

Study of Festival Folklore in Ancient Poems in Chinese Textbooks for Senior Middle Schools: On the Festive Folklore Teaching Strategy for *The Charm of A Maiden Singer*

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Abstract. As an intangible cultural heritage, festival folk customs are encountering internal and external troubles. Although it is faded by Chinese people in social life, it is eternally preserved in literary works. According to the new curriculum standard, “cultural inheritance and understanding” is one of the core literacy aspects of Chinese subjects in senior high schools. On this basis, this study probes into the strategy of using Chinese teaching to inherit the “intangible cultural heritage” of festival folk customs. First of all, the connotation of festival folklore should be clarified. Secondly, the content analysis can be used to explore the distribution of festival folk customs in ancient poems in the unified version of Chinese textbooks in senior high schools. Specifically, when it comes to the structure, festival folk customs are non-systematic with limited appearances in ancient poems. From the aspect of content, festival folk customs briefly introduce the festivals and their cultural connotations embodied in the textbooks but neglected by current society. As for the function, festival folk customs can be analyzed from three carriers such as time, folk and emotions for classification. Finally, taking *The Charm of A Maiden Signer* as an example, the feasible way of integrating festival folk customs into the teaching of ancient poems is proposed. Compared with the general teaching plan, such a design is original, which allows students to experience the national aesthetic tradition of “harmony between man and nature” during the Mid-Autumn Festival with the unique beauty endowed by Dongting Lake. Taking festivals and folk customs as a leadin of teaching can dig out the cultural connotation contained in ancient poems more deeply and accurately, so as to expand the profundity of teaching and improve students’ ability to appreciate ancient poems.

Keywords: Festival Folklore; Chinese Education; Ancient Poems; Intangible Cultural Heritage; *The Charm of A Maiden Signer*.

1. Research Background

On October 17, 2003, UNESCO, the largest intergovernmental intellectual cooperation agency within the United Nations system, formally incorporated intangible cultural heritage for protection and adopted the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* at the 32nd General Conference. In 2004, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of China ratified such a convention. The list of representative projects of China’s intangible cultural heritage is divided into ten items, including folk customs with festival folk customs as one of the categories.

Due to the praise of foreign modern festivals, business promotion and foreign cultural influence, many youths in the new generation are more enthusiastic about foreign festivals these days. However, Chinese traditional festivals are gradually disappearing due to the neglect of the new generation and even the society. For example, the Shangsi Festival, Spring Community Day, etc., only appear in textbooks at present but their circulated customs have been forgotten. It also gives other countries such as South Korea the opportunity to plagiarize. On November 25, 2005, South Korea successfully applied Gangneung Danoje Festival for World Heritage, while the application time of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival lagged behind, at which many scholars were discontented. According to most Chinese scholars, the Gangneung Danoje Festival in South Korea originated from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. Even some South Korean authoritative organizations insisted on its inheritance from China. “Danoje” in its English name means Dragon Boat Festival. However, due to the problem of

succession, Danoje can no longer be used when naming the Dragon Boat Festival, which can only be named Dragon Boat Festival through dragon boat racing, a custom in the Dragon Boat Festival. It is a regret that Chinese people cannot use the “Dragon Boat Festival” to name this traditional festival. Hence, the protection of festival folk customs in China is not optimistic due to internal and external crises.

Although festival folk customs are forgotten by Chinese people in social life, they are eternally preserved in literary works. Therefore, Chinese teaching undertakes the responsibility of inheriting festival folk customs, which also coincides with the spirit of the new curriculum reform in the *Curriculum Standards for Chinese Subject in High Schools (Edited in 2017 and Revised in 2020)*. In particular, one of the four core disciplines is cultural inheritance and understanding, which aims to inherit and carry forward the excellent traditional Chinese culture, enhance national cultural self-confidence, and “prevent national nihilism in culture”.

“Unifying instrumentality and humanism is the basic feature of the Chinese curriculum.” In Chinese textbooks in senior high schools, festival folk customs often appear in ancient poems and play an instrumental role in their use and understanding. If you fail to understand the festival folk customs, it may trigger a misreading of ancient poems. The knowledge of festival folk customs will be more conducive to students’ study of ancient poems. Besides, festival folk customs occupy a position that cannot be underestimated in terms of humanities. From the guidance of understanding and familiarizing with festival folk customs, students can perceive the wisdom of ancestors, enhance their cultural self-confidence and sense of identity, and foster a sense of belonging. Hence, festival folk customs are both instrumental and humanistic. The new curriculum standard also emphasizes that Chinese learning should be connected with the lives of students. In addition, festivals and folk customs are intertwined with life like a bridge, which can connect the jerky and difficult knowledge in books with daily life, so as to allow students to experience the charm and interests of traditional Chinese culture and related learning.

Apart from sorting out the festival folk customs in the ancient poems of the unified edition of Chinese textbooks in senior high schools, this paper will outline and reflect on their general overview to explore how to integrate festival folk customs into the education of intangible cultural heritage in Chinese teaching. In terms of social life, it is conducive to enhancing youths’ perception and recognition of festival folk customs, protecting and inheriting festival folk customs. Moreover, it indirectly and effectively prevents other countries from wantonly seizing Chinese cultural heritage such as the Dragon Boat Festival applied for intangible cultural heritage by South Korea. In terms of Chinese teaching, this paper can provide a reference for compiling Chinese textbooks to integrate festival folk-related content. Besides, it is helpful to accurately dig out the connotations of ancient poems, expand the profundity of teaching, and improve students’ ability to appreciate ancient poems.

2. Connotation of Festival Folk Customs

Folklore is a custom formed by the people due to the change in time sequence and climate. For example, an agricultural saying goes that “everyone is busy in the field in the cold dew season, planting wheat, picking flowers and harvesting beans.” The ancients summarized the customs and activities conducive to life and production under the corresponding solar terms and seasons, which indicates the wisdom and greatness of the ancestors.

Compared with the folk customs at the yearly temporal change that are more dependent on objective natural conditions, festival folk customs feature strong human factors. For instance, people set off firecrackers during the Spring Festival to drive out evil ghosts and welcome blessings with a certain superstition. According to Tao Lifan, people continue to enrich and process the content of folk customs during the year, making them major national festivals widely inherited by people, such as Chinese national festivals including the Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Laba Festival, etc.

In a word, “festivals are the days endowed with special social and cultural significance and interspersed in daily life. Festival folk customs refer to the cultural connotations of these special days and various activities that people inherit along the ancient convention.” The most vital element in festival folklore that can be distinguished from others is the need for ritualistic, social, and entertaining customs adopted by people.

3. Distribution of Festival Folk Customs in Teaching Materials

In the ancient poems of the Chinese textbooks senior in high schools compiled by the Ministry of Education, the presentation of festival folk customs mostly exists in the form of text and its annotations, which is to explain the festival folk culture in the text. Because ancient poems are different from vernacular Chinese, the annotations and the festival folk customs in the annotations can make students better understand ancient poems. For example, the “seventh day and ninth day” (chuqi and xiajiu) in *The Peacock Flies Southeast* does not explain the Qixi Festival. However, the students understand that the seventh day refers to the Qixi Festival through annotations and realize its corresponding folk activities in the text.

(1) Structure

The Chinese textbooks in senior high schools compiled by the Ministry of Education include compulsory volumes (1-2), and optional volumes (1-3). The following is an analysis and arrangement of the ancient poems in these five volumes, so as to understand the chapters about festival folk customs and calculate the specific proportion, with specific values shown in the table below.

	Total Number of Articles	Total Number of Articles Related to Festival Folklore	Proportion of Articles Related to Festival Folklore
Compulsory Volume 1	18	3	16.7%
Compulsory Volume 2	16	2	12.5%
Optional Volume 1	10	0	0%
Optional Volume 2	8	0	0%
Optional Volume 3	17	4	23.5%
Total	69	9	13%

The total number of ancient poems in Chinese textbooks in senior high schools is 69, of which 9 are related to festival folk customs. The proportion of all these volumes does not exceed 25%, and the total proportion is only 13%. Hence, the number of festival folk customs is very rare with a low proportion. From the perspective of distribution, the festival folklore is mainly distributed in the compulsory volumes (1-2) and the optional volume 3. Besides, ancient poems do not appear in optional volumes (1-2) without continuity in presenting festival folklore. Given that its distribution is scattered and non-systematic, the festival folk customs in the ancient poetry teaching of senior high schools still have a long way to go.

(2) Contents

The festivals and folk customs about ancient poems of the unified edition of Chinese textbooks in senior high schools include the Spring Festival, Spring Community Day, Shangsi Festival, Qingming Festival, Qixi Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Double Ninth Festival, and Winter Solstice. Considering the limited length, some festivals will be selected for a brief introduction. The celebration and cultural connotations of these festivals have been reduced or ignored in modern society.

3.1 Spring Community Day (She Ri社日)

In the Zhou Dynasty, the Spring Community Day was initially determined as 1 February. After the Han Dynasty, the fifth day after the beginning of spring and the beginning of autumn was officially selected. “社 (She) refers to land god.” Since ancient times, people have taken farming as the main productive force, and believed in gods and witchcraft. Their combination has contributed to the scene of worshipping the land god in the countryside. “The spring sacrifice community prays for anointment and rain, wishing that grains will be ripe; the autumn sacrifice community rewards meritorious service with abundant valleys”. In other words, praying in spring and repaying in autumn highlights the rural farmers’ awe of the land and their desire to conquer nature, which embodies hope and beauty. With the development of social culture, the superstitious belief in gods has weakened, replaced by entertainment and carnival. People have created a series of celebrations, such as games, enjoying social wine and meat, etc., among which drums are indispensable for celebration and have been widely used in sacrificial activities in the pre-Qin era. In addition, drums have the entertainment role of inspiring public emotions. “Drumming for Community Sacrifice” not only inherits the sacrificial gods of the previous dynasty, but also integrates current public entertainment, which creates a happy atmosphere that belongs to the exclusive social day. On top of the admiration and worship of the land god, it shows that the people have depression under the hard work day after day, rekindling their enthusiasm for life and their hope for a better future.

3.2 Shangsi Festival

Shangsi Festival had already emerged in the Zhou Dynasty, and the third day of March was determined as the Shangsi Festival in the later Cao and Wei periods. Regarding the origin of the Shangsi Festival, the saying that the witchcraft activity of soup to ward off evil spirits is widely circulated. According to expert research, Analects recorded the prototype of the Shangsi Festival custom activity: rive bath. “In late spring, I put on spring clothing. After bathing at River Yi with several adults and children, we go to Wu Yu Terrace to catch some breeze. Then we would be chanting songs as we return home.” River bath refers to that people wash away bad luck on their bodies, which has the meaning of praying for blessings and avoiding disasters with religious belief and witchcraft. The cultural connotation of exorcizing and eliminating disasters mostly appeared in the pre-Qin period, and weakened during the Qin and Han Dynasties and later, which was more inclined to entertainment. Literati during the Wei and Jin Dynasties boasted their elegance and set up the winding stream party to add romantic and humanistic interest to the entertainment. “People come out of the ponds and marshes of the river, facing the clear stream, and drink from the winding water.” The glass flows with the winding water, and the person corresponding to where it stops has to drink and compose a poem. They drink and compose poems while enjoying the scenery, which indicates the yearning and respect for nature. In the Tang Dynasty, the Shangsi Festival ushered in its peak period characterized by gorgeous and luxurious senses. With the changing society and dynasties, it is pitiful that customs related to the Shangsi Festival are rare in current daily life.

3.3 Qingming Festival

The opportunity for the Qingming Festival to change from a solar term to a festival is mostly due to the Cold Food Festival. Probably in the Han Dynasty, the Cold Food Festival was determined to be two days before the Qingming Festival. After the Tang Dynasty, it declined and merged with Qingming Festival, with its customs and activities belonging to Qingming Festival. The customs brought by the Cold Food Festival include banning fire, offering sacrifices to ancestors, and sweeping graves. The custom of offering sacrifices to ancestors can be traced back to a very early time. In ancient periods, human beings were aware of worshipping ancestors. “Every Qingming Festival, national affection bonds here. From the body language of pious worship, the overwhelming national affection can be felt.” Now it has been passed down from generation to generation. Ancestor worship

and tomb sweeping not only indicate respect and awe for history and life, but connect the past, present and future, expressing the endless life of a family and a nation.”

3.4 Winter Solstice

The winter solstice originally referred to the solar terms. Around December 22 in the Western calendar, it is scientifically the shortest day and the longest night in China, implying that winter will enter. People set time nodes through natural phenomena to make them orderly, thus creating the winter solstice. According to Xiao Fang, all ages have natural and humanistic attributes, but they have different changes in various periods. Later, the tools used by people for the period became more exquisite, and the natural attributes of the winter solstice decreased, while the humanistic attributes increased with customary activities. Therefore, the winter solstice has changed from a solar term to a folk festival. “From the perspective of social and humanistic attributes, the most vital value of the winter solstice is adjustment.” In ancient times, it was mainly reflected in the reconciliation of the relationship between the monarch and his ministers, officials and the people, people and people, and even people and gods, such as sacrifices, interactions between etiquette and customs, or public celebrations. Traditional customs such as eating glutinous rice balls also demonstrate people gathered together, implying harmony and reunion, as well as good wishes and expectations for the future.

3.5 Double Ninth Festival

The Double Ninth Festival is on the ninth day of the ninth month in the lunar calendar. Nine is the number of yangs in the *Book of Changes*. With two nines, the yangs are double and such a festival is named the Double Ninth Festival. In ancient times, it was considered unlucky, so related activities were carried out to exorcise evil spirits and avoid disasters. During the Han Dynasty, the Double Ninth Festival became a relatively complete folk festival, which is recorded in *Miscellaneous Records of Western Capital*. “Wearing dogwood on September 9th, eating agaric, drinking chrysanthemum wine...” The customs and activities of this period have a certain superstition, praying for disaster relief. With the changes of the times and social turmoil, feudal superstition no longer restricts the minds of the masses. The cultural connotation of the Double Ninth Festival folklore is more inclined to express human relations and family relations, and pray for blessings and entertainment. The reunion and harmony of relatives and the way of respecting the elderly are its characteristics. The custom of climbing was originally to pray for gods and avoid disasters. Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty once ordered an augur to climb the Lingtai (ancient high mountain) to search for fairy mountains, which proves that the ancients believed that the place where the gods were located was at a high place. Later, with the rise of poetry creation in the Tang Dynasty, climbing heights became a tool for literati to express their feelings. Poets climbed high and looked far, telling their unfulfilled feelings for family and country, or expressing their sincere and heroic admiration for the scenery and freedom.

3.6 Mid-Autumn Festival

The Mid-Autumn Festival first appeared as a festival on August 15. “According to the ancient summer calendar, a year is divided into four seasons and each season is divided into three periods including Meng, Zhong, and Ji, accounting for one month respectively. Autumn occupies July, August, and September, with August 15th in the middle of mid-autumn.” The Mid-Autumn Festival has been related to the moon from its origin, and the moon sacrifice ceremony is its original folk activity. At first, this custom was pertinent to more primitive concepts such as reproductive worship. Later, in the Zhou Dynasty, the cultural connotation of the moon sacrifice ceremony broke away from the primitive, which took the laws of natural science as the natural basis such as the concept of yin and yang expressing the operation and endless life of all things. Meanwhile, the moon has a close connection with it. “The sun rises from the east, the moon sets in the west, and the length of yin and yang is always patrolling each other.” The custom of appreciating the moon in the Mid-Autumn Festival first appeared in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. After that, it became the norm for literati to admire the moon and compose poems. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, the bright moon is the most

rounded and bright, which also symbolizes reunion. Combined with the yin-yang order based on the moon sacrifice ceremony in the previous dynasty, it expresses people's good expectations for the harmonious reunion of relatives, and comprehends the natural morality of the ideal life.

(3) Role

According to the content of ancient poems in Chinese textbooks in senior high schools compiled by the Ministry of Education, festival folk customs are roughly presented in three forms including time, folk and emotions.

As a carrier of time, festival folk customs play a role in explaining time and its corresponding landscape in ancient poems. According to the first sentence of the preface of *The Tune to Yangzhou Man*, "On the winter solstice in the third year (1176) of the reign of Chunxi" explains the writing time. The poet passed through Yangzhou on the winter solstice and felt the scenery along the way. The Double Ninth Festival is not clearly specified in *Climbing the Heights*, but is known through the climbing customs reflected in the title. The first two lines depict the scenery, exaggerating the sad atmosphere, and the third and fourth lines show the typical landscape of Kuizhou in autumn. The image of autumn mostly conveys depression and desolation in ancient poems. Moreover, the Double Ninth Festival is in late autumn, so the poet naturally expresses his sad feelings with the autumn scenery in front of him.

As the carrier of folk customs, festival folk customs mainly reflect the effect of corresponding cultural activities in ancient poems. In *Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion*, the "folk activity Xi" is mentioned at the beginning. "A clear stream with a rapidly running current that winds like a belt, shining in the bright sun, is ideal for floating wine vessels." Facing the clear running water, the author and his relatives and friends raised their glasses to toast, which could not be more comfortable. It is full of poetic and appealing picturesque, reflecting the joy and elegance of the winding stream party in Shangsi Festival.

Emotions and thoughts are essential in ancient poems, and festival folk customs are mostly presented in the form of emotional carriers. For example, *Joy of Eternal Union* depicts people offering sacrifices under the Buddha Temple to celebrate the arrival of the Spring Community Day. It should have been a scene where the people were peaceful and happy, representing the hope for a better life. However, because it was the palace of Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the Spring Community Day was worshiped by the people as a god and had been forgotten. Compared with the loneliness and depression of the previous dynasty, the beautiful joy of the Shangsi Festival shows even more desolate and painful senses. Furthermore, the folk culture connotation of the Double Ninth Festival is mostly to present human relations and family ties. In *Climbing the Heights*, the poet should have reunited with his family during the Double Ninth Festival, but he was wandering far away in a foreign land with overwhelming nostalgia.

4. Value of Festival Folk Customs in Teaching

In this section, the poem *The Charm of A Maiden Singer* will be taken as an example to illustrate the value of integrating festival folk customs into teaching that is different from ordinary teaching.

After reading many excellent teaching designs of *The Charm of A Maiden Singer*, it is found that most of them are unfolded in three parts including appreciating scenery images, analyzing characters' backgrounds and exploring characters' emotions. Such a way of thinking can make students understand the text step by step. However, some of the teaching interpretations is superficial. If it is another text with the same lyrical scenery, this way of thinking can also be applied. Thus, the teaching model that is too rigid fails to explore its fundamentals or find out its unique characteristics.

The folk custom of the Mid-Autumn Festival can be used as a unique feature of the poem *The Charm of A Maiden Singer*. How to use the folk custom of the Mid-Autumn Festival and interpret and teach the text to reflect its value will be explained in the following paragraph.

First of all, students should be guided to understand the Mid-Autumn Festival, including its time, folk activities and cultural connotations. The Mid-Autumn Festival is already a festival celebrated

across the country. Students should be familiar with its time, basic folk activities and connotations, such as moon appreciation and reunion, harmony and beauty, etc. Hence, the origin of the Mid-Autumn Festival folk activities, the ceremony of offering sacrifices to the moon, and the cultural connotation of harmony between man and nature and following natural morality need to be explained to students. Students should be aware of the fact that even if it is a well-known festival, there is still much knowledge behind it needing to be excavated, so as to attract more people to festival folk customs.

Secondly, based on the poem itself, students should be allowed to familiarize themselves with the text and figure out the time marker, that is, “near the Mid-Autumn Festival”. Then teachers can ask the students, “Is the scene depicted by these words unique to the Mid-Autumn Festival?” Students are required to use the Mid-Autumn Festival as a carrier to explain the time and the corresponding landscape for analysis. A metaphor is used in “acres of jade bright”, which vividly shows that the surface of Dongting Lake under the moonlight is as bright and clean as jade. Given that “near the Mid-Autumn Festival”, astronomical factors make “the moon on the Mid-Autumn Festival super bright”. Since the moonlight is brighter and warmer, Dongting Lake is endowed with the unique beauty of jade. In addition, “the skies with pure moonbeams overflow” bluntly demonstrates the brightness of the moonlight, reaching the ultimate radiance. It can be seen that when students are guided to observe the scenery during the Mid-Autumn Festival in the poem, they can have a deeper taste of the difference between the scenery of Dongting Lake at this time and other seasons, so that they can more easily mobilize their imagination and perceive the highest beauty of “brightness in both the surface and the inside”.

Then, the teacher should ask, “Do the poets have the unique folk activities of the Mid-Autumn Festival?” “How do the poets feel in this folk activity?”. After analyzing the scenery, students can quickly know that the poet is appreciating the moon, but the entrusted feelings are different from the common cultural connotations. The poet did not feel the beauty or sadness of reunion from moon appreciation, but reflected on himself such as “to lonely pure moonlight skin, I feel my heart and soul snow-and-ice-clear.” Why did he harbor such a feeling? On the one hand, the solitary light refers to the only bright moon in the sky. On the other hand, the poet metaphors himself as the solitary moon. In his political career, no one could understand his noble and arrogant sentiments, so he could only walk all the way forward by himself. Why is the emphasis laid on “I feel my heart and soul snow-and-ice-clear”? “Heart and souls” are things in the body, while “ice and snow” are things outside the body. How do they blend? Because the poet wanted to declare to the world that he was open and aboveboard with a pure heart. Based on a detailed analysis of these two lines in the second stanza, the poet has harmoniously integrated the beauty of nature and the purity of the individual. At this time, the teacher can lead the students to review the expanded cultural connotation of the Mid-Autumn Festival during the classroom introduction of “harmony between man and nature”. It is the aesthetic tradition of the Chinese nation. The Chinese people have always believed that human beings are a part of nature, and the changes in nature are closely related to the changes in human life. Appreciating the moon in the Mid-Autumn Festival is a good opportunity for dialogue between man and nature. Hence, it is not difficult to understand why “brightness above, brightness below” refers to both the clarity of the scenery and that of the soul of the poet.

From this perspective, the teacher is no longer teaching a poem, but a class of poems. According to another work about the Mid-Autumn Festival, *Prelude to Water Melody* written by Su Shi, “men have sorrow and joy; they part or meet again; the moon is bright or dim and she may wax or wane” and “so let us wish that man will live long as he can! Though miles apart, we’ll share the beauty she displays” also comes from the national aesthetic tradition of “harmony between man and nature”. With the folk customs of the Mid-Autumn Festival as a leadin to *The Charm of A Maiden Singer*, students can jump out of the shallow imagery and artistic conception appreciation, feel the unique beauty of Dongting Lake endowed by the Mid-Autumn Festival from the comparison, and also break through daily understanding and understand the common Chinese people. The spiritual pursuit of

“harmony between man and nature” is of great help in shaping values and forming cultural self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

Based on defining the connotation of festival folklore, this paper uses content analysis to sort out the distribution of festival folklore in ancient poems in the unified edition of Chinese textbooks in senior high schools. When it comes to the structure, festival folk customs are non-systematic with limited appearances in ancient poems. From the aspect of content, traditional festivals such as Spring Community Day and Shangsi Festival are introduced. The cultural connotations of “harmony between man and nature” embodied in the Mid-Autumn Festival is expounded. As for the function, festival folk customs are analyzed from carriers such as the time, folk and emotions. In addition, *The Charm of A Maiden Signer* is taken as an example to analyze its content and explore the feasible teaching strategy, so as to fully play the value of festival folk customs in Chinese teaching. However, there are still deficiencies in the study. Given the author’s insufficient theoretical knowledge of folklore and practical experience in Chinese teaching, the effect of integrating festival folk customs into Chinese education needs to be tested in practice in the future.

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