Merry Jewish Christmas: How Chinese food and the movies became a time-honored tradition for American Jews

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Chinese food has become a staple of many Jewish Americans' traditions each Dec. 25.

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There is a meme that circulates every holiday season, an image of a sign in a restaurant window. "The Chinese Restaurant Association of the United States would like to extend our thanks to the Jewish people," it says. "We do not completely understand your dietary customs ... but we are proud and grateful that your GOD insists you eat our food on Christmas."

Is the sign real? Perhaps not; the fact-checking site Snopes found no evidence of the association even existing. But the joke's popularity points to a tradition cherished by many American Jews – Chinese food on Christmas.

But why would Jews, who do not celebrate Christmas, have Christmas traditions?

Like many minority groups, Jews have always created ways of adapting to the societies in which they live, but whose culture they do not totally share. And one thing that means is a collection of Christmas traditions, varying by time and place. Many of them came up in interviews for my book "Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States."

Old World festivities

Long before Jews came to the United States, some of them celebrated Christmas – participating in many of the cultural traditions, even as they avoided the religious part of the holiday.

According to Jordan Chad, author of "Christmas in Yiddish Tradition," Jewish folklore about the holiday appears as early as the late 1300s. Plenty of Jewish communities in Europe spent Christmas Eve dancing and drinking, feasting and gambling – as many of their Christian neighbors did, when those neighbors were not in church.

Other scholars have argued that these traditions grew out of attempts to avoid studying Jewish religious texts on a Christian holiday. But Chad demonstrates that, over centuries, those customs came to celebrate the revelry of the season – though not the birth of Jesus.

Even in the 20th century, scholars such as Yaniv Feller have found, many middle- and upper-class German Jews embraced a secular Christmas, complete with a tree, a traditional dinner and presents. After all, some of those Christmas traditions stem less from religion than folk traditions and industrialization.

Some Jewish families decorate a 'Hanukkah bush' as a seasonal alternative to a Christmas tree.

Smith Collection/Gado/Getty Images

Given that long history, Jewish Christmas traditions are not necessarily a sign of Americanization.

That said, in the United States, Christmas is so culturally powerful – a day that almost everyone has off, and that the majority of Americans spend with their kith and kin – that many non-Christian immigrants celebrate it in a secular way, with family visits, Santa and a tree. They do not necessarily do the religious parts of the holiday, but they may well deck the halls. Certainly, my own Hindu relatives do.

And many Jews celebrate Christmas in some way because they are part of interfaith families – whether their own immediate family or extended relatives with whom they spend the day. Today, estimates place the American Jewish interfaith marriage rate as high as 50%.

Kosher-style Chinese

For plenty of contemporary Jews, however, it is profoundly important not to celebrate a secular version of Christmas. Starting in the 1970s, in fact, when American Jews were particularly worried about rising rates of interfaith marriage, many of the rabbis willing to perform ceremonies for Jewish-Christian couples made them promise to not have a Christmas tree. This happened despite the fact that, at the time, many American Jews did have Christmas trees in their homes.

Even if Jews do not want to deck the halls, though, many still have the day off. Meanwhile, their non-Jewish friends, families and co-workers are busy and much of the world is closed. And so many Jews have developed their own ways of marking the day.

The Chinese food tradition is particularly famous. In fact, during Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan's 2010 confirmation hearings, when Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham asked her where she had been on Christmas Day, she responded, "Like all Jews, I was probably at a Chinese restaurant."

The first written mention of Jews eating Chinese food on Christmas Day comes from 1935, when, according to The New York Times, a man named Eng Shee Chuck brought chow mein and toys to a New Jersey Jewish orphanage.

His generosity was probably not why Jews started going to Chinese restaurants on Christmas; it is more likely that they were already doing so. The two communities lived cheek by jowl in many American cities, where immigrants of different sorts ended up in the same neighborhoods. And Chinese food contains little dairy, meaning it rarely violated Jewish dietary laws against mixing milk and meat.

Most Chinese cuisines do use pork and shrimp, which is forbidden by kosher laws. But many Jewish customers were happy to make an exception, especially if the forbidden food was tucked in a dumpling or otherwise out of sight – at least outside their own homes.

As new research by New York University graduate student Shiyong Lu demonstrates, Chinese restaurants were also eager to cater to American Jews: They wanted to develop white, American clientele, and here were some right in their neighborhoods.

As restaurant owners learned that Jews often eschewed pork, some began to offer traditional dishes with chicken instead – allowing more observant Jews to eat "kosher style," without eating explicitly forbidden food. Today, there is wide variation in Jewish dietary practices, making Chinese food even more accessible for most Jews.

By the end of the 20th century, "Chinese food and a movie" had become the trope of Jewish Christmas. Because most Chinese immigrants were not Christian, their restaurants are often open on Dec. 25. And indeed, they are often filled with Jews.

Two men enjoy Chinese cuisine, prepared under kosher guidelines, around 1960.
Bettmann via Getty Images

Movies, volunteering and more

The same tends to be true for movie theaters. In 2012, I saw "Les Misérables" on Christmas Day in a theater that seemed to be a who's who of the Atlanta Jewish community. In fact, the movies and the Chinese food are often paired, whether out on the town or at home, streaming with take out.

Jewish museums are often open and are another popular destination in cities that have them. And some Jews use Christmas Day for travel. At least in eras past, plane tickets were notably cheaper than the days around the holiday.

Another Jewish Christmas tradition is simply to go to work, so as to let Christian colleagues have the day off. Many Jewish doctors and nurses are on call, or staff the emergency room or the intensive care unit, so that their colleagues can be home.

A Christmas tree is decorated with the pandemic in mind in the COVID-19 ICU at UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester, Mass., in December 2020.

Craig F. Walker/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

Still other Jews perform charitable deeds on Christmas: They staff soup kitchens and food banks, bring holiday cheer to nursing homes and hospital patients, or deliver gifts to children in shelters.

Living in a culture that largely closes down each Dec. 25, many Jews have found ways of making meaning in the day – be that sharing family time over beef and broccoli, followed by a holiday blockbuster, or working to make sure that more of their colleagues can have a family day. And those, too, are Christmas traditions.

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