Cultural Comparison between Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas Festival

Yuanhui HU
Khams Research Institute of Translation on Foreign Educational Literature, School of foreign languages, Sichuan Minzu College

Abstract: Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas have the same function, and they are the most solemn and grand festivals in the local area. Starting from the customs of Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas festivals, this paper discusses the differences in the way of celebration and eating customs between the two festivals, and also introduces the reasons for the cultural differences between the two festivals from three aspects of religious culture, Festival origin and geographical environment. At the same time, from the aspects of time, purpose, commerce and religion, the Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas also have something in common.

Keywords: Tibetan new year; Western christmas; Customs; Similarities and differences

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1. Introduction

The national festival is the result of a nation’s historical and cultural accumulation. It is a summary of a nation’s long-term production and life experience. It is a

About the author: Yuanhui Hu (1978- ), female, born in Guang’an City, Sichuan Province, is a lecturer in the school of foreign languages of Sichuan Minzu College. She is mainly engaged in the research of Chinese and Western literature and culture, and College English teaching.

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window for us to understand a nation. From the customs of national festivals, we can see a nation’s mode of production, living customs, value orientation and religious belief. With the development of economy and the establishment of global economic integration, international relations are increasingly close, and cross-cultural exchanges often occur. By comparing Tibetan New Year culture with Western Christmas festival culture, cross-cultural communication barriers can be reduced, and at the same time, it is conducive to the publicity and inheritance of Tibetan excellent traditional culture.

2. Differences between Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas Festival Customs

(1) The Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas celebrations are different
Tibetan New Year is the most important festival for Tibetans. Nearly a month before the New Year, Tibetans began to be busy for the New Year. In addition to preparing their own new year’s food, they should also prepare items for guests and friends. “At the New Year’s Eve, every family will prepare a wooden bowl called “zhusuqima”, which will be used to hold Zanba, ginseng fruit, fried barley grains and other food mixed with butter. On top of these foods, highland barley ears will be inserted. In addition, people will also make a sheep’s head with colorful butter flower (Luguo). These are essential items for the Chinese New Year, which means that the next year will be a good time for good weather and full of grain. In the morning of the first day of the New Year, women go to the well to worship the God of water and carry “golden water” (that is, the first bucket water carried on the first day of the New Year). The water is used for drinking or sprinkled with cypress branches in the corner of the house, which means that the whole family is free from disease and disaster. The man took Zanba, grain, and prayer flags to worship the mountain god near his home to pray for God’s blessing on his family. On the third day of the New Year’s day, Tibetans will go to the nearby holy mountains to pray for blessings and worship the mountain gods, and pay homage to or visit Living Buddhas with good relations in temples. After the third day of Tibetan New Year, it is the time for Tibetans to celebrate the New Year. Various recreational activities will be held in the county or village to celebrate the New Year.

In the west, about half a month before Christmas, people begin to prepare for the festival, such as buying food, Christmas tree and its decorations, greeting cards, etc. Christmas party is a necessary entertainment item for Christmas. It has various forms, such as family style, friend type, lover type, etc. The purpose of Christmas party is to be happy and entertaining. It reflects the carnival and romantic color in the festival, and pays attention to the value orientation of personal emotion. Children hang red socks on their beds on Christmas Eve, waiting for Santa Claus to give them presents in the
evening; cards given by friends are printed with legends about the birth of Jesus; people wear Christmas hats and sing Christmas songs at Christmas parties, which reflect the Western Christmas festival and have a strong religious color, which is closely related to Christianity in the West.

(2) The eating custom of Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas festival is different

Traditional culture is the accumulation and summary of people’s production, lifestyle and experience in the region. Cultural characteristics are closely related to the geographical location, climate and living habits of a nation. Ethnic groups in different regions have their own distinctive beliefs and customs. Tibetan people have lived in the Tibetan Plateau for generations, where there are lots of mountains, valleys and rivers. The perennial snow, cold climate and barren land create a unique way of living in Tibet. Highland barley, a kind of crop with strong cold resistance and wide adaptability, has become the main food crop on the Qinghai Tibet Plateau. Yak is a mammal living at the highest altitude (except human beings) in the world, and can adapt to the cold climate at high altitude. Therefore, highland barley and yak are essential food in Tibetan festivals. In addition, on the 29th night of the twelfth lunar month in the Tibetan New Year, every family will eat “Pa Tu” (local people call it “dough bumps”), and the whole family will sit and eat “Tu Ba” according to the order of their age. In Tibetan customs, “Tu Ba” is also known as “Gu Tu”, which has the function of avoiding evil spirits and exorcising ghosts. In some local customs in Tibetan areas, when people make “Gu Tu”, they will put some items in it. For example, putting highland barley in “Gu Tu” means the person eating highland barley will have good luck and smooth work in the new year; the person eating Zanba in “Gu Tu” means that he is kind and pure; the person eating chili in “Gu Tu” means that he can speak; the person eating “Gu Tu” with money means that he has fortune and money in the new year. Eating “Tu Ba” should be in accordance with the order of elders and children, which reflects the Tibetan moral value orientation of respect and the importance of filial piety.

Turkey and almond pudding are the dishes that must be prepared for Christmas dinner. This kind of eating habit is closely related to the real life conditions of Europeans when British come to America. In the west, the custom of eating turkey at Christmas has a history of nearly 400 years. At the beginning of the 17th century, when immigrants from England landed in Plymouth, the United States, other living materials were scarce, but there are plenty of wild Turkeys on mountains. Since then, Turkey has become the main dish of their Festival, and also become the main dish of Western Christmas and other festivals. In addition to Turkey, Westerners have the custom of eating almond pudding before Christmas dinner. “Westerners must stir the pudding clockwise when eating pudding at Christmas, which means that the New Year will be
smooth and good luck. When making almond pudding, the family will keep a whole almond in the pudding. It is said that the person who eats the only complete almond means the best luck in the New Year. There is a custom of preparing an extra meal and a seat for each family during the Christmas dinner, and there are two reasons for this custom: one is for the messenger of the LORD; the other is for passers-by.” [2]

3. Reasons for the Differences between Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas Festival Customs

(I) Different religious cultures

The Tibetan lived in the primitive closed society for a long time. They could not find the answer to the irresistible natural disasters by scientific means, so they had to seek relief through the worship of gods. The original religion of the Tibetan area, ”the divination of good and bad luck in case of disaster, praying for blessings and eliminating disasters, worshiping gods and expelling ghosts in all things” [3] caters to the Tibetan people’s psychology of extricating themselves from suffering. Therefore, the idea of harmonious coexistence between man and nature and the unity of heaven and man advocated by Bon religion has taken root in Tibetan areas. With the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan areas, Buddhism’s thought of good and evil causes and six ways of reincarnation affect the Tibetan people’s words and deeds, thus forming a tolerant and harmonious style of treating people and things in Tibetan areas. In the Tibetan New Year Festival, there are not only religious elements of worshiping mountain gods and praying for blessing, but also the entertainment of the whole people participating in the mass happiness regardless of age, occupation and status, which embodies the idea of harmony between man and nature and harmonious coexistence.

Engels once said: “without the foundation laid by Greek culture and Roman Empire, there would be no modern Europe.” [4] As one of the sources of western culture, ancient Greek culture laid the foundation for the formation of Western thinking mode, and had an obvious influence on western philosophy, art and literature. As a warrior nation, ancient Rome influenced the improvement and perfection of western social system in military and legal aspects. Another source of western culture is ancient Hebrew culture, also known as Jewish culture. After the Jews were ruled by Rome, people led a hard life and the people were in a difficult situation. The Christianity founded by Jesus preached the doctrine of loving God and loving others as one’s own, which won many supporters and helped the suffering people find a way to extricate themselves from their thoughts. Therefore, the number of believers has increased and the scale of Christianity has been expanded and developed. With the development and spread of Christianity, “the ancient Hebrew culture founded by the Jews quickly integrated into
Cultural Comparison between Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas Festival

western culture and became the core of western culture. Christianity also became an important part of western culture.” [4] Christianity believes that “people are born to atone for their sins, so they pray or recite poems during the festival to clear away their wrongs.” [2] Due to the influence of Christian doctrine, Westerners often worship in some important festivals, in order to achieve the purpose of meditating wisdom and improving morality.

(2) Festivals have different origins

As early as BC, there was a custom of celebrating the “Yasang Festival” in Tibetan areas. This activity was usually held at the turn of winter and spring. Before the ploughing and sowing the field in spring, the people had a period of free time. Therefore, they gathered together to sing and dance and play on the holy mountains, which was the beginning of the Tibetan year. “In the 13th century, during the Sakya Dynasty, the New Year was designated as the first day of the first January.” [5] From then on, the Tibetan New Year was officially formed. The formation of the Tibetan New Year is actually a way for the Tibetan people to express their joy after the autumn harvest. At the same time, this period coincides with the beginning of spring when all things are reviving, which shows the Tibetan people’s ardent expectations and good wishes for the New Year. The Tibetan New Year not only has the entertainment purpose of celebrating the harvest, but also shows the Tibetans’ hope for the coming year. Under the protection of the gods, people and animals will flourish, the wind and rain will be smooth, and peace and tranquility will be achieved. They will pray for peace and prosperity by worshipping Buddha and praying for God. Therefore, it has a strong religious color.

Christmas is the most important and strong festival in the West. Christmas is the 25th day of December every year in the Gregorian calendar. “Christmas is also known as” Christmas Day, “which is translated as” Christ mass. “It was originally the Roman god’s day to welcome the New Year. Later, the Vatican incorporated this festival custom into the Christian system to celebrate the birth of Jesus [6]. It is said that Jesus was the Virgin Mary who was unmarried and conceived by God. She gave birth to Jesus on her way to Bethlehem. In fact, the Bible does not record the date on which Jesus was born, but later generations calculated that Jesus was born on December 25 according to the seasonal situation. At the same time, “this day is the birth of the sun god in Roman culture, because Christianity believes that Jesus is the eternal sun.” [4] Although there are also reasons to celebrate the harvest of Christmas, but the religious color is also very strong.

(3) Different geographical environment

Tibetans have lived in the Tibetan Plateau for generations. With few people, deep
mountainous and covered with ice and snow all the year round, harsh natural conditions, hard living environment, and frequent natural disasters, people are powerless to sudden natural and man-made disasters. They are afraid of natural disasters, and gradually “form the worship of all things in the nature, believing that all things in the world have souls. All things in nature are personified.” Therefore, worshiping the holy mountains is one of the indispensable rituals in Tibetan New Year and major festivals, and holy mountains are very common in Tibetan areas. At the same time, the high mountains and steep roads in the Tibetan area, the backward traffic, and the lack of contact opportunities between the Tibetan people and the foreigners, so the unique local culture is little affected by the external culture. In the festival, the common entertainment among the people, regardless of rich or poor, forms a harmonious and harmonious scene between people.

Ancient Greece, the birthplace of Western civilization, is located along the Mediterranean coast. Political, economic and cultural exchanges between coastal countries are frequent, and cultural blending is very common. Ancient Greece belongs to the marine civilization. People lived on the sea and had frequent maritime trade activities, which also prompted the ancient Greeks to form a national character and national spirit of brave exploration and continuous development. The national democratic system of Athens in ancient Greece laid the foundation and rudiment of Western democratic system. The concept of democracy was also reflected in Western life. The concept of equality and individualism were deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. For example, at Christmas, Westerners paid more attention to the value experience of personal feelings.

4. Cultural Similarities between Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas Festival

In terms of time, both Tibetan New Year and Western Christmas are held for a period of time. The Tibetan New Year lasts about half a month from January 1 to January 15. In most European countries, Christmas lasts about 10 days to half a month, which is roughly the same as the celebration time of the Tibetan New Year. In terms of purpose, both of them are family reunion days. Relatives and friends will take advantage of the festival to exchange feelings, enhance friendship and strengthen family ties. They also give each other gifts to express their feelings. From a commercial point of view, these two festivals will promote economic development, “businesses will also use this festival for commercial speculation.” For example, there are all kinds of Christmas trees, Christmas hats, Christmas cards, Christmas tree ornaments and Ping’an fruits on the market at Christmas; fried fruits, card mats, sutra flags, Longda (a
kind of paper printed with Sanskrit and Buddha images, which are scattered on the holy mountain when worshipping God Mountains) and hada are also sold in the Tibetan New Year. From the religious point of view, both of them contain religious color. For example, in the cultural customs of the Tibetan New Year Festival, “Tibetans will take hada to the temple on the morning of the first day of the New Year to burn incense and worship Buddha, and go to the temple to visit the lamas with good relations.” [5] On the third day of the New Year’s day, each family will go to the nearby holy mountain to simmer mulberry, hang colorful prayer flags and salongda. In the west, most catholic churches hold mass activities on Christmas Eve on December 24. Christians also hold good news activities on that night and celebrate Christmas on Christmas day.

5. Conclusion

Different living environments in different places have created different production and life styles, and bred different foreign cultures with their own characteristics. Traditional festival culture is an epitome of a nation’s life for thousands of years. It reflects people’s life style, spiritual pursuit and value orientation. Through the comparison of Tibetan New Year culture and Western Christmas festival culture, Tibetan people can better understand the differences between their own culture and other countries’ culture, and make the unique traditional culture of Tibetan region remained enduring in the world of political and economic integration.

Works Cited