

FILIPINO-CHINESE FOLK BELIEFS

WRITTEN in Spanish by Paz Yuchengco in 1961, the translated article should be of interest to observers of the different peoples who make up [the Philippines]. The customs are from the province of Fukien in the center of China. These are not identical to those of other provinces even if the principal ceremonies are more or less alike.

"What is written here is a summary of all the Chinese customs and ceremonies that I have seen and learned during the past 18 years. My parents, being Christians and educated in the United States, hardly observed any of these until I married. In order not to lose face when they dealt with my in-laws, they had to learn and follow some of the most important.

"My parents and my in-laws were naturalized Filipinos, as a result of which their manner of living accommodated itself to Filipino and American customs. But since my in-laws spent their youth in China, they maintained many of the relevant customs of that country and were confident that their descendants would do the same.

"The customs I present deal with childbirth, marriage and death. These are the three most important events in the life of any person. Each custom has its special and distinctive feel. Some are interesting, others ridiculous and many lack feeling.

"Before starting, the reader should know certain things about the character and manner of being of the Chinese. The woman always has to accept her inferior position from birth to death without complaint. There is a tremendous difference between the two sexes. The Chinese believe that a daughter is useless because she cannot work or support her parents; when she marries she changes her family name and her children become as strangers.

"Another trait of the Chinese is that respect for the old is the most important rule in any house; moreover the young should fulfill the desires of their elders humbly and without complaint. This is one of the reasons why it is nearly impossible to discard completely some of the old customs.

"Another peculiarity of the Chinese is the great importance they place on 'face-saving'. A Chinese will do anything to liberate himself and his family from the shame in the eyes of his neighbors. He is capable of selling everything he possesses just so he can acquire the many useless things that may be important to maintain the tradition of an important ceremony.

"There are certain symbols that are always present in every celebration. For the Chinese to recognize the characteristics of each one of them is important, and the young and most modern should be aware of this.

"A Chinese will be eternally embarrassed if he uses inappropriate symbols; the most common are eggs and noodles that should always be together and represent long life and good luck. Other symbols of good luck, health, and fortune are mirrors, red paper and gold jewelry. Sweets represent the sweetness of life, as well as abundance of progeny. For the Chinese, rich or poor, like large families so that there are many symbols representing the idea of many children.

"There are as well symbols of bad luck, and one must recognize them in order to avoid any upsetting situations. For example, unless a family in mourning is offering the party, no one should go to a wedding or a birthday dressed in black. Another symbol of bad luck is the woman who has just given birth or is pregnant. The Chinese believe her to be impure.

"Chinese customs pertaining to childbirth:

"The Chinese prefer having a son rather than a daughter, whether they belong to a modern era or a previous one, rich or poor, Christian or Buddhist. At birth there is already a great difference between the sexes that is maintained until death.

"WHEN the child celebrates his first year, there is much activity in the house of the paternal grandparents. The celebrations must take place on that very day and the presents for the child should be given at the same time or a few days before but never afterwards. The major part of the presents from parents and friends comprises gold jewelry, money wrapped in red paper, and for the mother, food and wine. Some are given twice: at birth and after a month. The paternal grandparents send many kinds of food to the maternal grandparents and to other relatives, but these are obliged to return the wrappings of the obsequies with at least two dozen eggs and two or four packages of noodles which should be done the same day.

"If the child is the eldest grandson, the grandparents tender a great fiesta. Foreigners are not aware of the importance given the eldest grandson. In a Chinese family he is treated like a son. When the grandfather dies this boy receives the same inheritance as his uncles.

"At four months other celebrations similar to the ones that took place when the child was a month old are repeated. These are practically the same rites although there is a new one: the child must taste the noodles with eggs.

"The last with respect to customs concerning births is the first birthday. This day is the most important in the life of a boy and there may be no other celebration in his honor until he celebrates his 16th. The mother should follow strictly the prescribed customs for her son or else everything bad that happens to the boy will be blamed on her.

"At birth the destiny of the boy is already known. Ordinarily the grandparents or the parents visit a fortune-teller and inform him of the day, the hour and the year of birth. The Chinese believe that bad luck can be avoided, which is why they ask the advice of a good diviner. However, they are seldom interested in the destiny of a girl unless it pertains to her marriage." Marriage customs

[Chinese Marriage and Wedding]

"A foreigner attending a Chinese wedding seldom realizes the many preparations and expenses it entails. The honor of each family is at stake so that it becomes a contest between the two. The most important is to save face so that the head of the family will not hesitate to spend his entire fortune.

"When a son reaches maturity, his parents look for a girl if possible of his age and social status, with the help of a matchmaker (the first thing he does is to ask the day and hour of the girl's birth). Afterwards they visit a fortune-teller who will investigate the fate of the future couple. If their destinies are compatible, the matchmaker begins the negotiations in behalf of the groom. Nowadays many girls find their fiancés without the help of their parents. Despite that, they still need the services of a matchmaker who, after many visits to the two families, helps them to decide the date of the contract.

"From that moment on, the family of the groom begins to spend a lot of money. In rich families the groom almost always brings to the house of the girl, aside from the engagement ring, two dozen pieces of beautiful and expensive material, two bracelets of gold and two sets of jewelry, one of pearls and another of jade or diamonds. These presents are for the bride. Other items like food and sweets of all kinds are for the parents. The richer the family of the groom, the more presents are brought. The sweets represent the tenderness of the union at the same time proclaiming the imminent celebration.

"If the family of the girl is poor, money wrapped in red paper is given: one to buy the many things needed by the bride and the other for the parents as a price for their daughter. From the girl, on the other hand, the groom will only receive perhaps a watch and a piece of material for his suit. The family of the groom has to send to the girl's house the banquet tables so that the girl can invite her parents to the dinner. The ceremonies of that day are quite simple: the groom places the ring on the bride's finger, the bracelets on her arms and the bride does the same with the watch. The matchmaker and the in-laws begin to eat the noodles with eggs that bring good luck to the couple. When the parents of the groom leave the house they turn over to drivers and servants who have helped them bring the presents and food a red package with money. The richer the family, the bigger the tip.

"In the following months the family of the girl is very much occupied preparing and buying the house furnishings and trousseau. Now the father can demonstrate his wealth. The things the parents buy are at times useless. However they produce a good impression on the family of the groom. Among other things, they buy a refrigerator, an electric oven with all the accessories, a piano, a radio, furniture and a sewing machine. In fact, enough things are bought to open a store.

"The presents are given even if the couple will live with the groom's family. The father believes that the more presents he gives, the more prominent it makes him.

"In the meantime, the family of the groom is preparing the banquet salon and other necessary things for the wedding. He undertakes all the expenses: clothes for the bride and her entourage, the church, the feast, etc.

"A few days before the wedding, the bride's parents give a prenuptial party, but the father of the groom pays for it. If the girl is also rich, they will invite as many as 800 guests."

"However, in rich Chinese families, when the eldest child is a girl, some of the ceremonies that correspond to a boy are performed. In general the maternal grandparents have to prepare the things that a boy needs such as diapers, clothes and crib and they order that a servant girl attend to the mother for a month. On the other hand, the paternal grandparents pay all the expenses during and after the birth. The new parents hardly have to do or spend anything.

"When she gives birth the woman gains some kind of importance, especially if she gives her in-laws the first male grandson. The first month the mother-in-law pays her much attention, gives her all kinds of nutritious and expensive food so that her milk will be rich and in consequence the grandchild will be healthy and robust.

"But despite all these attention, the mother experiences much suffering and discomfort. During this period there are many things forbidden her because they will bring bad luck or which she doesn't do because she's scared of her in-laws. She cannot take a bath or shampoo her hair or cry or drink cold water or use an electric fan or expose herself to the wind or leave the house or climb the stairs or eat fruits and vegetables.

"Even today many modern Chinese women follow these customs because their elders have convinced them of the unpleasant time they'll experience if they don't. A premature baby is a symbol of bad luck and there are those who believe that when they visit a house rats will come in too."

"The presents of these guests will demonstrate the wealth and social status of the father of the bride. An interesting aspect of this custom is that each chauffeur or employee who delivers them receives a gratuity, which always has to be an even number.

"After the feast the bride's family packs the presents and send them to the new house or to the house of her in-laws but not without showing them off first to relatives and friends. The gossip about them will give added prestige to the father of the bride.

"There are items that the bride always has to include among her belongings: two lamps for the master's bedroom, a dozen different types of sweets, a mirror covered by a red cloth, a complete tea set and a urinal wrapped in red paper. The last indicates that the couple will have many children. If the bride lacks some of them, her in-laws will feel insulted and will reproach her and her parents for all the bad things that may happen.

"The bride must remember that none of her personal things should be black. If she desires a black bag or a black pair of shoes, for example, she can only wear them after the wedding.

"The problems of the family of the bride are over once her things are brought over to her fiancé's house. The expenses and headaches are now transferred to the future groom's family. The tips of that day are the largest especially for the two younger brothers or cousins of the bride who accompany her things.

"In general, a rich bride needs two or three carts (or conveyances) aside from a car to bring her many gifts and belongings. Then there are more or less 10 or 12 men who bring the things inside the house.

"You can imagine how much the groom's father has to shell out on tips. (In the 1960s, it was 10 to 12 pesos per, and for every two of the younger brothers, it was 48 pesos. The most then was 120 pesos for each of them, or 240 pesos.)

"The tips to the younger brothers were a demonstration of the fortune of the groom's family. The amount of these tips depended in general on how many things the bride has.

"The Chinese wedding these days is almost the same as that of Filipinos. Chinese ceremonies in China are very different from that of the local Chinese. There is much Filipino influence on local Chinese weddings. Even if the two families are not Christian, the wedding, almost always, is in a church (Catholic or Protestant) with all the religious ceremony and the presence of sponsors.

"With regard to the sponsors, it is interesting to know that among the Chinese they receive a great many presents from both families. Many times one of the sponsors is the matchmaker, especially if he is rich and prominent.

"For another week after the wedding, there is much activity in the groom's house. The day after the wedding, the bride has to rise very early and don a red dress. She has to prepare for the 'tea ceremony', one of the important ceremonies in a Chinese wedding. The bride begins her official duties as a daughter-in-law. From that day on she is under orders from her in-laws.

"As a bride, the Chinese woman has an important role and becomes 'queen for a day'. None of this lasts very long. As a daughter-in-law, her position changes immediately, and becomes worse than that of a daughter. Her own parents consider her a stranger, her in-laws treat her like a maid, and her husband thinks of her as the mother of his children, not as a wife. Poor woman! Even the children do not give her the same respect they give their father. Neither do they demonstrate any affection toward her.

"The life of a Chinese daughter-in-law does not improve until she becomes a mother-in-law herself, which is usually toward the latter part of her life. Despite all this, most Chinese women accept this degradation with patience and indifference-even those who are modern or have studied or travelled to other countries.

"We return to the new daughter-in-law. The 'tea ceremony' is advantageous to the bride. If her in-laws are rich, they give a large tip or expensive jewelry. Afterwards she has to serve tea to all the close relatives, and in exchange they also tip her or gift her with gold jewelry.

"There is one more ceremony that the new bride has to perform before she loses her importance. This is the ceremony of returning to her parent's house. A Chinese bride has to wait at least three or five days before visiting her family.

"First, her parents have to send her eldest brother with flowers to her house. This is like a formal invitation to invite their daughter and her husband. The couple, then, leave with the brother, bringing gifts of food and sweets and some money wrapped in red paper. The in-laws prepare these, and the bride's parents have to distribute them to their relatives and children. The couple remain until night time, when the party for her is over.

"When they leave her parents also give her food and sweets to distribute among the relatives of her husband. The wedding ceremonies end that day and the bride begins a new life."

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