

ELSLEY ZEITLYN LECTURE ON CHINESE
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Timely Images: Chinese Art and Festival Display

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Introduction

LOOKING AT A WORK OF ART brings pleasure, but if created long ago or in a civilisation different from the viewers' own, then some of the original nuances are invariably lost or even misunderstood by the audience. A body of literature exists that explores some of the unintended meanings and miscommunications that are conveyed when paintings and three-dimensional objects from times past and places faraway are put on display in museums, but the issue of 'time' itself in the creation and viewing of art—its connections with seasons, rites, and festival events—has not been addressed adequately, especially in the case of China which is the focus of this study.¹ As a step toward redressing this lacuna, the importance of time in the production and display of art and artefacts in late imperial China, with an emphasis given to the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, is presented here. The goal is to draw attention to the significant, yet often overlooked bond between Chinese visual culture and its temporal conventions in order to expand the interpretive framework for understanding Chinese pictorial art.

Before examining 'time' as one of the key motivations in the production and viewing of Chinese art, an example with global familiarity can

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¹For museum studies, see Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC, 1991).

help introduce the point. This is the Christmas tree that while originally associated only with a Christian holiday, has come to have an international presence as a beacon of wintertime joy and harbinger of consumer spending. Every year a spectacular twenty-foot blue spruce decorated with Neapolitan angels goes on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and exemplifies viewers' expectations about the display of a Christmas tree. This tree and its superb eighteenth-century figurines go on exhibition during the winter holiday season in a large interior courtyard where Christmas music is piped in. Visiting the tree is an annual ritual for adults and children from around the world but, despite the joy the display engenders, it is always taken down in January around the time of Epiphany (6 January). To even imagine this display in the summer months would be comical. People only expect to see the tree and angels at a certain time of year. However delightful as works of art the modelled figurines are, custom dictates that they and the great tree be on view only at a specific time of year for about a month before they are returned to the storage vaults of the museum.

In contrast, museum displays of Chinese art seldom demonstrate a similar sensitivity to the dimension of time. Take, for example, a subtly elegant flower painting by the Ming dynasty artist Lu Zhi (1496–1576), in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, illustrating a bouquet of branches of pomegranate blossoms, moxa, and loquat, a lily, and calamus leaves (Fig. 1). Imagine it on display in December in an exhibition of floral paintings; or consider the case of a Wanli-period (1572–1620) porcelain dish that brandishes the same triad of pomegranate flowers, calamus and moxa arrayed around the cavetto, which is on permanent view at the British Museum in a gallery dedicated to the Sir Percival David Collection of Chinese ceramics (Fig. 2). The well of the dish is decorated with boats that resemble a floating dragon, phoenix, and peacock; the unillustrated reverse side pictures five poisonous creatures.

For their original community of viewers, encountering either the dish or the hanging scroll in the winter would have produced a state of cognitive dissonance not dissimilar to that of the New Yorkers if they were to encounter the Christmas tree on view during the summer in the Metropolitan Museum. This is because the combination of pomegranate flowers, calamus, and moxa is instantly recognisable as appropriate for one moment in time only, the Double Fifth Festival, which falls on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month corresponding to the period between the end of May to late June in the Western calendar. Lu Zhi's inscription on the painting makes this association explicit as it names the holiday, *Tianzhong jie*,



Figure 1. Lu Zhi (1496–1576), *Bouquet for Double Fifth*; Ming dynasty, 1570; hanging scroll; ink and colour on paper; National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China. Photograph © The National Palace Museum.



Figure 2. Porcelain dish with *wucui* decoration for Double Fifth; Ming dynasty; Wanli (1573–1620) mark and period; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province; Height: 3.8 cm, Dia. 21 cm; Sir Percival David Collection at the British Museum; PDF. 750. Photograph © SOAS, all rights reserved.

which along with the names *Duanwu jie* and *Duanyang jie*, all literally meaning Solar Maximus, are the most common Chinese terms for the occasion. The event is known most widely in English as Dragon Boat Festival because of boat races that take place on the day and are referenced in the image on the dish. The poisonous creatures on the dish are apotropaic images also specific to Double Fifth. Yet despite the highly specific nature of the imagery discussed, museum curators often display such works at any time of the year in order to illustrate other points about the history of art in China, such as the artistic attributes of late Ming porcelain or the subtlety of Chinese brushwork.²

²Curators around the world, including in China, freely use festival images out of season if there is a larger art historical point to make. For example, an exhibition of bird-and-flower paintings at

Double Fifth is traditionally believed to be the most pernicious day of the year, when noxious vapours and pestilences peak in the stifling summer heat that coincides with the summer solstice which occurs close in date to Double Fifth. This is the season when pomegranate blossoms explode in full bloom and calamus and moxa peak at their most verdant. All three are traditionally credited with warding off evil. The dazzling red of the pomegranate blossoms imbues them with auspiciousness because of a long-established belief in the power of this fiery colour to deflect evil and attract joy. Positive associations are also lodged in the flowers because they are harbingers of the tree's many-seeded fruits. The words 'son' and 'seed' are homonyms and thus pomegranates are one of most common Chinese symbols to represent giving birth to many heirs, a blessing all families sought. Both the hot colour red and the wish for male progeny are especially appropriate for Double Fifth because of their association with the principle of yang—the bright, fiery, dry, male values—in the Chinese yin-yang cosmology of complementary bipolar forces that generate the cosmic phenomenon. At noon on Double Fifth the yang forces reach their zenith in the annual cycle, followed by the ascendancy of the yin forces.

The odiferous qualities of calamus and moxa are said to repel insects and disease, and lily flowers can be used in medicines explaining their choice in Double Fifth imagery. Moreover, calamus leaves resemble a sword, while moxa leaves, perhaps in what takes a greater feat of imagination, are said to resemble a tiger, thus imbuing these plants with additional symbolic qualities to fend off evil.³ Tigers, the King of Beasts in Chinese lore, are noted for martial spirit and paired with a sword signify the ability to slay malevolent forces. To anyone familiar with Chinese tradition, the festival association of the trio of pomegranate, calamus, and moxa is readily apparent and so to display an artwork with this motif out of season would seem weirdly inappropriate.

The Metropolitan Museum's Christmas tree and the Chinese painting by Lu Zhi or the Wanli-period dish or, more precisely, the circumstances of their display, demonstrate a truth so elemental that it is rarely mentioned

the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong included a painting by Wang Shimin, dated to the Double Fifth festival of 1661, as an example of top quality work, but without mentioning its place in a yearly cycle of imagery. This scroll, which is in the Guangdong Provincial Museum, presents a bouquet with pomegranate blossoms, calamus, and moxa. See Zhu Wanzhang *et al.*, *Flower and Bird Painting of the Ming and Qing Periods, Jointly Presented by the Guangdong Provincial Museum and the Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2001), no. 29.

³The leaves were sometimes plaited into tiger-shaped emblems to make the association clearer.

or thought about within the context of curatorial practice in the world of museums. It is simply this: when an object is seen can radically change its meaning and its power over the viewer's imagination; not everything was made to be seen all the time. Although it is a commonplace of cultural criticism and art historical writing to note that the artefacts that fill museums have been displaced from their original spatial, social, and ritual contexts, what is thought of less often, if at all, is how these objects have been snatched from their original temporal contexts in the societies that produced them. Placed on more or less permanent view in museums or displayed in exhibitions that have no regard for the time-specific nature of the works, the painting by Lu Zhi or the Wanli-period dish, here exemplifying a larger curatorial practice, provide year-round pleasure and edification, which, however, comes at the cost of obscuring their position within the grand rhythms of life that governed their production and original display, and imbued them with significance and performative functions in the lives of the viewers. The association between seasonality and the Christmas tree is universally known and respected, but with regard to displays of Chinese art (even including in some Chinese museums), their connection with the time of year is all too often ignored.

Any examination of how the concept of time has been made manifest in Chinese visual and material culture will first recognise the importance of the four seasons, which are a macro-level and fundamental organising principle in Chinese art and culture as has been addressed by several scholars, including Jessica Rawson in a study of cosmological systems as a source of ornament and Ogawa Hiromitsu in an analysis of flower paintings that mark the passage of time through the display of seasonal blossoms.⁴ Another way to analyse the role of time in Chinese art is to drill down to the micro-level of the celebration of festivals, both large and small, which reveals the extent to which China's visual culture has been generated in their service as markers of the annual cycle, especially in imperial, or pre-1912, China.⁵ While many practices have changed or been diminished in modern China, a link between major festival dates and specific imagery still exists.

⁴Jessica Rawson, 'Cosmological systems as sources of art, ornament and design', *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm*, 72 (2000), 133–89; and Ogawa Hiromitsu, 'Chū goku kachōga no jikū-kachōga kara kakizatsuga e' ('Space and time in Chinese bird and flower painting'), in Teisuke Toda and Ogawa Hiromitsu (ed.), *Chūgoku no Kachōga to Nihon* (Tokyo, 1983), pp. 92–107.

⁵One of the first English sources to draw attention to the subject of festivals is Tun Li-ch'en, translated and annotated by Derk Bodde, *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking as recorded in*

The calendar and marking the passage of time

The Chinese festival calendar—a term here used to refer to decorous rites and more boisterous, communal festivals—is extremely full, with more than one occasion to be marked each month. A tabulation of large and small annual events in the Qing dynasty yields nearly one hundred and fifty rites that required some form of observation, which could have been as simple as placing a vase of flowers or an offering of incense and wine on a domestic altar, or far more elaborate entailing exuberant public and family festivities.⁶

The number of major festivals for which the imperial court granted time off from work—from one to seven consecutive days—and which were celebrated with street parades, extended family visits, and elaborate social dining, differed over time. In the Tang dynasty (618–907) fifty-three such festivals were listed, while in the Ming and Qing dynasties the number was reduced to three—the Winter Solstice, New Year, and the Emperor's Birthday.⁷ Yet, in actual practice, Double Fifth and the autumnal Moon Festival also were major events in late imperial China and together with the New Year holiday served as the nexus for the most exuberant festivities and engendered the greatest production of objects for festival use and display. A reduction in the number of days off from work in the Ming and Qing dynasties compared to earlier times stands in an inverse relationship to the growing enthusiasm in the late period for observing holiday celebrations with elaborate preparations. Yet, many of the Ming and Qing events, while splendidly marked by displays of goods, were in fact nonetheless small holiday observances. Yet the culture of the

the Yen-ching Sui-shi-ji (Beiping[Beijing], 1936); another source that similarly focuses on late imperial festivals in Beijing is Zhang Jiangcai (comp.), *Beiping sui shi zhi* (*An Historical Account of Annual Customs and Festivals in Beiping*) (Guoli Beiping yanjiuyuan shixue yanjiu hui, 1936); more recently, see Yuan Hongqi, 'Qianlong shiqi de gongting jieqing huodong' ('Festival Activities at the Imperial Court during the Qianlong period'), *Gugong Bowuyuan yuankan*, 53(3) (1991), 81–7. For references to earlier festivals see Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China: New Year and Other Annual Observances during the Han Dynasty 206 B.C.–A.D. 220* (Princeton, NJ, 1975); Meng Yuanlao (1147), *Dongjing menghua lu* (Jinan, 2000); Jacques Gernet (trans. from the French by H. M. Wright), *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion 1250–1276* (Stanford, CA, 1970, from the French 1959).

⁶Tun and Bodde, *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking*. For detailed descriptions of some court festival observed during the Qianlong emperor's reign, see Yuan Hongqi, 'Qianlong shiqi de gongting jieqing huodong', pp. 81–7.

⁷Lien-sheng Yang, 'Schedules of work and rest in Imperial China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 18 (1955), 305.

period that promoted public displays of wealth was well suited to a mindset that deemed it essential to have special decorations, clothing, and foods for each different rite and festival.

Given the fullness of the festival calendar only a small subset has been chosen here to elucidate some connections between art and annual celebrations. As it is important to consider how both major and minor festivals impacted the visual culture of China, the events examined in this study include two major holidays—the opposing pair of the wintertime New Year celebration and the summertime Double Fifth—and a few minor festivals, notably Spring’s Beginning and the slightly later springtime Flower Festival.

It is worth noting at the outset that one of the distinctive features of Chinese festival customs and imagery is their inclusive nature. Commoners and the elite, including members of the imperial court, mostly celebrated the same holiday events with the same entertainments and foods, and sharing a consistent visual vocabulary across all social boundaries.⁸ The greatest difference was the degree of lavishness of any given celebration, which was linked to social position and personal wealth. Another point of consistency was across time: festivals and their routine practices naturally changed over time, and yet many precedents for late imperial customs are observed in the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) that itself continued and expanded upon seasonal rites practiced in the Zhou dynasty (c.1046–221 BC).

The period of greatest interest for studies of material cultural and art history, however, is the Ming and Qing dynasties. Craig Clunas has pointed out that time arguably had a greater visual presence in Ming culture than at any previous period, thus ensuring we can find many links between art and festival occasions.⁹ This trend continued to build momentum in the succeeding Qing dynasty, whose emperors carefully observed Chinese and Manchu rites. They also placed greater emphasis than before on charting festivals through sets of artworks consisting of twelve monthly images.¹⁰ The new emphasis on twelve may be in reference to Western calendrical traditions, although it is also a number with Chinese precedents.

⁸ Maggie Bickford brings attention to the inclusiveness of festival imagery in ‘The symbolic seasonal round in house and palace: counting the auspicious nines in Traditional China’, in Ronald G. Knapp and Kai-Yin Lo (eds.), *House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese* (Honolulu, HI, 2005), pp. 349–71.

⁹ Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644* (London, 2007), p. 24.

¹⁰ Chen Yunru, ‘Shijian de xingzhuang: Qing yuan hua shier yue ling tu de yanjiu’ (‘The Shape of Time: A Study of Twelve Months in the Qing Court’), *Gugong xueshu jikan*, vol. 22, no. 4 (summer 2005), 103–39. For a more general study of the importance of paintings created for annual festival

The rites and festivals that inspired the production of paintings, prints, ceramics, textiles, and many other types of artefact, as well as some of the buildings and gardens in which they were used, gave expression to a profound concern with correctly measuring and regulating time in imperial China, which was directly tied to the importance of the agrarian calendar.¹¹ One example that draws attention to the importance of measuring time for agricultural concerns and shows how such an exercise can be given a festive, visual form is the practice of counting off the eighty-one days that lay between the Winter Solstice and the beginning of warm weather for planting—a counting system that is measured in nine units of nine days each. This tradition of ‘counting the nines’ has been thoroughly studied by Maggie Bickford who illustrates examples of similar visual aids used by semi- or illiterate farmers and by courtiers alike to count off the days and bring good fortune to their families.¹² Both text-based and purely pictorial systems to count off these eighty-one days were employed. A clever example of word-based imagery was the practice of writing a poem that alluded to spring imagery and ensuring that the poem consisted of exactly eighty-one brushstrokes, or nine characters, each of nine strokes. Such a poem was prepared in advance by writing the words in outline form, and then beginning on the Winter Solstice, filling in one brushstroke a day. An example of such a work from the hand of the Daoguang Emperor (1820–50) is displayed in the Palace Museum, Beijing.¹³ The practice of an

dates at the Qing court, see a study on the works ordered by the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors by Giuseppe Castiglione: Wei Dong, ‘Lang Shining yu Qing gong jieling hua’, *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan*, 2 (1988), no. 40, pp. 80–7.

¹¹ That architectural settings were sometimes directly inspired by festivals is less often acknowledged than recognition of links with paintings, porcelains, and other portable art forms. One example of architecture relates to the Spring Purification Festival (*fuchu*) which is celebrated in the third lunar month. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, gardens—in the palace, temple compounds, and owned by private scholars—were sometimes embellished with man-made, decorative watercourses for use during this festival occasion. Originally the festival was a day for expelling evil and praying for fertility, but by the Ming dynasty it was widely celebrated as a day to compose poetry. This association can be traced to a link with China’s celebrated calligrapher, Wang Xizhi (AD 303–61), who on this day in 353 wrote the most highly admired calligraphic work in China, the *Preface to the Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion*. The setting for Wang’s composition was an outing of scholarly friends on Spring Purification Festival. They sat beside a meandering stream on which wine cups were floated with each participant compelled to compose a poem before the cup reached him, or he had to drink a forfeit. Ming and Qing garden designers made artificial watercourses for this purpose. One of the courtyards in the residential section of the Forbidden City boasts an example; see *Zijincheng* (Forbidden City Magazine) (2006), 3, 136, p. 56.

¹² Bickford, ‘The symbolic seasonal round’, p. 351.

¹³ See the cover of *Zijincheng* (Forbidden City Magazine) (2006), 3, 136.

emperor ‘counting the nines’ brings attention to the fundamental principle in imperial China that it was the Son of Heaven, the emperor himself, at the summit of the enterprise of keeping time and regulating the calendar in order to ensure the collective prosperity of his vast agrarian empire.¹⁴

The correct calculation of the calendar marked by festival observances provided practical guidance for timing the labours of the agricultural year. This was a complicated task given that the lunar calendar fluctuated as much as a month from one year to another and required a parallel system fixed to solar reckoning in order to bring it into accord with the seasonal dates for agriculture. The Chinese calendar is complex precisely because it is a luni-solar system. Months—or technically ‘lunations’—lasted either twenty-nine or thirty days and the Chinese year consisted of either 354 or 355 days, which thus required the periodic insertion of an intercalary month to align the lunar cycle with solar reckoning.¹⁵

The first day of the lunar year was set by court astronomers to fall on the first day of the second new moon after the Winter Solstice (fixed by the solar calendar), reflecting the close coordination between lunar and solar calculations. In understanding the intricacies of the Chinese lunar system, it is worth noting that equinoxes and solstices marked the zenith, or middle, of each season, unlike in the West where these four divisions herald the beginning of a season. Thus, the first, second, and third lunar months that comprise spring and embrace the spring equinox also encompass the extremely cold weather that corresponds to the month of February in the Western calendar, and likewise Chinese autumn begins with the hot weather that corresponds by Western calculation to August. The complexity of reconciling the lunar and solar systems is little less than a struggle which explains why devices, including pictures, charts, and poems that allow one to ‘count the nines’ and to determine when to plant seeds, were immensely important and popular.¹⁶

¹⁴The emperor’s role in keeping time that is well expressed by Jacques Gernet in his study of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) in *Daily Life in China* applies to later times as well: ‘It was the court that fixed, printed and circulated throughout the empire the official annual calendar for the year: the Emperor was still, according to most ancient traditions, the master and regulator of Time’ (p. 181).

¹⁵For greater detail about Chinese calendars see Helmer Aslaksen, ‘The mathematics of the Chinese Calendar’ (preprint, National Univ. of Singapore at <<http://www.math.nus.edu.sg/aslaksen/calendar>>, ‘Chinese calendar’, 1999); Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*, pp. 26–34 and 106–10; Joseph Needham with the collaboration of Wang Ling *et al.*, *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 3: Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth* (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 390–408.

¹⁶Ellen Johnston Laing, *Art & Aesthetics in Chinese Popular Prints: Selections from the Muban Foundation Collection* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2002) illustrates a number of prints that were of aid to farmers.

As the Grand Master of Time, the emperor took part in all the rites and festivals set by the Ministry of Rites that helped to regulate people's lives and their agricultural endeavours, including his ploughing the first furrow of the planting season. This imperial duty, which had been in place since the Zhou dynasty and lasted until the fall of the Qing, was predicated on a general understanding that the emperor's expansive virtue would ensure the success of the harvest and, while details of the practice changed over time, the basic outline was the same.¹⁷

Qing dynasty records indicate that the ceremony was practised with the emperor holding a yellow trowel and the reigns of a yellow ox attached to a plough of the same colour. Yellow was both the colour of the earth and emblematic of the emperor. During the rite, the emperor dug three furrows to plant seeds, and then his officials made further furrows and finally peasant farmers finished the job.¹⁸ This imperial spectacle took place in suburban Beijing at the Temple of Agriculture (Xiannong tan) on the day that corresponded to the first conjunction of the sun and the moon in the year, usually around 5 or 6 February, which is the Chinese festival called 'lichun', or Spring's Beginning. In concert with the emperor ploughing the ground in the empire's capital, the local officials repeated the same act throughout the rest of the country signalling the farmers to begin work in earnest.

The imperial connection with tilling is recognised in two types of artwork associated with the court. The more unusual case consists of paintings that depict a member of the imperial family in the act of farming. Prince Yinzhen, who took the throne as the Yongzheng Emperor in 1723, was the innovator for this kind of personal image and had himself painted enacting several stages of rice cultivation and also preparing silk. These self-referential commissions may have reflected an anxious desire to demonstrate his lofty character and thorough understanding of imperial duty since Yongzheng's rise to the throne was shrouded by court intrigue. Ideal depictions of him such as this may have played into some machinations useful to demonstrate his suitability as a ruler.¹⁹

¹⁷For reference to the Zhou dynasty, see Robert Eno, 'Chapter 1: Deities and ancestors in early oracle inscriptions', in Donald S. Lopez (ed.), *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), entry no. 57. A broader study is found in E. A. Armstrong, 'The ritual of the plough', *Folklore*, 54 (1943), 250–7.

¹⁸Rice seems to have been the general crop but the emperor also seeded corn according to Armstrong, 'The ritual of the plough'. Some Qing imperial paintings depict planting rice; see Frances Wood, *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795*, Guide for Teachers and Students, Royal Academy of Arts, 2006.

¹⁹Yinzhen is depicted in acts of farming and sericulture in the album *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving Portraying Yinzhen*, painted in the late Kangxi period (ink and colour on silk) in the

More conventional court practice was an imperial desire to assemble important paintings on the theme of tilling and weaving and reproduce these images through the media of stone rubbings, woodblock prints, and paintings on porcelains. The Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662–1722) sponsored sets of these images for wide distribution (Fig. 3). His grandson, the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–95), continued the enthusiasm for the theme and one of his inscriptions on a painting demonstrates the appropriateness of viewing images of tilling at the right time of year, bringing us to the point that in imperial China the act of viewing art was often coded by time of year. The date of his inscription on the antique scroll in his collection, *Tilling Rice, after Lou Shou*, illustrates this. When the painting entered Qianlong's possession it was attributed to the famous Song dynasty artist Liu Songnian (from c.1150 until after 1225) but, deploying his (or a courtier's?) skill as a connoisseur, he offered a more fitting assessment by reassigning the painting to Cheng Qi (active mid- to late thirteenth century).²⁰

Qianlong inscribed the work several times while it was in his collection, but the first instance was on the fifth day after *shangyuan* (fifteenth day of the first lunar month) in the *yichou* year (corresponding to 26 February 1769). He likely chose this time because of its proximity to *lichun*, making the date appropriate, or even auspicious, as a time for an emperor to view and discuss a painting about agriculture. The emperor's symbolic enacting of the practice of ploughing or, one step more removed, viewing the labour of tilling through artwork were both actions that took meaning from their timely practice.

The Chinese festival calendar is filled with business-like occasions, such as making the first furrows of the year, that mark the flow of time and establish proper behaviour for each season, but which do not entail communal, boisterous celebrations that are limited to a smaller number of major holidays. But many of these small annual rites engendered the creation of objects or dictated what should be displayed or worn. An example was the event every year in the third lunar month when the emperor inaugurated the change from wearing warm to cool hats (or the change from gold to jade hairpins for women) and in the eighth lunar month he marked the change back to wearing fur hats and gold hair ornaments.²¹

Palace Museum, Beijing. One leaf is reproduced in Evelyn Rawski and Jessica Rawson (eds.) *The Three Emperors 1662–1795* (London, 2005), figure 60, p. 242.

²⁰The painting in the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (accession no. F1954.21), is illustrated with translations of the poems and colophons at <<http://www.asia.si.edu/songyuan/default.asp>>, entry no. 13.

²¹Tun and Bodde, *Annual Customs and Festivals*, p. 35.

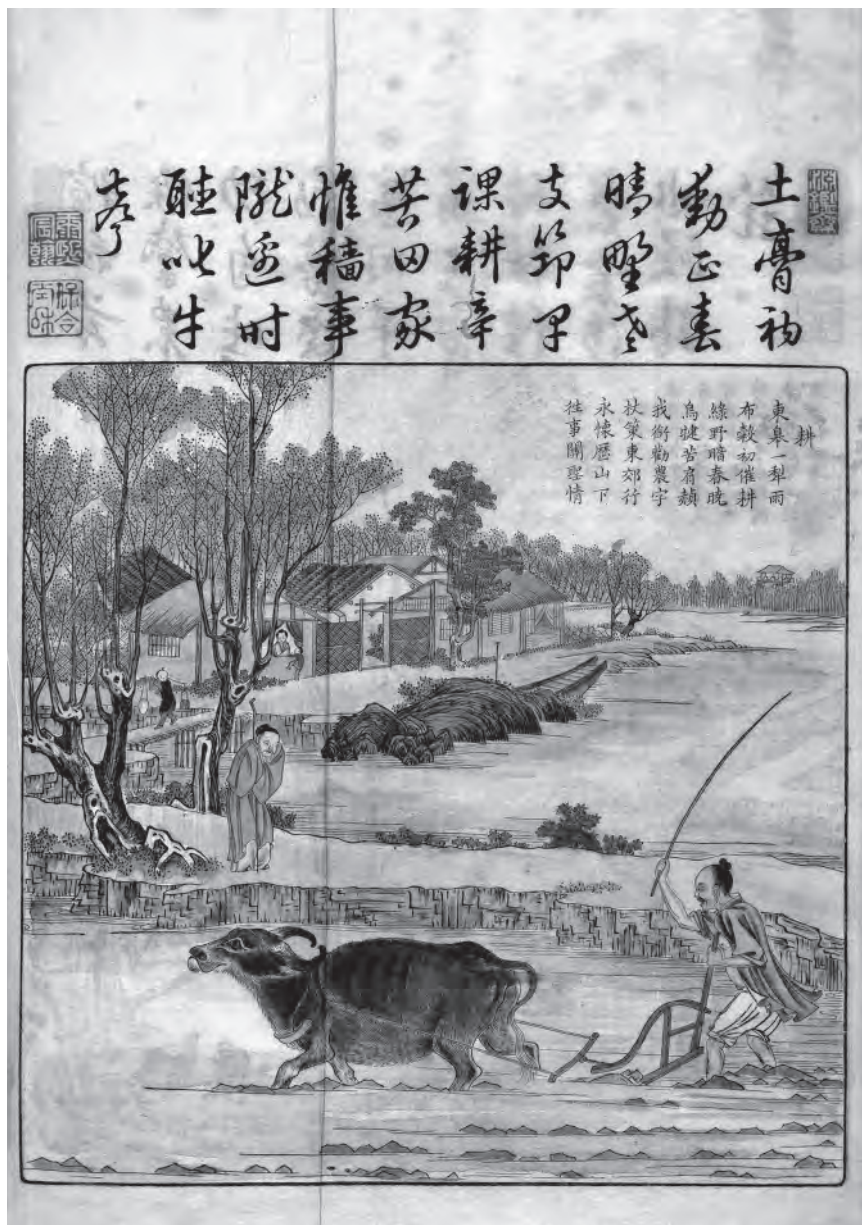


Figure 3. *Scene of Tilling* from *Imperial Commissioned Illustrations of Agriculture and Sericulture in 46 leaves* (*Yuzhi gengzhi tu*); illustration by Jiao Bingzhen, poetic inscription by Shengzu, the Kangxi Emperor; engravers: Zhu Gui and Mei Yufeng; printer, Imperial press Wuyingdian, Beijing; preface dated 1696; woodblock print in ink on paper, watercolours added by brush; 24 × 24 cm (impression); 1949,0709.0.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Communal festival celebrations

Anthropologists and philosophers have argued for the universal importance of festivals and given perspective to some of the functions they fulfil around the world. Roger Caillois in his seminal work notes that at their most basic level festivals are periods in which the boundaries between the sacred and profane become permeable, the human and spirit worlds interact, and communities and families draw together to find release from routine in forms of social catharsis that include communal entertainments, pageantry, feasting, and revelry.²² Caillois sees the importance of the festival lying its role as a paroxysm of life; an aspect that seems to be diminishing in celebrations in modern, industrial societies that become ever more regulated or sober as Charles Dickens presciently observed in 1831 when he noted that his fellow citizens were becoming so serious they no longer enjoyed dancing around the May Pole.²³

In the case of China, major festivals celebrate the complementary totality of gods, ghosts, ancestors, and family members reunited, confirm key agricultural dates, and provide social cohesion that links the imperial and commoners' realms through relentlessly inclusive practices and imagery. Festival activities provide the opportunity for grand ceremonies to expel evil influences and make the world ready for a new beginning.²⁴

In Chinese festival imagery flowers and children dominate the visual field and their importance is linked to notions of cosmic renewal. The predictability of flowers to regenerate and appear on seasonal cue as well as to grow quickly and luxuriantly is auspicious and easily linked to images of fertility, while plump male children whose vigour and presence in a family ensures the continuation of the lineage are considered to be the highest blessing in the Chinese hierarchy of wishes. Images of healthy boys and a profusion of flowers indicate a state of harmony and the promise of unlimited new beginnings; thus these two motifs, either singly or together, appear in the majority of pictorial images designed for festival use.

Another point about the importance of festivals is the necessary respite from work they provide. The dual nature of festivals as celebration

²² For general comments on festivals see Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, translated by Meyer Barash (Glencoe, IL, 1959); for views linked to Asia, see A. W. Sadler, 'The form and meaning of the festival', *Asian Folklore Studies*, 28 (1969), 1–16, and Charles Stafford, *Separation and Reunion* (Cambridge, 2001), chapter one on Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival.

²³ Charles Dickens, 'The "Clergy" on May Day', published in *All the Year Round*, 30 April 1881.

²⁴ See Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*; and Sadler, 'The form and meaning of the festival' for considerations of festivals as markers of a new beginning.

and rest is cited as early as the *Li Ji*, or the *Book of Rites*, attributed to Confucius (551–479 BC) and redacted in the Han dynasty. Comment on a festival to drive away evil spirits resulted in endorsement of the celebration solely on the grounds that it provided needed rest and pleasure.²⁵ In China, farmers, labourers, and government officials all organised their lives around festival dates, something that was increasingly the case for the social and political elite in the Ming and Qing dynasties, when frequent, minor breaks common in ancient work schedules were replaced by granting officials longer periods off at the major breaks, especially the New Year.

Mention of the term ‘festival calendar’ draws attention to a parallel calendar that explicitly demonstrates the thesis that by Ming times many artworks were intended only for brief display in synch with festival occasions. In the seventeenth century, Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645), a scholar, artist, and arbiter of taste, wrote the manual *Zhangwu zhi* (*Superfluous Things*) to provide detailed information about garden design and interior decoration appropriate for anyone trying to position themselves among China’s social elite. It included a ‘Calendar for the Display of Scrolls’ that advises on the appropriate images for paintings to hang on major holidays.²⁶ As with the rest of his advice to his readers, he emphasises the vulgarity of disregarding the guidelines he sets out. Living in an age of showmanship when the scholar-class competed to make certain their own good taste was known, his suggestions were widely followed. Wen Zhenheng appealed to a sort of snobbishness of the time by including the suggestion in his calendar that the paintings displayed are best if they date to the Song dynasty (960–1279)—works that were rare and expensive in the Ming dynasty.

On New Year morning you should display Song paintings of the Gods of Happiness and images of the Sages of olden times. Round the 15th of the first moon you should suspend on your wall paintings showing the Lantern Festival or marionette performances.

The Lantern Festival that occurs with the full moon fifteen days after the New Year is the concluding event of the New Year holiday season. Wen’s statement offers some insight into a little studied theme and helps explain

²⁵The seminal article on work and festival breaks in China is Lien-sheng Yang, ‘Schedules of work and rest in Imperial China’; Yang’s writing also brings attention to the comment in the *Li Ji*, see James Legge (trans.), *The Li Ki*, vol. 2, p. 167 (Oxford, 1885).

²⁶A comprehensive study of *Superfluous Things* is found in Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, 1991). For the calendar itself, see a translation in R. H. van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* (Rome, 1958), pp. 4–6.

a relatively large number of unsigned, untitled paintings depicting boys playing with marionettes in the Chinese repertoire. It is worth examining all of Wen's prescriptions to discover reasons for the popularity of certain themes, which were in fact images to be hung for short duration and useful for charting the passage of the year.

Wen Zhenheng's list continues:

In the second moon there should be representations of ladies enjoying spring walks, of plum blossoms, apricots, camellia, orchids, and peach and pear blossoms. On the third day of the third moon there should be shown Song pictures of the Dark Warrior, while round the Qingming Festival there should be shown pictures of peonies and *paeonia albiflora*. On the eighth day of the fourth moon, the birthday of Buddha, you should display representations of Buddha by Song and Yuan [dynasty (1279–1368)] artists . . . On the fifth day of the fifth moon there should be charms written by Daoist masters and calligraphic specimens by famous men of the Song and Yuan dynasties; further scrolls depicting the Duanyang Festival, the Dragon Boat races, tigers made of artemisia [moxa] and the Five Poisonous Creatures . . .

His stipulations clearly drew upon practices already in use before he wrote his treatise. His reference to displaying Song and Yuan paintings on these themes was completely plausible since a corpus of works with these themes exists suggesting that already by the Song preferences for specific festival imagery were under development, which is also borne out by writings of the period detailing holiday practices and displays.²⁷

James Cahill has made the point that already in the mid-Ming period before Wen Zhenheng the themes of paintings he mentions were important to collectors of the period to amass. The inventory list of belongings confiscated from the disgraced Ming prime minister Yan Song (1481–1568) match up closely with Wen Zhenheng's calendar for a year's worth of seasonal art display: 'Together, they [Wen's calendar and the Yan inventory] provide a good indication of the demands that were placed on professional painters, as well as on the antique market and the studios of forgers, who supplied "Song paintings" (such as are stipulated in Wen Zhenheng's list) for a demand that must have vastly exceeded the supply.'²⁸

²⁷ Song dynasty writings packed with information on festival practices and goods include Wu Zimu, 1274, *Mengliang lu* (Records of Dreams); Meng Yanlao (from c.1080 until after 1147), *Dongjing menghua lu* (Prosperity in the Capital), and Zhou Mi (1232–1308), *Wulin jishu* (Things of the Past from Wulin).

²⁸ See 'The Writings of James Cahill' at <http://jamescahill.info/rll.169.145.shtml#_ftnt1>, Cahill Lectures and Papers, CPL 30:1999, Columbia University Lecture, 3 March 1999: 'Is there a Chinese equivalent to Ukiyo-e?'

Chinese New Year

The best known category of seasonal imagery is that prepared for the Chinese New Year, including *nianhua*, or New Year prints, that appear as single-sheet wood-block prints used for display on doors and around the home.²⁹ One type of New Year print—images of protective Door Gods, or Guardians, which appear in pairs, one for each leaf of the traditional two part door—offer an obvious exception to the rule of short-term, timely display because they typically are left on view for an entire year (Fig. 4). But this practice is also rooted in the importance of the seasonal round and the need to change particular images on particular days. Custom dictated that the Door God images should be replaced every New Year's eve because faded, tattered images have little or no power; yet, their protective function was so important that it seemed best to leave the prints in place as a reminder to evil forces that the household was under a watchful eye. However, the images only possessed power if in the first instance, when they were fresh and brightly coloured, they had been pasted on a door in a timely manner, which meant New Year's eve. If so, the images of fierce, axe-wielding, bushy-bearded warriors dressed in armour were empowered to repel evil. In addition to military Door Guardians, pictures of civil officials also exist, and both the warriors and officials are sometimes pictured holding symbols emblematic of emolument and good fortune, wishes deemed especially appropriate for the new beginning of the year.

While Door Guardians are probably the most familiar Chinese auspicious images around the world because of their annual display every year by restaurant owners in Chinatowns across the world, there is a far more extensive list of New Year images all with a long history. The lunar New Year is both the most joyous and the longest holiday in the festival calendar because it falls at a fallow time of year when farmers could best afford to rest. It therefore was logical to make this the seasonal holiday with the most entertainments and visits to friends and family and, with so much social intercourse, it was also a perfect time to display special wares, including clothing, tableware, decorations and toys, each of which was encoded with auspicious wishes appropriate to new beginnings.

²⁹ See Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Picture Calendars in Late Imperial China: art and commerce', in Jennifer Purtle and Hans Bjarne Thomsen (eds.), *Looking Modern: East Asian Visual Culture from Treaty Ports to World War II* (Chicago, IL 2009), pp. 62–84; and Laing, *Art & Aesthetics in Chinese Popular Prints: Selections from the Muban Foundation Collection*.



Figure 4. *New Year Print of Door-god in Military Dress*; twentieth century; Yanzhou, Shandong province; woodblock print in ink and colours on paper; 45 × 28 cm; 1982,1217,0.133; © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The traditional name for the festival is ‘Passing over into the Year’ or *guonian*; however, in 1914, Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), as the first president of the newly founded Republic of China, changed the name to ‘Spring Festival’, or *chun jie*. This momentous decision was in order to differentiate the holiday from 1 January, which had recently been authorised as a government holiday in a move to demonstrate modernisation through acceptance of the Western, or so-called international, calendar.³⁰ People continued, however, to frame family and social life around the lunar New Year and merchants, too, persisted in using the familiar lunar holiday as the day of reckoning for accounts. A tense co-existence between the two New Year holidays ensued with the traditional date, now called *chun jie*, continuing to have the greater importance. This recent postscript to the ancient and continuous history of the Chinese New Year festival reconfirms in modern times the explicit political authority that is held by the person who controls and imposes the festival calendar. Just as the emperor’s court determined the first day of the New Year in imperial times, the President was showing his power by imposing a new regime of time and by adding the Western New Year into the list of annual celebrations.

Regardless of the relatively recent adoption of the nomenclature ‘Spring Festival’, the word ‘spring’ (*chun*) has in fact always been associated with the Chinese lunar New Year, or *guonian*. Images and the word for ‘spring’ figured prominently in traditional literature and visual imagery dedicated to the lunar New Year festival. In this paper the term ‘New Year’ is used to refer to the Chinese lunar date.

In imperial China (as now) the New Year was (and is) a time to display images that embody and broadcast wishes for long life, wealth, social and professional distinction for oneself and one’s progeny. Popular images can take many forms and often rely on a combination of sources, for example drawing on folklore and also often employing the device of the rebus to make their point. To exemplify this point a common image printed for the New Year depicts a boy dressed as a high-ranking official sitting astride a giant rooster prancing about on a ground laden with auspicious objects. The print bears characters that read ‘New Spring’—a reference to the New Year—and also provides the name of the workshop in Henan where it was produced in the early twentieth century.³¹

³⁰ Henrietta Harrison, *China* (New York, 2001), pp. 158–61 and 200–1 describes various attempts to convert from the lunar to solar calendar during the early Republic.

³¹ For this and other New Year prints see Clarissa von Spee (ed.), *The Printed Image in China: Eighth to Twenty-first Centuries* (London, 2010). My understanding of this print is indebted to Ellen Johnston Laing (see pp. 106–7).

The key to understanding the design lies in deconstructing it as a rebus. Lying on the ground are a music chime, a *ruyi* (as you wish) sceptre and three citrons. Through the value of these objects used as homophones it is possible to construct the phrase, ‘may you celebrate wishes for top rank in all three examinations [that will bring you official rank]’. ‘Three citrons’ (*san yuan*) sounds like ‘top candidate three times’, which is the number of exams a scholar must pass on his path to obtaining entrance to Chinese officialdom, a career aspiration that explains the boy’s costume. The music chime sounds like the word ‘to celebrate’. To say ‘big rooster’ sounds like another phrase that means ‘great good fortune’. The print also invokes folk traditions that extend back to at least to the sixth century CE, when it was customary to put an image of a rooster on the door on the first day of the New Year because the cockerel’s morning call dissipates the darkness of evil.

New Year prints, including Door Guardians and the above described image of a rooster, were displayed at the British Museum in an exhibition of wide-ranging print themes, entitled *The Printed Image in China: Eighth to Twenty-first Centuries*, which was on view from May to September 2010. The display certainly did not coincide with the New Year and rather was fixed according to other conveniences. Therefore, however engaging, attractive, and technically well-made the New Year prints are, when viewed like this, out of season and thus transformed into art in a formal sense, they lose their original performative power. The visitor is allowed to forget that the impetus for their creation was as working images with time-delimited powers.

In addition to prints, wealthy households and the court also commissioned all manner of expensive luxury goods for the New Year, including what James Cahill among others calls ‘functional paintings’.³² A delicate, exquisitely detailed hanging scroll painted on silk, which dates to the late thirteenth to early fifteenth century, now in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, represents a fine example of a popular type of image made for seasonal display (Fig. 5). The image depicts a princely household, and may have been made for such an establishment or at least for a distinguished household.³³ Conveniently for the modern viewer, it is a

³² James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Berkeley, CA, 2010).

³³ *Palace Women and Children Celebrating the New Year (F1916.403)* is illustrated on the Freer’s website at <<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectNumber=F1916.403>>, which gives the date as sixteenth century. This author believes the work is earlier—Yuan to early Ming in date, an opinion shared by James Cahill when we viewed the painting together many years ago in the Freer storage vaults, and who has recently published the painting in *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, p. 105, also with a Yuan to early Ming date.



Figure 5. *Palace Women and Children Celebrating the New Year*; anonymous; Yuan-Ming dynasty (thirteenth to early fifteenth century); panel mounted hanging scroll; ink and colours on silk; 228.2 × 3.5 cm; Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1916.403) © Freer-Sackler.

self-referential view of the New Year illustrating several of the key celebratory activities enjoyed during the two-week holiday period telescoped together into a single pictorial scene. This type of image and variations on it became extremely popular in the Qing dynasty, both at the court and among the wealthy in large cities.

The anonymous artist of the Freer Gallery's painting was a master of the style known as 'ruler, or boundary painting' (*jiehua*) and deployed fine-line brushwork and ruler precision to execute the scene. It presents the activities of women and children set within a splendid, walled-in compound of a two-story pavilion and several lower buildings constructed with bright red pillars, airy verandas and marble stairs. A towering pine and blossoming plum and camellia trees add natural beauty to the grand residence. Their open flowers at this time of year suggest the setting is in the Jiangnan region, perhaps near Nanjing, the first Ming capital, as the plum does not usually flower in time for the New Year further north.

The artist provides a bird's eye view into the compound and the first detail to catch a viewer's attention is a woman standing on a table to pin up an inexpensive print of a dishevelled figure. This is Zhong Kui, the Demon Queller—a legendary hero associated with the New Year since the eighth century. He is the subject of a huge number of popular, low-to-moderately priced prints that were widely distributed around villages during the twelfth month and for the New Year itself at the beginning of the first month. Many such prints have survived, including in the collection of the British Museum (Fig. 6). To see such a print being pasted on the wall of a princely household in this Yuan-to-early-Ming painting reinforces the point about the inclusive nature of festival imagery across social lines in imperial China. Such protective images were put up on New Year's eve when sacrifices of food and wine were being made to the family ancestors and also to guardian spirits, including the gods of the door, stove, bed, courtyard, and the earth. However, some traditions indicate images of Zhong Kui could be hung earlier as well, any time during the twelfth month.³⁴

Zhong Kui was also the subject of much more elaborate and expensive artworks intended for seasonal display, as seen in a sixteenth-century silk scroll painted for the New Year that depicts a humorous debacle (Fig. 7). Zhong Kui on donkey-back is shown trying to cross a snowy bridge at a moment when disaster befalls one of his supplicant demons. The grotesque

³⁴See Wen Zhenheng as translated by R. H. van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur*, p. 5.



Figure 6. *Demon-Queller Zhong Kui with wintertime plum bough and demon with tray of jewels; Qing dynasty, eighteenth century; Suzhou, Jiangsu province; woodblock print in ink and colours on paper, 29.4 × 21.2 cm; 1964,0411,0.12; © The Trustees of the British Museum.*



Figure 7. *Zhong Kui and Demons Crossing a Bridge*; Ming dynasty; close copy of Dai Jin (1388–1462); sixteenth century; panel mounted hanging scroll; ink and colours on silk; 197.4 × 118.6 cm; Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer (1911. 283); © Freer–Sackler.

little creature has just crashed through the bridge's sodden planks into the icy water below; pandemonium ensues and Zhong Kui's donkey balks.³⁵ This painting is signed as Dai Jin (1388–1462), but probably is instead an extremely close copy of his original work. Dai Jin, one of the most inventive talents of the Ming, served briefly as a court painter and then subsequently worked outside the imperial sphere, but his work in both the imperial and private realms points up the close connections in imagery and approach an artist could bring to festival paintings throughout the empire.

Zhong Kui Crossing a Bridge exemplifies the practice of major artists to create impressive works of him for display at court and in wealthy homes, or for gift giving. At the same time inexpensive wood block prints were also in demand by all social classes. The principle of production of a wide range of quality and prices of festival imagery applies to all holiday occasions.

The story of Zhong Kui that led to the proliferation of his image is rooted in an event said to have occurred in the eighth century, but which was first recounted in the Song dynasty.³⁶ Popular convention records that when the Tang Dynasty Emperor Xuanzong (r. 713–56) was suffering from a feverish delirium, he dreamt that his palace was besieged by demons. Suddenly a large, grotesque man appeared and devoured the miscreants. The delighted emperor sought to discover his protector's identity and learned it was Zhong Kui, a failed scholar from a previous era who had committed suicide out of shame for not being allowed to pass the palace examination because the emperor had declared him too unseemly for the honour. Xuanzong granted him special posthumous privileges and in return Zhong Kui's spirit vowed to protect the imperial household eternally.

Upon waking the emperor's health was miraculously restored and he summoned the court's most famous painter Wu Daozi (from 689 until after 755) to depict the imposing, dream-hero on a door to scare away evil.

³⁵ For more about *Zhong Kui and Demons Crossing a Bridge*, attributed to Dai Jin (1388–1462), F1911.283, see Shen C. Y. Fu, 'Puns and playfulness in Chinese painting', *Asian Art and Culture* (Autumn 1994), 58.

³⁶ General information about Zhong Kui is found in Hu Wan-ch'uan [Hu Wanquan], *Zhong Kui shenhua yu xiaoshuo zhi yanjiu* (Research on the Mythology and Stories of Zhong Kui) (Taipei: Wenshizhe, 1980); Ginger Cheng-chi Hsu, 'The Drunken Demon-Queller: Chung K'uei [Zhong Kui] in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Painting', *Meishu shi yanjiu jikan*, no. 3, 1996, pp. 144–62; and Mary H. Fong, 'A Probable Second "Chung Kuei [Zhong kui]" by Emperor Shun-chih [Xun zhi] of the Ch'ing [Qing] Dynasty', *Oriental Art*, XXIII, no. 4 (Winter 1977), 423–37.

Over time, Zhong Kui's conventional image came to show him as a wine-loving, swashbuckling gallant who, ugly and dishevelled, usually wields a sword and is accompanied by subservient demon helpers. Symbols of wealth and luck were also associated with him. By the Northern Song, his image was becoming indelibly linked to the New Year as a talisman to ward off evil and prints of Zhong Kui were sent along with almanacs to court officials at the end of the year.³⁷

The association between Zhong Kui and the New Year continues into contemporary times, as seen in paintings by several modern masters, including Zhang Daqian (1899–1983). A scroll in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, DC, dated to 1926, depicts Zhong Kui receiving an offering of a blossoming plum branch, which indicates the New Year season, from an attendant demon.³⁸ In a surprising twist Zhang Daqian's inscription reveals his plan to hang the painting for the summertime festival of Double Fifth. This points to a great jump in the power of Zhong Kui's image in popular imagination that began to occur gradually from the late fifteenth century on, so that eventually his powers of exorcism associated with the New Year expanded to be appropriate for the summertime holiday.³⁹ This transformation became deeply rooted in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it became standard to place Zhong Kui at the centre of Double Fifth celebrations. His image replaced that of the Daoist Celestial Master, another supernatural figure capable of exorcising evil who had had a long association with Double Fifth. Wen Zhenheng, in his late Ming dynasty calendar of paintings to display for different festivals, only mentions Zhong Kui for the twelfth month in advance of the New Year, suggesting that the link with the summer festival was not yet important during his lifetime.

The reasons for this change in Zhong Kui imagery are complicated, but as the New Year and Double Fifth festivals exactly mirror each other, occurring at the two times in the annual cycle when the balance of yin and yang shifts dramatically from the peak of one to the ascendancy of the other, they mark a dangerous temporary instability that calls for protective forces. It was presumably comforting in its symmetry to call upon the

³⁷ Ginger Hsu, 'The drunken demon queller', p. 142

³⁸ For the image, see <<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectNumber=S1988.49>>, *Demon Presenting a Plum Bough*, by Zhang Daqian, 1926, museum purchase, 1988.49 and for fuller treatment see, Shen C. Y. Fu and Jan Stuart, *Challenging the Past: The Paintings of Chang Dai-chien [Zhang Daqian]* (Washington, DC, 1991).

³⁹ National Museum of History (comp.), *Chung K'uei [Zhong Kui] Paintings on the Fifth Day of the Fifth Month* (Taipei, 1996).

same popular figure of Zhong Kui to rein in evil on both of these major holidays. What is surprising then in Zhang Daqian's desire to hang up a picture of Zhong Kui on Double Fifth is not the reference to Zhong Kui but that he used an image with explicit New Year imagery—the plum—to put on the wall out of season. He wrote 'I playfully hang up the scroll', perhaps in reference to his subversion of the normal rules about seasonality for it would have been perfectly easy for Zhang to follow modern convention and hang up one of the many images produced from Qing times onwards of Zhong Kui pictured with pomegranate blossoms that were specially made for Double Fifth.

Putting up protective images of Door Guardians and portraits of Zhong Kui, as well as displaying prints to ensure good fortune such as the image of a boy astride a giant rooster, was only a small part of the New Year festivities. Wearing appropriate clothing and setting off firecrackers to scare away evil spirits were also typical rites and special delights. In the painting in the Freer Gallery under discussion, the princely child, who wears an auspiciously coloured red robe, bears witness to one of the key events of the New Year. He covers his ears in anticipation of the bang from a firecracker being lit by the maid.

Clothing was coded for holiday celebrations, and for the New Year it was always important to wear new garments. During the Ming dynasty the court developed fastidious rules to match their dress to the yearly cycle of festivals and individuals wore special cloth badges decorated with imagery appropriate to each of the annual occasions. The badges worn on the front and back of a robe could either be woven into the garment itself or be made separately and sewn onto a garment. Wearing of festival badges at the Ming court built upon precedents established in the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan dynasties that, however, did not develop into an elaborate set of conventions until the Ming, reaching a crescendo of popularity during the latter part of the dynasty. These badges have been the subject of much study, initially and notably by Schuyler Cammann, to whose work the reader is referred for more information.⁴⁰

In association with the long New Year celebration, the imperial family and courtiers wore two badges, one for the period extending from the Winter Solstice until the Lantern Festival, when a different badge was affixed to their clothing.⁴¹ The imagery on the Ming badges appeared on

⁴⁰ Schuyler Cammann, 'Ming festival symbols', *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, 7 (1953), 66–70.

⁴¹ Information about many Ming imperial customs, including festival badges is found in Liu Ruoyu (fl. c.1572–1620), *Ming gong shi* (History of the Ming Palace) (Beijing, 1981). For examples

paintings, porcelains and other objects of the season. The badge put on clothing at the time of the Winter Solstice displays nine phoenixes as a main image in reference to the custom of ‘Counting the Nines’ to pace off the time until warmer weather for planting arrives. Seasonally appropriate plants—the plum, pine, and bamboo (the so-called Three Friends of Winter)—are typically worked into the design and carry wishes for longevity because of the hardiness of the plants to bloom and remain green in frigid weather. In addition to the phoenixes, the Winter Solstice/New Year badges also typically depict three rams standing on red sunlike disks. Through the device of homophones this image creates a rebus for the common New Year expression, *sanyang kai tai*, that welcomes the blessings of the New Year, which has been explored in the work of Maggie Bickford.⁴²

As the New Year season is the time when the yang forces begin their cyclical ascent after the yin forces have crested, the pairing of images of phoenixes and rams takes on additional poignancy to draw attention to this important cosmic shift. The image of the ram (also pronounced *yang*) is a useful device to draw attention to the propitious rise of this element, and the phoenix—an emblem of yin forces—appears larger than the rams in the design for the reason that it is the time of their peak, just before the yin/yang balance shifts.

After the fall of the Ming, the popularity of badges declined, but in the Qing, just as during the Ming, the colours of robes, their patterns and the details of the imperial headgear continued to be coded for each festival date. The annals from the Qianlong Emperor’s reign bear punctilious record of his costume changes for each major event in the annual calendar.⁴³

Returning to discussion of the Freer Gallery painting, it illustrates many of the joyous New Year’s activities. In the courtyard a maid is pictured holding aloft a tray strewn with trinkets that suggest the abundance of merchandise available in special holiday markets set up just before the New Year, that overflowed with baubles, including glass balls, strings of pearls and beads, and toys, especially puppets, all of which are present here.

of badges see Urban Council of Hong Kong, *Heaven’s Embroidered Cloths: One Thousand Years of Chinese Textiles* (Hong Kong, 1995), pp. 278 and 286. The section on rank badges, pp. 254–98, includes a number of festival badges for various of the annual celebrations.

⁴² Maggie Bickford has written on the theme of the three rams; see ‘Three rams and three friends: the working lives of Chinese auspicious motifs’, *Asia Major*, 3rd series, 12 (1999), 127–58.

⁴³ Yuan Hongqi, ‘Qianlong shiqi de gongting jieqing huodong’, p. 83.

A woman arriving at the gate of the compound holds up a large ball of a type popular at the Lantern Festival. Its roundness recalls the full moon that is celebrated on that night and coloured balls, large and small, were tossed about in games throughout the empire during the New Year and Lantern Festival break. Some of the larger ones were intended for use as lanterns and were placed on stands as shades for burning candles. Lanterns of this construction are pictured in a section of the long handscroll, *Xianzong Enjoying Pleasures*, that depicts the Ming Emperor Zhu Jianshen, (temple name Xianzong; r. 1465–1487) delighting in seasonal entertainments.

Produced by court artists, this colourful painting now in the National Museum depicts the emperor at several moments in time, including his tour of the palace surveying the elaborate festivities he ordered for the Lantern Festival.⁴⁴ Court records supply lively descriptions of the New Year festivities he orchestrated several times during his reign, including grand feasts and ball games. On more than one occasion he directed the palace staff to reproduce folk celebrations within the palace grounds—a practice indebted to Song dynasty precedents which continued uninterrupted into Qing times, especially under the Qianlong Emperor, who expanded the scale of festival celebrations.⁴⁵

Emperor Xianzong converted a spacious courtyard in the private area of the palace into a lantern fair filled with archways constructed from branches and bedecked with row upon row of brilliantly blazing lanterns. The court set up booths with vendors hawking wares, and folk artists, acrobats and performers demonstrated their skills. The cost was considerable which, more than merely suggesting a capacious appetite for pleasure, also demonstrates the importance emperors placed on festival celebrations.

In the Qing dynasty, the Manchu rulers continued most of the previous dynasty's New Year and Lantern Festival customs, while also adding some of their own ethnic celebrations or intermixing the two. Court artists, like those outside the palace as well, produced a copious number of

⁴⁴ A detail of the New Year scene is reproduced in Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness*, p. 140.

⁴⁵ Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China*, p. 189–90 discusses the Song precedents. For a view of an elaborate Lantern Festival presentation at the Qing court, see the painting by Ding Guangpeng (active 1708–71) entitled *Taicu shi he* (Peace for the New Year); illustrated on the National Palace Museum, Taipei, website: <<http://www.npm.edu.tw/exh99/palace/>>. A letter by the Jesuit Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–68) offers some evidence of the practice of using the imperial garden in the Yuanming Yuan for festival celebrations in which eunuchs set up markets and re-enacted popular celebrations for the emperor's entertainment. See, a translation from the French by Sir Harry Beaumont (pseudonym of Joseph Spence) included in R. Dodsley and J. Dodsley, *Fugitive Pieces, on Various Subjects VI* (London: 1765), repr. Kessinger Publishing (Whitefish, MT, 2008).

paintings for each holiday. One of the common themes was to present a holiday-time domestic interior that showed family harmony, which was emblematic of the theme of cosmic harmony associated with festival events. This type of visual programme is represented by the New Year painting in the Freer Gallery of Art.

Another popular presentation was to picture boys—symbols of fecundity and cosmic harmony—gaily engaged in holiday games and typically in a garden setting effulgent with blossoming flowers appropriate to the season, thus bringing into play another motif to reinforce the image of fertility and abundance. The children's activities should not be interpreted as snapshots of actual events, but rather present carefully contrived images created to broadcast auspicious messages. In some ways these paintings were analogous to the modern Hallmark greeting card that employs conventional, even hackneyed, imagery to convey well wishes for the recipient. However, unlike the modern card, the Chinese paintings were understood to have agency to attract the very messages of good fortune to which they alluded and just as importantly to repel the evil forces that circulated at times like the New Year and Double Fifth when the balance of yin and yang was shifting and the boundary between the mortal world and that of gods and ghosts was porous.

Qing festival imagery drew heavily upon Chinese Han customs, but also incorporated occasional references to Manchu heritage.⁴⁶ An album leaf in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, of chubby boys playfully engaging in a mock hunt with lanterns as their props makes this point (Fig. 8). One of the rascals tugs at two wheel-mounted lanterns shaped like a rabbit and a deer, each of which sports a burning red candle in a cavity in the animal's back. His aim is to wheel them out of the danger posed by a companion boy mounted on a hobby horse—also a lantern with lit candle—who pulls taut a toy bow ready to release its arrow. Another fellow gleefully lunges towards the boy with the rabbit and deer, menacingly shaking his own lantern which is fashioned as a predator falcon and standing next to a hunting-dog lantern. The boys are enacting a Manchu hunting festival of *Xijing jie*, during which mounted archers skilfully pursue game in the wilds of Manchuria.⁴⁷

⁴⁶For discussion of intermixing Han and Manchu foods and feasting customs at the Qianlong court, see Yuan Hongqi, 'Qianlong shiqi de gongting jieqing huodong', p. 85.

⁴⁷See National Palace Museum (ed.), *Yingxi tu* (Children at Play) (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1990), p. 44. This leaf is from a Qianlong-period album entitled *Shengping leshi* (Peaceful Entertainments).



Figure 8. *Lantern Festival* from 12-leaf album of *Peace and Prosperity at the New Year*; Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign period (1736–95); album leaf in ink and colours on silk; National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China; © National Palace Museum.

It would be misleading to suggest that prints and paintings are the only, or even the main, type of New Year and Lantern Festival objects, at court or in the realm beyond. All nature of materials were pressed into service, including textiles and luxury goods fashioned of lacquer, porcelain, metalwork, jade and ivory carvings. Tableware and gift boxes used to present holiday foodstuffs comprised major categories of festival decorations because of deeply entrenched associations between feasting and seasonal celebrations.

Many of the popular designs for New Year food boxes used at the Ming court continued in use throughout the Qing. One of the favourites in the Qianlong period was first used on carved lacquer boxes at the mid-Ming court of the Jiajing Emperor (1521–67). The success of the design is seen in the complex interweaving and overlaying of multiple motifs that together proclaim the power of the New Year to bring wishes of springtime rebirth and bounty. The Chinese word for spring (*chun*) is written large at the centre of the round box lid, positioned above a bowl

overflowing with gems and symbols of prosperity from which bands of radiant light emanate.⁴⁸ Shoulao, the star god of longevity, is superimposed over the top part of the word *chun*, which is flanked by images of dragons. The one on the right is depicted with subtly carved scales suggesting he represents the directional animal the Dragon of the East, while the dragon on the left, oddly enough for his species, has been given a treatment that suggests soft fur, creating a dragon motif that incorporates a reference to the Tiger of the West. The presence of directional coordinates imbues the design with a greater cosmological symbolism appropriate to the New Year and Lantern Festival as a time for the emperor to reassert his central role in coordinating the calendar and announcing the arrival of spring and a time of rebirth.

The Qing emperors produced more festival-specific objects than in any previous court, perhaps because of the great prosperity of the eighteenth century, but also because of their desire to broadcast publicly their full command of the festival calendar in demonstration of the ruler's position at the apex of time; thusly impressing upon the Han population the legitimacy and propriety of their authority despite their own foreign origins. The Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723–35), who among the Qing emperors had the most artistic eye, was fastidious in his orders for festival tableware, including for the Lantern Festival. One of his edicts concerns instructions for the imperial workshop to follow in producing a set of porcelain bowls. All subsequent Qing emperors continued these patterns, making only technical updates to employ newly developed enamel palettes for ceramic decoration.

Yongzheng instructed the court eunuch Hu Shijie to present to him a blue-and-white food bowl and then issued the imperial command:

By imperial edict send the bowl to Tang Ying [supervisor of the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen] to make bowls according to the size, thickness, depth, and design of this bowl. The exterior of the bowls should be decorated in designs using all colours of *wucai* [a palette of translucent overglaze enamel colours and underglaze cobalt blue]. Each pattern should be auspicious according to the seasonal festivals. The inside of the bowls should accord with the exterior pattern, but should be rendered in the blue-and-white technique. For New Year use '*sanyang kaitai*' [the 'three yang force heralds prosperity' represented by a rebus picturing three goats and a sun]; for the Upper Primordial Festival [Lantern Festival] use 'abundant harvest of the five grains ...'⁴⁹

⁴⁸ An example from the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art is illustrated at <<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectNumber=F1990.15a-e>>.

⁴⁹ Forbidden City (comp.), *Qing gong neiwufu zaobanchu dan'an huihuan* (Collection of Qing dynasty palace archives from the Office of the Imperial Household), in Zhang Faying (comp.),

At the end of the edict Yongzheng demanded ten examples of each festival bowl to be brought to him for close inspection. The emperor's order mentioned five other festival designs, designating an iconic image for each. His design choices were not innovative but, by codifying and applying them for use on festival tableware, his gesture was one step toward an ever greater elaboration of holiday display that accompanied his reign.

The Lantern Festival design mentioned is another rebus. The motif consists of a lantern with hanging streamers that consist of strings of decorative baubles, including small ornaments shaped like wasps. The words 'lantern' and 'wasp' said together sound like the word *fengdeng* meaning 'bumper harvest', a wish especially appropriate to emanate from the emperor whose virtue and righteousness in theory enabled such a result.

Flower festival

After the double-barrelled holiday of New Year and the associated Lantern Festival, the next truly joyous celebration in the traditional Festival Calendar is the Flower Festival that was marked in late imperial times by visits to temples, picnics, flower shows and competitions, poetry writing, and the creation and display of pictorial arts, especially paintings and statuettes of figures holding or in close proximity to flowers.⁵⁰ By the mid-Qing, the temples visited were usually specifically dedicated to Flower Spirits, and altars, often set up in outdoor courtyards, held candles, fruits, and sweets. Although Flower Festival belongs to the category of a lesser festival in the sense that people were not granted leave from work nor were there large family reunions or street parades, it was nonetheless widely celebrated both inside and outside the court.

Tang Ying quanqi (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2008), vol. 4, 1252. For an illustration of such a bowl see Louise Alison Cort and Jan Stuart, *Joined Colours: Decoration and Meaning in Chinese Porcelain* (Washington, DC, 1993), p. 131.

⁵⁰The most comprehensive study of the festival is Gōyama Kiwamu, 'Min Shin jidai ni okeru hana no bunka to shūzoku' (Flowers in the Culture and Conventions of the Ming and Qing dynasties), in *Chūgoku bungaku ronshū*, no. 13, pp. 142–86 (Dec. 1984), or see <<https://qir.kyushu-u.ac.jp/dspace/handle/2324/9744>> for a pdf file. The article quotes a number of Chinese sources, including descriptions of temples furnished with Flower Spirit statues. A major Chinese source is Chen Meng-lei (comp.), *Gujin tushu jicheng* (The Complete Collection of Illustrations and Writing from Ancient to Contemporary Times, published 1725–8), repr. (Shanghai, 1934), fol. 18, 4–5. The best English studies are by Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Picture calendars', pp. 76–81, and Laing, 'Notes on ladies wearing flowers in their hair', *Orientalists* (Feb. 1990), 32–9.

The most common name for the festival is ‘*huazhao*’ (flower morning), but it is also known as *huashen jie*, Festival of the Flower Spirits, and *baihua shengri* (Birthday of the Flowers). Each lunar month was assigned a Flower Spirit but as this group of figures is complex with frequently shifting values, it is not addressed here.⁵¹ The words *hua zhao* appear together in some ancient agricultural texts, but do not seem to refer to a special event, and Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) lists of festivals do not include this occasion. Gōyama Kiwamu suggests that the occasional appearance of the term in Song dynasty texts may presage a formal celebration of Flower Festival, but there is no secure evidence for it being a true holiday celebration until the late Ming dynasty. Certainly its most enthusiastic commemoration was during the Qing period.⁵²

It should be acknowledged that there are many contradictory statements in popular literature, including on both English-language and Chinese-language websites, about the origin of the holiday. Numerous references point to celebrations held in the Tang dynasty; however, such stories all post date the Tang and were applied retrospectively. The festival corresponds perfectly with new concerns in the Ming and Qing when commercial flower growing and ardent interest in flower arranging, including books dedicated to the subject, reached a crescendo among the educated elite and the imperial court.⁵³

With the gradual decline of the glory of the Qing dynasty beginning in the nineteenth century, celebration of the Flower Festival gradually faded, but at least through the 1930s Japanese and Western observers were still being impressed by the festival to write accounts of it before its total eclipse in the struggles of mid-twentieth-century China. Today Flower Festival is enjoying a beginning resurgence, even if only as a tourist event. Women re-enact the custom of cutting red and yellow silk ribbons to tie them on the stems of peonies and tree boughs in order to encourage the blossoming of the plants. This custom was one of the most popular practices of the festival in Qing times.

The annual date for the Flower Festival varies by region. It always falls during the second lunar month, but depending on place can be celebrated on the second, twelfth, or fifteenth day (usually corresponding to a time in March). The Qing dynasty court, perhaps because of its base in

⁵¹ See Ellen Johnston Laing, ‘Picture calendars’, pp. 76–9.

⁵² Gōyama Kiwamu, ‘Min Shin jidai ni okeru hana no bunka to shūzoku’, pp. 142–6.

⁵³ See for example, Yuan Hongdao, *Ping shi (A History of the Vase)*, written in 1599; translated by Duncan Campbell in *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 5(2) (Dec. 2003), 77–93.

cold Beijing and with another palace still further north, chose to celebrate on the fifteenth when more flowers were in bloom as it is supposed to be a day to greet all the flowers. However, in reality, the court relied heavily on the ability of the gardeners to force hothouse flowers for use in decorating the imperial temples they had built and dedicated to the Flower Spirits.

The Qing court's decision to officially celebrate *huazhao* on the fifteenth had the advantage of creating a symmetrically balanced nodal point with the Mid-Autumn Festival celebrated on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month (usually September). Together these holidays were described as *huazhao yuexi*—Flower Morning and Moon Evening.⁵⁴ The three most significant festivals of the year are New Year, Double Fifth and the Mid-Autumn Festival, thus the pairing of the Flower and Mid-Autumn festivals is an endorsement of Flower Festival's importance.

Another reflection of its status and the attention devoted to the Flower Spirits venerated on this day is seen in a minor rite practiced in the Qing with the purpose of sending away the Flower Spirits. A passage in the celebrated Qing dynasty novel, *Honglou meng*, recounts that during the sixth lunar month offerings of wine and flowers were placed on a domestic altar and a ceremony held to send the Flower Spirits into retirement until their return the following year at Flower Festival. This observance is all the more poignant given the close association in the novel between the beautiful young women who occupy the attentions of the male protagonist, Jia Baoyu, and individual flowers; as well as the significance that the female protagonist Lin Daiyu, who deeply loves Jia Baoyu, was born on the day of the Flower Festival.

Particular flowers have a long history of being associated with each month, and references to flower calendars can be found in texts of the Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 BC).⁵⁵ Yet, the floral assignments changed by place and over time, making it no surprise that the identities of the Flower Spirits (themselves probably a Ming phenomenon) never became fully standardised. It was not even agreed whether there were twelve Flower Spirits, or thirteen in order to provide for years with an intercalary month. The most commonly invoked lists of monthly flowers overlap in their choices, and certain flowers such as the lotus appear in

⁵⁴This phrase appears at least as early as the second half of the Ming dynasty in a poem by Tian Rucheng, 'Xihu youlan zhiyu' (Record of sights while travelling around West Lake). See Gōyama Kiwamu, 'Min Shin jidai ni okeru hana no bunka to shūzoku'.

⁵⁵See Xiaoxiazheng zhuan (Comments on the Lesser Annuary of the Xia dynasty).

invariable positions, such as the sixth month in this case; or for apricot blossoms in the second month, but there was considerable latitude, usually correlated with regional climates. By the Qing two more or less standard lists existed, one for the south (the Jiangnan region) and one for the north (Beijing). For example, in the Jiangnan list the flowering plum represents the first month, while in the north it represents the twelfth month. In the Beijing calendar winter jasmine is assigned to the first month, but is not included at all in the Jiangnan list.⁵⁶ Because of regional discrepancies there is often some ambiguity in which month is suggested by the appearance of a particular flower in an artwork.

The enthusiastic celebration of Flower Festival during the Ming and Qing dynasties engendered the creation of many objects, including paintings, figurines, imitation *pengjing* made with gemstone trees, and porcelains for display at this time of year; yet in contemporary times these associations have often been forgotten. The desire for floral decorations on this day recalls Wen Zhenheng's Calendar for Scrolls in which he advised displaying paintings of ladies walking beneath blossoming trees during the second moon.

By examining paintings with inscriptions that mention *huazhao* it is clear that the images suitable for display at this time of year are broader than Wen Zhenheng mentioned, nor do they need to be directly connected with the concept of Flower Spirits. A painting by Wang Wu (1632–90) of a rock, peonies, and butterfly bears the date 'huazhao' and the cyclical year corresponding to 1677; while a fan painting of hydrangea, azaleas and butterflies by Wu Shangxi dated to the Flower Festival of 1854 presents a related theme but with different choices of flower.⁵⁷

The presence of the butterfly is appropriate for Flower Festival but its use in Chinese motifs is also much wider because of its value in various rebuses, where it can be used to sound like a word for an octogenarian or a word meaning to multiply and reduplicate. Association with Flower Festival in particular was first pointed to by Ellen Laing who traces it to a Flower Festival custom apocryphally ascribed to the Tang Emperor Minghuang (r. 712–56), who allegedly instructed the court women to visit his palace garden wearing flowers in their hair and holding peony-decorated fans to

⁵⁶ Yang, Boda (intro.); *The Tsui Museum of Art: Chinese Ceramics IV, Qing Dynasty* (Tsui Museum of Art, 1995).

⁵⁷ Wu Shangxi's painting in the Guangdong Provincial Museum is illustrated in Zhu Wanzhang *et al.*, *Flower and Bird Painting of the Ming and Qing Periods*, entry no. 40. For Wu Shangxi, see Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Notes on ladies wearing flowers'.

attract butterflies. The beauty first visited by a butterfly was the emperor's choice for the night. The flower and butterfly paintings by Wang Wu and Wu Shangxi would no doubt be treated as generic floral motifs in contemporary painting studies if they were not specifically dated to Flower Festival as a reminder of their place in the Chinese custom of creating works of art for specific, timely displays. Many other paintings of an identical theme exist without any date or inscription and it is worth considering them afresh as works very possibly painted as gifts for Flower Festival. At home, families offered fruit and wine to the Flower Spirits and if they hung a suitable scroll above the offering table the setting was presumably enhanced.

Paintings of flowers could also change meaning in association with the Flower Festival, which was the one time of year that embraced all flowers. A chrysanthemum painting dated to the twenty-fourth day of the ninth lunar month painted by Ren Bonian (1840–96) for his close friend, the artist Wu Changshi (1844–1927), was judging from the date probably made in association with either the Mid-Autumn Festival or the Double Nine, when chrysanthemum imagery was appropriate. But the painting took on new life when Wu Changshi subsequently presented it to another friend and inscribed it as a gift for *huazhao*, indicating pleasure for Flower Festival in creating broad, inclusive displays of seasonal flowers.⁵⁸

Many fewer three-dimensional objects carry a date than do paintings, except for those with an imperial reign mark, which in any case provides only the year and not a month or day. Thus when considering gem-trees, porcelains, and ivory carvings it is not easy once they have been removed from their original context and placed in the art market to identify whether they were made for a specific calendrical observance. The Qing emperors constructed temples dedicated to the Flower Spirits at the Chengde Summer Villa for Escaping Heat and at the Yuanming Yuan palace, or Garden of Perfect Brightness. These edifices must have required specific decorations for Flower Festival, but if such images are circulating today it is difficult to separate the generic types from images of Flower Spirits. Although women are more closely linked in popular imagination to flowers, each month had both a male and female incarnation of a Flower Spirit.⁵⁹ Thus many figures, including images of men wearing a scholar's

⁵⁸ I thank Yu Ping Luk for bringing this reference in Ding Xiyuan, *Ren Bonian nianpu* (The Annual Record of Ren Bonain) (Shanghai, 1989), p. 87 to my attention.

⁵⁹ See Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Picture calendars', p. 77, for some of the most common designations, including the beauty Yang Guifei (717–55) and the poet Bai Juyi (722–846).

robes and holding a flower, may likely have been made for the Flower Festival in the second lunar month or perhaps for display in the specific month that the Flower Spirit represents, but such figures were not intended for long term display.

Among the most exquisite sets of twelve images of flowers are sets of small porcelain wine cups made in the Kangxi period, beginning in the early 1680s, and each bearing a reign mark on the base (Fig. 9).⁶⁰ The vessels are extremely thin, painted on one side with a flower rendered in overglaze enamel colours and inscribed on the other with a poetic couplet written in underglaze blue. Ten of the twelve stanzas are from identifiable Tang poems, but two have not yet had their source successfully identified. Each cup is inscribed with the square seal legend ‘*shang*’ following the poem. Usually translated as ‘admired’, it correctly means ‘awarded to’ in reference to receiving a cup of wine as a winner in a drinking game in which these cups were used.⁶¹

The use of the cups has given rise to different interpretations, including that the emperor used the one appropriate to each month in cyclical succession for his private dining. Described in the Qing imperial household records of the Zhaobanchu under the rubric ‘yueling bei’ (cups for the months), their association with specific months is clear and some scholars equate them also with the Flower Spirits, although there is no secure evidence for the later point.⁶² Since they are imperial commissions and include an image of winter jasmine among the flowers, it is clear the monthly association for each flower should follow the Beijing calendar and thus the plum blossom should be assigned to the twelfth month, although various publications have positioned this flower as the first month.⁶³

The exact use of the cups is somewhat nebulous but they were used in drinking games to test participants’ knowledge of poetry by the inscriptions.

⁶⁰ I thank Peter Lam for this information in personal correspondence and much insight about the month cups. He notes that Liu Yuan was the designer of the cups.

⁶¹ Peter Lam provided the reference in personal correspondence for the association with wine games found in a small booklet called *Jiuling* (Drinking for the months) produced by the Imperial Porcelain Factory supervisor, Lang Tingji (1663–1715), in *Sheng yin Bian* (repr. Yuan Fuzheng (ed.), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991).

⁶² Xuan Caoyuan, ‘Qiantan Kangxi shier yueling huashen bei’ (‘Notes on the Kangxi-period month cups of Flower Spirits’), *Shoucangjie*, 2006, no. 6, p. 62.

⁶³ The Percival David Month cups have been previously published with the plum denoting the first month. Rosemary Scott, ‘Fine porcelain and delicate brushwork: a group of Qing dynasty wares with overglaze enamel decoration from the Percival David Foundation’, *Orientalism*, 11 (1986), 22–35.



Figure 9. Set of twelve porcelain wine cups with underglaze cobalt oxide and overglaze enamels; Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722); Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province; H. 5 cm; Sir Percival David Collection at the British Museum; PDF 815; photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Peter Lam also points out the analogy between these cups and sets of eight cups of the Drunken Immortals used in drinking games. At present there is no evidence to suggest when one set of drinking cups was used instead of the other. The month cups were perhaps brought out more often at the time of the Flower Festival as expression of the court's delight in this holiday which was celebrated at all three of the imperial palaces—the Forbidden City, Yuanming Yuan, and at Jehol, each of which had dedicated flower temples. It is worth noting that the Kangxi Emperor's commission for the twelve month cups seems to be the first order for a set of twelve porcelain vessels each decorated with a specific monthly indicator and this draws attention to Qing court practice to focus on charting time in twelve monthly units, which is discussed below.

Double Fifth

This presentation began with mention of the Double Fifth Festival, to which I return as a last case study in this examination of the time-specific nature of Chinese art. A wide variety of objects was commissioned for this day because its dangerous aura mandated that a multitude of apotropaic devices should be put on display to avert evil; and like the other festival days of the year, it was also an occasion for social communion. The New Year season was very clearly set aside for family reunions, while the Double Fifth was not as much of a family day and therefore provided a good focus for social intercourse among friends. Paintings themselves provide the evidence for some of these outings, such as a handscroll by the Qing artist Fang Xun (1736–99), who painted such a gathering on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month in 1782. The setting was the waterside garden-residence of his patron Jin Deyu.⁶⁴

Similar gatherings occurred across China, for some of which there are entertaining records that outline the activities of the festival day, while also tellingly revealing the social anxieties of the participants—a group of wealthy merchants in eighteenth-century Yangzhou. The Double Fifth described by Ginger Chengchi Hsü in her study of Yangzhou points to the event as a combination of expelling evil, commemorating friendships, and

⁶⁴A. Kerlan-Stephens, ““Glimpses of the Duanwu Festival” by Fang Xun (1736–99): commemorative painting or private souvenir?”, *Phoebus, A Journal of Art History*, 9 (2001). The painting is illustrated in Claudia Brown, *Myriad Points of View: New Research on Ming and Qing Paintings in the Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection* (Phoenix, AZ, 2006).

engaging in social climbing all in the one holiday activity.⁶⁵ On the occasion in question the locally famous Ma brothers invited their influential townsmen to view a collection they had assembled of paintings depicting Zhong Kui, the Demon Queller. They were quick to promote the thirteen artworks dated from the Ming dynasty or earlier showing their acumen and status as serious and wealthy collectors. This anecdote also reveals that Wen Zhenheng's instruction to display works by early artists for Double Fifth still held currency as a key for advancing one's social reputation.

Fang Xun's painting belongs to the self-referential genre that we have seen for the New Year in which an artist describes the events of the festival and people display it on the holiday itself. In Fang's work he shows a portrait of Zhong Kui hanging in the main pavilion over a table set with a vase of pomegranate flowers. Outside, a pomegranate tree is in full bloom. Lush loquat, hollyhock and calamus plants on the shore also confirm the time of year. The familiar trope of depicting male children as part of a festival image is here presented in a believable manner since the painting is constructed to read as a real-time family gathering. A woman, presumably Jin Deyu's wife, with a baby in her arms, is watching two toddlers. One of them amuses himself with a toy shaped like a three-legged toad, one of the poisonous creatures feared on the day that is replicated and displayed following the principle of apotropaic magic.

Many paintings are easily associated with Double Fifth because they invoke obvious devices such as Zhong Kui in proximity to pomegranate flowers, but other images can easily be subsumed into the category of generic flower paintings unless they are inscribed. Only if they bear a dated inscription do we become alert to the time-sensitive nature of the iconography, as was seen in the case of paintings of peonies and butterflies. It is important to take account that certain 'generic' looking floral scenes were actually made for time-linked displays in the yearly cycle and they serve as functional markers of time and were appropriate for seasonal gift giving.

A good example is a scroll by Gao Jian dated to 1662 in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, DC. The scene presents a scholar, perhaps the artist himself, with a jar of wine at his side, loosely robed, lolling by the side of a stream to catch the summer breeze and perhaps compose a poem (Fig. 10). Pomegranate flowers blossom overhead and tall blades of calamus follow the watercourse, which are seasonal clues to Double Fifth,

⁶⁵ See Ginger Chengchi Hsü, *A Bushel of Pearls: Painting for Sale in Eighteenth-Century Yangchow* (Stanford, CA, 2001).

but the association is clear to the modern viewer because the artist's inscription dates the painting to four days in advance of the day of Double Fifth. In the original context, viewers would have judged any similar painting even if it was uninscribed as appropriate only for the season of Double Fifth, but modern viewers often disregard such clues and erroneously assume that Chinese paintings like many works in the Western canon could be displayed without strict observance to the time of year.

Since Double Fifth was a potentially dangerous time it required the display of apotropaic devices equally at the court and in humble households. It was only the elaborateness and expense of the objects that differed. Many images invoke the power of tigers to protect children. A common practice was to write the word for 'tiger' on their foreheads using a special combination of realgar (an arsenic sulphide used for medicine) and powdered dregs of wine that had been evaporated under a noontime sun, which represented the strength of the strong 'yang', or positive forces.

Double Fifth was viewed with such trepidation because it was a double whammy of dangers: on noon of the day the yang forces peaked and if they became too potent they could turn destructive. Large fires, even in home hearths, and all smelting operations were banned for the day. As soon as the yang forces crested, yin began its ascendancy bringing with it vexatious vapours, chills, and poisonous creatures. This led to the commission of pictures and decorated tableware and household goods that could avert evil forces. At least as early as the Song dynasty records show that such gifts were appropriate to give for Double Fifth, including a preference for giving round fans with apotropaic images. Archives from the Qing imperial household reveal Double Fifth as an important occasion to give gifts to the nobility and high officials, and likewise courtiers sent seasonally coded tribute gifts to Beijing in advance of the holiday for imperial enjoyment.

Some of the best descriptions of practices for the Double Fifth are found in early twentieth-century writings. At the time there was a sense of urgency and national pride among some Chinese scholars to record as much folklore as they could in the face of the escalating adoption of Western customs and loss of tradition. Most of these documents corroborate and amplify practices recorded in earlier records. The early twentieth-century *Record of Annual Festivals in the Capital* by Guo Lichen records that for Double Fifth shops churned out a large number of inexpensive stamped prints made on yellow paper as protective devices. Some of these depicted an imposing figure called the 'Heavenly Master, Zhong Kui',



Figure 10. *Enjoying Pomegranate and Hollyhock Flowers*; by Gao Jian; Qing dynasty, 1662; Suzhou, China; hanging scroll in ink and colours on paper; 239 × 83.2 cm; Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Arthur M. Sackler (S1987.271); © Freer-Sackler.

which is a name that conflates the two identities of the Daoist Celestial Master and Zhong Kui, both of whom repelled evil. Some strips were decorated with the five poisonous creatures (spider, scorpion, snake, three-legged toad, and centipede)—the same group on the back of the imperial Wanli-period porcelain discussed in the beginning of this paper. Guo described people in the capital almost fighting to buy the lucky paper strips in order to paste them on their main doors to repel evil spirits.⁶⁶

A record composed around the fall of the Qing dynasty by Dun Lizhen provides another view of the festival by describing the offerings for placement in local temples and on altars dedicated to the ancestors in individual homes. The list is headed by glutinous rice dumplings, or *zongzi*, and continues with cherries, mulberries, peaches, water chestnuts, and cakes known as the Five Poisons. Only the first two were deemed suitable for temple offerings, while the other foods made appropriate gifts to friends and family. The presence of these foods in earlier paintings attests to the traditional nature of this list.

Two similar paintings—one in the Palace Museum, Beijing, and one in the National Palace Museum, Taipei—are good examples of imagery suited for display in the palace and elite homes for Double Fifth (Fig. 11). The version in the Palace Museum, Beijing was executed by Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining 1688–1796) in a dazzlingly beautiful and precisely naturalistic style, while the anonymous version in Taipei, less assured in its command of Western descriptive techniques, offers a more complete iconography. Palace archives record that the Yongzheng Emperor ordered Castiglione on the twenty-ninth day of the fourth lunar month of 1732 to prepare a painting on silk that could be hung for the *Duanyang* festival.⁶⁷ The nearly identical work should date close in time.

The main subject is a ceramic vase filled with effulgent flowers: pomegranate, calamus, moxa, and the seasonal rose mallow flower. Hanging from one of the flower branches is a decorative sachet pouch filled with pungent herbs that ward off illnesses, which is another common symbol of the holiday season. Both paintings also depict the seasonal foods, including *zhongzi*, that were appropriate for offerings and gifts.

The top edge of the painting in Taipei provides one more reference to Double Fifth and in particular to the need for protective symbols. It is embellished by a series of rectangles that resemble the lappets at the top

⁶⁶ Guo Lichen, *Yanjing suishi ji (Record of Annual Customs in the Capital)* (repr. Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1969), pp. 62–3.

⁶⁷ Wei Dong, 'Lang Shining yu Qing gong jieling hua', p. 81.



Figure 11. *Vase with Bouquet for Double Fifth*; unknown artists in style of Giuseppe Castiglione; Qing dynasty, eighteenth century; hanging scroll in ink and colours on silk; National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China; © National Palace Museum.

of a temple cloth banner, each with a wildly written seal-style character of a type associated with Daoist talismans, and with an image of Zhong Kui. This version of the painting is more traditionally Chinese and was perhaps even a draft or first version created for the purpose of Castiglione to consult when creating his more Westernised presentation of the subject.

The prominence of the *zongzi* introduces a second layer of associations that the Double Fifth festival carries, which is the story of the famous statesman and poet Qu Yuan, who lived in the third century BC. A trusted and forthright advisor to his ruler, Qu Yuan was maliciously slandered by jealous opponents who caught the ear of the emperor and had him banished. Qu Yuan produced poetry of indescribable beauty and emotion during his exile, but the depth of his disillusionment at having been wronged by his king, now forever tainted by corruptibility, led Qu Yuan to drown himself. According to popular legend, villagers raced into the water to save him, but failing they instead threw their lunch of rice dumplings into the river as a decoy to keep the fish from devouring his corpse. They also beat drums to fend off evil. This is the rationalisation invariably given to explain the dragon boat races held on Double Fifth, but the boat races with wild drumming predate any link between the festival and the story of Qu Yuan's death. The races were timed with ancient practices at the Summer Solstice to attract rain-bringing dragons to quench the dry lands.⁶⁸ A sort of amalgamation or blend of practices associated with the Summer Solstice and with Double Fifth reflects on the the luni-solar nature of the Chinese calendar.

During the Ming and Qing the Chinese courts produced a large array of luxury objects to celebrate Double Fifth which often featured the boat races, as already seen with the Wanli-period dish. They also commissioned paintings, textile hangings, and small trinkets, such as a rooster-shaped box in the National Palace Museum that opens to reveal a delicate ivory carving of swiftly racing boats. The rooster appears for its value as a homophone for 'good fortune', a meaningful wish at any of the seasonal festivals. But since the rooster was widely associated with the New Year festival, its use at the opposite holiday of Double Fifth is another example like the invocation of Zhong Kui at both the winter and summer festivals of a desire to impose a degree of symmetrical balance on the festival calendar.

⁶⁸ Bodde, *Chinese Festivals*, pp. 314–15.

Sets of twelve

In the Qing, especially during the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, the number twelve and its association with charting time through seasonal and festival activities became more deeply entrenched than before in the court's practice of commissioning artworks.⁶⁹ An important subcategory of Qing court art is known as '*nian jie bei yong hua*' (paintings for annual festivals prepared in advance (to have in reserve for the day)), and among this group of images two nearly identical sets of twelve paintings deserve consideration in this light.

The sovereign would never risk being without exquisitely prepared artworks of seasonal imagery to use for display or give as gifts at the opportune moment in the annual cycle. Judging from court records it seems that painters were called in from one to several months before a festival to produce an appropriate work.⁷⁰ Given the weeks it takes to mount a hanging scroll it was typically necessary to order scrolls a few months in advance, but some of the orders seem to have been placed unnervingly close to the display date, as was the case with the Castiglione commission for Double Fifth mentioned above. Perhaps it was efficacious to commission certain subjects in the appropriate season and once approved by the emperor the scrolls could be mounted in studios out of sight and stored for display the following year. This fits into the practice of having festival objects made in advance to avoid what would have been understood as a calamity if the palace room were not properly decorated.

The 'twin' sets of twelve paintings under consideration were produced during the consecutive reigns of the Yongzheng Emperor between 1723 and 1735 and by the Qianlong Emperor, early in his reign around 1736. It is clear in each case that the works were produced as a set, each set having the same dimensions and materials of production, including the silks used to mount the scrolls for display. Both sets are entitled *yueling*, or *Monthly Activities*, a term that appears in the Book of Rites rooted in practices of the Zhou dynasty and redacted in the Han dynasty, in a chapter devoted to instructions developed to attune the ruler's behaviour to coordinate with the seasons. The Qing paintings are unrelated to the abstruse instructions recorded in the Book of Rites, but instead record in precise visual detail a wide array of festival activities practiced in Qing times.

⁶⁹Chen Yunru, 'Shijian de xingzhuang: Qing yuan hua shier yueling tu yanjiu' (The 'Shape of Time: a Study of Twelve Months in the Qing Court'), *Gugong xue shu jikan*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2005), 103–39.

⁷⁰Chen Yunru, 'Shijian de xingzhuang: Qing yuan hua shier yueling tu yanjiu', p. 124.

When the Yongzheng Emperor commissioned the first set of *Twelve Monthly Activities* he was drawing upon a precedent established in the late Ming dynasty that gave pictorial expression to monthly festivals. The court painter Wu Bin (died *c.*1627) produced twelve album leaves representing annual ceremonies and festivals, which are now in the National Palace Museum. Each painting features a major activity of the month. For example, the fourth leaf presents the rite of ‘Washing the Buddha’ to commemorate the festival celebrating his birthday, a subject matter that would have been acceptable according to Wen Zhengheng’s calendar for the scroll discussed above (Fig. 12). A large temple complex dominates the painting and, within the inner recesses of the main hall, a small standing figure of the baby Buddha (standing because he took seven steps at birth) is depicted in the centre of a basin on the altar. A bird’s eye view into the temple allows the viewer to witness the custom of believers ladling water over the statue to ritually wash the infant Buddha as a declaration of faith.

The late Ming was a time of imperial anxiety as the Wanli Emperor struggled to hold on to his ever diminishing power. In this climate he may have felt it especially important to place renewed emphasis on observing all the rites and festivals in order to assert his sovereignty and domination over his realm in time and space. It was during his reign that the greatest number of festival badges were made for court robes and his was the first commission of a set of twelve monthly activity paintings, which provide much more detailed information about customs than earlier court paintings produced on festival themes. The creation of a set of twelve caught the Yongzheng Emperor’s attention as an appropriate model to follow.

Perhaps the completeness of such a set to record annual customs suited his own concerns to portray his legitimacy as the Grand Master of time and local custom. A fascination with the phenomena used to calculate time and space, such as astrolabes and Western clocks, also manifests this emperor’s deep concern with charting time. These instruments appear as palace decorations in several court paintings of his era revealing that such tools were not stored away with the court astronomers, but held pride of place as palace decorations. During the Qianlong reign, this trend, especially for collecting Western timepieces, continued to accelerate.

Yongzheng’s commission for the *Twelve Monthly Scrolls* incorporated three significant changes from the Wanli precedent—the format of the paintings was shifted from an album to a large hanging scroll in order to give them greater potential for highly visible display. He also inserted his own portrait image into each of the monthly activities, thereby announcing the centrality of his role in the annual cycle. He also had the subject



Figure 12. *Washing an Image of the Buddha* from *Album of Seasonal Paintings*; by Wu Bin (active c.1583–1626), Ming dynasty; album leaf in ink and colours on paper; National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China; © National Palace Museum.

matter widened. Wu Bin's Ming paintings each depict the single most important festival activity for a month, while Yongzheng had his court artists create composite images that combine in a single scene the monthly customs of different regions in his realm. An example is the scroll for the Fifth Month which features dragon boats and highlights this empire-wide custom, but he also had inserted in the lower portion of the scroll the arrival of a mendicant with his acolyte who carries a medicine gourd, alluding to a day after Double Fifth that in some parts of China commemorates those skilled at compounding medicines.⁷¹ The same iconography appears in the Qianlong version of the fifth month scroll (Fig. 13).

The Yongzheng Emperor's changes to *Twelve Monthly Activities* made his set a much stronger testimony of imperial authority and domination over the Chinese festival calendar than the Wanli period exercise. Qianlong repeated the model Yongzheng pioneered with one major exception. He did not have his own image represented, probably in deference to his father's memory as it would have been improper to substitute his own visage in the place of the recently deceased imperial ancestor. The Qianlong Emperor was not shy about having himself depicted and brought the genre of imperial portraits of the emperor in leisure-time activities to grand heights; thus it may have come as a disappointment that he could not appropriately have his physical presence inserted into the *Twelve Monthly Activity* scrolls. That he repeated the compositions so closely attests to their perceived efficacy, and since Qianlong commissioned his version early in his reign, he may have felt pressured to begin his rule with a proper representation of the calendar, while he had not yet had time to explore other visual presentations of the subject.

Both sets of *Twelve Paintings of Monthly Activities* were created collaboratively in the imperial workshop, and although not signed some of the same artists worked on both sets, notably Tang Dai (from 1673 until after 1752), Ding Guanpeng (active 1708–71), and Chen Mei (1697–1745). The artists incorporated selective details of foreign style taking advantage of chiaroscuro and Western descriptive techniques in these paintings to create highly detailed, so-called 'realistic' images. It is more appropriate, however, to read them as a mixture of fact and idealised fantasy blended together. They can perhaps best be described as 'believable' rather than as 'realistic'.

A look at the First Lunar Month exemplifies the programme that each of the twelve scrolls follows. While we do not have a record from the

⁷¹Chen Yunru, 'Shijian de xingzhuang: Qing yuan hua shier yueling tu yanjiu', pp. 125–6.



Figure 13. *Painting of the Fifth Lunar Month* from a set of 12 *Paintings of the Months*; court painters, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95); hanging scroll in ink and colours on silk; National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China; © National Palace Museum.

Yongzheng-period archives that states when the scrolls were to be displayed, references to various of the individual month scrolls appear in the household archives about the Qianlong-period set, including edicts commanding which painters should be assigned to the task and references about getting the scrolls mounted. From these comments it is clear the emperor intended that each of the twelve scrolls should be displayed one by one during the month referenced in the painting.⁷² The scrolls thus at first seem akin to modern wall calendars; however, the purpose is not for charting time day by day, but rather to represent in a holistic fashion the calendar of festivals of each month. Since the beginning of imperial times festival observances had always been a primary concern of the emperor if he was to keep his behaviour in sync with the seasonal life of his subjects.

The imperative to represent multiple festival activities in one scene reflects the Qing emperors' notion of the imperial self as grand master, whose rule was extensive in its physical reach encompassing diverse peoples and customs. By the display of the *Twelve Monthly Activities*, mostly rooted in Han customs, on the one hand, and of paintings illustrating imperial hunts, a quintessentially Manchu activity, on the other, the emperors made manifest in visual form the universality of their power.

In the scroll of the First Month, the New Year and Lantern Festival are amalgamated (a practice already seen in the scroll in the Freer Gallery discussed above). For the imperial commission, the Yongzheng Emperor had himself shown dressed as a Chinese scholar standing in an ornate doorway, watching his sons explode a firecracker. In the lower corner of the painting, men observe tall, dancing sprays of water, which can be interpreted as the far away Hangzhou tidal bore that was observed annually during the first lunar month (and also later in the year when the bore arrived for a second more spectacular display). Surely the man-made pond in the imperial Yuanming Yuan garden, which is the identifiable setting of the painting, could not have produced such a geyser in the frigid Beijing weather of the New Year. But in the medium of painting, it was easy to turn the imperial garden into a simulacrum of all of China, with the Yongzheng Emperor presiding as the grand master of ceremonies.

Some of the ancillary figures in the *Twelve Monthly Activities* corroborate the theatrical flair of the paintings. As mentioned above, emperors were known to have palace staff imitate folk customs or to invite pedlars and acrobats to come into their private confines at the New Year. The

⁷²Chen Yunru, 'Shijian de xingzhuang', pp. 108 and 124.

wide variety of figures represented in the First Month scroll are meant to illustrate all the stereotypical peoples of the empire, and whether they are represented by actors or real commoners is beside the point. Their presence indicates that both in the actual practice of court New Year celebrations and in the permanent record given in paintings, it was important for the emperor to be inclusive and show his sovereignty over a diverse domain.

The popularity of sets of twelve to depict festival activities reached a new height in the Qing. Beside the sets of scrolls under discussion, many court albums depicting children enacting festival rites (including the Lantern Festival image in Figure 8) were created in sets of twelve, as was a set of images of women engaged in monthly festivities. Chen Yunru persuasively argues a connection between measuring a complete yearly cycle in units of twelve with new Qing court interest in Western systems of time keeping. But regardless of how the Qing emperors perceived and divided the yearly calendar, the individual festival dates were always the most critical unit of time in imperial China. A list from the end of the Qing dynasty records some 155 major and minor festival events in the annual cycle for the Emperor to preside over, and each of these generated a vast production of visual materials, which have in modern time often become jumbled together and read out of context.⁷³

Conclusion

China's many festivals, especially the popular examples discussed here of the New Year, Lantern Festival, and Double Fifth celebrations, if not as much the less-known Flower Festival, are subjects that have been studied by anthropologists aiming to understand and explicate the customs that underpin the rhythm of Chinese life. However, not enough attention has been devoted to the interplay between festivals and China's rich visual culture. We can better understand Chinese culture if we attempt to recover, whenever possible, the positions in time originally occupied by objects and reassign to them the power and special qualities they embody precisely because they are meant for limited use only. Time, our old enemy, eats away at all things; it obscures and erases both geological formations and the artefacts of human hands, but only by acknowledging that the significance

⁷³ See Tun Li-ch'en, translated by Derk Bodde, *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking as recorded in the Yen-ching Sui-shi-ji*.

of countless works of art in China was shaped by the temporality of their production and perception do we recover, however fleetingly, the meanings they conveyed during the brief lifetimes of those who made and viewed them.

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