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The Influence of Chinese Culture on Japanese Traditional Festivals

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I. Introduction

In 794 A.D., the first permanent capital in Japan, which was called *Heian-kyo* (*Kyoto* today), was modeled after the Chinese capital, Chang-an. During the Heian Period, there were a great number of envoys sent to the Tang Dynasty to learn Chinese social system, calligraphy, art, literature and entertainment. These typical envoys were called *Kentoshi* in Japanese, who transmitted and passed on Chinese culture to Japan in the Tang Dynasty. Festivals were one of the most major conventions that were accepted by the Japanese. The Japanese had a great success in assimilating and then adapting the new culture. They transformed the customs into the ones that suited themselves the most. Therefore, since the Chinese culture was introduced to Japan, the adopted culture has become partly different from the original one. That is, Japan has mixed the borrowed culture with new elements. The Japanese festivals seem similar to their original forms in some aspects but actually have become unique in all.

Which Japanese festivals originated from Chinese traditions? Which aspects of the Chinese festivals were introduced and copied? Which parts of them were transformed, or adapted? How were they different from the original ones? Why such adaptation was made? These questions are worth exploring because they can help us to clear up the national character of Japanese and to retrieve some of our lost Chinese traditions, which have been preserved well in Japan since the Heian Period. A few researchers have found these questions important, including Han Liang-Lou (2014), a well-known Taiwanese author, and Shintani Takanori (2012), the professor of the National Museum of Japanese History. Therefore, this study was aimed to discover how the Japanese adapted the Chinese festivals and to uncover the causes behind the adaptation via collecting related data and analyzing them. Five important Japanese festivals that derive roots from Chinese culture were focused upon for analyses: the Japanese New Year, *Hinamatsuri*, *Tango no Sekku*, *Tanabata*, and *Bon* Festival. They were compared with their original counterparts respectively: the Chinese New Year, *Shang-si* Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, *Qixi* Festival, and Ghost Festival. By comparing and contrasting the original customs of Chinese festivals and the borrowed customs that are practiced in Japan, the aspects of adaptation could be sorted and the

causes behind the adaptation could be induced.

II. Thesis

A. Chinese versus Japanese Conventions of the Five Main Festivals

During the Chinese Tang Dynasty, science and culture from China were introduced to Japan during the Heian Period by the imperial ambassadors. Among the introduced cultures, festivals were especially prominent because they could truly reflect the life of ancient Japanese. These Chinese traditions have been adapted into their unique forms in today's Japan by the aristocrats and the populace since then. In Japanese culture, there are five *sekku*, which are the traditional seasonal festivals, including *Oshogatsu* (Japanese New Year), *Momo no Sekku* (*Hinamatsuri*), *Tango no Sekku* (*Duanwu* Festival), *Tanabata* (*Qixi* Festival) and *Choyo no Sekku* (Double Ninth Festival). Nowadays, *Choyo no Sekku* is less practiced by the Japanese; the *Bon* Festival (Ghost Festival) takes its place and has become the fifth main Japanese festivals. These festivals originated from the Chinese Zodiac Calendar. The ancient Chinese used to organize activities for all of them, but now the celebrations have changed and some traditions have been lost. Today, each of these festivals remains in Japan and reminds Japanese people to be aware of the transformation of the seasons.

1. The Japanese New Year versus The Chinese New Year

The New Year, which starts on January 1st of the lunar calendar, is the most significant festival in Chinese culture, and so is it in other countries influenced by China. Japan is no exception. However, while the Chinese and Taiwanese celebrate the New Year on January 1st of the lunar calendar, the Japanese celebrate it on January 1st of the solar calendar. During the Meiji Restoration¹, Japan abolished the use of lunar calendar and made all the lunar calendar festivals be celebrated on the same date on the solar calendar.

¹ Meiji Restoration is the westernization and modernization of Japan, when Japanese set up a constitution, bureaucratic government, a powerful army and navy, and had a significant growing on

Traditionally, Chinese people have a family dinner on New Year's Eve to celebrate the reunion of all the relatives. Similarly, Japanese have "osechi-ryori." In both cultures' New Year dishes, carrots, lotus roots, fish, rice cakes and noodles are common ingredients. Nonetheless, there are some differences between the two cultures today. For instance, Japanese drink "Otoso" during the New Year, while modern Taiwanese or Chinese do not. *Otoso* is a type of medical wine consisting of the Japanese alcohol *sake* and herbs, which are beneficial for the body to stay warm. Cinnamon sticks, Japanese mountain pepper, balloon flowers², *baizhu*³, *fangfeng*⁴ and dried tangerine peels are commonly seen in the ingredients of *Otoso*. It is said that drinking *Otoso* can not only ensure one's health in the next coming year but also drive the spirit of devil out of one's body. The tradition of drinking *Otoso* on the New Year's Day began in China's Tang Dynasty, and was adopted by Japanese aristocrats in the Heian Period. This tradition can no longer be found in Taiwan or China.

Another important tradition from China is the porridge of seven herbs. In ancient times, Chinese would have "porridge with seven herbs" to supplement some nutrition to their body, and the tradition was also transmitted to Japan in the Tang Dynasty. The recipe of the porridge is different from region to region. In Fujian, the porridge contains spinach, celery, scallion, garlic, leek, mustard, shepherd's purse herb and Chinese cabbage. In Kyoto, it is composed of Japanese parsley, shepherd's purse herb, cottonweed, chickweed⁵, henbit⁶, turnip and Japanese radish, which are common wild plants in Japan. Although the traditions of having *Otoso* and the porridge of seven herbs have disappeared in China and Taiwan for a long time, they have been preserved well in Japan since the Heian Period.

² The botanical name of balloon flower is *Platycodon grandiflorus*. It is a native in northern China, Korea and Japan, and is advantageous for treating cold and bronchitis.

³ The botanical name of baizhu is *Atractylodes macrocephala*. Baizhu is a Chinese medicine for improving one's immune system and hematopoietic function.

⁴ The botanical name of fangfeng is *Radix Saposhnikovia*. Fangfeng is recorded as one of the highest level herbs by Shen Nong in *Compendium of Materia Medica*. It is commonly used to prevent and expel the causative bacteria from entering one's body.

⁵ Chickweed is a kind of common wild herb in temperate zone. It contains abundant nutrition and vitamins; therefore, it is commonly used in spring salad in western countries.

⁶ The botanical name of henbit is *Lamium amplexicaule*. It is a main herb used in springtime salad in temperate zone. Its bloom colors are purple and pink.

2. *Hinamatsuri* versus *Shang-si* Festival

Hinamatsuri is also a critical festival in Japanese traditional culture. The origin of *Hinamatsuri* is the *Shang-si* Festival, which is forgotten by the Taiwanese and Chinese in the modern society. According to *the Analects of Confucius*⁷ and the poetry⁸ by the prominent poet, Du Fu, the history of *Shang-si* Festival can be traced back to the Cunqiou Era in China. In ancient times, Chinese would go to the rivers together to have leisure activities and have their bodies cleaned. It is also mentioned that on that day ancient Chinese would express their love to the one he or she had a crush on. This festival was adopted in the Heian Period, and nowadays, Japanese display a set of dolls for their daughters on that day for the purpose of praying for health and happiness.

3. *Tango no Sekku* versus the *Duanwu* Festival

Duanwu Festival, also called the Dragon Boat Festival, is held on May 5th of the lunar calendar, which is an important festival in the Chinese culture. In Chinese culture, people eat *zhongzi*, drink realgar⁹ wine, wear perfume pouches, hang mugwort and calamus¹⁰ at the door outside their houses, and attend dragon boat racing on that day for the purpose of preventing pandemic and memorizing the patriotic poet Qu Yuan. The customs of *Duanwu* Festival was introduced from the Tang Dynasty to Japan in the Asuka Period, and has become a traditional festival in Japan, called *Tango no Sekku*. After the Meiji Restoration, the festival was celebrated on the May 5th of the solar calendar. In 1948, the Japanese government decided to make the day the Children's Day. Today, Japanese celebrate this day by having a calamus bath, eating *kashiwamochi*, which is a kind of rice cake wrapped in oak

⁷ 《論語》先進篇第二十五章：「莫春者，春服既成，冠者五六人，童子六七人，浴乎沂。風乎舞雩，詠而歸。」

⁸ 源自杜甫《麗人行》：「三月三日天氣新，長安水邊多麗人。態濃意遠淑且真，肌理細膩骨肉勻。繡羅衣裳照暮春，蹙金孔雀銀麒麟。」

⁹ Realgar is a soft orange mineral with arsenic sulphide. Chinese used to sprinkle realgar powder and drink realgar wine to repel serpents and insects because of its toxicity.

¹⁰ Calamus is a kind of general plant in temperate zone. It can be use as a tranquilizer and wonder drug, but also be beneficial for treating fever.

leaves, and raising carp-shaped flags for the boys in the family.

4. *Tanabata* versus the *Qixi Festival*

The *Qixi* Festival is celebrated in the Chinese culture on July 7th of the lunar calendar. In Chinese culture, young girls pray to Goddess Zhinu for wisdom, love and better domestic skills. In the past, embroidering competition was one of the most crucial activities of the festival. With the mere moonlight, adolescent girls gathered to compete for making the most sophisticated embroideries. The more consummately a girl finished her handcrafts, the more likely it was that she could marry her dream husband. Today, only a few tribes in China are still practicing this tradition for the *Qixi* Festival, while many other people celebrate it as a Valentines Day.

This festival was also transmitted from China's Tang Dynasty to Japan in the Asuka Period. The *Qixi* Festival is called *Tanabata* in Japanese. It first became popular between the royals and the aristocrats, and holding a poem party for *Tanabata* was a symbol of aesthetic taste. Guests would be able to admire and criticize poems at the party. It was not until the Edo Period that the custom was popularized to the public. Contemporarily, Japanese couples celebrate *Tanabata* by writing wishes or poems on small pieces of colorful paper and hanging them on the twigs of bamboos.

5. *Bon* Festival versus Ghost Festival

The Ghost Festival is a traditional Buddhist festival celebrated on July 15th on the lunar calendar in Asia. In Chinese culture, people hold a ghost-feeding worship ceremony and fold floating lotus-shaped paper lanterns with a view to worshipping their ancestors and the ghosts. In Japan, the Ghost Festival is called the *Bon* Festival. *Bon Odori* is one of the most common and popular activities during the festival. It is a kind of simple folk dance to welcome the spirits of the dead during the festival. At the end of the *Bon* Festival, Japanese set floating paper lanterns into rivers. They believe that the lanterns can guide the ghosts back to the world of the dead.

B. Japanese Adaptation of the Five Festivals

1. Dates

The dates of the festivals were identical as they were in China when they were first introduced to the Japanese. Nonetheless, there was a considerable change during the Meiji Restoration. At that time, Japanese government abolished the lunar calendar and made all lunar-calendar festivals celebrated on the same dates on the solar calendar. All of the five main festivals are now celebrated on the same dates, yet on the solar calendar. Though the Japanese government has changed the dates, in some areas, people still follow the lunar calendar to hold the festivals to match the change of seasons.

2. Ingredients

Due to the climate and environmental differences between China and Japan, the Chinese recipe of the food in the celebration could not be fully imitated by the Japanese. Take *Otoso* and the porridge with seven herbs for example. Their ingredients in Japan are different from those in China. That is because the Japanese ancestors used the native plants in their homeland to make the dishes. Since some of the plants used in China couldn't be found easily in Japan, Japanese have to seek their own native plants with the same efficacy. That is why some of the borrowed customs in Japan, especially the ones about food, are a little different from the original ones.

3. Celebrations

As time passes, some of the festivals' original meanings have changed in Japan. *Hinamatsuri* and *Tango no Sekku* are the most obvious ones. *Shang-si* Festival, the origin of *Hinamatsuri*, was once the official holiday for young couples to date in the Han Dynasty. Now, *Hinamatsuri* is regarded as the girls' day in Japan. *Tango no Sekku* has changed its celebration as well. It's the national children's day in Japan instead of the purpose of memorizing Qu Yuan. Notwithstanding, Japanese still remain the custom of hanging calamus at the door and having a calamus bath to avoid

pests and contagious diseases in summer.

B. Cause of Festival Adaptation

According to Ye, Weh-Qu, a prominent translator in China, Japanese are sensitive to the transformation of the seasons because they show respect and gratitude to the nature. Based on the ancient Japanese mythology, cultural researchers infer that Japanese care about the nature a lot and regard it as the origin of lives, which is why they are able to discover the subtle differences of it. They see themselves as a part of the Earth and integrate their life with the nature instead of controlling it.

Japanese had accepted Chinese culture with the view to learning the advantages of its political and social system. This cultural learning peaked during the Heian Period and seemed to have launched prior to the Heian Period due to ancient Japanese's obsession with Chinese civilization after they visited China. **“For more than a century prior to the Heian Period, Japan obsessed over things Chinese. Japanese envoys who visited Tang China found a magnificent civilization far more advanced than their own.”** Ethan Segal (2010) from the Michigan State University said. It is generally accepted that Japanese imported the cuisine, architecture, literature and writing system from Tang Dynasty, China.

Nonetheless, festivals became the by-products of this cultural transmission. According to Guan Ji-long and Jing Xiao-ling (2005), festivals were regarded as a tool for the aristocrats to bring the Chinese social system to the peasantry class because understanding a culture's custom first could help them learn its thoughts much more effortlessly. To make the festivals be accepted by the civilians, the aristocrats adapted some of the Chinese customs in accordance with their national character. On the other side, Japanese had learnt astronomy and astrology from Chinese; therefore, they imported the twenty-four solar terms and their related festivals at the same time, namely the five *sekku* (traditional festivals).

III. Conclusion

The study was set out to explore the contrast between the native Chinese culture from Tang Dynasty and its adaptation in Japan since the Heian Period; it has also sought for what affected the Chinese culture to be changed in Kyoto. Based on the previous analyses about Japanese festival customs, it is found that Japanese did not imitate Chinese culture completely. Instead, the natives had transformed it into the one that was more appropriate for them during the process of remolding their society and absorbing foreign cultures. Their national character was the implication for their insistence on adapting an exotic culture.

The culture transmission has created a considerable amount of variations between Chinese and Japanese culture since the Tang Dynasty and the Heian Period. For Japanese civilization, Chinese culture is not its “replacement” but its “substance.” Japanese still keep the original core of their character while facing the world hegemony. Hence, Japanese had developed their peculiar culture.

Nowadays, festivals have become tools of business and entertainment. The original spirit of the festivals has faded. To avoid the festivals from disappearing, there is need for people to preserve those conventions and pass them down to the next generation.

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