIVAL AND VISUAL ART

1.1 Natural Rhythms

The origins of Chinese festival have shaped the characteristics and style of its visual art. Chinese festivals related to natural rhythms evolve from calendars and solar term. Calendars based on the laws of celestial movement were develped to help people perceive the time, climate, and phenology, and to carry out agricultural and humanistic activities. The ancient Chinese calendar system went through a period of complex evolution and gave birth to many calendar systems. Until the Han Dynasty, which experienced a period of cultural prosperity and technological progress, rulers established a set of standards to consolidate their reign. *The Taichu calendar,* the most sophisticated calendar at that time, was created. By this time, the initial model of the Chinese calendar was basically determined. The ancient Chinese emperors enjoyed taking command of time, who routinely promulgated the calendar at the end of each year to provide a time reference for political and agricultural activities as well as festival ceremonies.

The Chinese calendar is a lunisolar calendar that combines both the lunar and the solar cycles. And the twenty-four solar terms were summarized according to the solar part of Chinese calendar. Some of

the solar terms with strong humanistic color and rich customs have been transformed into festivals. The solar term system was an important guidance for both upper and lower classes. Officials often issued decrees and held ceremonial activities during the solar terms. And people in lower class engaged in corresponding agricultural production activities in accordance with them. Derived from calendars and solar terms, ancient Chinese festival visual art inevitably carries elements corresponding to phenologyand climate of nature.

1.2 Regions and myths

Religious and primitive myths have significant impact on the formation of Chinese festival visual art. The local and foreign religions jointly constitute the Chinese cultural system. Halim and Truna (2023) state that when a empire gains political advantages from certain religions, they were acknowledged as offical religions. Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism were the three most politically influential religions in ancient China. And festivals, especially from the first two, were integrated into official festivals. Buddhism was introduced to China through Zentralasien during the Han Dynasty and has been flourishing since the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Under the auspices of the rulers, it was localized forming some Buddhist festivals with Chinese flavour, such as the Buddha's Birthday, the Ullambana Festival and the Laba Festival. Taoism is a native Chinese religion that follows *the Huang-Lao thought* and worship different gods. A relatively complete gods system of it was formed in the Song Dynasty. Shi (1988) categorized the Taoist gods into ten levels, namely, the main gods, gods of weathers, gods of celestial bodies, gods of landform, gods of the underworld, gods of soil and grain, etc. Among them, Three Great Emperor Officials oversee three different festivals. The heaven Official bestows blessings on the Lantern Festival, the Earth Official pardons sins on theGhost Festival, and the Water Official eliminates distress on the Xiayuan Festival. In addition, some folk gods are partially absorbed by Taoism and generate corresponding festive images.

The primitive Chinese myths are also associated with festivals visual art. Four-directional deities in the ancient mythological genealogy of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors have the attributes of four seasons, four colors, and four directions simultaneously. Zhang (2021) mentions the most influential four directional deities are from an ancient book *Shanhaijing*, in which the deities are Gou Mang (the god of spring in the east), Zhu Rong (the god of summer in the south), Ru Shou (the god of autumn in the west), and Yu Qiang or Xuan Ming (the god of winter in the north). Each of the four directional deities corresponds to a festival. For example, the Gou Mang image was sacrificed by people at the start of spring (a festival, the first solar term of the year).

1.3 Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship is at the core of the Chinese social life, and it reflects rites of a state, traditional moral and Confucian filial piety. It arose from an ancient belief in the soul, where people think that the deceased ancestor are always with them. Their souls have the mysterious power to bless posterity and dispel disasters. The descendants could communicate with the soul of their ancestor through sacrifice, and they regard this as an effective form of family reunion, especially at the four major Chinese ancestral festivals: the New Year's Eve, the Qingming Fetival, the Double Nineth Festival, and the Ghost Festival. Xiao (2005) argues that ancestor worship often has three spatial forms that are sacrificing at home, at the tomb and in ancestral halls. Festival visual art emerged during this process.

2 FESTIVAL VISUAL ART AND DISPLAY TIME

‘In imperial China the act of viewing art was often coded by time of year’ (Stuart, 2011, 306). Ancient literati and dignitaries pursued a stylish and elegant lifestyle by displaying corresponding artworks in different months for good fortune. The book *Zhangwu Zhi (Superfluous Things)* written

by Wen Zhenheng of the Ming Dynasty mentions the suitable categories and locations for hanging paintings or calligraphy in each month. During the later period of feudal dynasties, a large number of artworks in the form of twelve-a-set emerged, painted with festive activities or scenery of each month and display in proper time. *Yueling Tu* (*Monthly painting*) by Wu Bin in the Ming Dynasty, *Shieryue Xingle Tu (Activities of the Twelve Months Painting), Shier Jinyujing Tu (Twelve Scenes of the Forbidden Palace Painting), Twelve Flowers Gods Cups Set* in the Qing Dynasty were created. The appearance of these artworks in twelve-a-set reflects the attitude of the ancients to follow the laws of natural timing and their profound understanding of life.

The ancient Chinese court had a comprehensive etiquette system with costumes corresponding the seasons. *Book of the Later Han* (432-445/2007) records a color etiquette for the dress of aristocracy in the Han Dynasty named the five seasonal colors. This means that nobles and officials had to dress in green, vermilion, yellow, white and black according to the four seasons of spring, summer, *jixia* (the last month in the summer), autumn and winter respectively. In the Ming Dynasty, symbolic patterns corresponding to time were richer and more specific, and festival patches on clothes named *buzi* were developed. *Buzi* is a textile on the chest and the back of a garment in the form of square or medallion, the latter was used by the exalted or women. Nobles and officials wore clothes with appropriate *buzi* based on the dress code to identify their rank. Civil officials wore bird pieces to symbolize their literary prowess, while military officials wore beast pieces to symbolize their brave and powerful (Wang, 2016). Liang and Zhang (2016) mention that decorative patterns are not only attached to clothes as patches, but also embroidered on the robes, socks, scented bags and other accessories. Then they summarized the main and auxiliary festival patterns of *buzi* in Ming Dynasty and categorized them into three categories: folk activities, myths and legends, and symbolic objects. *Zhuozhong Zhi* (ca. 1628-1644/2018) records different patterns of *buzi* corresponding to each festival. A gourd pattern was used in the New Year. This round fabric (Fig. 1) is embroidered with a five-clawed dragon holding a gourd symbolizing longevity, and decorated with seawater and auspicious clouds below, the overall meaning of which is prosperity and wealth for generations. Besides, the Qixi Festival corresponds to the image of Magpie Bridge, the Lantern Festival corresponds to lantern, the Qingming Festival corresponds to swing, the Dragon Boat Festival corresponds to the five poisons and the wormwood tiger, the Mid-Autumn Festival corresponds to a moon rabbit and fairy, the Double Ninth Festival corresponds to chrysanthemum and the Winter Solstice corresponds to sheep.

Figure 1 Full Embroidery Jiangshan Wandai Dragon Pattern Round Patch, textile, 34.5 cm × 37 cm, Ming Dynasty, Wanli reign period (1573-1620)
(Source: https://www.cguardian.com/auctions/item-detail?categoryId=1306&itemCode=3045
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3 VISUAL ART OF FOUR FESTIVALS

Chinese festive customs and images have two distinctive features. One is inclusiveness, where commoners and elites mostly celebrate festivals with the same entertainment, food, and vocabulary. The other is the consistency across eras, where many customs are similar from the Han Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty (Stuart, 2011). The New Year, the Lantern Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival and the Qixi Festival are the four representative festivals of different seasons that contain rich artworks.

3.1 Visual Art in the New Year

The Chinese New Year and the Spring Festival are considered to be the same nowadays. However, in ancient China, before 1912, the New Year was the first day of the Chinese calendar and the Spring Fstival referred to the first solar term. People started a new year with a series of rituals to get rid of the undesirable old and embrace the auspicious new.

Taofu (Peach wood charm) was used to expel ghosts and their house safe. The ancient Chinese believed that peach wood was a divine wood condensing the essence of five types of wood including mulberry, elm, peach, locust and willow. The form of *Taofu* has undergone gradually changes. Peach branch, peach cane, puppet carved from peach wood had been used before the Qin Dynasty. By the Northern and Southern Dynasties, *Jingchu Suishi Ji (Festivals and Seasonal Customs in Jingchu Area)*(ca. 501-565/2018) had recorded that peach plank and peach wood charm began to be used. *Suishi Guangji (Extensive records of festivals and seasonal customs)* (n.d./2020) records the shape of a *Taofu* that is a thin wooden board of two or three *chi* (a Chinese length unit) long and four *cun* (a Chinese length unit) large (similiar to Fig.2). It painted with mythical beasts such as *Suan Ni* and *Bai Ze*, under which are spring prayer words or names of door gods.

In ancient times, most of the front doors were double-leaf posted with pairs of door gods, such as Shen Tu and Yu Lei or Qin Qiong and Yuchi, etc., while most of the back doors were typically single-leaf adorned with a single god such as Zhong Kui or Wei Zheng. It is mentioned in *Duduan* (独断) (ca.132-192/2022) in the Eastern Han Dynasty that Shen Tu and Yu Lei were the two door gods in early times who tied up the evil ghosts with reed ropes and fed them to the tigers. Han dynasty tombs in Mianxian (Fig. 3) and Nanyang, Henan Province, and Boxian, Anhui Province have unearthed stone reliefs about the image of S*hen Tu* and Y*u Lei*, which provided an early reference to investigate the image of them (*Chinese New Year Paintings*, n.d.). The image of Zhong Kui's has been constantly incorporated with new motifs according to the characteristics of the times. Initially, Zhong Kui was portrayed as a cynical and aggressive figure who would fierociously goug out the eyes of demons. This might be influenced by the style of Buddhist Hell paintings, which depict the imagination of hell to deter viewers from committing crimes. Gradually, ZhongKui became a degage and enigmatic individual image with literati temperament, which could be painters' self-expression or a social fashion at that time. In the painting of *Zhong Kui in the Chinese New Year* (Fig.2) by Zhang Zhongxue, Zhong Kui sits in pine forest holding an ink-laden brush ready to inscribe a peachwood charm. One demon holds the other end and the other stands behind. Images of marrying sister, drinking, fishing, etc. are also major motifs of ZhongKui. In addition, the successive emergence of military door gods and civilian door gods reflected the transformation from worshiping the supreme gods to humanized gods, which demonstrates people's affirmation of their own power and belief in their own race.

Shenma (folk deity print) is also an important New Year print artwork, which could be used to pray for fortune in the coming year. With rich themes and various styles, it sprouted in the Qin dynasties and took shape in the Song dynasties. It is a ritual object that is close to folk life and has specific functions. During the New Year, the ancient Chinese people posted the *Shenma* on corresponding places for blessing. In most areas of southern China, the way to sacrifice *Shenmas* is inviting folk deities to their homes for a period during the New Year, and then burn them to heaven after sacrifice. However, in some regions of the north, only a few types of deities were incinerated after the sacrifice, for people here prefer deities to live with them so that they could meet them at any time (Jiang, 2013). *Shenma* in Neiqiu region belons to the latter, which is a portrayal of life in an agrarian society, with a mysterious, exaggerated, and naive style. It is mostly printed with black, yellow, red and green natural dyes. The black is made from the soot from the chimney and the black substance at the bottom of the pot, the yellow comes from the locust tree, the red is the crushed dried pomegranate flowers, and the green is the juice squeezed from wild leeks, etc. 'Everything has a spirit' is what they trust. Neiqiu *Shenma* is divided into three categories: natural deities, living deities, and religious deities. Natural deities represent everything naturally existing in the world, which have over

thirty species including deity of heaven and earth (Fig.4), deities of animals, and deities of plants. Living deities related to production and daily life, and it could be subdivided into household deities, auspicious deities, property deities, and deities for eliminating evils. For example, the car deity bestows blessings for safe driving, and the ladder deity bestows blessings for going up and down the ladder safely. Deities of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism include *Taoist Laojun*, Kṣitigarbha, the small Jade Emperor, etc. (Fu et al., 2014).

Figure 2 Zhongkui in the Chinese New year, by Zhang Zhongxue, painting, 127.5cm × 63.5cm, QingDynasty (1616-1912)
(Source: https://theme.npm.edu.tw/opendata/DigitImageSets.aspx?sNo=04024461, © Taipei National Palace Museum)

Figure 3 Shentu Yulei Portrait Stone, relievo, Han Dynasty (202 BCE - 220 CE)
(Source: Rare edition of ancient Chinese New Year pictures, Henan volume, p.2, 2015, Copyright Consent: This artwork won't be visualised here to protect the copyright)

Figure 4 Heaven and Earth God Shenma
(Source: Intangible Cultural Heritage of Neiqiu, Living Fossil of Traditional Culture, 2014, Copyright Consent: This artwork won't be visualised here to protect the copyright)

3.2 Visual Art in the Lantern Festival

The Lantern Festival originated from sacrificing the Heaven Official, emperor Wu of the Han dynasty and the Taiyi God, etc. This Festival is rich in images and famous for various kinds of lantern. *Aoshan Lantern* is the most special and exquisite one built by the ancient officials for this Festival every year. *Aoshan Lantern* originated from the legend named 'giant turtles carry mountain on their backs'. According to *Liezi* (ca. 475-221 B.C.E), there are five sacred mountains floating in a bottomless valley called Guixu in the east of the Bohai Sea. However, the foundations of these mountains were unstable so that they often drift with the waves. The god of heaven was afraid that sages in these mountains would lose their homes, so he ordered the northern water god Yu Qiang to lead fifteen giant turtles to wear the mountains on the top of their heads to stabilize them. Based on this legend, ancients designed Aoshan Lanterns with sacred and auspicious meanings.

Aoshan lanterns, also called colorful hill, were first recorded in the Northern Song Dynasty. *Dasong Xuanhe Yishi (The legacy of Xuanhe of the Song Dynasty)* (ca. 960-1279/1954) records that *Aoshan Lantern* is sixteen *zhang* (a Chinese length unit) long and two hundred and sixty-five paces wide, in which are two twenty-four *zhang* (a Chinese length unit) long pillars entwined by golden dragons and a board with the words 'The colorful hill in the year of Xuanhe, enjoyment with people'. *Dongjing Menghua Lu* (*Gorgeous Dream in Eastern Capital)* (1127/1985) records an extremely gorgeous *Aoshan lantern* with immortal stories painted on it. It was decorated with small lamps in the shapes of Manjushri, Samantabhadra, lions and white elephants. On the top of the lantern hill, flowing water poured down like a small waterfall and millions of candles were lit like winding dragons flying around.

Zhuo Zhong Zhi (ca. 1628-1644/2018) by Liu Ruoyu records that before the Lantern Festival, *Aoshan Lanterns* would be installed in Shouhuang Hall, some of which were as high as thirteen floors. The *Zhonggu Si (a royal department*) would compose music to praise the beauty of these Lanterns. Liu commented that it was a pity to create such a costly and short-lived pleasure to show the illusory peace and prosperity in contrast to the suffering of the people. Both *the Nandu Fanhui Tujuan (bustling scenery of Nandu)* and *Yueling Tu (Monthly Painting)* (Fig.5) in the Ming Dynasty show the images of *Aoshan lanterns*, which resemble palaces decorated with colorful ornaments, with people praying around them. In addition to *Aoshan lanterns*, the eunuch of *Xiunei Si (a royal department)* organized an event every year to select creative lanterns including boneless lanterns, bead lanterns, sheepskin lanterns, and silk lanterns, etc. (Zhou, n.d./2007).

The lantern painting is another important visual art of this Festival, which was particularly prosperous in Beijing aera during the Qing Dynasty. Tai (2021) proposed that opera and novel were the two main motifs of lantern paintings of this period. The contents of opera lantern paintings include acrobatic fighting plays and singing plays, etc. And novel lantern paintings include historical stories, gods and monster stories (Fig.6), worldly affairs and public cases. She believes that lantern paintings in the Qing Dynasty are characterized by secular themes, bright colors, realistic painting techniques and various composition styles.

Figure 5 Monthly Painting 1st volume part, by Wu Bin, painting, 29.1cm × 66.9 cm, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)
(Source: https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Painting/Content?pid=3729&Dept=P, © Taipei National Palace Museum)

Figure 6 Sun Xingzhe adjusting the plantain fan for the second time, silk painting, Qing Dynasty (1616-1912) (Source: Rare edition of ancient Chinese New Year pictures, Beijing volume, p.215, 2015, Copyright Consent: This artwork won't be visualised here to protect the copyright)

3.3 Visual Art in the Dragon Boat Festival

The characters commemorated on the Dragon Boat Festival vary according to time and space, including Zhang Tianshi, Zhong Kui, Qu Yuan, Wu Zixu, Cao E, Jie Zitui, etc. The images of Tianshi and Zhong Kui have the function of exorcising demons. Liu (ca. 1628-1644, 2018) mentioned that small plates painted with the images of Tianshi or fairies were hung on the doors of palaces during the Dragon Boat Festival in the Ming Dynasty. Fucha (1906/1981) in the Qing Dynasty also recorded that market shops sold small yellow paper with images of Tianshi, Zhong Kui or the Five Poisons and stamped with red seals (Fig.7) when the festival arrived. People were interested in buying it and sticking it in the middle of their door.

The five poisons are representative images of the Dragon Boat Festival. Zhang (2012) believes that avoiding the harm of the five poisons during the Dragon Boat Festival includes two parts: recognizing the five poisons and cursing the five poisons. The traditional images of the five poisons include scorpions, centipedes, spiders (geckos), toads, and snakes, with slight variations from different places. It is a useful way to recognize the five poisons by applying their images to the textile of head, feet, chest, and abdomen where children need to protect and make tiger-head hats, tiger-head shoes, and Dudou (a kind of baby's halter top) (Fig.8). Besides, people often cut out papercut with images of the five poisons being pecked by chickens and tigers, inhaled into gourds, or killed by swords to curse the five poisons. It is believed that pasting these papercuts with symbolic meaning in the room and in places with small holes leading to the outside can ensure the safety of living. In addition, wearing the five poisonous coins threaded with colored silk is another way to curse and suppress it.

The ancients believed that plants on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival have strong effect on curing diseases. Hollyhock, pomegranate flower, day lily, gardenia, calamus, mugwort, etc. are important plant images at this time (Huang, 2018). Hollyhock could decrease internal heat in midsummer, day lily has the effect of reducing swelling and detoxification, and mugwort and calamus can repel mosquitoes. There is a legend that when Zhang Tianshi was fighting with demons, he lit mugwort and turned it into a tiger to disperse them. That's why ancients thought mugwort has the function to keep evil spirits away.

Huang (2018) mentioned a court etiquette of giving fans painted with plant during this festival already existed in the Tang Dynasty, and it became more institutionalized in the Song Dynasty. *Mengliang Lu* mentioned that the emperor usually bestowed fan with images of hollyhock and pomegranate and his inscription to officers. In addition to flowers and plants, festival fans also include themes of children playing, baby bath, picking herbs, and marionette show, etc. Among them, the *Baby Bath Fan Painting* (Fig.9) is related to a custom named *Mulan Tang* (Herbal Bath) in this festival. People believed that the positive energy and medicinal effect is the strongest at noon on this day every year, so they boil water for herbal bath to expel demons and viruses.

Figure 7 Tianshi Guarding the House, painting (Source: IRare edition of ancient Chinese New Year pictures, Jiangsu Zhejiang and Shanghai volume, p.329, 2015, Copyright Consent: This artwork won'tbe visualised here to protect the copyright)

Figure 8 Blue Satin Embroidered Tiger Suppress Five Poisons Pattern Bellyband, textile, 60 cm × 55cm, Qing Dynasty (1616-1912) (Source: Beijing, China, ©Tsinghua university Art Museum)

Figure 9 Baby Bath, by Qiu Ying, silk fan painting, 27.2 cm×25.5 cm, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) (Source: Shanghai, China, © Shanghai Museum)

3.4 Visual Art in the Qixi Festival

Praying for ingenuity, love and offspring are the three major things women did in the Qixi Festival. The methods of praying for ingenuity include threading needles, throwing needles into the water, and observing wheather the spider web in a small box is dense or round enough. And women usually made festival food named *Qiaoguo*, *Qiaoren*, *Qiaosu* during the festival, which were sweets made of oil, flour, and sugar. *Qiaoguo* came from a story of praying for marriage, so using *Qiaoguo* as tribute is a method of praying for love. In the painting named *Qiqiao Tu (Praying for ingenuity)* (Fig.10), a group of gorgeously dressed women on the right side are threading needles to pray for ingenuity and the other group on the left side are setting up ritual supplies and praying to a small figurine named *Mohouluo* on the table with their hands folded for continuation of their offspring.

People always express their desire to have children by displaying melons and *Mohouluo* on the table. The festival item *Mohouluo*, a figurine made of clay, was welcomed by ancient women. Most scholars reckon that the *Mohouluo* had evolved from Buddhist gods (Mahākāla, Mahoraga, Rahula), others believe that it is related to Tammuz in Western Asia and a custom about crying for the son of god in ancient Zoroastrianism (Liu, 2012). In the Qixi, women usually used wax to make a lotus baby named Hua Sheng floating on the water for appreciation. Hua Sheng may be the predecessor of *Mohouluo* (Liu, 2012). Zhang (2017) also mentioned the custom of enshrining figurine as early as the Tang Dynasty, and the story of a deer mother giving birth to a lotus flower that turn into a baby told in a Buddhist scripture. The combination of multiple meanings increases the mystery of *Mohouluo* and reinforces the festival's function of praying for offspring.

The materials of *Mohouluo* had become more expensive later, and people liked to dress them up for pleasure. In the Southern Song Dynasty, the *Mohouluos* were made of ivory and ambergris, and they were decorated with mini clothes, hats, hairpins, bracelets that were made of seven treasures (Zhou, 2007). The seven treasures refer to gold, silver, glaze, crystal, tridacninae, coral, amber in Buddhism, which vary slightly in different records.

Figure 10 Part of Praying for Ingenuity, by Qiu Ying, painting, 27.9 cm × 388.3 cm, Ming Dynasty(1368-1644)
(Source: https://theme.npm.edu.tw/opendata/DigitImageSets.aspx?sNo=04028119, ©Taipei National Palace Museum)

4 CONCLUSION

This paper summarizes the natural rhythm, religion and myth, and ancestor worship as the three origins of the Chinese festival visual art. And the ancients in China were used to looking at different artworks at different times. Besides, representative visual arts from the New Year, the Lantern Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Qixi Festival are selected for in-depth interpretation. The festival visual art in ancient China varies with time, region, and nationality. It is a fusion of art from folk and official, local region and foreign region. At the same festival, art may have different styles and expressions in different regions. In addition, this paper only discusses the mainstream festival art and customs in ancient China, excluding that of ethnic minorities. Further research could be conducted in this regard.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wang Yuqi as the main author played a role in data search, analysis, and writing, while Mumtaz Mokhtar as the second author acted as a supervisor.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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