

PROJECT TITLE: Diversity in the Calendar	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** – How do Chinese New Year, Mardi Gras, St. Patrick’s Day, Independence Day and Labor Day reflect the history and diversity of our country?

2. **Contextual Essay** –

The Egyptians, the Romans, the Aztecs and other organized ancient civilizations had community celebrations to honor the birthdays of their gods. (Christians would later do the same thing to honor their saints). The people believed they were responsible for feasts and sacrifices to keep the gods happy, or pay their debt back to them. To help keep track of the seasonal events occurring yearly, each culture created their own map. These maps still exist today, only now goes by another name - the calendar. “Let me check my calendar.” People, including my students, use these words almost daily to keep track of their busy lives, like assignments, appointments, meetings and vacations.

Even though people in modern days have become less reliant on nature, we still use our holidays to mark significant points in the yearly cycle. “Whether they be high jacked versions of old ones, or new ones that we create (Martin Luther King Jr. Day, President’s Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, V-J Day, D Day. Columbus Day, Veterans Day, and Pearl Harbor Day are a few that have arisen since American nationhood), we continue to reconfigure time; we make it conform to what we desire and deserve (Aventi, 8).”

Some of the holidays on the American calendar that reflect our diverse past include Independence Day, Chinese New Year, Mardi Gras, Labor Day, and St. Patrick’s Day. Where did these holidays come from? Are they unique to America’s history or are they a shared global holiday that were brought to America by immigrants? Why do we celebrate them when we do? What symbols, foods, customs and/or traditions do we associate with them?

Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year marks the first day of the lunar month. It symbolizes the end of winter and the coming of spring. It is considered a major celebration, and has a rich, cultural history. The official holiday at Spring Festival lasts three days.

Over the course of two thousand years, Chinese New Years customs have emerged, developed and changed (Liming, 15). It involves almost everyone and is engrained in the lives of Chinese people all over the world. New Years Eve is an important family time. Often, family members get together to

eat dinner, and *Shou Sui*, which means not to sleep on the last night of a year and to stay up late welcoming in the New Year. In addition, they lit candles and oil lamps to stay up all night, symbolizing that the light shone on all evil, plagues and diseases, and drove them away, and anticipated good luck and fortune in the New Year (Liming, 20). When the clock strikes midnight, people will eat *jiaozi* (Chinese dumplings), which symbolizes replacing the old and changing the year. The *jiaozi* are shaped like gold ingots. By putting plates on the table it represented the hope of making a big fortune in the future.

People also visit relatives and family during the Spring Festival. *Bai Nian*, which means paying a New Year visit, is seen as a way of getting rid of the old, welcoming the new and expressing good will to each other. On these visits, people wish each other happiness, health and all the best in the New Year.

Children often receive *Ya Sui Qian* (money) from their elders with good wishes. Its usually given in a red paper bag, and distributed after New Years dinner (or the clock striking midnight). It is believed this *Ya Sui Qian* will keep evil away, and ensure them a peaceful and healthy New Year. Setting off fireworks is popular for the children too. Traditionally it was believed to drive away goblins, and demons. The fireworks also add to the excitement of Spring Festival.

In addition, each region has its local traditional entertainment – the lion dance, the dragon dance, the land boat dance, and stilt walking being the most common. Many regions also hold temple fairs, which attract thousands of people.

Chinese immigrants brought old world traditions and rituals with them to the new land – including Chinese New Year (or Spring Festival) (Yeh, 15). These rituals served as a link between immigrants and their home country. It also created a sense of community in their new home.

Mardi Gras

Mardi Gras dates back thousands of years throughout Europe (Rome, France, Germany, Spain and England). Traditionally, partygoers would binge on food and drink as they prepared for fish and fasting during Lent. In France, the day before Ash Wednesday became known as Mardi Gras (or Fat Tuesday).

According to historians, in 1699 the French Explorers Iberville and Bienville landed in what he called “Bayou and Pointe de Marti Gras.” Later French explorers established the settlement of La Nouvelle Orleans on the Mississippi River in 1718 and they brought the Parisian Carnival tradition with them (Santino, 89). The port city was influenced by such a diverse group of migrants, each of whom brought with them their unique foods, music, and dance, making this celebration even more grandiose and rich.

The first Mardi Gras parade in the US didn’t take place in New Orleans, but rather in Mobile, Alabama in the early 1700’s. The Rex parade incorporates the traditional tiny floats of yesterday with large super floats of today, just as Carnival itself bridges the gap between Christmas and Easter, winter and spring (Santino, 94). The colors generally associated with Mardi Gras are purple, green and gold. Purple is said to represent justice, while green represents faith and gold represents power. These colors were first seen in the Rex krewe in its first parade in 1872, and have stuck ever since. The Mardi Gras beads didn’t appear until the 1920s when the Rex parades float threw homemade glass beads out and that tradition was born.

One traditional food associated with Mardi Gras is the King Cake. The traditional King Cake is made from twisted strands of cinnamon dough, topped with icing, and sprinkled with purple, green, and gold colored sugar. Today, many additional varieties of King Cake are also available, with fillings such as cream cheese, strawberry, apple, and lemon. A small baby, symbolizing the baby Jesus, is baked into each cake. While custom holds that the person who finds the baby in their slice will be rewarded with good luck, that person is also traditionally responsible for bringing the King Cake to the next party or gathering.

Mardi Gras, which is not a legal holiday anywhere other than Louisiana, is a popular cultural event that draws hundreds of thousands of people to New Orleans each year for a day of eating, drinking, and partying.

St. Patrick's Day

The patron saint of Ireland, Saint Patrick, was a well-known figure in Christianity during the fifth century. March 17th marks the date of his death. The Irish have observed St. Patrick's Day as a religious holiday for over a thousand years. Traditionally, Irishmen would attend church, then celebrate later in the day. Since St. Patrick's Day falls during Lent, people were allowed to waiver from their prohibition for the day. In Ireland, many people who had given up meat, took advantage of the chance to eat a traditional meal of Irish bacon and cabbage. Since it honors a saint, most of Ireland still regards it as a solemn day.

Irish immigrants took the St. Patrick's Day traditions with them. However, in the United States in 1762, the first St. Patrick's Day parade took place. The parade allowed immigrants to reconnect with their Irish roots. They played traditional music on bagpipes and wore traditional Celtic kilts.

One of the most well known symbols of St. Patrick's Day is the shamrock. Legend has it that Saint Patrick used the shamrock as a way to teach the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost to the non-Christians. Green is also traditionally worn to symbolize the "Emerald Isle."

Labor Day

Labor Day was first celebrated in New York City in 1882. The Central Labor Union, a broad organization made of a variety of labor activists, proposed a labor festival for all workers. They chose the date of September 5 because it coincided with the national Knights of Labor general assembly. "A massive demonstration in the city's streets would show the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and Labors organization and warn politicians that they shall go no farther in pandering to the greed of monopoly and reducing the condition of the masses." (Dennis, 240) A parade of workingmen began their march at City Hall Park with only about 80 men. By the time they passed a grandstand at Union Square, Terrence Powderly (the leader of the Knights of Labor) estimated they had between ten and twenty thousand marchers. According to their Grand Marshal McCabe, "Our parade has awakened the city...What a brotherhood was formed that day! The young people danced and sand, the old people smilingly looked on, and augured on the grand future of labor as the outcome of the day's good work. (Dennis, 242)

For three generations after the founding of Labor Day in New York City in 1882, union members filled the streets and parks of their cities, politicians and other public figures proclaimed their high regard for the labor movement, and the daily press described the floats, banners, music, costumes, and speeches in lavish detail. (Kazin & Ross, 1294) Labor Day was the one day each year when unionists could present their goals to millions of people. They had two goals: to build and inspire the labor movement, and articulate their message about their work conditions (hours, minimum age of workers, work environment). Floats, banners, uniforms, and speeches, declared that organized workers were

essential to the nation's economy and ideals. At the same time, the mass picnic and the lighter aspects of the street parade, brought diverse groups of workers and labor activities allowed workers to forget their differences and enjoy their day.

Congress legalized Labor Day as a holiday in 1894. It was the first national holiday that a class or ethnic group invented, and forced the state and private businesses to honor as a day off from work. The United States Department of Labor declares on its website, "Labor Day, the first Monday in September, is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country." While many people now think of it simply as the last day of summer, Labor Day has a significant history within our country.

Independence Day

The Fourth of July is the oldest, and most arguably, the most public of America's political holidays. In a letter to his wife Abigail, John Adams wrote, "The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore." His prediction was mostly true. July 2nd was when the Continental Congress resolved to declare Independence, but the final version wasn't signed until July 4th.

Independence Day promoted a national identity for its people and bound us together as citizens. An example of that is the Independence Day naturalization ceremony. On July 4, 1996, 713 immigrants in Detroit, Michigan, and 60 in Lincoln, Nebraska publicly took their oath of citizenship. Some 75 new citizens participated at Monticello in Virginia on the same day, while 4,000 in El Paso, Texas (Dennis, 77).

Independence Day is also a time for lighthearted picnics, parades and fireworks. Fireworks have no real meaning. They are exciting, captivating, thrilling and in a sense diplomatic "the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air." Parades allow an opportunity for patriotism to shine through. People wearing red, white and blue can be seen lining the parade route. In addition, people can be seen waving flags and listening to patriotic music.

Conclusion

Our calendar is full of holidays – some of which were born in America, and others that were brought with immigrants to the United States. The customs, traditions, foods, music, and people are as unique to the countries they originated from. As you can see, from the examples provided, the growing number of ethnic and racial holidays reveals that America is a diverse country.

3. Annotated Bibliography –

Angell, C. (1996). *Celebrations Around the World: A Multicultural Handbook*. Colorado: Fulcrum Resources.

This is a great resource for teachers! It provides a brief, easy to read history on thousands of holidays around the world, as well as easy to do activities for each holiday. It doesn't provide the most detailed historical background, but it is a great starting point for teachers trying to incorporate multicultural activities.

Aveni, A. (2003). *The Book of the Year*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This book looks at the calendar as if they were seasons or cycles. It starts with an explanation of the ancient holidays, and their connection to nature and the gods. It also draws on the modern calendar being an ever-changing cycle that attempts to maintain a sense of nationalism while not leaving out the migrants who brought customs and traditions with them. It doesn't explicitly teach about any one holiday, rather makes connections and comparisons between many.

Dennis, Michael. (2002). *Red, White and Blue Letter Days; An American Calendar*. New York: Cornell University Press.

This book focuses on the political holidays on our calendar. It has a huge number of primary and secondary source references throughout. It doesn't separate holidays, but rather groups them together. I focused on the St. Monday and Political Fireworks chapters.

Kazin, Michael and Ross, Steven. (1992) *America's Labor Day: The Dilemma of a Workers' Celebration*. (retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2079344>) *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 78, No 4. (pg. 1294 – 1323).

This article provides a thorough history of Labor Day. It makes a number of connections to labor unions now and labor unions in the late 1800's, as well as providing a number of insights on how different Labor Day is compared to other holidays.

Liming, W. (2011). *Chinese Festivals*. New York: Cambridge University Press

As the name of the book implies, this resource is designed to teach everything you ever wanted to know about Chinese festivals – traditional, statutory, and other festivals of the people. Each section is clearly marked, uses actual Chinese language, and focuses on the rich history of their culture. I focused only on the section regarding Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival.

Santino, J. (1994). *All Around the Year*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Yeh, C. (2008). *Making and American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

This book provides the history of the Chinese New Year celebration in San Francisco. It also gives the historical background needed to understand how Chinese-Americans have been treated since their arrival. It focuses on Chinese New Year parade and beauty pageant, and the effects the three-hour parade had on the Chinese-American community. It demonstrates the acceptance of their culture in America, and the impact on the San Francisco community as a whole.