

## LIFE IN CHINA

## Folk Arts Make Spring Festival Colorful

By Staff Reporters

The most important holiday for the Chinese people is Spring Festival, also known as Lunar New Year. It is a time when all family members gather and celebrate together. The festival is also observed in some East Asian and South-east Asian countries and regions. The Lunar New Year in 2024 will begin on February 10.

**Time-honored traditions**

The Spring Festival involves many traditions, some of which are still followed today, but others have been updated with the development of technology.

Preliminary Eve is the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month. People offer sacrifices to the kitchen god at this time. However, most families now prepare delicious food for the occasion.

People start preparing for the New Year after the Preliminary Eve. This is referred to as "seeing the New Year in." Before the New Year, people thoroughly clean their homes and their clothes, bed-clothes, and then start decorating their clean rooms to create a festive and joyful atmosphere.

Spring Festival couplets are pasted on each side of the front door, highlighting Chinese calligraphy with black characters on red paper. Displaying the Chinese character FU (which means "blessing or happiness") is essential.



The Chinese character FU. (PHOTO: VCG)



The Xiling Temple Fair held at Jiefang Road in Yichang, Hubei province. (PHOTO: VCG)

Usually, the character is pasted upside down on the door between the couplets, because the "reversed FU" is homophonic with the phrase "Good luck arrives" in Chinese pronunciation.

Everyone dresses up when they wake up on New Year's Day. The day begins with people greeting their parents and grandparents. Then, as a New Year's gift, each child will receive money wrapped in red paper, also known as lucky money, which usually represents the new year's wishes from parents.

Fireworks were once the most popular Spring Festival custom. People believed that the sound could help drive away evil spirits. However they have been either entirely or partially prohibited in most cities after being considered unsafe, noisy, and the cause of environmental pollution.

**Intangible heritage shines**

With the Year of the Dragon commencing on February 10, Chinese find themselves at the crossroads of tradition and reality. The New Year not only

marks the beginning of spring, but is also a time of introspection about the richness of intangible cultural heritage related to the Spring Festival.

Chinese New Year pictures, or Nianhua, a form of colored woodblock print, have a long history dating back to the Western Han Dynasty. Nowadays, Nianhua's cultural and artistic value makes it a reflection of Chinese people's daily lives.

Originating in the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC- 24 AD) more than 2,000 years ago, Chinese lanterns are an ancient traditional handicraft, which integrate different skills, including painting, paper-cutting and paper binding. It is a Chinese custom to hang red lanterns in the New Year, which symbolizes peace and prosperity.

The temple fair, also known as Miaohui in Chinese, is a traditional cultural event that features all kinds of Chinese folk arts during the Spring Festival. The fair is usually held at temples or adjacent to them, hence the name.

**Popular lion dancing**

The dancing lions, along with the sound of drums, cymbals and gongs, signal the approaching Spring Festival in China. This performance is popular in Guangdong province.

The Guangdong Lion Dance, which was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, is a combination of martial arts, dance and music. It originated as the royal lion dance during the Tang Dynasty (618- 907) and was later introduced to the south by migrants from the north.

It developed into its modern form during the Ming Dynasty (1368- 1644). In traditional Chinese culture, lions are regarded as a symbol of integrity, power and prosperity, which can protect humans and livestock from the evil and disease.

This art form is not only popular in south China's Guangdong province, but also in other parts of the country and with overseas Chinese, making it a cultural bridge for Chinese who are seeking their national roots.

**Spark of iron flowers**

What makes the Spring Festival so vibrant is not just lion dancing and fire-crackers. The Datiehua folk art, which means "striking iron flower," was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2008. This folk art involves splashing molten iron to create sparkling streaks of light, which simulate fireworks. The performance is a traditional way of celebrating the Spring Festival.

The history of Datiehua can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn periods (770BC—476AD), with the emergence of the mining and iron-smelting industry in China. At first, Datiehua was just used for sacrificial rituals by craftsmen in their own industry. However, in the Song Dynasty, it gradually evolved into a traditional folk celebration.

## Dialogue

## Assist to Fulfill China's Pharmaceutical Dream

By BI Weizi and LONG Yun

Ten years ago, Israeli biopharmaceutical expert Yehuda Zelig had no idea that he would forge an unbreakable bond with China, a country 6,000 kilometers away from his home, and dedicate himself to helping realize the Chinese dream of developing its own insulin.

Over the past decade, Zelig has helped Chinese companies overcome many difficulties in insulin R&D and production, breaking the monopoly of some foreign companies in the Chinese insulin market. He and his Chinese colleagues are looking for solutions to the world's problem of new insulin, in the belief that their research in China will bring more fruitful results. He was awarded the Chinese Government Friendship Award in 2019.

**Sharing is caring**

After graduating from Tel Aviv University with a master's degree in life sciences, Zelig decided to pursue a career in biopharmaceuticals, which were at the forefront of the fight against certain cancers and autoimmune diseases. Over the next 20 years, his hard work gradually took him from R&D technician to R&D engineer, and then to senior executive positions in a number of internationally renowned biopharmaceutical companies.

In 2009, the chairman of a biotechnology company in Hefei met Zelig while visiting Israel, and the two hit it off. "Since then, I have been working in China, traveling between China and Israel nearly 10 times a year on average, hoping to introduce the most advanced insulin production technology to China," said Zelig.

Insulin products have high technical barriers, making the insulin industry a competitive field in which only a handful of technology companies who have mastered high-end gene recombination technology can participate. Since the early 1990s, China's insulin market has basically been monopolized by multinational companies, with product supply and pricing power in the hands of foreign parties. Therefore, developing insulin drugs has become a common dream for practitioners in the Chinese pharmaceutical industry.

"I don't want to keep this technology to myself. I am willing to share this technology with more people and benefit more Chinese people," said Zelig, adding that improving the quality of life for more people is what motivates him.

Typically, the development of an innovative drug takes decades and costs billions of dollars. Zelig's team brought internationally advanced insulin manufacturing technology to China, shorten-



Yehuda Zelig. (COURTESY PHOTO)

ing the product development cycle and reducing capital investment. "It took us only seven years to set up a facility, which is a very short time," he said, adding his Chinese colleagues are quick learners.

**Open minds drive pharmaceutical progress**

Besides technology, Zelig also introduced his Chinese counterparts to Western pharmaceutical standards and regulations to facilitate international cooperation. "You have to understand not only the language of biotechnology, but also a lot of things like law and society," he said, adding that open-mindedness and mutual understanding play an increasingly important role in the modern world, where international cooperation provides an essential framework for addressing global challenges that transcend borders.

According to the WHO, the number of people with diabetes rose from 108 million in 1980 to 422 million in 2014. The prevalence of diabetes has been rising rapidly throughout the world.

Against this backdrop, harnessing the collective wisdom of people from different cultures in cutting-edge research is the way to go. "Integration between countries and people leads the way to great products in a more efficient way," said Zelig, adding that not isolating oneself in one's own lab and collaborating with other people are the basic principle of scientific research.

Zelig revealed that his team is currently working intensively on insulin, which he called "a global problem." According to him, the successful development of the new insulin medicine has a potential to significantly improve the quality of life for people with diabetes.

XU Jie from the Department of Science and Technology of Anhui province also contributed to the article.

## Letter to the Editor

## Learning to Make Dumplings on New Year's Eve

By John Thomas Arants

As this year's Spring Festival approaches and my friends and colleagues head home to celebrate with their families, memories of holidays spent with my friend, Mu Laoshi come to my mind. Two years ago, he invited me to join his family celebrations on Chinese New Year's Eve. I gladly accepted.

When I arrived, three generations were bustling around the kitchen, preparing jiaozi (dumplings). They welcomed me and immediately put me to work. I was nervous, I'm not a great cook and I had never prepared jiaozi before, but Mu's mom was a great teacher. We rolled out the wrappers, filled them with pork and diced vegetables, then folded them and squeezed them shut.

Everyone in Mu's family was an ex-

pert at it, even his 10-year-old daughter. They took the ends of the wrapper between their thumbs and forefingers and pressed them together creating a tight seal. They even shaped the wrappers, creating a little wave pattern around the outside of the jiaozi. They looked great.

Mine did not look quite so beautiful. Some of the jiaozi were understuffed and therefore too small. Some were overstuffed and difficult to close. And all of them seemed ready to fall apart as soon as they hit the boiling water. I knew they looked bad, but Mu and his family had only kind words, encouraging me and occasionally helping. They were very kind and even though my jiaozi were not perfect, I enjoyed the process of making them.

Mu's mom boiled the jiaozi and the rest of us set the table, putting out

bowls and chopsticks, preparing the vinegar and soy sauce dip, with just a dash of chilly pepper to give it a little extra kick. When the jiaozi were ready, they were put in the center of the table, on three large plates. I was welcomed and treated more like a friend than a guest, and it never felt like I was foreign at all.

The jiaozi were delicious, maybe the best I had ever had. We ate and talked and laughed. But I noticed Mu's daughter eyeing the jiaozi suspiciously. I knew that one of the jiaozi held a lucky coin inside, and I assumed she was looking for it, but then she started pointing at all the jiaozi that didn't look quite so perfect, saying, "That's one of John's. And that's one of John's. And that one." In the end, all of us laughed and everyone said that my jiaozi tasted just as

good as the rest.

All in all, it was a great and fun evening. We ate, we watched the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala, and the Mu family shared stories that spanned generations. The entire home was filled with laughter and joy. And as I took it all in, learning more about my friends and Chinese culture as a whole, I found that I missed my family more and less at the same time.

Because Christmas with my family is very much the same, our home is filled with laughter and joy and stories told from grandparents to grandchildren. It was a great way to end the year. And an even better way to start the next one.

This author is an American teacher at Xi'an International Studies University.

## Traditional Eastern Wisdom

## Yongle Porcelain: Pinnacle of Ancient White China

By ZONG Shihan

Yongle porcelain, also called sweet white porcelain, was produced during the Ming Dynasty's Yongle period (1403-1424), and features a special glaze giving a smooth and creamy appearance. This kind of porcelain was described in ancient times as "white like congealed fat, immaculate like piled-up snow," denoting the highest level of ancient Chinese white porcelain.

The earliest white porcelain emerged during the Northern and South-

ern Dynasties (420- 589). With the advancement of raw materials selection and purification techniques, white porcelain reached its peak in the Ming Dynasty, creating the Yongle sweet white porcelain.

In terms of raw materials, the sweet white porcelain was primarily made of porcelain stone, supplemented by kaolin clay, which had the advantage of good plasticity and high stability during firing, making it easy to produce an eggshell porcelain. In terms of purification, craftsmen reduced the content of

calcium and iron in the glaze, and increased the content of potassium to enhance the whiteness and transparency of the porcelain.

The unique feature of the sweet white porcelain is that it has reached a form of semi-bodiless ware with paper-thin texture, leaving only a thin body and a layer of transparent glaze. The production process of the semi-bodiless ware is extremely strict, with one cut less resulting in too thick porcelain and one cut more resulting in it being discarded.

The sweet white porcelain is most commonly seen in the form of bowls, dishes, small pots, high feet goblets, and plum bottles. Many designs also draw inspiration from foreign cultural elements as China had frequent cultural and trade exchanges with Europe and other Asian countries in the early Ming Dynasty. Based on the extensive absorption of Western pottery, silverware, enamelware and other elements, the innovative design of the sweet white porcelain made it more beautiful and unparalleled, becoming the peak of the white porcelain.

## Expats Activity



On February 2, the Shandong Provincial Department of Science and Technology organized a vibrant Spring Festival event for foreign experts and their families.

The event not only facilitated a lively exchange among the foreign experts in Shandong, but also helped them to understand and integrate more deeply into the local community and discover the charm of China and the Chinese.

Peter Monka, a Slovakian expert from the Qingdao University of Technology, shared the story of his five-year journey in China, "In China, I have discovered one big secret that the greatest wealth of this country is its wise, skilled and hardworking people."

(PHOTO: The Shandong Provincial Department of Science and Technology)