

Sweet Offerings in Chinese Cultural Rituals in Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses sweets in Chinese traditional cultural rituals (consider to use traditional Chinese ritual). Ritual is very important because through a study of the rituals of a group, we can understand a religion. Religious action is primarily demonstrated in rituals. (add a line about why ritual is important for the Chinese life, and why did you discuss the offerings, instead of the ritual performance. Make it 2 or 3 sentence). Food is one of the centers of a ritual because food offerings is one of the pillars of Chinese culture. The research was conducted within a family in Jakarta and at the Toa Se Bio Temple in Jakarta. The research methodology used in this study is qualitative methods, with data collection through observation, interviews, documentation, and data analysis carried out in 2023. This article specifically discusses the meaning and function of sweets in three Chinese cultural rituals: the pre-wedding tradition (*sangjit*), the Chinese New Year ritual, and the deity's birthday ceremony (*sejit*). The research results show that sweets in Chinese cultural rituals function as a means of communication to the gods and humans. Sweets also symbolize the hope that life will always be as sweet as the sweet offerings.

KEYWORDS

Chinese New Year; Sangjit; Sejit; Sweets; Toa Se Bio Temple

INTRODUCTION

Food can serve as a symbol of important ceremonies in human life, such as weddings and religious ceremonies. In religious rituals, the food tends to be perceived in its symbolic meaning rather than its nutritional value. For instance, as a means of maintaining the relationship between humans and God, as well as the relationship among fellow human beings (Ma, 2015:196).

From a social perspective, food functions as a medium to maintain good relationships within the community (such as with relatives or business associates), while from a religious standpoint, food can be used as offerings to ancestors and serves as a means to maintain harmonious relationships with spirits, ancestors, and deities (Gumulya, 2017:141).

The social attachment to food emerges when it is served at various events experienced by individuals or communities. Events that mark the human life cycle—such as birth, marriage, and death—are always accompanied and symbolized by various rituals that include a variety of foods and communal meals shared with family members or friends.

Togetherness becomes the core of social bonding during communal meals in such rituals (Budianto, 2004:68).

In Chinese cultural rituals, food is an essential offering to the gods, serving as a form of respect from temple worshippers to their deities. It is said that, in the past, Chinese immigrants advised their children to always present offerings to the spirits of their ancestors on certain occasions, such as when parents or family members pass away, and during major ceremonies like Chinese New Year (春节 *chūn jié*), Qingming Festival (清明 *qīng míng*), and the Hungry Ghost Festival (鬼節 *guǐ jié*).

For major ceremonies, they typically prepare *samseng* (a dish consisting of three types of animals that symbolize the three worlds, namely pig, chicken and fish). In addition to *samseng*, *tehliao* (a dish consisting of three types of sweets made from fruit, namely rock sugar, *tangkue* and *angco*) is also served. However, nowadays, these offerings are often replaced with candies and chocolates (Wibisono & Tjahyadi 2018:320). One example of food offered in Chinese rituals is preserved sweets such as preserved plums, canned fruits, *tehliao*, chocolates, and candies.

According to Marcus A.S (2002:55), sweets among the Chinese people symbolize the hope of attaining the ‘sweet’ of life. In Chinese traditional beliefs, people offer sweets with the hope that they will be granted something sweet in their lives.

Sweets are closely associated with Chinese cultural celebrations or rituals that has become a tradition. Hartati (2020:17), in her research in Bekasi, states that tradition is a way to integrate actions reflectively with the organization of space and time in society. Tradition is dynamic because it must be recreated by each new generation as they inherit the cultural legacy from their predecessors. Tradition is a hallmark of a cultural form that is dynamic and ever-changing. It is transmitted, preserved, and not lost—passed down over time, taught from generation to generation, and demonstrated and believed in the present. Tradition connects the past and the present and reflects both change and continuity.

Food is not only seen as a means of fulfilling the necessities of life but is more often viewed in terms of its cultural significance within a society. This study will discuss the meaning and function of sweets in Chinese cultural rituals. In Chinese cultural rituals, there is a tradition of offering food as a form of tribute, both vertically — to the gods — and horizontally, to fellow human beings or entities of equal status. One type of food used as an offering is sweets. This article discusses the function of sweets in the traditions of Chinese New Year, deity birthday ceremonies (*sejit*), and the *sangjit* engagement ceremony. *Sangjit* is a tradition before the wedding ceremony in Chinese culture. *Sangjit* comes from two words in Hokkian, *sang* which means to usher in a good day and *jit* which means day, from these two the word *sangjit* is formed which means to usher in a good day before the wedding.

RESEARCH METHODS

The method used in this study is qualitative research. This research conducted in a natural setting with the intention of interpreting phenomena that occur, using various available methods. Qualitative research seeks to discover and narratively describe the activities carried out and the impact of those actions on the lives of the people involved (Denzin & Lincoln in Fadli, 2021:36). In qualitative research, data collection techniques are carried out through observation, interviews, documentation, and document analysis.

To further explore sweets and their functions in Chinese cultural rituals, I began by conducting observations at Petak Enam Market, followed by a visit to the Toa Se Bio Temple during the Chinese New Year celebration. Interviews were conducted with several sources, including temple officials from Toa Se Bio, sweet vendors, and a family performing the *sangjit* ceremony. For documentation, I took photographs in the field, both at Petak Enam

Market and the Toa Se Bio Temple, to support the data collection process. In addition, this research also relies on books, journals, and online sources about sweets, such as the history of sweets, types of sweets, and their functions in Chinese cultural rituals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sweets in China

In China, candied fruit has been a very popular food for centuries. Originally, it was created as a royal delicacy. In Mandarin, candied fruit is called *guofu* (果脯). *Guofu* is described as a food made from fresh fruit that is peeled, boiled in sugar water, and then dried. It has a dry, sticky texture with low water content. It is preserved by boiling it in sugar or honey, followed by a drying process.

According to the Beijing Institute of Culture and History (2023), the types of candied fruit commonly found in China include candied peaches, candied apples, candied pears, candied plums, candied hawthorn (hawflakes), candied dates (*angco*), and candied fruit peels.

Sartini & Aribowo (2005:34) explain that *guofu* means preserved candied fruits. The character *fǔ* in *guofu* shares the same pronunciation as *fú* (福), which means happiness and prosperity. The symbolic meaning of this food is that people should always be kind and behave sweetly towards others, and that goodness should be preserved and maintained so that it does not turn into bad behavior. By maintaining this goodness, people hope to attain happiness and prosperity in the future.

Rituals in Indonesian Chinese Culture

Rituals are important celebratory events in every society that has lived together for a long time. Adherents of traditional religions hold traditional festivals to celebrate the social, religious and cultural events of the community, culminating in a series of performances, entertainment, rites, and rituals. Traditional celebrations persist in modernity due to the interconnection between tradition and modernity (Hartati, 2020:18). Chinese cultural rituals are closely related to food offerings. One type of food used in Chinese cultural rituals discussed in this thesis is sweets. The use of sweets in Chinese cultural rituals can be seen in both individual and communal rituals.

Individual Rituals

Rituals can be divided into two types, namely individual and communal. An individual ritual is a private ritual carried out within a family. Individual rituals serve functions according to each individual's perspective and are also related to the individual's position in the ritual process, whether as the subject or the object of the ritual (Saputra & Hariyadi, 2015:14). An example of an individual ritual that involves the use of sweets can be seen in the *sangjit* ceremony.

Sangjit

Sangjit (送日 *sòng rì*) is a tradition held before the wedding ceremony in Chinese culture. The word *sangjit* comes from two words: *sang*, which means to deliver or escort, and *jit*, which means day. Together, *Sangjit* means delivering the auspicious day before the wedding.

According to Caroline, an informant the *sangjit* ceremony holds symbolic meaning as a sign of commitment and seriousness in the relationship between a man and a woman, as well as a way to strengthen the familial bond between the two families. In *sangjit* ceremony, various items are required for the *seserahan* (gift exchange). These items hold symbolic

meanings rooted in Chinese culture, representing values such as responsibility, gratitude, health, prosperity, luck, harmony, a sweet life, longevity, good offspring, unity, and happiness. All the symbolic meanings behind the items used in the *sangjit* ceremony are hoped to manifest in the married life of the bride and groom.

During *sangjit*, the *seserahan* consists of both goods and food. It begins with the groom's family bringing gifts to the bride. The items they bring typically include jewelry, women's accessories such as bags, perfume, and wallets; oranges, apples, pig's feet, canned lychees, *misoa* (thin noodles), wine, and sweets. The sweets offered include peanut brittle (*tengteng*), red dates (*angco*), lotus seeds, candies, and chocolate coins.

Then, the bride's family will also give goods and food in return to the groom's side. The gifts from the bride usually consist of wedding money, men's accessories such as shoes, a wristwatch, and a tie; oranges, apples, pig's feet, canned lychees, syrup, *misoa*, steamed cupcakes (*kue mangkok*), and sweets such as *tengteng*, *angco*, lotus seeds, candies, and chocolate coins.



Figure 1. The giving of betrothal gifts in the *sangjit* ceremony
Source: Caroline's documentation, 2021

The items and food offerings presented by both side and vice versa during the *sangjit* ceremony holds significant symbolic value and meaning. *Angco* (red dates) symbolize blessings and, bringing *angco* in the *sangjit* ceremony is believed to bring blessings to the couple, especially blessings of happiness in life and the gift of offspring. Lotus seeds, known in Mandarin as 蓮子 (*lián zi*), are symbolically associated with 年子 (*nián zi*), or more fully 年年有子 (*nián nián yǒu zi*), which can be translated as "having children every year" (Wijaya, 2012:13).

Candied sweets in the *sangjit* ceremony specifically symbolize peace, the sweetness of married life, prosperity, well-being, and good fortune in the future, with the hope of a continuously happy marriage.

Communal Rituals

In addition to individual rituals, Chinese culture also includes communal rituals. Communal rituals are those carried out together in groups and are usually performed in temples. These rituals serve a uniform function and act as a medium to achieve social harmony, with the impact felt by the community that supports the ritual. An example of a communal ritual that involves sweets can be seen in the celebrations of Chinese New Year and the deity's birthday ceremony (*sejit*).

Toa Se Bio Temple

Kelenteng is especially in Java, indicate a place of worship for Chinese people in general. The term kelenteng has gone beyond its limits and is generally accepted by the Chinese community as a term for a place of worship for Chinese beliefs that have various kinds. Kelenteng is a place of worship for Chinese people and this word comes from non-Chinese (Cangianto, 2022). According to Doroty Perkins (1999), traditional sacred buildings of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist adherents have been widely established both in China and abroad, particularly in regions with significant Chinese migrant populations, such as Southeast Asia—especially in the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Vihara Dharma Jaya Toa Se Bio or Toa Se Bio (大史廟 *dà shǐ miào*), located at Jalan Kemenangan III No. 48, Glodok, Taman Sari, West Jakarta, is also known as Hong San Miao. This temple is considered one of the oldest in Jakarta. According to the historical monument placed on the right side of the building, Toa Se Bio temple existed long before the Chinese Massacre (Geger Pecinan) of 1740. Toa Se Bio Temple is rich in Chinese cultural elements. This bright red temple building with dragon statues on its roof is located alongside residential homes. the eye is immediately drawn to the.



Figure 2. Toa Se Bio Temple
Source: Personal documentation

Cheng Goan Cheng Kun (清源真君 *Qīng Yuán Zhēn Jūn*) is the patron deity of Toa Se Bio Temple. According to the official guide of Toa Se Bio Temple, the name *Cheng Goan Cheng Kun* means “a virtuous angel from a clear source.” In Chinese traditional belief, Cheng Goan Cheng Kun is believed to protect cities surrounded by water. Looking at maps of Batavia from the 17th–18th centuries, Jakarta—then known as Batavia—was surrounded by rivers to the west, east, and south, while the northern part faced the Java Sea. Therefore, the Chinese community believed Cheng Goan Cheng Kun to be the guardian of Batavia and prayed to him for the city’s safety.

Chinese New Year

In Indonesia, the Chinese New Year is more commonly known as Imlek. The term *Imlek* (春节 *chūn jié*) comes from the Hokkien dialect and means lunar calendar. Therefore, Chinese New Year (*Tahun Baru Imlek*) refers to the beginning of the new year according to the lunar calendar (Widiastuti, 2023:61). According to Cheung, Angelina, and Pradana in their book *Chinese Celebrations in Indonesia* (2022:8), the Chinese New Year is also known

as the Spring Festival, and it is the most significant folk celebration in the Chinese calendar. Originally, the Imlek celebration was an agricultural festival held by farmers in China to welcome the arrival of spring. As such, the Chinese New Year celebration includes various dishes and traditional cakes.

Chinese temple in Indonesia celebrate Imlek by offering prostrations of gratitude for the blessings received over the past year, while also expressing hope that the coming year will be better than the last. Sartini & Aribowo (2005) explain that, as with most rituals, the Imlek celebration involves various offerings, each filled with symbolic meaning. The selection of these offerings is not based on personal preferences but rather reflects symbolic interpretations and religious values. These offerings consist of objects and food items that are considered essential in every *Imlek* celebration.

The food prepared as offerings in Chinese New Year in this temple includes twelve bowls of white rice, twelve cups of various drinks, and fresh fruits, and canned fruits. Besides the aforementioned food and beverages, there are other dishes presented as offerings to the deities, such as roast pork, Peking duck, pickled vegetables, *kue keranjang* (sticky rice cake), and of course, sweets like assorted candies, rock sugar, and chocolate coins.



Figure 3, 4. The Food Offerings

Source: youtube channel of Toa Se Bio

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiKn2N21qTA>



Figure 5. The Food Offerings

Source: personal documentation

After the offering food is fully prepared, the temple caretakers begin to make other preparations related to the Chinese New Year celebration. Then, exactly at 12:00 AM a communal prayer is held at Toa Se Bio Temple. The temple caretakers and devotees gather at the temple to perform the prayer together. The purpose of this joint prayer is to give thanks for the blessings that have been received and to ask for forgiveness for past wrongdoings. They also pray to the deities for continued health, protection, blessings, and for good things to come in the year ahead.

Typically, the communal prayer concludes around 1:00 AM. After the prayer, the previously prepared offerings are distributed to the devotees who have just completed the worship at the temple. Worshippers are allowed to consume the offerings after the prayer or take them home. They believe that the food has been blessed by the deities, and so the devotees will gladly take it. The temple devotees believe that what they offer to the gods will return to them in some form. On January 22, 2023, which coincided with Chinese New Year, Toa Se Bio Temple began its activities at 6:00 AM. In front of the temple entrance, many devotees were already waiting to perform their prayers. These prayers were carried out while bringing offerings such as fruits and candies. The offerings brought by the worshippers are, of course, full of meaning. offering is believed to be a way of planting good *karma*. The spiritual principle of cause and effect (*yin guo bao ying* 因果報應) — the idea that a person's actions (good or bad) influence their future experiences. They hold the hope that the good actions they sow will bring about sweet outcomes, just like the candies and fruits they offer.

Deity's Birthday Ceremony (*Sejit*)

Reverence for deities is one of the earliest forms of worship in China. According to historical records, the worship of deities in China has existed since the Shang Dynasty (1600–1406 BCE). These deities represented natural forces such as the sun, rain, and moon. Examples include Yu-huang, the god of heaven; Fei Lian and Feng Po, gods of the wind; Lei Kung or Lei Zi, the god of thunder; Chang E, the moon goddess; Gong Gong, the god of floods; Han, the river god; Hou Ji, the god of millet; and other deities responsible for rivers and mountains. All of these deities have been worshipped since the Shang Dynasty, with others becoming prominent after that period, like Fu De Zhengshen, Mazu, Guangong, etc. (Hartati, 2020:15).

The *sejit* ceremony, or the birthday ceremony of the temple's patron deity, is one of the major events held at Toa Se Bio Temple. The *sejit* ceremony conducted have many meanings such as an expression of respect and honor toward the temple's patron deity, Cheng Goan Cheng Kun. The annual *sejit* ceremony at Toa Se Bio also enlivened with events such as cake-cutting ceremonies, Barongsai (lion dance) performances, *Gambang Kromong* (a traditional Betawi musical ensemble), and also a healing ritual through a *tangsin* (童身 *tóng shēn*), which is a form of healing performed by a spirit medium who becomes a vessel for the deity's spirit to enter and assist in the healing process. As stated by Bell (1989) popular religion functions as the medium for the diffusion of common values to a variety of subgroups, each of which may appropriate them in distinctive ways.

During the time of this research, the *sejit* ceremony at Toa Se Bio Temple took place on July 10, 2023. The celebration began the night before, on July 9, which is commonly known as *sejit* eve. I had the opportunity to attend and witness the ritual firsthand over the course of two days. On *sejit* eve, the event began at 7:00 PM according to the schedule that had been distributed. Many devotees and visitors arrived early to receive food, known as *Cia Peng An* (吃平安 *chī píng ān*), where the temple distributes free meals to worshippers as a symbol of receiving blessings and peace.



Figure 6. *Cia Peng An*

Source: Personal documentation

When entering the temple, food and beverages were seen neatly arranged on the main altar table. These offerings were dedicated to the deity Cheng Goan Cheng Kun, the host deity of Toa Se Bio Temple, who was celebrating a birthday. The offerings included 12 bowls of rice, a cone-shaped rice dish (*nasi tumpeng*), various chicken and meat dishes, noodles, fruits such as oranges, pears, and dragon fruit, as well as a birthday cake and sweets, including assorted flavored candies, chocolate coins, rock sugar, sweetened peanuts, and canned fruits. In addition to the food, the main table also held drinks, which consisted of water, wine, and tea—each served in 12 glasses.

At exactly 7:00 PM, the event began with entertainment featuring a *barongsai* (lion dance) performance, followed by a *gambang kromong* musical performance. At 11:18 PM a communal prayer was held, along with a birthday cake-cutting ceremony. After these agendas were completed, the *sejit* evening celebration was officially concluded. The food and beverages offered on the main table were believed to have received blessings from the deity and could then be shared.

The next day, on July 10, the temple committee prepared golden and silver piggy banks, along with a golden chest, which would later be burned as part of the *sejit* ceremony. Around 11:00 AM, a ritual called *Sembahyang Khai Kuang* (开光 *kāi guāng*) a ritual to open the worship altar, was held. This ritual is performed to protect the statues of the deities in the temple from negative influences. The burning of the golden and silver piggy banks and the golden chest took place at 1:00 PM, followed by the *Sejit* prayer ritual led by Bhikshu Shangha at 5:00 PM. After the *sejit* ceremony was completed, the peak celebration commenced, featuring joyful entertainment with *barongsai* and *gambang kromong* performances and dancing throughout the night.

The food and drinks offered to Deity Cheng Goan Cheng Kun during the *sejit* ceremony hold symbolic meaning, serving as an act of respect and a way to seek blessings from the deity. Similar to the Chinese New Year celebration, temple devotees see these offerings as a form of planting good *karma*, done with the hope that the good *karma* will bear positive results. Sweets, in particular, are an important element in the *sejit* ceremony—they are offered with the hope that the deity will bestow blessings and a life that is sweet and joyful, just like the taste of the sweets.

CONCLUSION

Sweets among the Chinese people are regarded as a symbol of hope for a 'sweet' life. In Chinese culture, people offer sweets with the hope that they will be granted sweetness in their lives. From these practices, it can be concluded that sweets symbolize hope—by offering and consuming sweets, a wish is made for pleasant and good things to always be present in their lives. Sweets are closely associated with Chinese cultural rituals. In the Sangjit ceremony, sweets are an essential element traditionally included as part of the gifts presented by the groom's family to the bride's family, and vice versa. Sweets symbolize peace, a sweet life, prosperity, well-being, good fortune in the future, and a lasting happy marriage.

During Chinese New Year and deity's birthday ceremony, sweets are used as offerings to deities and ancestors. These offerings carry specific meanings and purposes, primarily as expressions of respect and gratitude for the blessings received. Moreover, offering sweets to deities and ancestors is a symbolic gesture of hope—to continuously receive blessings, fortune, and a life as sweet as the sweet offerings themselves. This research concluded that sweets serve as a means of communication in the rituals of Chinese New Year and *sejit* ceremony.

Chinese culture is rich in symbolic meaning, and sweets are no exception. In the three ceremonies—*sangjit*, Chinese New Year, and *sejit*—sweets can be considered an important medium of communication. However, what differentiates them is the type of communication: in Chinese New Year and *sejit*, sweets function as a medium for vertical communication, namely between humans and supernatural powers such as deities and ancestors. When people offer sweets, they are placing their hopes in these spiritual beings for continued blessings and a sweet life. In contrast, *sangjit* involves horizontal communication, or communication between people. Sweets symbolize a sweet and happy marriage; when both the groom's and bride's families exchange sweets as gifts, it is a subtle form of communication that expresses a mutual desire for a joyful and lasting marriage.

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