THE CHINESE FEAST OF LANTERNS

By Henry Winfred Splitter

This paper will attempt a synthesis of diverse reports and interpretations of the Chinese Feast of Lanterns, with a view toward arriving at a more complete description of this important feast than has heretofore been available. Some new material on associated folk customs will also be presented.

Among the most picturesque and significant of Chinese festivals, particularly in North China, is the Feast of Lanterns, which is celebrated on the night of the first full moon of the New Year, that is, on the fifteenth day of the first month. It is, according to Eder,\(^1\) one of China’s most joyous feasts, two only competing with it in this respect, namely the springtime Feast of the Dragon Ship and the Feast of Mid-Autumn. The Feast of Lanterns marks the conclusion of the New Year holiday period, and at the same time the beginning of another spring season. The Feast of Lanterns is called, says Hodous,\(^2\) shang-yuan or the First Creative Power. This Power is conceived of as the spring sun, which warms the earth and renews vegetation. The lanterns, symbolizing the great ruler of light, are made of various materials, mostly paper, over bamboo frames, and resemble vegetables, fruits, animals, fish, men, and various other objects. “There are transparencies covered with silk gauze. Some have figures which are set revolving by the rising heat of the enclosed candle. Some are in the form of immense pumpkins. The dragon shape is quite prominent.”\(^3\) The lanterns begin to appear, for preliminary testing, two or three days before the 15th, and on that night two hundred million of them blossom forth throughout China.

An ancient story tells of the great ferris wheel, two hundred feet high, which was erected for this night, in the capital of China, A.D. 713. The wheel glittered with gold and silver flowers and was lighted by fifty thousand lamps. Beautiful maidens adorned with flowers and jewels danced and sang below the wheel for three days and nights. The ferris wheel symbolized the sun.\(^4\)

On this evening of the Feast of Lanterns, there also commonly sweep through the streets numerous huge paper dragons, some twenty or thirty, even up to a hundred feet long. Each section of three or four feet, lighted from within by a candle, is carried on a pole by a boy. These boys are specially trained to manipulate their dragon, gracefully gliding through the streets and around corners. Preceding the dragon, there is carried a large globular lantern representing the spring sun “which the dragon is trying to catch.”

An early missionary to China records his impressions of this feast as seen at Amoy in the year 1845.\(^5\) There were, he observed, continuous discharge of

\(^2\) Lewis Hodous, Folkways in China (London, 1929), pp. 44 ff.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) The Reverend George Smith, A Narrative of an Exploratory Visit to the Consular Cities of China, etc. (London, 1847), pp. 457 ff.
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fireworks, noise of gambling tables, play-actors blocking the streets with their impromptu stages, and everywhere, lanterns of infinitely varied pattern and design. Some were made of glass, others of gauze, but mostly of paper; their shape was that of birds, beasts, fishes, and dragons. Many of them were kept in constant motion by the rarefied air produced by their lights, and were bobbing and tossing about like a vast zoo in fairyland. In the principal temples and in the houses of rich men glowed huge candles, some of which were two feet in circumference. Here and there marched bands of pipers, to the sound of gongs and cymbals. Geyers of light spurted up, subsided, and renewed themselves in great streams of colored fire, as the pieces purchased for the public delight by rich men were set off. Within the temples he could glimpse, on the principal tables, large cakes made in the form of a tortoise, the sacred symbol of Buddhist mythology. And, finally, there were occasional bonfires, over which daring individuals were, for future good luck, leaping like deer, amid the sound of gongs and the plaudits of the people.

According to the foregoing descriptions, then, the Feast of Lanterns seems to be chiefly distinguished by a display of lanterns, and of light generally, as in fireworks, and candles, all symbolic, it is generally assumed, of the renewal of the sun's power in springtime. From other evidence, however, it would appear that the sun symbolism may not be the only one celebrated in this feast. Historically, says Morgan, lanterns were not used in the feast until some eight hundred years after its initial appearance. He remarks that the Feast of Lanterns dates back two thousand years to the Han dynasty, when it was a ceremonial worship in the Temple of the First Cause. It is possible, then, that the festival has changed materially in scope and purpose since its initiation. For example, contrary to the general idea that the feast celebrates only the return of the sun in spring, there is the statement of Eder that the Feast of Lanterns is to be explained as commemorating the birth-night of the God of Good Fortune, T'ien-kuan, who if he is honored acceptably on this occasion, will grant his worshiper good luck for the ensuing year. Dennys says that New Year's Day is the day of the year for luck, and the Feast of Lanterns is the conclusion if not the climax of the New Year's festivities. The leaping over bonfires for luck, noted in Amoy by the Reverend Smith, is significant.

There seems also to be a connection with field cleansing rites and fox-devil chasing. In Kiangsu, remarks Eder, quoting Nagao Ryuzo, torches are lighted on this night and carried about in the fields. If the lights appear red to the watchers back home in the village, the coming year will bring drought; if they appear white, there will be floods. This torch-carrying, Eder emphasizes, is not imitative sun-magic, but is connected with fox-devil chasing, and also with the traditional cure of a disease connected by lore with fox-devils.

In Kiangsu, likewise, continues Eder, images of boll-cotton are made from

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9 Chinese Folk Customs [title translated by Eder from the Japanese] (Tokyo, 1940?). 2 vols.
wheat meal, and then placed in the fields, together with bundles of rice straw. On the evening of the Feast of Lanterns, the peasants light the ends of the straw bundles, and with these in hand dance about the fields singing the following folk song:

"Prayer for Fruitfulness"

In the middle of the first month we light fires.
Other families are still only planting their vegetables;
Ours are already on the market.
The soya-beans of other families are still as small as peas;
Ours are as large as baskets.
The cotton of other families is meagre and short;
Ours is sturdy, and so tall that it supports the sky.10

The occasion of the Feast of Lanterns is, in general, good for prognostication and for divining the future. By the shadow of the moon may be foretold the coming season's weather, crops, and prices.11

These probably more primitive and certainly more popular aspects of the Feast, it appears, have from a very early date consistently offended the sensibilities of high officials and emperors. Hodous cites an official of the Sui dynasty (A.D. 589–618) as having memorialized the throne, requesting the emperor to forbid the riotous customs of the fifteenth of the first month. He said: "Every first month the fifteenth night, crowds of people fill the streets. The sound of drums din the ears of heaven. Blazing torches illuminate the earth. Men wear the faces of animals and don women's garments. Prostitutes and actors exhibit their tricks and strange shows. With ribald jests they make merry, while men and women look on together. High platforms [theatre stages] encroach upon the roads, and bands of cloth over the streets resemble the clouds. The women are decked out in brilliant garments. Carts and horses clatter and crowd. Viands and wine abound everywhere. Stringed instruments and flutes make riot together. Wealth is squandered and property is wasted. The high and low, men and women mingle together. White and black are not separated. The result is immoral conduct, theft, and robberies, and gradually the custom is fixed."12

In 1910, the Manchu dynasty, a year before its overturn, issued a final proclamation against the dragon-lantern procession and contests, apparently still without effect.

Mrs. J. F. (Annie) Cormack13 indicates that in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Feast of Lanterns was in Peking hardly observed by "official and wealthy families," that only cake and tea shops and a few others in the respectable parts of the city went so far as to hang out lanterns to attract trade. She did, however, notice that there were many people (presumably of the lower classes) on the streets "between the 13th and 17th of the first month, especially on the 15th."

10 Eder, p. 59 (re-translated from the German).
11 Hodous, p. 41 ff.
12 Ibid.
13 Chinese Birthday, Wedding, Funeral, and Other Customs (Peking, 1922), Preface and p. 115.
The earthy folk aspects of the Feast of Lanterns are further illustrated by the following apparently as yet unnoted account (from North China Herald, 1852) concerning customs associated with this festive night.14

"Those living in the country set fire to the stubble of the grass left on the grave mounds from last year's cutting of fuel, and allow it to spread in all directions till it ceases of its own accord. This they say is to burn up any evil influences that may exist, and whoever sees the stubble burning will thereby insure to himself a wholesome condition of body for the year.

"The rustics, also, on this night eat bean curds, and vermicelli in its long, unbroken state—the former typifying cotton, and the latter, the cords used for binding together the large round baskets containing it. They do this that they may realize an abundant crop of cotton during the season.

"They also eat round balls of rice flour, in the middle of which are small quantities of meat, vegetables, or confections, believing that, having eaten these, should they chance during the year to swallow a bit of bristle while eating pork, it will not hurt them. It is to be observed that they ascribe a certain disease among them to a pig's bristle, lodged, as they imagine, in some corner of the intestines. These rice balls are also placed as propitiatory offerings before the kitchen god, who is supposed to descend from heaven on this day and take his accustomed place over the cooking range. He had been absent since the 23d day of the last month, on his annual mission to render up his account of the conduct of the family.15

"Another superstitious notion is that if a person crosses three bridges on this evening, he will by so doing secure vigorous health for the year just commenced.

"There is yet another practice observed by some. An individual goes out of his house about midnight, and the first sentence he may chance to hear uttered, by a person passing along, or one of two conversing as they walk along, he considers as indicative of his own fortune for the coming year. If he finds no one in the street, he goes from door to door of his neighbors' dwellings or shops, until he hears someone talking, and the first sentence that he catches in this way he regards as prophetic. Should it be one in which happiness, health or prosperity of any kind are named or alluded to, he runs home with a glad heart. But if, on the contrary, misfortune, sickness, or death are mentioned, he is filled with gloomy forebodings for the future."16

The account in the North China Herald closes with some remarks on the sequel of the Feast of Lanterns, the so-called "opening of the seals," or official resumption of business after the prolonged New Year holiday:

"It is five days later, on the 20th of the first month, when, according to long established usage, the public offices are re-opened for the transaction of business, after having been closed since the 20th of the last month of the old
year. The native term for the event signifies ‘opening of the seals.’ The people have a superstitious belief that all the affairs of the unseen world are suspended, and resumed, on these same days. The priests advertise the fact by proclamation to that effect on the sides of the entrance to the temples of the deities presiding over matters in the infernal regions.

A native adage for this day runs as follows:

If it rains on the 20th of the first month,
Cotton will not yield a picul to the mau;
But if the sun gleams out but once,
Each mau will produce several piculs.¹⁷

When we note the two contrasting source aspects of the Feast of Lanterns, considered above, and remember furthermore that its celebration has always been more important in the North than in the South of China, it seems logical enough that this feast has been only infrequently observed in the United States. William Hoy¹⁸ says that in his two decades in San Francisco he has never yet seen the Feast of Lanterns celebrated there, and moreover that there is no evidence of its celebration by the California Chinese for at least three decades. The Cantonese and their descendents, who make up almost the totality of the Chinese in America, have never, Hoy asserts, been too much concerned with the feast, since at no time has it been more than perfunctorily observed in their part of the homeland.

One important reason, according to Hoy, for its non-observance in America, is a commercial one. In contrast with the month-long observance of the New Year in China by a closing down of most business, the United States Chinese have since the turn of the century limited their celebration of New Year to not more than ten days; indeed, within recent years it has ceased throughout the country on the seventh day, which is the so-called Day of Man. Since, then, the Feast of Lanterns falls on the fifteenth day, it is easy to see why the cutting short of the observance period would in itself tend to eliminate the feast.

Other witnesses to non-observance of the Feast of Lanterns in America are Dr. Chen of the University of Southern California, and Miss Soohoo of the Chinese consular staff in Los Angeles.

In sum, the Feast of Lanterns can probably best be described as an antique festival of pagan origin, whose promitive folk meaning has, as in comparable Christian festivals, been overlaid and to some extent supplanted by later religious and ethical interpretations. Yet the worship of the sun and the ethics of Buddhism seem in a sense hardly compatible with the field-cleansing and fox-chasing rites of Kiangsu and with the primitive preoccupation with the materialism of the God of Good Fortune, T’ien-Kuan. Indeed, judging by the consistently supercilious and even hostile attitude of the cultured

¹⁷ Dennys has (op. cit.) an oddly similar St. Swithin’s Day rime from England:
St. Swithin’s day, if thou dost rain,
For forty days it will remain;
St. Swithin’s day, if thou be fair,
For forty days ’twill rain nae mair.

¹⁸ Private letter to the author.
classes toward the Feast of Lanterns, the attempted transformation, through the centuries, of the ancient good luck festival into spiritualized sun-worship seems to have been but very incompletely successful. The folk elements, originally dominant, apparently to this very day retain among the wider masses of the Chinese population almost their pristine vigor.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Venice, California}

\textsuperscript{19} In regard to these folk elements and the manner in which a later religious practice appears to be superimposed, compare the Japanese Feast of Lanterns (also called Urabon, or Festival for the Spirits of the Dead) celebrated in Japan from the 13th to the 15th of the seventh moon (Ensho Ashikaga, \textit{"The Festival for the Spirits of the Dead in Japan,"} \textit{Western Folklore}, IX (1950), 217–228.). Although this festival is to all appearances the Japanese All-Souls Day, when ancestral spirits re-visit the earth and are appropriately welcomed according to Buddhistic ritual, there are underlying cross-currents of observance possibly stemming from earlier indigenous practices. The lanterns are ostensibly for the guidance of the returning spirits, but there seem to be deeper associations. Ashikaga observes that fires were kindled on the final night on the mountains outside of Kyoto as a fire offering to seven stars in the northern constellation of the Great Bear, and suggests a further connection with an esoteric Buddhistic rite invoking health and longevity. The farewell, or Bon, dance ushering the spirits back to their abode on the last day is believed originally performed for the purpose of exterminating noxious rice insects. Festal offerings to the spirits being mainly agricultural products (rice, millet, etc.), it might be possible, remarks Ashikaga, to say that prayer was thus being offered to the ancestral spirits for an abundant harvest, and that the custom of such a service had existed before Buddhism.