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CHINESE CUSTOMS AND FESTIVALS

Lee Siow Mong

When we talk about customs, we must be clear on what are customs. It must be something which has been accepted by a majority of people and practised for a long time, as a guide to their way of life and to the things they do. It is not something which came into practice only yesterday or even just a few years ago. These cannot be called customs. Customs are from time immemorial and have become our way of life. Indeed no one questions customs, because they have been accepted and must be either practical, meaningful or useful or they would not have lasted hundreds if not thousands of years. In a nutshell, a custom is the expression of the minds of the majority of a people or race over a long period of time, and has a fixed pattern which governs or guides the way of life of the people in the proper management of their livelihood and society.

As a civilization progresses and ways of life change because of the interaction of other cultures, people begin to question the usefulness or meanings of certain customs. This is inevitable because customs are part of our culture, and culture is always changing as a result of intermingling with other cultures.

Cultures that are prepared to intermingle with other cultures or even adopt what is good and practical from other cultures will be enriched. Such a culture is Chinese culture which today contains many elements from other cultures and is very much enriched thereby.

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For the purpose of this paper I can only deal with customs that are of immediate importance to us in our day-to-day life in relation to our fellow-men. I would like to discuss Chinese social customs because we are all social animals and we must know how to conduct ourselves in accordance with our customs which have been practised from time immemorial. The greatest human value lies in how a person conducts himself in private and in public. I say this is the greatest human value because the early forces that moulded Chinese civilization stress the importance of human relationship and this has remained ever since until today.

The starting point of Chinese social customs is the customary politeness which is the fountain head of good and harmonious relationship among mankind. We have been taught that there are five basic human relationships