

Art Review

Birthday Celebrations in the Ming and Qing Dynasties of China: An Exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC

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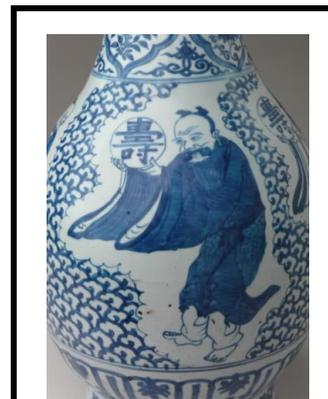
Art Review Editors

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From February 2010 through November 2010, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City is presenting a special exhibition in the Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for Chinese Decorative Arts entitled *Celebration: The Birthday in Chinese Art*. The exhibition includes 50 works of Chinese art from the Museum's permanent collection of Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. The artworks focus on the iconography of birthday celebrations and the symbols and ideographs for *Shou* (壽 long life), *Lu* (繁榮 prosperity), and *Fu* (喜 happiness) as they appear in scroll painting, embroidery, tapestry, porcelain, ceramics, jade carvings, screens, jewelry, clothing, furniture, and lacquer boxes.

In every culture, birthdays for the young and old are generally considered a special occasion although males generally receive preferential recognition. The birthday celebration typically recognizes the celebrant's life in the past year while offering him/her good wishes for success and health in the coming year. Rites of passage in many cultures celebrate birth, adulthood, marriage, elderhood, and death.

While the celebration styles vary in different societies, activities, clothing, food, beverages, decorations and participants associated with birthday or birth year are commonly embellished with numerology and symbols of



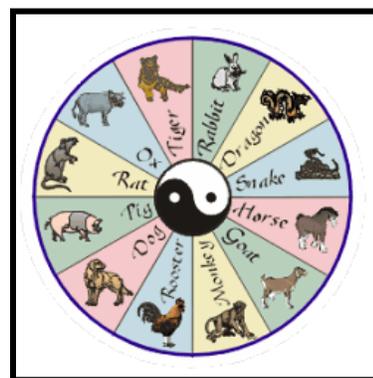
**Vase with Immortals
Bearing the Character
for Longevity (Shou)
Ming dynasty,
Wanli period
(1573–1620)¹**

anthropomorphized nature. The exhibition enlightens viewers with specifics about traditional Chinese birthday celebrations.

Chinese Birthday Celebrations

Birth precedes the celebration of birthdays. The first ritual after a baby's birth in China is to select a name that may in part determine the baby's future. The family name is established and goes first, followed by a first or generational name based on a family birth order. Since the dynastic Chinese believed that the world was composed of five principal elements – metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, one of these elements was usually included in the name.

Buddhist influence is noted on the naming of Chinese birth years. Before Buddha (563-483 BC) departed Earth, he allegedly called all the animals to visit him and 12 appeared. To reward their loyalty Buddha named a year for each one. The year in which a child is born occurs in a 12-part cycle, similar to the 12-month Western zodiac, and is believed to determine his or her character and events in his or her life. When a Chinese child is born, he or she is considered one year old, and a second year is added after the first day of the Lunar New Year. Thirty days after the birth of a child a celebration is held to give offerings to the heaven and household gods for the protection of his or her life. The child's parents also present gifts to relatives and friends. Those gifts are dyed red or wrapped in red paper as this color symbolizes happiness. After the first birthday passes, the next important birthday celebration is the 60th, which marks the completion of a life cycle and transition into elderhood. High-ranking officials and upper-class people are also honored and celebrated in 10-year cycles after their 60th birthday celebrations.



Birthdays in dynastic China were important events for newborns and the elderly because they incorporated the Confucian ethic of filial piety as well as reverence for and worship of family authority. The Chinese family and the Five Social Relations form the basis of all just societies. These obligatory relations existed between master (ruler) and servant (subject), father and son, husband and wife, older and younger siblings and relatives, and older and younger peers/friends. Each relationship had a response based on *Li* (reciprocity). A ruler should be benevolent, a subject loyal; a father loving, a son obedient; an older sibling gentle, a younger sibling respectful; a husband good, a wife attentive; an older friend considerate, a younger friend deferential. Actions never occur in a social vacuum because one's act affects someone else's. The emphasis is on maintaining social harmony, carefully balancing Yin and Yang, and ensuring the unity of words and deeds. The Chinese language contains

complex and prominent ideographs that can represent subtle messages for important events and rituals such as birthdays.

As children became adults it was their duty to organize birthday celebrations for their parents. To show appreciation and respect filial piety, children bowed to their elders. In Imperial Chinese the *Kowtow* (bow) had different levels. The most elaborate and solemn bow was required during the coronation of a new emperor. Members of the royal court performed the ceremony of the three kneeling and nine *Kowtows*. This required a person to kneel from a standing position three times, and each time touch the ground with his or her head three times while kneeling. When government officials performed duties for the Emperor, commoners had to kneel, perform a *Kowtow*, and remain kneeling. A scholar who passed the imperial examination and earned a degree knelt but was permitted to sit while addressing the official. Confucian tradition expected children to show great reverence to their parents and grandparents to thank them for educating and supporting them. Confucius (551-479 BC) believed there was a direct link between thought and actions; a person who is kneeling will develop the social concept of respect.



According to traditional Chinese customs, the birthday of a mother or father begins with a breakfast of hot long-life noodles and other longevity symbols such as peaches of immortality. Both foods represent a wish that the celebrant lives for 100 years. The peaches are rarely real and are substituted with peach-shaped steamed rice buns filled with sweetened lotus or bean paste. Then guests and family members gather to wish the celebrant happiness, wealth, and longevity. The guest of honor may receive simple foods or a banquet; a token amount of money wrapped in red paper or expensive gold and jade jewelry on a gold chain.

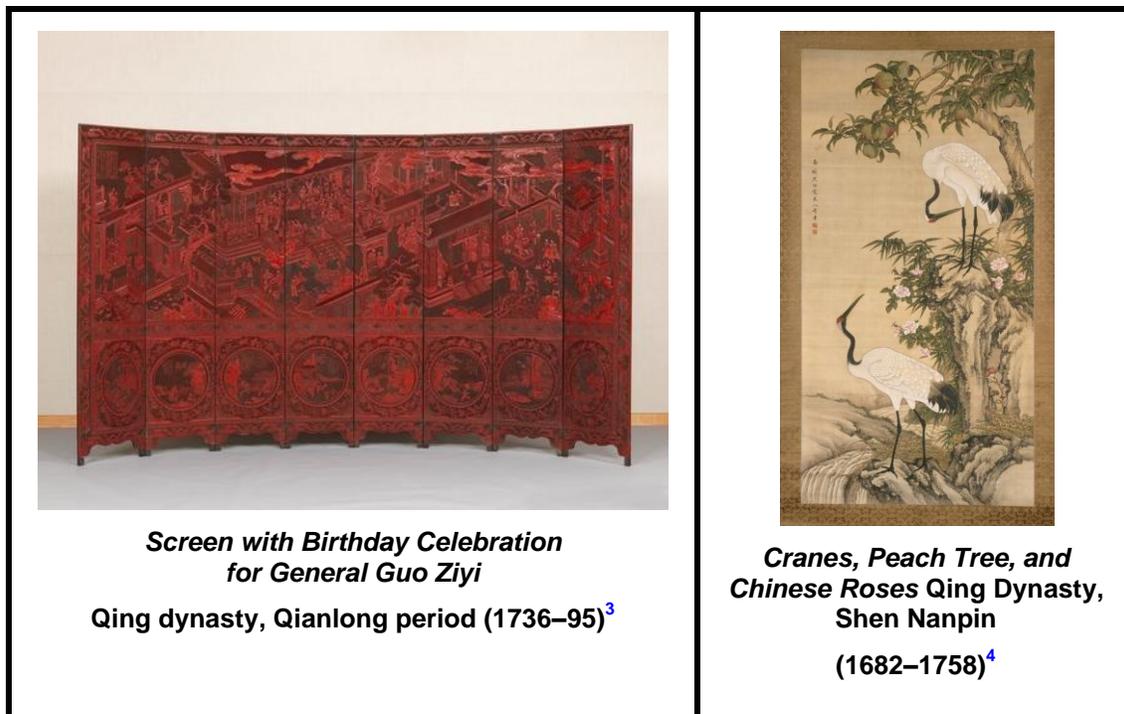
Chinese Birthday Ceremonies in Art



Celebratory Scene; Qing Dynasty (1644–1911); 17th Century²

In the exhibition's 50 artworks, some stand out more than others. A 17th-century Qing set of 12 painted scrolls called *Celebratory Scene* contains embroidery with metallic thread and feathers on silk satin. The painting depicts an elaborate birthday ceremony of General Guo Ziyi of the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) at his Shanxi province estate. The celebration included family members welcoming guests, sharing birthday greetings, honoring the couple, and showing respect during the joyous occasion. The painting is divided into three sections. The right side depicts guests arriving on horses. The center details the General with his wife and servants in their large home, welcoming guests. Many of the guests and their wives are wearing robes festooned with official badges, which indicate their court rank. The third section shows the guests in scholarly and contemplative activities. The scroll painting is replete with nature symbols—trees, rocks, and birds (crane)—representing long life, wealth, and health. The celebration of the General's birthday became a motif for other period pieces during the Qing dynasty.

Another work commemorating the birthday is presented in a carved eight-panel lacquer screen (84" x 148") entitled *Screen with Birthday Celebration for General Guo Ziyi* dated 1777. The elaborate carving repeats the story of the 12 hanging scrolls. On the right side, guests arrive and are greeted by musicians; in the middle, the General celebrates his birthday in a reception; and on the left side, other social activities occur. The setting is a very busy and complex design in a maze of compounds confirming the General's wealth and status.



A hanging scroll (78" x 40") in ink and water colors on silk entitled *Cranes, Peach Tree, and Chinese Roses* by Shen Nanpin (1682-1758) is filled with

longevity symbols (cranes and peaches) evoking an image of tranquil life on Penglai, the isle of paradise. One crane preens under peach-laden branches while its life-long mate observes, combining good wishes for longevity and filial piety. Foods symbolizing good luck would be present at birthday celebrations: e.g., oranges (luck), eggs (fertility), long noodles (longevity), fish (prosperity), duck (fidelity), chicken (unity), fruit seeds (fecundity), sweet rice cakes (abundance), garlic (eternity), and bamboo shoots (wealth). Tigers symbolize good luck for children and appear on birthday clothing and toys. A colorful porcelain dish with over-glaze enamel



Dish with Peaches and Bats
Qing Dynasty

Yongzheng Period
(1723–1735)⁵



Robe

Qing Dynasty, 17th Century⁶

from the Kangxi period (1662–1722) of the Qing dynasty, entitled *Dish with Peaches and Bat*, shows five full grown peaches and three flying bats that also symbolize long life. The theme of peaches representing long life and immortality appears throughout the exhibition. *The Vase with Peaches* from the Qianlong period (1736–95) has a rich mixture of peach blossoms, fruit, and healthy branches denoting good wishes for a happy birthday

and long life.

Birthday celebrations for upper-class Chinese, royalty, scholars, and merchants required elaborate costumes for men and women. A blue and gold silk and metallic thread tapestry (*Kesi*) robe is embossed with five-clawed dragons, clouds, and flaming jewels against a rich blue ground above waves and mountains. Mixed in with the dragons are stylized versions of the Chinese character *Shou* (longevity), which makes this robe an appropriate garment for birthday celebrations.

Artistic renderings of General Guo Ziyi's birthday were replicated in hundreds of humorous and lighthearted versions in different mediums. A 32"-tall porcelain vase of the Kangxi period



Vase with Peaches
Qing Dynasty
Qianlong Mark and
Period

(1736–1795)⁷

shows his birthday celebration. At the General's feet are guests carrying gifts. The General and his wife receive congratulations from family, friends, and guests. At the top of the vase, *Shoulao*, the god of longevity, oversees the celebration accompanied by the eight Taoist immortals. The General, his wife, and others are smiling broadly, which is an unusual display of emotion for ceremonial events in dynastic China.



Conclusion

Birthday celebrations in dynastic China represent a confluence of three belief systems—Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism—with a generous sprinkling of regional animism. The Imperial Chinese birthday exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum presents the richness of these diverse traditions and leaves a substantial and sweet taste in the mouths of the viewers as the peach-shaped rice buns do for birthday celebrants.

Anyone who is interested in integrating Chinese dynastic traditions into multi-cultural learning activities will find the *Artists Helping Children* website (<http://www.artistshelpingchildren.org/chineseasianjapanesecraftsideaskids.html>) helpful. The site presents 150 inexpensive Asian arts and crafts projects for

students in grades PK-12. Illustrated directions are provided for creating traditional Chinese artworks such as:

Ang Pow Red Packets	Fortune Boats	New Year Crown
Blossom Tree	Fortune Cookies	New Year Lanterns
Bowl of Oranges	Flower Blossoms	New Year Banner
Box Dragon	Golden Dragon	New Year Drum
Carp Wind Sock	Good Fortune Cupcakes	New Year Noisemakers
Celebration Cymbals	Good-luck Goldfish	Opera Mask
Character Cards	Handprint Dragon	Orange Tray
Chi Bang Tan gram	Hanging Scrolls	Paper Dragons
Coins for Beading	Hanging Snake	Paper Weaving
Double Happiness	Juggling Sticks Craft	Paper Cutting
Dragon Boat	Kai-Lan Lantern	Racing Dragon Boat
Dragon Costumes	Kites	Red Gift Envelopes
Dragon Kite	Knots Collage	Rice Paper Lantern
Dragon Pull Toy	Lai See Fish	Roll up Flute
Egg Box Dragon	Lion Dance Costume	Salt Dough Oranges
Felt Dumplings	Lion Mask	Slithery Snake
Festive Ribbon Dragon	Lion Puppet	Welcome Door Hanger
Flying Fish	New Year Bracelet	Zodiac Wreath

Sources

1. China - Art History Resources (<http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/timelines/china/china.html>)
2. Confucius - K'ung-fu-tzu (<http://www.friesian.com/confuci.htm>)
3. God of Longevity – Shou Xing (<http://www.godoflongevity.com/>)
4. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Confucius (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>)
5. Timeline of Chinese Dynasties (<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/china/timeline.html>)

Photo Credits from the Metropolitan Museum of Art
(www.metmuseum.org)

1. *Vase with Immortals Bearing the Character for Longevity (Shou)*; Ming dynasty, Wanli period (1573–1620); Rogers Fund, 1916.
2. *Celebratory Scene*; Qing dynasty (1644–1911); 17th century; Promised Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky.
3. *Screen with Birthday Celebration for General Guo Ziyi*; Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95); Gift of Mrs. Henry-George J. McNeary, 1971.
4. *Cranes, Peach Tree, and Chinese Roses*; Qing dynasty (1644–1911); Shen Nanpin (1682–1758); The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art.
5. *Dish with Peaches and Bats*; Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Yongzheng period (1723–35); Gift of Stanley Herzman.
6. *Robe*; Qing dynasty (1644–1911); 17th century; Bequest of William Christian Paul, 1929.
7. *Vase with Peaches*; Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong mark and period (1736–95); Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917.
8. Two views of *Vase with Birthday Reception for General Guo Ziyi*; Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662–1722); Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913.