

Yuandan (Chinese New Year) The first day of the first month in the lunar calendar

Introduction

Yuandan is the first day of the lunar calendar. It is the day when the earth has circled the sun for one round and is beginning another circling. It represents a new beginning when people send off the old days and welcome the new ones. As the first day of the year, Yuandan has been considered to be the most important festival since the ancient times.

Customs

1. Kaisui(beginning of the year): According to the Chinese traditional custom, starting from haishi(9p.m. to 11p.m.)of the last evening of the twelfth lunar month, each family must prepare offering's to deities at the altar. At the same time, they too prepare food for the New Year day: The whole family will then stay awake together to attend to the year(called shou sui). After haishi, zishi(11p.m. to 1a.m.)will come, and this is the arrival of New Year(Yuandan). At this moment, people begin the celebration with fireworks. Vegetarian and sweet foods will then be placed are the altar for offerings, and incense be burned to welcome the deities. In the ancient times, it was believed that haishi connected the two years and thus was called kaisui.
At the same night, some families will follow the instruction in Tongshu and place preparing altar in the direction of the "fortune deity" during the "fortune time" to receive the deity. If the direction of the "fortune deity" is at the "ill position", people will choose to receive "happy deity" or "noble deity" instead.
2. There is an apparent difference in the custom of food taking on Yuandan between the Chinese in the northern and southern regions. The northern Chinese has the habit of taking jiao zi (dumpling made of flour with vegetable and meat wrapped inside). Some people may put a sweet or a coin inside jiao zi, hoping to have a sweet year after tasting the sweet and a wealthy year after tasting the coin. on the other hand, the southern Chinese have the taboo for killing on Yuandan. Therefore, they do not take meat in tee morning of Yuandan, so as to avoid bloodshed or mutual slaughter. In order to evade misfortune, they have the first meal of this day without meat. Instead, they take vegetarian food for the sake of virtue.

3. What is special during the New Year is that parents or elders will distribute red packets(ang pao or ya sui qian)to the children. People in the ancient times were more particular in giving away the red packets: the distribution took place on the eve of New Year so that the kids could suppress the past year and enter the New Year. Ya sui has the meaning of overcoming the unpredictable future. Representing the wishes for the healthy psychological growth of the children, ya sui qian symbolises the elders' hope to see their children overcome all the unpredictable elements brought by the "year".
4. There is an extraordinary number of taboos on Yuandan. Each place has its own customs of taboo. Here, we will mention only a few common taboos in Fujian Province, Guangdong Province and Southeast Asia:

In the past, people commonly believed that fortune was hidden in the house. So, sweeping of floor must be done in the direction moving inwards, and there was no clearance of rubbish at night. Particularly on the New Year day, in order to keep fortune from flowing out, there was no sweeping. Some families kept this taboo until the fifth or even the fifteenth day. If anything was broken, the pieces were wrapped up in order not to let the fortune slip away and were disposed only the fifth day.

Yuandan (in more serious families, the period extends from the 1st to the 15th day) marks the new beginning. In the hope that New Year brings good beginning, people should utter neither unkind words nor vulgar language. Making noises, fighting, quarreling and especially weeping are avoided to deter misfortune. There are even taboos of taking medicine and having sneeze, for it is believed that they can lead to sickness throughout the year. Taboos of the past also concerned the use of knife and the breaking of things. If a thing was broken, the word "break" or any other word importing similar meaning was not used. Instead, words like "falling to the floor and blossoming like flowers" which delivered pleasant senses were used to suggest good connections.

On Yuandan, neither lending and nor giving of money to others is done so that there will be no out-flowing of money during the year. There is also the saying that if a male sleeps in the afternoon, his career will breakdown, and if a female has an afternoon nap, the kitchen will collapse.

5. Ancient rite: In the past, there was a rite called he zheng (proper greeting) during New Year. When a person paid a New Year visit to friends or relatives, he took along a piece of paper or card on which the name of the host was written with Chinese brush. The receiver of this greeting card would normally paste it on the wall of his main hall to show his respect to and appreciation for the visitor. The quantity of greeting card received reflected the person's public relationship with others, while the names and status of the people who gave the greeting cards indicated the host's boundary of social network and standard of living. Nowadays, because of easy communication, convenient transportation system and wider social network, when people send their greetings they tend to follow the Western style. The greeting is now done by mail and even by email. Today, he zheng is done by simply bringing along red packets and food presents when making a visit.

To be in line with the custom of giving away money on the first day, families in some places do not pay New Year call to others. Instead, the whole family simply goes out to enjoy themselves or stayed at home for family happiness.

6. In the past, there was a superstition that when a person left his house in the New Year, he must take the correct first step. A particular person would look for the fortunate direction in accordance with the day, month and year of this birth basing on the explanation of Chinese calendar. On Yuan Dan, when a person stepped out of his house, he must go in the fortunate direction and avoid the unfortunate direction. Even people of less particularity also consulted Chinese calendar to find out where the fortunate directions and fierce deities were before the first step out of their houses.

Meaning

From the above mentioned customs, we can see that there are especially many taboos during Chinese New Year. On Yuan Dan in particular, there are more taboos on speech and behaviour than those on other ordinary days. Similarly, there are more activities in pursuit of good cause than usual. On probing the activities and taboos, we have no difficulty to understand that the theme behind is always related to fortune, wealth and goodness, and that people usually concern themselves with a good beginning for the year.

Some taboos may look superstitious on the surface, but they do produce efficacy. If we practice them circumspectively, they will yield practical results. For example, the prohibition of bad words, quarrel, weeping and crying, together with the emphasis on thinking positively even when things are broken, provide some normative rules for people to follow. This gives people the opportunity to mend their ways, to develop good attitudes, and to form a habit of thinking positively and looking at the good side of things. The prohibition of sweeping and disposing the rubbish in the first five days forces people to arrange their things and clear away the rubbish properly at the end of each year, so that no unwanted things will be carried forward to the new year. At the same time, the taboo also compels people to learn to be thrifty. This is because to prevent accumulated things from becoming rubbish, people must be careful in the use of any paper or other things, and thus avoid waste of things.

The avoidance of medicine and sneeze on the first day looks like a joke and is absurd as far as the patient is concerned. However, because of the taboos, people will be conscious enough to take serious care of their health during the windy and snowing season. Thus, they will avoid falling sick in the New Year and wasting away the precious spring hours.

Nowadays, people have abandoned the custom of bringing along greeting cards when they go for New Year house visits. However, Chinese Malaysians still maintain the habit of sending New Year greeting cards by post before the New Year.

There are even non-Chinese sending New Year greeting card in English or Malay languages to their Chinese friends. Moreover, the Chinese like to use colourful New Year cards to decorate their houses, so as to strengthen the New Year atmosphere. Like the ancient days' greeting cards for the zheng which were displayed in the main hall, these modern New Year cards also reflect the social position of the persons who receive the cards. Thus, in the way, the ancient rite of the zheng has developed in Malaysia with a Malaysian colour.