What Makes Lunar New Year (Nónglì Xīnnián, 農曆新年) a Buddhist (Fójiào Tú, 佛教徒) and and Taoist (Dàoshi, 道士) Celebration? Cíyún (慈雲) Temple, Keelung (Jīlóng, 基隆).

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Figure 1.] Cíyún (慈雲) Temple, Anyi Rd, Anle District, Keelung.

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Introduction:

The Luni-Solar Calendar (Yīnyánglì, 陰陽曆).

The *lunar new year* (Nónglì Xīnnián, 農曆新年) also known as *Spring festival* (Chūnjié, 春節) is derived from the *luni-solar calendar* (Yuan, 2016), also known as the *yīnyánglì* (陰陽曆) (McHenry, 1997). This is a dual calendared system which incorporates the activities of both the sun and the moon (Yuan, 2016). Spring festival generally occurs on the second new moon after the winter solstice (Aslaksen, 2002).

Yánglì (陽曆).

The winter solstice for the northern hemisphere is calculated based upon the *solar calendar*: the *yánglì* (陽曆)(Aslaksen, 2002) and is the shortest day of the year (Tiquia, 2008). In the west the solstice is regarded as the beginning of winter, whilst in Taiwan it represents the mid-point of the winter and is known as: *dōngzhì* (冬至)(Aslaksen, 2002), translating as the *extreme of winter*. As the *yīn* (陰) energy peaks before the *yáng* (陽) energy begins to grow and the days begin to get longer (Tiquia, 2008).

Yīnlì (陰曆).

The new moon is derived from the *lunar calendar*: nónglì (農曆), also known as the *yīnlì* (陰曆) (Tiquia, 2008). A new moon is the first phase of a 29.5-day lunar cycle in which the moon orbits the earth (Aslaksen, 2002). This is when the moon sits directly between the sun and the earth thus, its shadow unlit side faces the earth and is invisible to the naked eye (Coco, 1994). Whilst there are ordinarily 12 lunar months per year, this amounts to only 354 days hence, causing the lunar new year to be celebrated 11 days earlier each year (Yuan, 2016). To prevent the lunar new year from falling out of sync with the spring, the lunar new year day is recalibrated by the addition of an intercalary month periodically to ensure the new moon is always celebrated in the spring (Yuan, 2016). This lunar new year marks the entry to the year of the snake.

Buddhists Celebrate a Taoist Festival?

Whilst the above celestial and geological principles are essentially Chinese and Taoist in essence, as to their quantification in terms of yīnyáng (陰陽) and the shǔ (屬)(*animal zodiac sign*) of the snake, which metaphorically represents our current point of an astrological cycle (Tiquia, 2008; Yuan, 2016). We find the Taiwanese Buddhist community at Cíyún temple celebrate and welcome in the new year as a major component of their culture and religion.

Fig 2.] Illuminating Snake Inflatables. Cíyún (慈雲) Temple, Keelung.

The Lunar Calendar (Nónglì, 農曆) & the National Taiwanese (Míngúo, 民國) Calendar.

Nónglì Xīnnián (農曆新年).

Unlike the solar new year which tends to be less than a two-day celebration: the new year's eve for night time festivities, with only new year's day taken as a national holiday in Taiwan. The lunar new year celebratory period tends to begin on eve of the lunar new year i.e., the 28th of January, 2025 and lasts for just over two weeks until the 12th of February, 2025.

National Taiwanese (Míngúo, 民國) Calendar.

Tourists should note that the Taiwanese solar calendrical system utilises a different numerical system, representing the exact same time and dates as 01/28/114 and 02/12/114, respectively. In which the month is marked before the day and the year '*114*' marks the years since the Republic of China's foundation in 1911 (Harris, 2008). The current Taiwanese calendar is termed the *míngúo* (民國) calendar, which is otherwise identical to the conventional *Gregorian* solar calendar. This national calendar was created early last century to replace the lunar calendar which was deemed impractical and was marginalised as regarded as superstitious (Harris, 2008).

Buddhism Versus the ROC in the Early 20th Century.

Yet, the Buddhist community amongst others fought against the nationalist party of the Republic of China (ROC) in the early 20th century to have their lunar calendar and lunar festival reinstated and whilst these ancient practices were temporarily abolished, they were later reestablished in both the Republic of China and mainland China (Harris, 2008). Taiwanese people today use both calendars: the míngúo calendar for governmental and business functions and the lunar calendar for festivals (Yuan, 2016).

Analysis:

The Origins of Spring Festival (Chūnjié, 春節).

Whilst primitive ritual lunar new celebrations trace as far back as the Shang dynasty (Shāngcháo, 商朝)(16th-11th century BC), the first formal celebrations of the lunar new year began under the rule of Emperor Wu (Wǔdì, 武帝)(156 – 87 BC) of the Hàn (漢) era (206 BC-220 AD), though this custom developed into national and unified cultural festivals with functionable calendric systems much later within the Suí (隋)(581–618) and Tang dynasties (Táng cháo, 唐朝)(618–907) as Chinese society developed materially and economically (Huang, 1991;Yuan, 2016) allowing the opportunity for intellectual growth.

The Absorption of an Buddhism into Hàn (漢) Culture.

Whilst I claim that Hàn (漢) culture is the dominant ideology in Keelung (see blog post: *The twelve-animal zodiac & the twelve bridges of Keelung*). Buddhism, though originally an Indian tradition (Chen, 2000), does not rank in second place to Taoism (Dàojiào, 道教). For multiple millennia, the Hàn Chinese culture absorbed Indian culture which impacted their philosophical, moral and religious viewpoints as well as the Mandarin language (Guang, 2013). To facilitate the successful absorption of Buddhism, the Mandarin language had to adapt and create new Mandarin characters to represent words and terms (Chen, 2000) to represent new concepts to think within.

Reception of Hàn Culture in Taiwan.

Taiwan however, received the two religions in unison alongside the Mandarin language and Confucianism (Rúxué, 儒學) centuries later in one assemblage (Zhu and Liu, 2019). Thus, from the perspective of the inheritor, this can be regarded as one tradition, to which the hybridity at Cíyún (慈雲) temple is tremendous**.** Whilst it is a Buddhist temple dedicated to the worship of *Kuanyi*n (Guānyīn, 觀音), Cíyún (慈雲) temple features an extensive pantheon of Taoist (Dàoshi, 道士) gods alongside Buddhist deities for daily worship e.g., the *Jade Emperor* (Yùdì, 玉帝) (fig 3). Chanting (sòng jīng, 誦經) could be heard throughout the holiday period and attendees would offer incense (xiāng, 香) to deities indiscriminately.

Figure 3.] The Jade Emperor (Yùdì, 玉帝). Cíyún (慈雲) Temple, Keelung.

The Jade Emperor (Yùdì, 玉帝)

The legendary Yùdì (玉帝) is regarded as the highest deity within the Taoist pantheon (Stevens, 1989) and metaphorically represents the unfolding of celestial activity upon earth (Olson, 2003). He is accredited with the creation of the 12 animal zodiac (shēngxiào, 生肖): rat, ox, tiger rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey rooster dog and pig (Yuan, 2016)(see blog post: *The twelve animal zodiac & the twelve bridges of Keelung).*

Shēngxiào (生肖) Symbology.

In connection to the ancient Táng dynasty shēngxiào myths (Stevens, 1989; Yuan, 2016), traditional dragon and snake shēngxiào (生肖) symbols were the centre of the display as Cíyún temple opted for illuminating inflatable animals. The dragon for 2024/113; the year just leaving (fig 4) and snakes (fig 2.) to represent the year just arriving 2025/114.

Lunar New Year: A Taoist (Dàoshi, 道士) & Buddhist (Fójiàotú ,佛教徒) Celebration.

Figure 4.] Illuminating Dragon Inflatables. Cíyún (慈雲) Temple, Keelung.

The Traditional Red Lantern.

The new year's celebration culminates with the lantern festival on the first full moon (02/12/114), after the new moon (01/28/114), lunar new year's day (Splitter, 1950). The exterior festive season decor comprises hundreds of traditional red lanterns hung within the temple entrance (fig 1.), as well as all around the perimeter of the temple courtyard wall.

Lanterns for the Buddha (Fó, 佛) in the Hàn dynasty (漢朝).

These hanging lanterns first emerged within the Han dynasty (Hàn cháo, 漢朝, 206 BC-220 AD)(Splitter, 1950), the same period in which Buddhist text were first being translated into Mandarin (Chen, 2000). Shortly after the reign of Emperor Wǔ, Emperor Ming (Míngdì, 明帝, 27-75 AD) of the Hàn era, utilized the lantern within finale of the lunar festival for the promotion of the Buddha dharma (Fófǎ, 佛法), this became a pivotal moment in Buddhist history as is heralded as influential to the success and spread of the lantern festival (Lu, 2024). Thus, the lantern has been a prominent feature within the Spring festival from its official origins. Whilst the calendrical basis of the lunar festival and the mythical shēngxiào narrative (*the 12-animal river race)* are clearly Chinese or Taoist in essence (Tiquia, 2008; Yuan, 2016), the lunar new year celebration has for millenia also been a Buddhist festival (Lu, 2024; Splitter, 1950).

Figure 5.] Crafted Spring Festival Fruit Lanterns. Cíyún (慈雲)Temple, Keelung.

Renewal Versus Enlightenment.

From a nature worshiping of Taoist perspective, the lantern represents light and renewal, in reference to the physical celestial objects: the sun (*spring*) and the (*full*) moon (*cycle*)(Splitter, 1950; Huaiyu, 2014). Whilst within Buddhism light of the full moon interlinks with the Buddhist concept of light in reference to the *enlightenment* of the human body (Huaiyu, 2014). Hence, for over two millennia these two traditions have grown intertwined, thus the lantern festival represents both religions simultaneously.

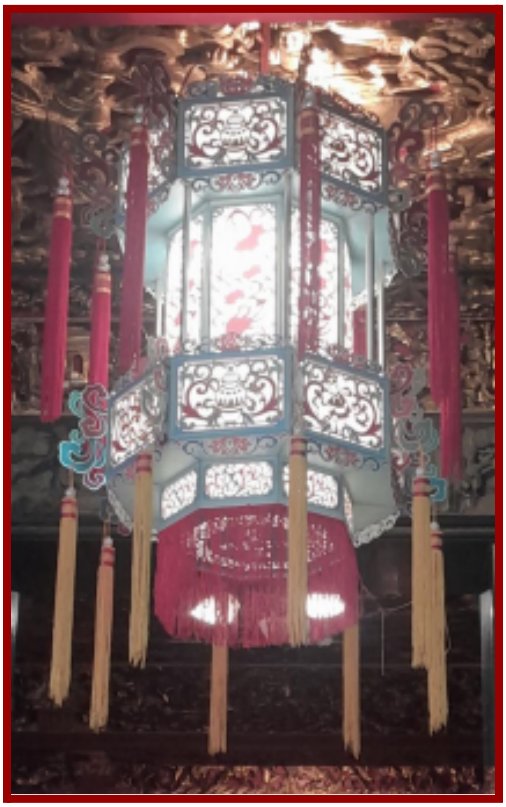
The Shēngxiào Fused with the Lantern.

Dragon and Snake shēngxiào (animal zodiac) symbolism fused with the concept of the lantern creating snake and dragon inflatables, whilst these may appear much less orthodox in comparison to the traditional lanterns, Lu (2024) points out that lanterns have always existed within a myriad of different materials and designs. Other ornaments included crafted spring festival fruit lanterns (fig 5.), mirroring the fruits placed upon the numerous altars as offerings (fig 3.). A practice which is quintessential of both Taoism and Buddhism.

Tibetan (Cáng, 藏) Buddhist Hybridity.

Taiwanese Buddhism is not only a fusion of Taoism within Buddhism. But is also characterised by plurality between Hàn Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism (Jagou, 2018). For example, figure 10 shows Tibetan Buddhist motifs, printed onto a hanging lantern within the main shrine room at Cíyún temple, amongst the array of the traditional circular red lanterns. These Tibetan symbols are referred to as the *precious parasol*, the *conch shell*, the *two golden fish*, the *eternal knot*, the *treasure vase,* the *victory banner*, the *lotus flower* and the *dharma wheel* (Namgyal, 2016).

Figure 6.] New Years Lantern with Tibetan (Cáng, 藏) Iconography. Cíyún (慈雲) Temple, Keelung.



Golden Fish Lanterns.

The Tibetan symbology of a pair of golden fish, referred to in Tibetan as *Gser nya* (གསེར་ཉ), could also be found displayed separate from the other seven symbols as a craft lanterns (fig 7). The fish represent fortune (Namgyal, 2016), as does the Chinese lantern (1950). Yet, the fish are also symbolic of salvation, bravery, and freedom from what Tibetan Buddhists term the *ocean of suffering* (Namgyal, 2016).

From a scholarly perspective, this demonstrates the fusion of the two of the largest forms of Buddhism with traditional Taoism. Yet, entirely diverges from the original Taoist new year's narrative of the 12-animal zodiac by the addition of a 13th animal (*the golden fish*), placed next to the shēngxiào, yet, these fish did not rank within the Jade emperor's river race.

Figure 7.] Tibetan Motif of Two Golden Fish Integrated into a New Year Lantern. Cíyún (慈雲) Temple, Keelung.

Conclusion.

In Taiwan, the lunar new year is a Buddhist celebration (Huaiyu, 2014; Lu, 2024) just as much as a Taoist calendrical event (Tiquia, 2008; Yuan, 2016). Besides Taiwanese Buddhist ancestors of recent generations, governmental protests during the early decades of the Republic of China's (Harris, 2008). The lantern festivals function as a Buddhist ritual significantly contributed to the success of Spring festival as a national event and determined the lantern as an integral element of Hàn Buddhism (Lu, 2024). Post the amalgamation of multiple forms of Buddhism and Taoism, the mixture has solidified into one unified culture from a myriad of lineages (Huaiyu, 2014; Jagou, 2018).

The Local Taiwanese Perspective.

Whilst I have cited the Tibetan fish as a divergence from the Taoist tradition, this may equally be considered an integration of Tibetan symbology into Hàn Buddhism. Scholars analyse and dissect traditions to comprehend the reception of religions and the adaptation of sociological behaviors. However, many of the local people in and around Keelung explain they are rather aloof to segregational classifications and impartial to preference and just regard the variety of imagery, deities and practices as Taiwanese culture today.

For more information on Buddhist and Taoist hybridity in Taiwan,
see blog post: *Fo Guang Shan JiLe temple*.

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