

Festive Facts

Jesus is the reason for the season?

Christmas Day commemorates the birth of Christ. However, Christmas is really a mixture of pre-Christian, Christian and secular customs. For example, many pagan cultures had long exchanged gifts and made merry during the winter solstice. In addition, whilst not being the most pious of scholars, I've reason to believe pigging out on chocolate, slumped on the couch, farting your way through vaguely Christmas-themed television, whilst silently cursing your nearest and dearest for not buying you what you so obviously hinted at, wasn't really what Jesus wanted.



CHRISTMAS V



by William Gray

Chestnuts roasting on an

Perfect presentation or grudgingly accepted gifts?

As an adult I don't want gifts. They're for kids right? Nope. Of course I want gifts. And, despite the fact when I wrap a present it looks like I did it blindfolded after necking a big bottle of huángjiǔ (黄酒), I expect my presents to come beautifully presented, topped off with a red ribbon tied in a nice neat bow. So get wrapping. Christmas in the UK looks Christmassy, for want of a better adjective, be it the presents, the tree, or Christmas dinner. Despite being a sarcastic, cynical bugger all year round, I have, however damn chilly it gets, gradually warmed to Christmas as I mellow with age and the 'bah humbug' side of my character slowly subsides. Christmas rituals, such as the wide variety of decorations and



SURPRISE!!

presents under the tree, all stir up familiar feelings of contentment and anticipation. There's just something reassuring about it all. My experience of China during Chinese New Year is that although red lanterns look nice enough, and the fireworks are certainly spectacular, there is not the same cosiness I attach to Christmas back home. It's hard to achieve cosiness when there's no central heating, let alone a fireplace. And, let's face it, the unrelenting fireworks do start to grate. But what of the gifts? Well red envelopes are all very well but we know what's inside them. Where's the mystery? The Chinese, from observing my in-laws anyhow, think UHT milk suffices for a present. Unwrapped! Probably for the best as who wants to rip off wrapping paper in an barely-contained fit of excitement only to reveal...milk. Useful? Perhaps. If you like stockpiling heat-treated discharge from cows' udders. Exciting? Not really. Unless there's a lingerie model bathing in it Cleopatra style and I'm allowed to watch. And whilst in the UK we sit around wide-eyed, eagerly participating in the act of gift-giving, in China people prefer to feign refusal before inevitably accepting the gift anyway, be it after an obviously staged physical struggle that lasts for ages. Yawn. Just cut to the chase China. You know you want the gift. Just take it and say thanks. Job done. And, if not feigning refusal, my in-laws are simply waving their hands, batting gifts away with indifference, and, in doing so, essentially instructing you

just to plonk their 'present', a huge bottle of cooking oil, down by the same door you entered their home through. They'll get to it later. And who can blame them? It's cooking oil. What they really wanted was a giant Toblerone.

Winner: Christmas

Family fun or draining drag?

Having a little boy means I'm determined to celebrate Christmas just so he gets to experience the same excitement that formed a cornerstone of my childhood. Prior to him being born however, my preference was simply to pretend it wasn't the season to be jolly. Paying to eat Christmas dinner, which could never be a patch on what my family are scoffing at home, with a bunch of randomly assembled Westerners could only make me miss home more. I understand why people do it though. It can be a lonely time and having company can prove effective at staving off seasonal depression. If it works for some, all power to them. China can be alienating at the best of times so when all you see of Christmas is its soulless commercial edge, minus the closeness of family and old friends, which is

Festive Facts

The new year is the reason for the...errr...festival?

Yes. Kind of. The Chinese, as a gross generalisation, will insist on approaching life differently, from thinking beeping a car horn means it's acceptable to speed up on encountering pedestrians using a zebra crossing, to arriving at the conclusion sliced bread can be improved with the addition of red beans. I know as the oldest continuous civilisation Chinese culture predates mine but basing New Year on the lunar calendar? No. Sorry - it's just plain wrong. Come on China, you can't just move between calendars on a whim. Make up your minds. Oh, that's right - they're not listening.



SCHINESE

NEW YEAR

open fire or red envelopes?

actually what makes it all worthwhile, then it's easy to feel down. As I touched on in the previous section, Christmas is about having an ace time with family and friends. And by 'having an ace time' I mean eating a wide variety of cheeses. This year, whilst not fully comprehending how important cheese



or Christmas is, my son, I'm sure, will be thrilled to behold a Christmas tree adorned with pretty lights, although we'll be ensuring he doesn't get too close to it for any prolonged period of time. He will also enjoy opening presents no doubt. This will be a marked improvement on recent Christmases, one of which saw me eating fried rice cakes by myself for Christmas dinner. Actually they were damn tasty and I enjoy my own company but it was hardly a scene reminiscent of the ending of It's a Wonderful Life. I can't wait to take my boy home one year so he can experience Christmas properly. Whilst back in the UK we're mixing our drinks playing The Really Nasty Horse Racing Game into the early hours, is there a comparably joyful experience to be had during Chinese New Year? Well I'm sure there is for many people. I do like seeing the in-laws together enjoying much needed time-off eating,

drinking and being merry. If you can play at a competent level, mahjong is as much fun as any game we play back home, I'm sure. Nevertheless, during Chinese New Year I'm effectively frozen out of proceedings. Not deliberately or maliciously. Just by virtue of the fact even if I was highly proficient

in Mandarin, my Chinese family would still be speaking in their local dialect anyway. The only thing the Chinese New Year TV schedule is good for is sedation and if there's anything more irritating than that WeChat shake your smartphone to collect virtual red envelopes activity my wife and sister-in-law were repeatedly partaking in last year I haven't found it.

Fit food or unmemorable morsels?

You'd expect China to score a consolation goal in this final section considering how the country dominates when it comes to all things food. However, this is a time the UK offers some serious competition in the food stakes. Whilst I actually often miss food back home anyway, I can be objective and rational enough to admit that's just because it's what I'm used to and, when you consider

Winner: Christmas

Conclusion

So there you have it. This was one contest I couldn't remain diplomatic about. Perhaps during a time where Cameron and Osborne are bending over backwards to accommodate China it was about time I ruffled a few feathers and asserted Chinese New Year just ain't all that. Even my Chinese wife admits Chinese New Year is not what it was when she was growing up. More dragon dances and less staring at smartphones please China.

the variety on offer just in this one region of China, let alone the whole country, even the most patriotic of British foodies has to admit China is hard to compete with. You can have too much of a good thing though and during the Christmas period I have to put to the back of my mind all the delicious food on offer back home. It's just business as usual in China you see, and whilst I'm obviously spoilt beyond belief in complaining that I'm experiencing an endless conveyor belt of deliciousness shovelled into my pie-hole living here, the saying that 'you are what you eat' has taken on new meaning since making China my home. By this I don't mean that I actually have, literally, now become a pork dumpling, although admittedly, I do exhibit more than a passing resemblance, I am more asserting that it takes living far away from where you were brought up to really understand just how much the food you eat in the formative years of your life affects you. Christmas food is a huge part of this. Chinese New Year food, generally speaking, doesn't excite me in the same way. A) because it's not an inherent part of my experience growing up and B) all the foods which are supposed to be Chinese New Year dishes my in-laws eat all year round anyway!

Winner: Christmas