

## **The Chinese Adoption of Valentine's Day**

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Only a small percentage of Chinese people have direct contact with Western culture, yet February has become the month for love gifts and celebrations, heavily promoted by the media.

The media has had a large role in the diffusion of Valentine's Day, which most Chinese people learn of through reports, news, advertisements, and sale promotions. Today, Valentine's Day has established itself as an important day among Chinese youth in urban areas, especially in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. During the week in which Valentine's Day falls, flowers are sent back and forth in the cities, and chocolate ranks among the best-sold food. Romance, money, and expectation fill young people's minds and businessmen's wallets. Florists, card shops, and chocolate vendors all do a raging business, as lovers rush to purchase tokens of their affection.

### ***Qǐ Qiǎo Jié* (乞巧节)**

Ironically, the Chinese already have a day devoted to love. The seventh day of the seventh month in the Chinese lunar calendar (celebrated in the Western Calendar during the month of August) is known as *Qǐ Qiǎo Jié* (乞巧节) and referred to as Chinese

Valentine's Day. It is a day devoted to romance. According to legend, the seventh daughter of the goddess of heaven, who was also the prettiest daughter, caught the eye of a cowherd during one of her visits to Earth. The couple lived together happily for several years. Eventually however, the goddess of heaven ordered her daughter to return to heaven. However, the mother once a year takes pity on the couple and allows them to be

reunited. Legend has it that on the seventh night of the seventh month, magpies form a bridge across the Milky Way with their wings so the seventh daughter can cross to meet her husband. Today, stargazers celebrate *Qǐ Qiǎo Jié* by gazing up at the star Vega, east of the Milky Way, which represents the seventh daughter, and at the constellation Aquila, on the west side of the Milky Way, where her husband, represented by the star Altair, awaits her.

Unfortunately, festivities surrounding Chinese Valentine's Day have fallen off in recent years. In the past, Seven Sisters' Associations would put up colorful shrines made of paper, fresh fruit, and flowers as a tribute to the lovers. Today, younger Chinese are often unfamiliar with the holiday and more likely to celebrate Valentine's Day on 14 February. Still, in some cities efforts are being made to bring back many of the traditional festivals, including *Qǐ Qiǎo Jié* in order to attract tourists.

### **How a Foreign Cultural Phenomenon Takes Hold**

Three distinctive phases may be recognized in any process of acceptance of a foreign cultural trait: introduction, compatibility, and integration. In general, the form, meaning, and function of cultural elements introduced from the outside must be modified by the receiving society for complete internalization. This is certainly true of the adoption and integration of Valentine's Day in China. Chinese society has adopted the Western images, functions, customs, and behaviors extensively, but people still hold their original system and culture, as is evidenced by how they understand some of the symbols and constructs, including love.

In creating a mass awareness of Valentine's Day, the media first projected it as a fashion, then as a cultural emblem. An analysis of Valentine-related stories that ran in

*Xinmin Evening*, *Beijing Youth*, and *Guangzhou Daily*, three of China's most influential newspapers, from 1983 through 2003 showed that usually for a month around 14 February, the media actively promoted and covered the holiday. The first report on the subject appeared in 1983 in *Xinmin Evening*. It was an essay titled "Marx's Favorite Flowers."

The 1980s as a whole represent the first stage of the introduction and adoption of Valentine's Day. During the 1980s, the articles in newspapers were introductory essays treating the practice as a totally alien notion. It was characterized as an expression of literary passion. The second phase was the early 1990s, when editors paid more attention and gave more space to the coverage of Valentine's Day in China and began to indicate that it was being widely celebrated in China. The third phase in the adoption of Valentine's Day began in the latter half of the 1990s and continues into the present. Today, the media provide a multiplicity of information related to Valentine's Day, which they define as a well-established cultural practice. There has been increasing cooperation between media and business, as the mass media needs some spice to attract the public's eyeballs, while the industry sees the week surrounding the day as a "golden week."

In the days approaching 14 February, print media, radio, and TV all focus on the Western practice of Valentine's Day. The Internet—the global medium—plays a similar role. One reporter who works for a liberal newspaper in Nanjing remarked that he felt that "some writers and editors value the day because of its emotional and economic potential; it spices up the newspaper." Thus people cannot help but be exposed to the coverage, although many people regard the adoption and diffusion of Valentine's Day as

a collusion between media and business circles to make it seem that it is necessary to celebrate Valentine's Day if one is to be a part of a modern, globally connected society.

### **Valentine's Day as a Sign of Modernity**

Many of the 30 people I interviewed regarding perceptions of Valentine's Day said that they associated Valentine's Day with a sense of modernity. They reported that celebrating Valentine's Day in its modern form helped them improve their sense of self-esteem and helped them to feel that they were connecting and adapting to a dominant and modern global culture. One college student at Southeast University said that he adopted the practice not because it was Western but "because it stands for modernity," a view that was echoed by almost everyone I interviewed. Therefore, we can say that the sense of modernity also plays a role in the process of cross-cultural adoption. Compare this with people's attitudes toward *Qǐ Qiǎo Jì* It is considered outdated to display needlework, burn incense, or make offerings to the night sky to celebrate that romantic day. The appeal of the traditional holiday has fallen off; the youth prefer more realistic, direct, and modern ways.

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