

Tech on Tradition

I wish everybody a happy year of the Dog. As I wrote this at Stanford University, people on campus were greeting each other saying “Happy New year”. I remember when I first arrived at the US in 1970, Chinese New Year was relatively unknown in American society. It has since entered into the consciousness of many Americans, but still it is nowhere near the level of cultural festivals of other cultures in the US.

For example, in regions of the US where there are large Jewish populations, it is quite common that the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) is “observed” by many organizations informally, even though it is formally not a public holiday. At the US universities where I have taught, the faculty members were “suggested” to not give out exams on Jewish New Year, and also to allow observing Jewish students to take a leave for family celebration. I don’t think CNY has risen to that status yet, but it is certainly trending up: In June 2015, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio declared that CNY would be made a public school holiday. May be more cities will soon follow suit.

Over the years, I notice how technology has had a big impact on how an old tradition like CNY is “practiced”. In the old days, I had to line up to make an IDD call to HK to send my greetings, which was very expensive. The prohibitive cost of an air ticket (I had to save up for 2 years before I could make my first return trip to HK in the 1970s) also meant that scattered families would have a hard time to gather even around CNY; instead, we were used to send each other greeting cards by mail or, if distance allowed, we would buy gifts and give them in person.

How things have changed. Today, we do our gift purchase online, with direct delivery to the recipient; instead of greeting cards in the post box, we now send electronic greetings with our phones—I must have received more than 100 in the past 2 weeks alone. As air travel has become much more common and affordable, it is no longer difficult for scattered family members to gather together somewhere on the globe to celebrate the long holidays. And the proliferation of the Internet and messaging apps mean that we are always in touch with one another regardless of distance—IDD calls have become a relic of the past. And China’s new high speed railway system is making its notorious annual CNY travel rush more bearable, too.

To me, the biggest influence of tech to tradition is precisely this ability of tech to bring everyone closer together and enhance human relationships. As I write this article, my family of four are in 4 different cities with 3 different time zones (as long as 11 hours apart), and we are daily using email, SMS, WhatsApp, WeChat and FaceTime to keep up with one another. Through online news platforms, family members can keep track of news in their loved ones’

region, which builds a context for social interaction. When HK was hard hit by a #10 typhoon, my children immediately sent their concerns. When there is a natural disaster happening in my children's cities (e.g. wild fire in California and huge snow storm in US North East), we'd be on alert together with them. My brothers who live in CA often know about the latest news in HK before me, because they read the online news before I even got a chance to read them myself! My children take this for granted but this kind of global instant news and close communication with loved ones was simply unimaginable in my younger days.

This collection of "social communication systems" is one of the most impactful tech advances in human history. It is the best kind of tech - not only does it make our life more convenient, but more importantly, it makes our relationship with our loved ones closer and deeper. So it is OK with me that the founders of these companies are rich and famous. Good for them because they do good for the rest of us!