



COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CULTURAL CUSTOMS: CHINESE SPRING FESTIVAL AND SINHALA AND TAMIL NEW YEAR FESTIVAL

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Abstract:

There was a gradual increase in the popularity of the Chinese language across the globe owing to China's economic and social developments. Thus, this resulted in a momentum of the teaching and learning of the Chinese language that elevated the number of Chinese language acquirers. It is obvious that culture grants a dual role in foreign language acquisition. Yet, many learners undergo obstacles in interpreting a foreign language and its cultural context by reminiscing through their native culture. On the other hand, the knowledge of the culture of the target language supports resolving misunderstandings and problems that arise within the learning context. Both learners and teachers should strive to view both the target and their native cultures from multiple perspectives, fostering an open-minded and rational understanding. In the scope of culture, festivals become a key component in every country. Therefore, this study focusses on comparing the traditional Spring festival in China with the Sri Lankan cultural festival, Sinhala and Tamil New year. The primary methodology employed in this regard is the survey method to denote a comprehensive understanding of similarities and discrepancies of these festivals. Furthermore, this study caters for three major objectives: to apply the findings of the study to Chinese language instruction, to promote cross cultural understanding between two countries and to explore the impact of technological development on festival culture.

Keywords: cultural customs, Chinese Spring Festival, Sinhala and Tamil New Year, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

The concept of culture can be defined as a social heritage that evolves from one generation to the next through a composition of individual experiences. Culture is a

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combination of beliefs, customs, values and shared knowledge and experiences. These characteristics are conveyed through the cultural element of 'language' (Taga, 1999).

It is obvious that language and culture are inseparable units, and in order to acquire a foreign language effectively, a learner should gain adequate exposure to the culture associated with the language. Moreover, language acquisition consists of improving speaking, reading, writing and listening skills parallel to the understanding of the culture.

Several Sri Lankan universities have designed Chinese language programs that include Chinese culture and predominately focus on Traditional festivals. The majority of Chinese language instructors have graduated from local universities, while few teachers had completed Masters or Doctoral degrees in China. Thus, these instructors have limited knowledge and cultural exposure. The correlation between language and culture is inseparable. It is disadvantageous for second language learners when language instructors merely focus on linguistic competency of the language while neglecting culture (Dimitrios Thanasoulas, 2001). In this spectrum, the incorporation of culture into the curriculum is challenging for Chinese language teachers. The key issue is to find an effective methodology for the integration between language and culture in Chinese language instruction.

Every country has a unique cultural heritage reminiscent of the history and values of a community. In this regard, festivals epitomize a significant phase as a distinctive cultural feature. This study focusses on a comprehensive analysis of the New Year celebrations in both China and Sri Lanka in which is entitled as the Spring festival in China while in Sri Lanka which is known as the Sinhala and Tamil New year. Moreover, the study depicts the way traditional festivals have evolved with advancements of technology by providing a deeper understanding on the procedure of integrating festival-related content in the process of language acquisition.

2. Literature Review

The available literature manifests that there are only a limited number of studies conducted on the comparative analysis of Chinese and Sri Lankan festivals. Although there are numerous studies conducted on the Chinese Spring Festival and New Year Festival, researches on the comparison of both festivals, particularly in relation to Chinese language instruction, has not been conducted yet. Furthermore, comparative studies on festival culture from a cross-cultural perspective are limited. Available studies focus on comparisons between China and countries such as Japan, Korea or the United States. This gap indicates potentialities for future research.

Most researches on Chinese festivals predominantly focus on East Asian or Western cultural backgrounds. As an instance, Lu Youyi (1994) in *The Origins and Comparisons of Chinese and Japanese Folk customs*, compared traditional festivals such as Dragon Boat festival, the Qixi festival and the Chongyang festival of Japan and China. Similarly, Ma Xingguo (1995) has done a comparative study on Seasonal customs in

China and Japan, while Yonghong (2004) focussed on customs and social etiquettes in Chinese and Japanese culture by examining festivals such as the New Year, the Dragon Boat festival and the Obon (urabon) festival.

Moreover, different researches on integrating Chinese festivals into the teaching of Chinese as a second or a foreign language upsizes the increasing significance in this scope. It further articulates the rapport between the role of education and language instruction. As per Zhang Ying (1994), several possibilities of integrating culture into language instruction were examined. Fan Caixia (2012) and Li Jing (2012) depicted the importance of the inclusion of Chinese traditional culture and rituals in language teaching. Furthermore, Cheng Yehui (2013) explored the contribution of Confucius centres to infuse festive folk culture into research. Zong Wenjun (2014) discussed the utilisation of traditional autumn festivals in Chinese language teaching. These researches exemplified the importance of integrating cultural content into language teaching in order to bridge cultural differentiations that hinder effective second language acquisition.

In addition to that, there is a gradual development in the pragmatic integration of Chinese festivals into language instruction. Zhai Wenting (2017) analysed the teaching of the Spring festival, addressing the cultural significance and also proposing strategies to improve the standards of language instruction. Yu Ting (2018) denoted challenges in teaching Chinese traditional festivals and suggested teaching strategies such as visual aids and experiential learning to improve cultural teaching. Additionally, Guo Xiaozi (2017) studied the integration of Chinese festivals into the language education of Korean students by demonstrating the way understanding cultural differences can improve language proficiency. Yan Mei (2015) applied experiential learning methods in teaching traditional festivals to Thai primary students by providing insights into how cultural content can be effectively integrated into language teaching. Lin Xiuyu (2014) articulated Malaysian Chinese festivals by offering teaching methods to bridge cultural differences and enhance student comprehension.

In particular, no studies have compared Chinese and Sri Lankan festivals in the context of teaching Chinese to Sri Lankan learners or Sinhala to Chinese learners. This gap represents a valuable opportunity to enhance cross-cultural understanding and improve language education.

3. Research Methodology

This study surveyed 100 students from various Chinese and Sri Lankan universities to learn whether young people view the cultural relevance of the Chinese Spring Festival and the Sri Lankan New Year. As participants are in the 20–25 age range, the statistics will solely represent the opinions of people in this age range. The questionnaire used for the survey has a total of 14 questions.

4. Results and Discussion

Every country is inherited with a unique cultural history, values and customs that are connected to New Year celebrations. The main objective of the study is to focus on comparing the cultural ethos and customs of the Chinese Spring Festival and the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in Sri Lanka. A survey was conducted with undergraduates to unravel perceptions and experiences of traditional New Year customs amalgamated with language instruction.

Through the survey and analysis, it was found that while some aspects of the Spring Festival and the Sri Lankan New Year share similarities, there are also notable differences between both festivals.

4.1 Similarities

4.1.1 Emphasis on Family Reunion

The main focus of New Year's celebrations in Sri Lanka and China is gatherings with relatives. 87% of Sri Lankan respondents and 78% of Chinese respondents, respectively, believe that family reunions are a significant part of the New Year. The reunion dinner remains the most important ritual, even though regional customs differ. During a holiday supper, families come together to share happy memories. The majority of Chinese respondents and all Sri Lankan respondents to the survey on reunion lunch locations decided to hold it at home, underscoring the value of family. As a sign of good fortune for the upcoming year, families in Northern China eat dumplings during reunion dinners, whereas in the South, tangyuan (glutinous rice balls) are eaten to symbolise family unity. In Sri Lanka, family members serve one another as an expression of compassion and concern for one another, and they also consume coconut milk rice. Even though the cuisine varies, the main idea of family reunions remains identical.

4.1.2 Traditional New Year Customs

The tradition of paying New Year visits can be seen in both Chinese and Sri Lankan cultures. People in both countries employ traditional methods such as home visits or sending greeting cards to convey their New Year wishes. Moreover, a common tradition called 'lucky money' is also a unique feature in this regard. In China, 97% of respondents manifested that sending or receiving red envelopes is a significant phase in their new year celebrations. On the other hand, 66% of respondents in Sri Lanka indicated that they maintain a similar sort of custom. Children in both countries predominately do this.

4.1.3 New Changes to New Year Traditions

While celebrating the New Year with family and friends remains a ritual, new technologies have made it possible for individuals to do so in new ways. The custom has become more modern and convenient as people can send New Year's greetings by phone, text, email, video chat, or applications like WeChat, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others.

4.1.4 Influence of Foreign Cultures

The survey indicated that foreign culture has directly impacted on undergraduates in Sri Lanka and China. Recently, young Chinese individuals have increasingly been enthusiastic of Christmas than their own traditional festivals. A survey conducted by the Chinese Social Survey revealed that 90% of young people plan to celebrate Christmas, and 37% now treat it as a regular holiday, comparable to Chinese festivals like the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival. Cultural exchanges have occurred in Sri Lanka, which frequently impact foreign invasions, trade, tourism, and other cross-border migrations. The celebration of the Chinese Spring Festival has spread to Sri Lanka in recent decades due to the increase in cross-cultural marriages. In Sri Lanka, Western culture has had an enormous effect. According to 50% of respondents, companies' utilisation of foreign holidays for financial gain has increased the popularity of Western celebrations and made them livelier. Since these international celebrations have only recently made their way to Sri Lanka, 48% more people think their novelty has added to their attraction. This data demonstrates the growing impact of international vacations.

4.2 Differences

4.2.1 Different Celebration Times

The Chinese Spring festival is based on the ancient Chinese Lunar calendar and annually falls on a date in January or February as per Gregorian calendar. On the other hand, the New Year is determined by the Sri Lankan astrological calendar (litha) and is annually celebrated between the 12th and 15th of April.

4.2.2 Religious Influence

According to the Chinese lunar calendar, the Chinese Spring Festival is basically a celebration of family reunions that ushers in a new year. However, the traditional New Year celebration in Sri Lanka combines historical, cultural, and religious aspects. Both Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka observe this holiday. In order to give prayers to the Buddha or God, Buddhists travel to temples around the New Year, while Hindus visit Kovil to make offerings of fresh milk, fruits, and flowers.

4.2.3 Differences in Traditional New Year Customs

Given its size and population, China has regional differences in how its citizens celebrate the Spring Festival. On the other hand, Sri Lanka, a small island nation, observes the New Year more consistently throughout the nation. The Chinese Zodiac, which consists of the following 12 animals: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig, is used in China to symbolise a different animal yearly. This year could be the Year of the Snake, for instance. On the other hand, Sri Lanka does not celebrate the New Year with this idea.

There are several customs for each day of the Chinese Spring Festival, which spans from the first to the fifteenth day of the lunar new year. However, there are no set times for these customs. Yet, in Sri Lanka, both Sinhalese and Tamil people observe specific

'auspicious time' dates to carry out specific New Year's rituals that have their roots in astrology.

4.2.4 Differences in New Year Decorations and Clothing Traditions

It is significant that the color red is employed as an epitome of joy, luck and prosperity during the Spring festival. It is commonly used in decorations, such as red lanterns, couplets, and 'Fu' (福) characters. People wear red clothing with the belief of good fortune for the upcoming year. All decorations in streets and homes are also in red color that is reminiscent of festive spirit.

In contrast, the choice of color for decorations and clothing is decided by astrologers annually in Sri Lanka who broadcast auspicious colors through mass media. People eventually follow this tradition with the belief of prosperity and good luck in the upcoming year. In both countries, colors are embodiments of good luck and prosperity for the new year.

4.2.5 Differences in New Year Traditional Cultural Activities and Games

During the Sinhala Avurudu festival, entire villages undergo a transformation into vibrant celebratory spaces, where individuals across generations participate in various recreational activities, fostering an atmosphere of joy and enthusiasm. The festival is predominantly characterized by community-organized sports and traditional games, including onchili-pedima, kalagedi-sellama, olinda-keliya, meemesi-keliya, mallawapora, and ali-pora, among others. These activities, organized at the familial and village level, serve to strengthen social cohesion rather than fulfill religious obligations. A significant musical tradition associated with Avurudu is the playing of the rabana, a large single-sided drum, often performed by elderly women within households to enhance the festive ambiance. Notably, these activities occur outside religious institutions such as temples and kovils, underscoring the festival's secular and communal nature.

Conversely, the Temple Fair (庙会), a traditional folk event deeply intertwined with religious and commercial customs, distinguishes the Chinese Spring Festival. Temple Fairs are held within or in proximity to temples, where attendees engage in religious rituals such as worshipping deities and offering prayers for blessings while simultaneously enjoying cultural performances. Historically, these fairs emerged as marketplaces where vendors established stalls around temples to cater to festival-goers, eventually evolving into large-scale cultural events featuring folk performances, traditional craftsmanship, and regional cuisine. Unlike Sinhala Avurudu, which is centered on secular village-based festivities, Chinese Temple Fairs retain a profound connection with religious and spiritual practices.

Thus, while both festivals incorporate traditional games, communal participation, and cultural festivities, their core distinctions lie in their respective venues and underlying purposes. Sinhala Avurudu prioritizes family-centered and village-based games that reinforce social ties, whereas the Chinese Spring Festival's Temple Fair

integrates religious observance, commerce, and entertainment within a temple-centered framework.

4.3 Integrating Cultural Content into Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

The cultural and linguistic practices that Sri Lankan students bring from their mother tongue have to be taken into account when teaching learners Chinese. Learning Chinese can be influenced by learners' existing linguistic structure and thought processes. Thus, it's important to compare elements of their original language with Chinese, particularly when discussing idioms, mythology, politeness, values, and customs. Particularly for significant cultural events like the Spring Festival, merely imparting cultural knowledge from the syllabus frequently fails to give pupils a thorough comprehension or appreciation of the cultural background. In order to make cultural lessons effective and genuinely engage students, educators must use more comparison and interactive teaching strategies.

Cultural comparison is a useful strategy. Teachers can, for instance, compare the Sinhala and Tamil New Years in Sri Lanka to the Chinese Spring Festival. In both celebrations, traditional meals with loved ones are emphasised in addition to family reunions. Students can relate to the content better when they are told that, in Sri Lanka, families cook and share Kiribath (milk rice), while in China, families get together for a reunion dinner and eat dishes like dumplings or sticky rice balls. Students are able to understand the relevance of these customs in Chinese culture by using this comparative method to connect familiar traditions with aspects of foreign culture.

Moreover, teachers' use of a strategy to stimulate a festive aura in the language classroom can foster real-life scenarios to get an authentic experience of the culture of the target language. As an example, the teacher can say, "Today is Chinese New Year, similar to how you celebrate the Sinhala or Tamil New Year in Sri Lanka." The teacher can further enhance the experience by introducing cultural practices like writing couplets, decorating with "Fu" (福) characters, or creating paper lanterns together with students. This inclusive learning becomes a catalyst in the successful integration of culture with a deeper understanding.

Cultural context is also vital in understanding idiomatic expressions, which often don't directly translate between languages. For example, in Sinhala, people say "බිච්චි අලිනට වීණා වයනවා වගේ", which literally means "to play the piano for a deaf elephant." It is typically employed in a number of contexts, such as (1) illustrating the meaninglessness of someone discussing complicated subjects with an idiot; (2) describing an outsider speaking to an insider; or (3) sarcastically describing how someone doesn't comprehend his audience. However, "对牛弹琴" (Play the piano for a cow) could be an idiom in Chinese. Moreover, the Chinese Spring Festival consists of many phrases related to blessings (祝福语) and relies on wordplay and cultural symbolism. As an example, 年年有余 (Nián nián yǒu yú) can be literally translated into "Every year has a surplus", yet the actual meaning it indicates is a wish for abundance and prosperity in the coming year. Furthermore, this phrase is also a pun, as 余 (yú, surplus) sounds like 鱼 (yú, fish) in

Chinese. This articulates the fish as an essential dish during New Year's celebrations. A lack of cultural awareness could lead to pupils misinterpreting or misusing these terms. Thus, educators need to help pupils understand the cultural connotations of these idioms in addition to language mechanics. This helps them avoid literal translations and improves their ability to use the language naturally.

Furthermore, engaging students in practical tasks associated with Chinese holidays could enhance their understanding of the culture. Teachers can involve students in preparing dumplings (做饺子), making paper lanterns (做纸灯笼), or writing Chinese couplets (对联), when teaching about the Spring Festival, rather than simply speaking about customs. Students learn about Chinese New Year in a more genuine way by participating in these traditional customs. For instance, elucidating the significance of wearing red during the festival and then motivating students to do the same or create decorations provides an unforgettable educational experience that embodies the culture.

5. Conclusion

According to the survey, Sri Lankan and Chinese New Year customs have both parallels and differences. Family reunions and customs, such as visiting relatives in the New Year, are valued in both cultures. However, these behaviours have become more modernised due to contemporary communication methods, including social media, text messaging, and phone conversations.

Crucial distinctions include the fact that Sri Lanka celebrates its New Year in mid-April utilising a Solar Calendar, whereas China employs the Lunar Calendar for its Spring Festival. Regional variations exist in Chinese New Year celebrations, but Sri Lankan celebrations are generally consistent across the nation. Sri Lankan culture lacks a counterpart to the Chinese custom of representing each year with one of the twelve zodiac animals. There are also notable cultural distinctions in the attire and decorations used during festivals. These distinctions provide important teaching points for Chinese culture. To assist pupils in understanding cultural contexts, educators can employ situational learning and comparative methods. Students can relate to Chinese customs, for example, by drawing comparisons between the Chinese Spring Festival and the Sinhala and Tamil New Year.

Students can relate to Chinese customs, for example, by drawing comparisons between the Chinese Spring Festival and the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. Students' awareness of Chinese culture is enhanced, and their immersion is deepened when they participate in practical activities like cooking dumplings or making Chinese New Year decorations. Especially in cross-cultural contexts in Sri Lanka, this method enhances the interactivity and significance of cultural instruction.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Ms. M. M. N. M. Lakmali is currently pursuing a PhD in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at Beijing Foreign Studies University, China. She holds both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language and has over three years of experience teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages. Her research interests include second language acquisition, Chinese language teaching methodologies, applied linguistics, teacher training, and the role of culture in language learning.

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