

Happy New Year!

We wish you
 A year of wonderful happiness
 A year of good health
 A year of great success
 A year of incredibly good luck
 A year of continuous fun
 A year of world peace
 Happy New Year 2018

新年快樂

DONGZHI FESTIVAL

"In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer." Albert Camus



In the Sunshine State where we reside, winter exists only in our memory. The grass and trees remain green 綠草如茵, 綠樹陰濃 and flowers are blooming 花兒盛開 all year around. I have to look up the Chinese calendar to find out that Dongzhi Festival 冬至 falls on December 22, this year. Dongzhi stands for the arrival of winter. Around the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476BC), Chinese astronomers established the date of winter solstice by using a sundial to observe the movements of the sun; it referred to the day when the sun is at the celestial longitude of 270°. It is the day when sunshine is weakest, daylight is shortest, about ten hours; and night is longest, about fourteen hours. After this day, the days become increasingly longer, while the nights become progressively shorter.

At the arrival of winter in ancient Chinese agricultural society, farmers had finished their yearly labor and it was time to celebrate and enjoy their bountiful harvest, and have a happy family reunion. They merrily enjoyed a feast and other festivities including music and dance, with family, relatives and friends. In addition, they gathered to worship and express their gratitude to the gods who bestowed them the abundant harvest. They prayed to them for another good year of farming.

During the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD), Dongzhi evolved as a festival, called the Winter Festival, which was a legal holiday. Government officials organized various celebratory activities and all the people enjoyed a day of rest and relaxation. Relatives and friends visited and offered scrumptious foods to each other. Likewise, the Winter Festival flourished in the Tang and Song Dynasties (618-1279); emperors devotedly worshiped the Heaven; while the populace commemorated and offered sacrifices to their ancestors, departed parents and relatives. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), it was officially called the Dongzhi Festival. It was written in Qing Jia Lu that the Dongzhi Festival was as significant as the Spring Festival 冬至如年.

In Northern China, people customarily eat dumpling soup on the Dongzhi Festival. The



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origin of consuming dumpling can be traced to the famous Dr. Zhang Zhongjing 醫聖張仲景 in Han Dynasty. He and his students prepared ear-shaped dumpling with mutton, chili peppers and herbs in broth, which could cure chilblains on the ears of the poor people exposed to extreme cold weather in winter. Eventually, it has evolved as a tradition of eating dumpling soup on Dongzhi Festival.

In Southern China, the whole family will get together to enjoy a delicious meal and eat tangyuan, which are round dumpling balls made of sweet glutinous rice flour with sweet fillings usually made of sugar, sesame, walnuts, bean paste, or jujube paste. Tangyuan is pronounced similar to "tanyuan" 團圓, which means reunion, and moreover, tangyuan is sweet and round in shape corresponding to the full moon. Thus, eating tangyuan together symbolizes union, completeness 圓滿, harmony and happiness for the family. In Taiwan, besides following some of the traditions, people worship their ancestors with a ceremonial sacrifice of nine-layer cakes in the shapes as a cow, duck, chicken, pig or sheep. These animals symbolize auspiciousness.

Interestingly, there are regional sayings regarding Dongzhi Festival: 江南: 清爽冬至 暹過年, 暹過冬至清爽年。上海: 冬至菜花年大麥。廣東: 冬大過年。乾冬濕年。香港: 冬唔凍, 過年凍。

As a consequence of the swift change of pace of living and social cultures as well as modernization in China, Dongzhi Festival has lost some of its significance in Chinese society. Nonetheless, the festival remains as an important cultural holiday embraced in many parts of China. It was originally celebrated as a harvest festival, similar to Thanksgiving in America. However, nowadays, it is observed as a family reunion to enjoy a lavish feast including dumpling or tangyuan, and to express filial piety to parents.

崔日用: 洛陽桴鼓今不鳴, 朝野咸推重太平。冬至冰霜俱怨別, 春來花鳥若為情。



At the Summit Gate

THE FUJI NINJAS

(part two)

by Dr. Benny Ko, retired Indy Radiologist

After a good night's sleep, aided by a little sake, the team moved on to Shinjuku the next day, a business/government district in central Tokyo. We stayed there for the night and the next morning, we boarded the designated bus bound for Mt. Fuji. Three hours later, we arrived at her 5th mountain station. The mountain is divided into ten stations, the base being the first station and the summit, the tenth. The place was teeming with climbers or otherwise, sightseers that go no further than to mill around the few souvenir shops. Judging by the languages that emanated from the horde of humanity, Chinese and English were as readily heard as Japanese. It was very much an international crowd. We were told by the guide that came with us on the bus to wait at a designated area. Shortly, a wiry gentleman and a young, pretty woman showed up, together, the three of them were to be our mountain guides. We were told roll calls would be made at every mountain station for safety measure. There were about fifty climbers in total from our bus. Since the fourteen of us came as a group, the wiry man that called himself 'Mr. Yama' (Mr. Mountain) suggested that we picked a group name and keep an eye on one another. When we were scratching our heads to come up with one, the young woman offered the suggestion of "Fuji Ninjas." Ninjas are a class of legendary warriors in feudal Japan known for their speed, agility, and toughness. The name was adopted immediately and unanimously.

It was a hot day. We were told to use the bathroom and drink all we could as each would cost a couple dollars once we move above the 5th station. Where the road ends and trail begins, all food and water have to be brought up and all manners of wastes and trash have to be moved off, both are labor and energy intensive. Mr. Yama and his lady side-kick had just returned from the top and told us the temperature at the 8th station was below freezing during the previous night. Again, he reminded us that if we have to rent warm clothing from one of the mountain huts, it would be costly. Sweating as we set out, I don't think too many took his advice too seriously; a drop of 50 degrees within the same day is hard for the human mind to process. From the 5th to the 6th station was a long hike, but gradient was relatively gentle, and we were still below the tree line. At a fork in the trail, we were warned that on our way down the next morning, be sure not to turn right. That wrong turn would continue to go down for another seven or eight hours, to end up in a primeval forest at the mountain base. It is better known as the "Suicide Forest" rather than its more poetic name of Aokigahara, or the 'Plain of Green Trees'. Regardless of intention, many who wandered into that part of the mountain were never to come out again. Of all people, I should know this well. In the blinding rainstorm and howling wind, KC and I did exactly make that wrong turn ten years ago.

We went on it for what seemed to be hours, but that day was not destined to be our last. We came up against a small platoon of JSF (Japan Self-Defense Forces) soldiers who were out on a mountain maneuver. When they realized we were miserably lost, they guided us to a highway and contacted our Japanese friend Keiko to come and pick us up. It was a great relief to Keiko and my wife. The two women have been left worrying silly in the inn that we stayed when we failed to return on time. It was a humiliating but at least not tragic ending to that episode. Above the 6th station, there are no more trees and the soil turned into a layer

of volcanic gravel. The gradient has also become steeper and the trail now took on the configuration of endless zig-zags turns. By the time we pulled into the 7th station, the sun was lying low and lazily on the western horizon. Mr. Yama was not happy with the speed of our progress, a few were obviously incapable of going any higher, so he assigned his young adjutant to stay with them overnight in one of the mountain huts and to rejoin the main party in the morning when we descend. All the Ninjas gamely plowed on. Soon after, the sun would set completely and only in its dimming afterglow, one climber after another, one foot after another, we went on. The gravel has by now turned into large volcanic rocks, they were sharp and unstable, and we were warned specifically not to pull on them or otherwise depend on them for balance. It was another four hours of a grueling climb before we saw the light emanating from the mountain huts at the 8th station. Our assigned hut was named Tomoe, a pretty if not anachronistic name typical for country-girls of a few generations back. The building was a rather simple but utilitarian shelter. Judged by the large crowd the staff have to serve, I would say the service is efficient but very basic. The choice for dinner was either curry rice or ramen noodle, but they actually tasted better than they sounded. After eight hours of an uphill hike, we could eat a boot and not find it to be all that bad. After that, we were told to each pick out a sleeping berth in some crawl-in only compartments, packing six to each compartment if needed to. If I choose to be kind, I would say the sleeping quarter resembles a beehive; otherwise, Auschwitz comes to mind. In any case, I was too tired to care and soon was snoring away.

At three in the morning, someone came by to wake us up. I was too groggy to recognize who that person was. We assembled outside the mountain hut, it was freezing cold just as Mr. Yama had told us. The Fuji Ninjas were separated into two groups. Those who desire to walk around the crater rim, in the dark and illuminated only by their own head-lamps, were to set out immediately. My cousin and 'nephew-in-law' were the two intrepid souls that joined this group. I only care to reach the summit that I didn't a decade ago. The rest of us set out at four. Two hours later we were also at the summit and much surprised to find how crowded it was. Several hundred would be a conservative estimate. At this altitude, we were at least a thousand feet above the clouds and the summit resembled an island protruding out of a white, roiling sea. Soon, a glow is seen at a sector of that 'sea-of-clouds' first turning the cloud from white to pink, then from pink to orange. Gradually, a brilliant ball of fire poked out of the clouds and projected all shades of red into the four corners of heaven and earth. It was surreal, and mesmerizing and we were all awe-struck.

Eventually, senses and sobriety returned, we realized it was time to get back to the lower realms. On descend, some people actually had more difficulty as they are intimidated by the steepness of the trail. Fortunately for this old ski-hound, fear was not an issue. Nonetheless, the return to the 5th station had taken me fully six hours; for the last of the Ninjas to arrive, seven and a half hours. From there, we were treated to a hot-spring bath before the bus took us back to Tokyo. All Fuji Ninjas had made it to at least the 8th station and all returned safely. I cannot think of a more happy and satisfying conclusion to an exhilarating adventure.

A chapter is also now closed.



Top of Mount Fuji



Steeper and tougher climb



Dr. Benny Ko celebrated his 70th years on earth above the clouds