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Ritual Symbolism and Culinary Practice in Winter Solstice Folklore: A Comparative Study in East Asia

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the symbolic and ritual functions of winter solstice food traditions—particularly red-bean porridge, wontons, and pumpkin-based dishes—in East Asian cultures (China, Korea, and Japan). The research aims to uncover how these culinary customs, rooted in folklore and seasonal cosmology, function as embodied responses to the liminality of the winter solstice, a period historically viewed as both auspicious and dangerous. **Methodology**: The study uses a qualitative-historical research approach, drawing from the disciplines of folklore, cultural anthropology, and historical ethnography. Data were collected through close readings of primary sources such as *Jingchu Suishiji*, *Engishiki*, and classical diaries, alongside secondary analyses by modern East Asian folklorists and scholars. Victor Turner's theory of liminality serves as the core analytical framework, with a comparative lens applied across the three national contexts. **Findings**: The research finds that solstice food customs—like red-bean porridge in China and Korea, and pumpkin dishes in Japan—serve not merely as seasonal nourishment but as apotropaic rituals aimed at warding off evil spirits and maintaining social cohesion. These culinary traditions reflect broader cosmological beliefs rooted in agricultural cycles, yin-yang theory, and mythological storytelling. Furthermore, the study highlights the intergenerational transmission of these customs through oral and embodied practices, while also identifying vulnerabilities posed by urbanization and cultural erosion. **Implications**: The findings contribute to the growing field of intangible cultural heritage studies by positioning solstice food rituals as vital forms of vernacular cosmology and community resilience. **Originality and Value**: This research offers an original contribution by foregrounding food as a cosmological medium—an epistemological tool that allows communities to ritualize astronomical transitions. It departs from conventional studies of solstice marked through monuments or festivals, and instead emphasizes domestic, edible rituals. By theorizing the hearth as a cosmological site, the study invites rethinking cultural astronomy through taste, tactility, and seasonal embodiment, providing new intersections between folklore, anthropology, and food studies.

Keywords: Cultural astronomy; East Asia; Folklore; Red-bean porridge; Winter solstice.

Introduction

Equinoxes and solstices always served as a source of awe-inspiring astronomical mystique worldwide. On the winter solstice day, for example, the extension of day length into the nighttime marks the initiation of a gradual progression toward longer days until the summer solstice day comes. This pivotal moment stimulated our past ancestors to create winter solstice folklore, depicting a significant natural threshold that would usher auspices into human societies as the onset of the vernal season.

Throughout human history, astronomical phenomena such as the equinoxes and solstices have stirred awe and inspired cultural imagination across diverse civilizations. The winter solstice in particular—marking the year's longest night—has been observed as a powerful celestial threshold that invites mythmaking, ritual, and communal

reflection. Among the Adyghe people, for instance, winter solstice is celebrated through mythoepic traditions that blend agricultural symbolism with cultural identity (Kuek & Kuek, 2024). Ancient Rome similarly wove solstice meanings into imperial ideology, aligning public monuments with the sunrise of the solstice to signify celestial favor upon the emperor (González-García, García Quintela, Rodríguez-Antón, & Espinosa-Espinosa, 2022). For the Inka, the winter solstice anchored the festival of *Inti Raymi*, a state ritual central to their ceremonial calendar (Giovannetti, 2025), while Southeastern Indian communities associated the solstice sunset with death, conducting mortuary rites that marked the season's emotional and cosmological weight (Kay & Sabo III, 2006). Across northern Europe, pre-Christian traditions such as Jul—later absorbed into Christian Christmas—celebrated the triumph of light over darkness, embedding solstice symbolism into evergreen branches and festive fires (Nistor, 2009). Even among Latvian exiles, winter solstice traditions persisted alongside Christmas as cultural anchors in unfamiliar lands (Kovzele & Kacane, 2023). These varied practices, rooted in astronomical observation yet charged with spiritual and emotional significance, demonstrate how the winter solstice has long served as a liminal juncture—between night and day, life and death, despair and renewal—prompting communities to ritualize the cosmos through storytelling, symbolism, and shared culinary customs.

Simultaneously, however, people also regarded the winter solstice as an unstable juncture between auspiciousness (vernal time) and inauspiciousness (hibernal time), compelling them to take measures to shield themselves from potential malevolent situations. This kind of irrational yet convincing view toward the winter solstice day made people fear that various fiends would roam around human inhabitants, threatening to spread epidemic diseases on that day. Eventually, this anxiety formed the basic theme of winter solstice folklore. Despite sounding laughable at the present day, such folklore stories enact various kinds of masquerading parades and unique performances worldwide today, such as *Krampus* in southern Germany (Little, 2023), *Perchten* in Pernik, Bulgaria, and Tyrol regions of Central Europe (CBS News, 2014), *Namahage* なまはげin northern Japan (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2020), and *Mang gao jie* 芒篙節in South Central China (Xinhua Net, 2016).

Across continents and centuries, the winter solstice has stood not only as a marker of the year's longest night but also as a canvas upon which civilizations have projected their fears, hopes, and celestial imaginations. In ancient Rome, the solstice was not merely a seasonal shift, but a symbol of cosmic alignment, woven into the cult of Saturnus and echoed through monuments oriented toward the solstice sunrise, affirming Augustus's divine connection (González-García et al., 2022). Among the Maya, the 2012 solstice carried eschatological weight, signaling the end of a great calendrical cycle and, for some, the threshold of transformation (Sitler, 2012). The Adyghe people, deeply rooted in mythoepic consciousness, have long linked the solstice to agricultural renewal and sacred time (Kuek & Kuek, 2024). For Southeastern Indigenous tribes, the solstice sunset ushered in a space for mourning and ancestral communion, aligning mortuary rituals with the rhythms of the dying sun (Kay & Sabo III, 2006). In the wintry north, Germanic and Christian traditions wove together solstice themes of rebirth and light with the celebration of Jul and Christmas (Nistor, 2009), while Danish communities have reimagined the solstice through secular gatherings under the stars, reaffirming connection and community in the stillness of winter (Trolle, 2021). Even in the borderlands of Belarus and Ukraine, or atop Lithuania's sacred Rambynas Hill, the solstice emerges not merely as a date but as a moment thick with memory, ritual, and mythic geography (Belova,

2023; Kaniava, 2022).

Yet amid this vast constellation of meaning, one thread remains curiously underexplored: the ritual of food. While solstice celebrations have been richly documented in song, architecture, and processions, the culinary dimensions—how food becomes a vessel for symbolic protection, seasonal renewal, or communal bonding—often slip beneath scholarly attention. The warm bowl of red-bean porridge, simmered in East Asian kitchens as both offering and amulet, stands as a quiet yet potent ritual act. This study, therefore, steps into that overlooked space—where astronomy meets appetite, and folklore simmers with meaning—to explore how solstice customs in China, Korea, and Japan use food not just for sustenance, but as a medium of cosmic and cultural passage.

Notably, in East Asian agroecosystems, red beans are typically harvested in late summer and dried for winter preservation. This agricultural cycle birthed folklore that attributed protective qualities to red beans, particularly due to their vibrant, enduring color during winter. In southern China, for example, red beans were believed to exorcize malevolent spirits (Morita, 2010, pp. 79–81). These beliefs gave rise to captivating stories and culinary traditions centered around red beans, particularly the preparation and consumption of red-bean porridge on the winter solstice. It was thought that this porridge warded off evil spirits, which were said to detest red-bean products. This interplay between natural observation and imaginative storytelling not only enriched folklore but also established the red-bean porridge custom as a protective ritual during the winter solstice. Despite its cultural significance, we cannot say that folk cultural studies on the origin of the red-bean porridge tradition have been conducted sufficiently. So, we need further academic explorations on that tradition world-widely.

At the heart of this study lies the assumption that winter solstice culinary customs are not merely seasonal habits or remnants of folklore, but living rituals shaped by liminality—a threshold space where the ordinary is momentarily suspended and the symbolic takes hold. Drawing from Victor Turner's theory of *liminality*, this research contends that the act of preparing and consuming symbolic foods (Turner, 1969) —such as red-bean porridge in China, pumpkin stew in Japan, or rice cakes in Korea—constitutes more than cultural tradition; it becomes a rite of passage through time itself. In the quiet interstice between the longest night and the slow return of light, communities enact a subtle drama of protection, renewal, and transition. These foods, steeped in myth and memory, serve as edible charms—anchoring the body in warmth while guiding the spirit across a cosmological divide. As Turner suggests, it is in these liminal moments—where the structure of the everyday is loosened—that transformation becomes possible, and through these rituals, cultures find continuity not only with their past, but with the rhythm of the cosmos itself.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative-historical approach rooted in the disciplines of cultural anthropology, folklore studies, and historical ethnography to trace the symbolic, ritualistic, and culinary practices associated with the winter solstice in East Asia. Focusing on three cultural contexts—China, Korea, and Japan—the research prioritizes textual analysis of classical literature, travelogues, seasonal chronicles, and ethnographic accounts to uncover the embedded meanings behind culinary customs such as red-bean porridge, wonton, and pumpkin-based dishes.

Primary sources include historical texts such as *Jingchu suishiji* by Zong Lin (6th

century), which offers one of the earliest records of solstice-related culinary customs in southern China, alongside Qing Dynasty commentaries by Dun Sui that highlight both elite imperial rituals and commoners' food traditions. Ennin's 9th-century travel diary provides a rare outsider's perspective on Tang Dynasty solstice celebrations, while Japanese court records and literary works such as *Engishiki*, *Makura no Sōshi*, and *Tosa Nikki* offer insight into how solstice-related food practices were formalized in aristocratic contexts.

Secondary sources—such as the works of modern folklorists like Yanagita Kunio in Japan, Jang Chogeon and Chung Heesoo in Korea, and contemporary scholars including Morita Kiyoko and Yeon Cheong-ha—were consulted to trace the continuity, adaptation, and symbolic transformations of these customs. Where applicable, references to broader historical contexts such as epidemics (cf. McNeill, 1998) and the symbolic theories of yin-yang and five-element systems were incorporated to situate these culinary rituals within the larger cosmological worldview of East Asia.

To ensure analytical depth, the study draws on Victor Turner's theory of liminality as an interpretive lens, understanding the winter solstice as a temporal threshold and culinary rituals as rites of passage (Turner, 1969). This theoretical framework guides the comparative interpretation of each cultural case, highlighting how food practices mediate between cosmic cycles, seasonal transitions, and communal identity. While empirical observation of contemporary practice is beyond the scope of this historical inquiry, the study's diachronic focus seeks to uncover long-standing symbolic continuities that still echo in present-day ritual forms.

Results and Discussion

1. Winter Solstice Folklore and Red-Bean Porridge Culinary Custom in China

While the actual impact of the winter and the summer solstices on geo-energy and human vitality remains in debate, Chinese scholars have actively sought to understand this potential influence since ancient time. They first detailed these astronomically periodical events in *Han shu* 漢書 (Book of Han, ca. the fifth century). In the mid-sixth century, along with varieties of local customs and annual festivals held in Jingchu region, the southern part of China, Zong Lin 宗懍 (502?–565?) recorded the winter solstice folklore and related culinary custom in his book *Jingchu sui shi ji* 荊楚歲時記 (Seasonal Chronicle in Jingchu Region, mid-sixth century). He informs us that the people there erecting a wooden pole on the ground to determine the winter solstice day by measuring the length of its shadow over the field. Besides this measuring practice, Zong Lin recounted an intriguing episode related to the winter solstice day:

> A semi-deity named *Gong Gong* 共工 or 龔工 had an immoral son. This son died on the very day of the winter solstice, subsequently becoming *yigui* 疫鬼 [an epidemic-causing fiend]. This fiend was believed to bring about various epidemic diseases to human societies, but the people came to know that he hated red beans. So, they cook and consume red-bean porridge on the winter solstice day to ward off the fiend that would come to the region harming the people with spreading out epidemic diseases (Zong, 1978, p. 228).

The above episode highlights that the people in the Jingchu region linked frequent

epidemic outbreaks with the winter solstice day in the lunar calendar November (which falls on the solar calendar December). They believed that the day's lengthening starting on that day served as an auspicious sign, warding off potential threats to their daily lives. Furthermore, while they agriculturally harvested red beans during the summer, dried red beans as the winter preservation stock retained their vibrant red color and, thus, Jingchu residents thought red-bean porridge would take effect as a deterrent to such a fiendish entity.

This kind of folklore reveals the fact of the struggle against epidemic disease outbreaks like smallpox in the Jingchu region, where effective remedies were scarce during that time (McNeill, 1998). Mentioning Edward Schafer's book *The Vermilion Bird* (1967), McNeill describes such a horrific situation how the residents in the southern part of Chine constantly suffered epidemic diseases in the past. In the absence of medical cures for deadly afflictions, people turned to the consumption of red-bean porridge as a protective measure, hoping it would possess apotropaic properties. Although the effectiveness of red-bean porridge as a preventive measure against infectious diseases remains questionable today, it is no doubt that the people blended the astronomical mystique of shifting daylength longer with unfading shiny red-color of red beans, weaving the above Jingchu region's folklore story that red-bean porridge could effectively overwhelm the abominable epidemic-causing fiend.

In the above book of his, Zong Lin did not elaborate on the medical perspectives of the red-bean porridge's efficacy against epidemics. Arguably, the underlying theory of the red beans' power may have originated from *Wu Xing* 五行説 (five-element theory)[1] and *Yin Yang* 陰陽 (yin-yang theory),[2] accompanied by vernacular nutrition knowledge prevailed among the people at that time (Kampo Life, 2017). No matter what theories the people leaned on for practicing the red-bean porridge custom, they uniquely fictionalized the cause of deadly infectious diseases in connection with the winter solstice day and, then, birthed a fictive apotropaic measure—red-bean porridge—against deadly diseases. Through consuming red-bean porridge as fantastic preventive measure, Jingchu people stood up to real predicaments—epidemic outbreaks.

Though he did not mention any episodes about the red-bean porridge custom in his book, Dun Sui 敦崇 (1854–1911), a distinguished official of the Qing Dynasty in China (1636–1912), accentuated how much the winter solstice day had given enormous significance to the ruling authority in China:

> On the winter solstice day, as positive solar energy ascends [because the daylength gets longer and longer from that day], the emperor celebrates it by praying for his enduring reign over China. In contrast, since negative solar energy starts prevailing on the summer solstice day [because the daylength gets shorter and shorter from that day], the emperor refrains from any celebrations on that day (Dun, 1996, p. 186).

[1] Five elements are *mu* 木(wood), *huo* 火 (fire), *tu* 土 (earth), *jin* 金 (metal or gold), and *shui* 水 (water), and each element corresponds to specific color and season: "wood corresponds to blue and spring," "fire to red and summer," "earth to yellow and the turning-point of the season," "metal金to white and autumn/fall," and "water to black and winter." According to this theory, red beans belong to the fire category because the red-bean harvest time is in the late summer and its color is red.

[2] Yin represents darkness, softness, liquid, winter, nighttime, plants, and femaleness; and yang represents brightness, light, sturdiness, fire, summer daytime, and maleness. According to this view, the winter solstice is considered the peak of Yin negative energy, representing the longest night and the shortest day in the year and, thus, people looked forward to having Yang positive energy from that day onward (J. Mao, 2019).

Although the above imperial activity on the winter solstice day may sound far-fetched today, Chinese emperors simply deemed that the astronomical cycle was gravely responsible for all the phenomena happening in this terrestrial world. Whatever theories and beliefs lay in the foundation of the above imperial winter-solstice-day ceremony, there is no doubt that the day has been honored as a significant astronomical power wielding over political equilibrium and good harvests in the whole societies.

2. Winter Solstice Folklore and Wonton Culinary Custom in China

The winter solstice tradition in China drew the interest of Ennin 円仁 (794–864), a Japanese Buddhist monk, who journeyed on foot around the northern part of Tang China (618–907). During his travels there from 838 to 847, he kept a diary that later evolved into an extensive ten-volume travelogue. This diary focuses not only on Buddhist teachings he learned in prominent Chinese temples but also on a diverse range of Tang Chinese folk cultural customs. Notably, Ennin's diary describes how Chinese people celebrated the winter solstice day by consuming delectable foods. As Edward Reischauer remarks, the winter solstice day held unparalleled significance for all the strata of Tang Chinese societies in comparison with other seasonal celebrations, including the mid-spring ceremony, the first day of summer, and the first day of autumn. Thus, it is no doubt that Ennin actively engaged in documenting his participation in the winter solstice celebrations both inside and outside of Buddhist temples on numerous occasions during his stay in China (Reischauer, 1999, pp. 206–207).

Take the winter solstice ceremony on the lunar calendar November 26 (which was around on the solar calendar December 26) in the year of 840, for example. Ennin eloquently described that "[i]n the morning of this day, people enjoyed not only porridge but also wonton [Chinese dumplings] and some fruits" (Ennin, 1990, pp. 569–470). While this description might invite various discussions about what types of porridge, wonton, and fruits the people consumed during the winter solstice day celebration, it undeniably demonstrates that they regarded the preparation and consumption of these delicacies as a significant seasonal event. Ennin's descriptions provide us with valuable glimpses into the winter-solstice foodways among Tang Chinese people (Zhou, 2006, pp. 22–29).

In addition to red-bean porridge on the winter solstice day, Chinese people in the early modern time enjoyed another delicacy on that very day. During the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), emperors stood on the sacred platform set in *Tiantan* 天壇 (Temple of Heaven), sincerely invoking prayers for perdurable peace and abundant harvests across over China on the very day of the winter solstice. This emperor-presided ceremony proved how significantly the winter solstice day operated as the vital celestial phenomenon to the Chinese ruling authority at that time. Although he did not mention any epidemic-causing spirits in his description, Dun Sui also vividly portrays ordinary people's merriment in downtown Beijing on the winter solstice day in the Qing Dynasty. He describes:

> The winter solstice is a special celebration of the celestial sphere, and thus, an emperor prays for the heaven on that day. However, commoners do not engage in any special ritual practices on the winter solstice day. Instead, they traditionally cook and eat *huntun* 餛飩wonton for commemorating that day. This eating-wonton tradition is very similar to folk culinary custom of eating *mian* 麵noodles on the summer solstice day. Therefore, people living in Beijing always say: "To cook and eat wonton on the winter solstice day, and noodles on the summer solstice day" (Dun, 1996).

Moreover, he continues:

> The shape of huntun wonton is almost identical to that of a chicken egg, the shape of which is quite similar to that of *tiandi hundun*天地混沌 [a chaotic phase of the whole universe]. That is why people usually cook and eat wonton on the winter solstice day [because they thought that it would be a better way to do so for avoiding any negative affections on them from the turning-point of the daylength that could easily create a chaotic phase of the whole universe] (Dun, 1996).

The above description indicates that the commemoration of the winter solstice day in China has traditionally entailed the practice of cooking and consuming not only red-bean porridge but also wonton on that day. Indeed, the connection between the shape of wontons and "tiandi hundun" sounds far-fetched, but it is evident that the people of Qing China placed a considerable importance on the winter solstice day in association with the origin of wonton dishes and the reason for consuming them (Zhou, 2006). Whatever profound theories lie behind the shape and origin of the wontons, Chinese people have continuously relished them not only on the winter solstice day but also other annual festivals such as New Year's Day.

While it remains uncertain whether Chinese people have sincerely believed in the positive influence of the winter solstice day on their everyday lives or not, historical records show that they have joyously celebrated this occasion as a pivotal feast for welcoming the spring season with consuming delectable dishes for more than two thousand years. Indeed, folklore and culinary customs linked to the winter solstice day might work well as laughingstock today, but they mirror our ancestors' tendency to create narratives addressing their fears of uncontrollable afflictions and hopes of having a safeguard against potential threats to happiness and prosperity. This inclination essentially galvanizes the human creativity of fictionalizing realities into fantasies. Even today, the remnants of this kind of fictionalization can be detected not only in Chinese folk culture but also in Korean and Japanese counterparts.

3. Winter Solstice Folklore and Red-Bean Porridge Culinary Custom in Korea

The winter solstice day continues to play a significant role in the vibrant tapestry of Korean cultural heritage. Historically in early modern Korea, the winter solstice marked Little New Year's Day, prompting the Korean nobility to host banquets where they exchanged calendars as New Year's gifts. Interestingly, the lunar calendar month of November, corresponding to the solar calendar December, was referred as the "winter solstice month." The celebration of the winter solstice day involved the preparation and consumption of red-bean porridge, this practice which was not indigenous to Korea but was introduced from China (Yeon, 2014).

Jang Chogeon, a Korean folklorist, illuminates a red-bean porridge culinary custom for commemorating the winter solstice day:

> In Korea, the winter solstice is also known as the "Little New Year," and red-bean porridge is considered as a seasonal food [to cook and consume] during this time to celebrate everyone's longevity for the coming year. For this celebration, the people

> also enjoy another kind of special meat-and-vegetable stew for commemorating [the Little] New Year's Day (Jang, 2003, p. 276).

He describes how red-bean porridge was important for Korean people:

> [The people thought] epidemic-causing spirits hate red beans. Thus, people have traditionally smeared red-bean porridge on the walls and entrance gates to block those evil spirits from entering houses on the day of the winter solstice [because the evil spirits would start haunting human communities on that day]. These spirits hesitated to enter a house, fleeing away [from the house when they saw red-bean porridge smeared on the walls and entrance gates of the house] (Chung, 2006, pp. 76–77).

Even though the above folk narratives and culinary custom are too weird to believe, they have already taken deeply root in Korean folk cultural landscape. Thus, the winter solstice day custom of red-bean porridge captured scholarly curiosity of Japanese academies during Japanese ruling period of Korea (Naraki, 1913, pp. 121, 135–136; Oh, 1935, p. 203).

In addition to red-bean porridge, a variety of delightful delicacies used to be savored on the winter solstice day in Korea. These culinary delights are, for example, *dongchimi* 동치미 (which literally means winter taste, consisting of Korean radish, napa cabbage, scallions, pickled green chili, ginger, Korean pear all soaked in brine), *gakseok gyeondan* 각석경단 (rice cakes crafted by boiling kneaded glutinous rice with grinding some sweet ingredients including powdered soybeans and sesame seeds), and *sujeonggwa* 수정과 (a sweet beverage infused with ginger and cinnamon). Among these winter solstice delicacies, red-bean porridge still maintains greater popularity today due to its simpler preparation. Nevertheless, collectively, these delectable dishes stand as a testament to the unforgettable significance of the winter solstice day and its associated foodway (Chung, 2006; Yeon, 2014).

We need further studies to delve into the folk cultural history of the winter solstice tradition in Korea, but we may say that the above culinary customs not only tantalize the taste buds but also represent their fear of epidemic outbreaks and hope of bright warm spring days, bringing auspices to them. Such fear and hope have intertwined into the long-lasting winter solstice celebration heritage of Korea.

4. Winter Solstice Folklore and Red-Bean Porridge Culinary Custom in Japan

Japanese folk culture also encompasses the time-honored tradition of the winter solstice day celebration by consuming red-bean porridge. While agricultural studies indicate that Japanese people began cultivating red beans as a staple grain as early as the fourth century BCE, we do not have any firm evidence to confirm when the Japanese commenced celebrating the winter solstice day with red-bean porridge (Josuian, 2021). Probably this custom was introduced through Japanese government-sanctioned envoys traveling to China and Korea. Since the early years of the seventh century, though not consistently on an annual basis, the Japanese government significantly launched diplomatic and trade relations with Chinese dynasties and Korean kingdom by

dispatching official envoys to them. These envoys constituted not only diplomats but also Buddhist monks, skilled artisans, and government-appointed merchants, aiming to acquire and bring back emerging knowledge and cutting-edge technologies to Japan.

Commenting on Zong's book *Jingchu sui shi ji*, Moriya Mitsuo, a Japanese scholar of Chinese literature, suggests that the basic concept of the winter solstice day celebration reached Japan no later than the tenth century through the envoys returning from China (Zong, 1978). Before the introduction of the winter solstice celebration to Japan, the cultivation of red beans had already spread out across broader regions of Japan. Moreover, the vibrant red color of preserved dried red beans became particularly appealing to the people during the harsh winter season. Consequently, the newly-introduced Chinese winter solstice celebration custom gradually permeated all strata of Japanese societies to honor the winter solstice day by preparing and consuming red-bean porridge as a protective measure against fiends believed to cause deadly infectious diseases like smallpox among communities (Morita, 2010).

Besides the winter solstice day celebration, there was another red-bean porridge culinary custom in Japan during the freezing midwinter days. According to extant literature, ancient Japanese people had a specific tradition of preparing red-bean porridge to consume on the lunar calendar January 15 as an edible charm to ward off any evil spirits. This practice was held in Japanese royal court enforced by *Engishiki* 延喜式 (Procedures of the Engi Era, 927) (Morita, 2010) and, it was also reported in the diary-style novel *Tosa nikki* 土佐日記 (Tosa Diary, ca. 935) by Kino Tsurayuki 紀貫之 (866–945), a court noble and poet (Morita, 2010). We can find an interesting description about the above January 15 red-bean porridge culinary custom in *Makura no Sōshi* 枕草子 (The Pillow Book, ca. 1001) by Sei Shōnagon清少納言 (c. 966–1017 or 1025). She portrayed some enjoyable pranks related to red-bean porridge played inside the eleventh-century royal court (Morita, 2010). The consumption of red-bean porridge on January 15 widely remained among Japanese societies until the end of the Edo period (1603–1868) (Okamoto, 1986, p. 13).

Japanese folklore has many legends associated with red-bean porridge, often interwoven with the tales of an itinerant Buddhist monk. This monk is frequently fictionalized in connection with the renowned historical Buddhist reverence Kūkai 空海 (774–835), also known as Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師 (Yanagita, 1977, p. 30). During his sojourn in Tang China (805–807), he studied esoteric Buddhism there, introducing its teaching to Japan. Along with the numerous fictitious narratives surrounding this itinerant Buddhist monk Kōbō Daishi, Japan abounds in spooky folktales related to red beans, such as *azuki arai* 小豆洗い (a preternatural humanoid creature known for washing red beans) (Yanagita, 1956, p. 198, 2013, pp. 117–123).[3] In Tōno, Iwate Prefecture, located in northern Japan, the local deity, *Oshira Sama* おしらさま, is reputed to share a special connection with red-bean porridge and *azuki mochi* 小豆餅 (a rice cake stuffed with red-bean paste) (Yanagita, 1955, p. 114, note 79).

The custom of preparing and savoring red-bean porridge as part of the winter solstice celebration remains honored in China and Korea to this day. However, an interesting shift occurred in Japan from the late nineteenth century. The traditional midwinter red-bean

[3] Kunio Yanagita notes that Japanese folklore stories have numerous stories about *azukiarai*, preternatural red-bean-washing entities. Despite this abundance of tales, the reason behind their existence remains unexplained so far. Plausibly, the widespread cultivation of red beans gradually became familiar motifs contributing to storytelling communities across Japan.

porridge custom in Japan gradually moved to a new trend, placing greater emphasis on the preparation and consumption of pumpkin dishes, such as steamed and stewed pumpkin (Yeon, 2014). This shift, especially notable in the southern regions of the country, has now become a prominent feature of the winter solstice day culinary custom. Scholars have debated the historical origins of the pumpkin-based winter solstice culinary custom. Although pumpkins were introduced to Japan from Cambodia by Portuguese merchants in the mid-sixteenth century, their connection to the winter solstice did not emerge until the late nineteenth century (Shintani, 2004, p. 74). While early modern Japan lacks detailed textual sources on this kind of pumpkin food custom's origin, communities in the southern regions began linking pumpkins with the winter solstice day no later than the early twentieth century. These communities usually highlight the nutritional richness of pumpkins as a preventive measure against various infectious diseases. So, this pumpkin food custom on the winter solstice day reflects lingering concerns about fatal diseases and long-lasting hopes for effective preventive measure against them, continuing to be honored on that specific day in Japan.[4]

Discussion

This study explored folkloric culinary practices associated with the winter solstice in three East Asian countries—China, Korea, and Japan—focusing on the symbolic and ritual functions of seasonal foods such as red-bean porridge and wontons. The findings reveal that these dishes are not merely traditional winter fare but serve as symbolic tools to ward off evil spirits, prevent illness, and mark a cosmological transition from darkness to light. Historical records, folk narratives, and court traditions demonstrate that these foods were believed to possess apotropaic properties, grounded in both agricultural rhythms and seasonal anxieties. Across all three cultures, food emerges as a ritual medium through which communities negotiate the liminal nature of the winter solstice—transforming cosmological uncertainty into a shared, edible expression of protection and renewal. While the specific expressions and myths vary, the underlying structure—a response to seasonal thresholds—remains strikingly similar across the region.

The enduring presence of red-bean porridge and other winter solstice foods in East Asian societies is not simply a matter of seasonal cuisine—it is a ritualized response to cosmic instability. These practices emerge, as Victor Turner might suggest, in the liminal spaces where structure falters and transformation becomes possible. The winter solstice marks such a threshold: a celestial hinge between descent and return, cold and warmth, illness and health. It is in this temporal in-betweenness that red-bean porridge, wontons, and pumpkin dishes acquire their symbolic weight—not just as nourishment, but as talismans of passage.

Turner's (Turner, 1969) concept of **liminality** helps us understand why these culinary customs carry more than folkloric charm. On the longest night, when day and darkness seem to negotiate dominion, communities enter a ritual space where ordinary rules are suspended, and sacred narratives rise. Here, food becomes more than food—it becomes a **rite of passage**, guiding individuals and collectives across seasonal and spiritual boundaries. The porridge is not merely eaten; it is enacted as a threshold meal,

[4] The pumpkin harvest in Japan spans from early June to late July. Although the pumpkin harvest in Japan does not coincide with the midwinter season, pumpkins have high storability, allowing them to be stored and consumed during the winter season.

consumed with the hope that what follows will be lighter, safer, and more auspicious.

Furthermore, these acts of communal preparation and consumption foster what Turner terms **communitas**—a deep, unstructured bond among participants forged through shared vulnerability and hope. Whether in the shadow of smallpox in ancient Jingchu or amid winter chills in rural Korea, the act of eating together becomes a gesture of solidarity, a reaffirmation that life continues through ritual, myth, and memory. Thus, what this research uncovers is not just the what of winter solstice food customs, but the why: a human impulse to ritualize uncertainty and to move together through the dark, one warm bowl at a time.

In the field of cultural astronomy, scholars such as Gullberg (2019), Avilés (2005), and Dowd (2017) have illuminated how solstices function as pivotal moments within religious calendars, mythic cosmologies, and sacred architectures. From the alignment of Mesoamerican temples with solar cycles (Dowd, 2017) to the calendrical systems of ancient Greece, Mesopotamia, and China (Lobel, 2020), and even to the ritual symbolism encoded in Japanese solstice practices (Renshaw, 2015), these studies reveal how celestial transitions shaped the worldview and ritual life of diverse civilizations. Yet, these works have largely focused on **monumental, spatial, and calendrical dimensions** of solstice culture—how communities marked the heavens with stones, ceremonies, and solar-aligned temples. What they have not addressed in depth are the **intimate, domestic, and embodied** ways in which solstices are also lived—around firesides, in kitchens, and within bowls of red-bean porridge. This study extends the scope of cultural astronomy by moving from skywatching and sacred geometry into the sensorial realm of **seasonal foodways**, arguing that solstice rituals are inscribed not only in architecture and myth but in the ritual preparation and consumption of food. By examining solstice cuisine in East Asia as an **embodied cosmology**, this research offers a fresh contribution to the field: revealing that the domestic space—like the temple—is a site where the cosmos is ritualized, tasted, and shared.

While descriptive studies of East Asian folklore have long mapped the symbolic landscapes of dragons, fox spirits, oni, heroic women, and sacred gourds (Chen, 2024; Izotova, 2024; Reider, 2016; Sung, 2025; Veselič, 2022), they have often privileged mythic characters and performative rituals over the quieter, quotidian practices that unfold in kitchens and around the family hearth. These studies offer deep insights into cosmology, heroism, shamanic rites, and seasonal taboos—yet they rarely pause to ask what simmers in the pot during those sacred thresholds. This study enters that overlooked domain, revealing how culinary practices like preparing red-bean porridge on the winter solstice function not merely as folk habits but as narrative acts embedded in cosmological frameworks. Unlike much of the prior folklore scholarship, which tends to catalog motifs and plotlines, this research highlights **edible ritual** as a dynamic site where fear, hope, and cultural identity converge. By linking solstice folklore with domestic rituals of food preparation, this study offers a narrative ethnography of **how myth meets meal**, illuminating a novel axis of folklore that dwells not in storybooks alone, but in seasonal broths, shared bowls, and the ritual rhythm of stirring through winter's longest night.

While anthropological studies have richly explored the symbolic role of food in rituals of grief, identity, health, and social bonding (Amy Hackley & Hackley, 2015; Dietler, 2012; Yuan Wang & Jin, 2024), much of this literature has centered on the function of food in rites of passage or crisis—funerals, hospital wards, migration, or illness. These studies illuminate how food becomes a vessel of memory, a bridge of continuity, or a quiet act of resistance. Yet few have examined how seasonal foods, especially those tethered to celestial rhythms like solstices, operate as cosmological

mediators in everyday domestic contexts. Where Sanford (2020) traces the sacred economy of food in Hindu temples and Dietler (Dietler, 2012) unpacks the political power of feasting, this study turns instead to the simmering pots of East Asian kitchens on the longest night of the year. Here, red-bean porridge and pumpkin stew are not only cultural expressions or mnemonic devices—they are ritual responses to cosmic transition, edible rites of passage that bind body, time, and cosmos in a single spoonful. What this study contributes, then, is a novel convergence: an anthropology of food anchored in the skies, where calendar, cuisine, and cosmology meet at the liminal threshold of the solstice.

The findings of this study reveal that culinary customs surrounding the winter solstice are not merely echoes of antiquated folklore but are active cultural texts through which societies negotiate time, belief, and belonging. By interpreting food as a ritualized cosmological response, this research reframes the winter solstice not simply as an astronomical event but as a cultural interface between body and cosmos, memory and myth. The act of cooking and consuming red-bean porridge, wontons, or pumpkin stew on the year's darkest day becomes a quiet but powerful form of cosmological literacy—an embodied script by which communities rehearse resilience, invoke ancestral protection, and welcome the returning light.

Socially, this study reveals that in moments of seasonal and symbolic vulnerability—such as those signified by the winter solstice—East Asian communities do not face uncertainty in isolation but rather through shared meals that bind individuals into collective resilience. This communal act of eating together, or *commensality*, operates not only as a cultural routine but as a moral infrastructure: a form of emotional and symbolic scaffolding during liminal transitions. As seen in the kin-based rituals of the Mentawai (Darmanto, 2024) and the symbolic food offerings in East Asian weddings (Han, 2023), food becomes a medium for reinforcing social bonds and expressing mutual support. Moreover, like the *anna-daan* practices in India that feed the hungry during crises (Raju & Manasi, 2024), these winter solstice meals serve as quiet declarations of solidarity in the face of existential uncertainty. Even in contemporary settings, shared food rituals—as observed in Central Asian tea gatherings (Montgomery, 2013) or among Chinese Muslim students navigating halal taboos (Ding, Wei, & Liu, 2023)—continue to provide psychological anchorage amid broader cultural tensions. What this study contributes, then, is a deepened understanding of how red-bean porridge or seasonal stews are not simply culinary heritage but ritualized enactments of *communitas*, feeding not just the body, but the collective spirit in the darkest time of the year.

Historically, the findings of this study illuminate how cultural memory and ancestral belief are transmitted not through the grandeur of state-sanctioned monuments or national calendars, but through modest, recurring acts of food preparation—rituals of warmth, flavor, and symbolism carried across generations. In East Asia, red-bean porridge, pumpkin stew, or ceremonial dumplings serve not only as seasonal delicacies but as mnemonic vessels, encoding hopes for health and fears of disorder into edible forms. This resonates with global ethnographic insights that show how food rituals—such as the *Passover Seder* in Jewish families (Fischer, 2015), or Sunday dinners in Italian Harlem (Cinotto, 2010)—function as powerful intergenerational anchors of identity and memory. In contexts as varied as Hindu *Chaṭha* meals (Yadav, Srivastava, & Chandra, 2025) or the goose harvesting rites of the *Omushkego* Cree (Ahmed et al., 2024), the embodied act of cooking and eating becomes a sacred choreography through which historical consciousness is sustained. Rather than relying on institutional scripts, communities embed cosmological worldviews and existential narratives in the sensory intimacy of the kitchen. Thus, this study adds to a growing body of research (Beagan & D'Sylva, 2011;

Duggan, 2011) that recognizes culinary practice as an archive of cultural continuity—one that simmers quietly beneath dominant historical discourse, yet endures far more intimately across time.

This research contributes to a broader understanding of how culture operates not solely through textual traditions or public spectacle, but also through the intimate realms of taste, tactility, and seasonal embodiment. By positioning food rituals—especially those surrounding the winter solstice—as cosmological acts, it invites scholars across folklore, cultural astronomy, anthropology, and food studies to expand their interpretive lens beyond temples and texts toward kitchens and stews. In doing so, it reframes culinary practices as epistemological gestures—where simmering pots become sites of meaning-making, and a humble bowl of red-bean porridge becomes a cosmogram: a sensory map of seasonal passage, cultural memory, and celestial rhythm. This study thus calls attention to the hearth not merely as a domestic space, but as a cosmological one—where the sky's turning is ritualized through flavor, and where humans, through edible tradition, inscribe their place in the unfolding order of time.

The findings of this study offer both illuminating functions and revealing limitations regarding the cultural, symbolic, and social role of winter solstice food rituals in East Asia. On the one hand, the research underscores the *functional vitality* of everyday culinary practice as a vessel for resilience, identity, and cosmological continuity. These rituals function not merely as seasonal customs but as deeply rooted mechanisms for navigating liminality—bridging the gap between darkness and light, illness and healing, solitude and solidarity. They sustain cultural memory without reliance on state authority, sacred institutions, or written doctrines, thus empowering communities—especially marginalized or diasporic ones—to maintain continuity through embodied knowledge. The positive implication here is clear: food rituals provide a decentralized, intimate, and emotionally potent means for communities to encode and transmit their cosmologies across generations, particularly during periods of social or ecological instability.

However, the study also surfaces potential *dysfunctions* and vulnerabilities inherent in the very mechanism it celebrates. These culinary traditions, rooted in oral and embodied transmission, face erosion in the face of rapid urbanization, industrialized food systems, and homogenizing cultural forces. Unlike monumental heritage sites or canonized texts, these practices are fragile—susceptible to forgetting if not actively performed, adapted, or recontextualized. Moreover, while these rituals can offer psychological comfort and social cohesion, they may also mask or defer more structural responses to seasonal precarity, health crises, or social inequality. For example, the symbolic consumption of red-bean porridge as a ward against illness may coexist with—and sometimes obscure—the historical lack of access to medical care or public health infrastructure.

In essence, this research brings into relief a paradox: the very intimacy and adaptability that make food rituals effective as cultural anchors also render them vulnerable to neglect or commodification. The implication, then, is twofold: there is a need not only to celebrate and document these practices but also to critically examine how they operate within broader systems of power, memory, and survival. Future research might extend this reflection to consider how these rituals are being reinvented or preserved in diasporic settings, digital spaces, or among younger generations increasingly distant from traditional seasonal rhythms. By situating the hearth as both a cultural sanctuary and a contested site of change, this study invites scholars, educators, and policymakers to rethink what counts as heritage, where it lives, and how it is kept alive.

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regarding the cultural, symbolic, and social role of winter solstice food rituals in East Asia. On the one hand, the research underscores the *functional vitality* of everyday culinary practice as a vessel for resilience, identity, and cosmological continuity. These rituals function not merely as seasonal customs but as deeply rooted mechanisms for navigating liminality—bridging the gap between darkness and light, illness and healing, solitude and solidarity. They sustain cultural memory without reliance on state authority, sacred institutions, or written doctrines, thus empowering communities—especially marginalized or diasporic ones—to maintain continuity through embodied knowledge. The positive implication here is clear: food rituals provide a decentralized, intimate, and emotionally potent means for communities to encode and transmit their cosmologies across generations, particularly during periods of social or ecological instability.

However, this study also surfaces the intrinsic vulnerabilities embedded within the very cultural mechanisms it celebrates. The winter solstice food rituals—red-bean porridge, wontons, pumpkin stews—are rooted in oral transmission and embodied practice, forms of cultural memory that are inherently fragile. As Vansina (2017) and Foley (2013) explain, oral traditions, though rich in communal meaning, are evanescent and easily disrupted when not continuously performed or contextually adapted. In the face of rapid urbanization, these culinary traditions face accelerating erosion. As shown in Saha's (2022) study of gentrification in Kolkata and McDaniel and Alley's (2005) work on rural Georgia, urban expansion displaces localized knowledge systems and homogenizes diverse cultural landscapes. These embodied rituals, unlike canonized texts or monumental heritage, are susceptible to forgetting, especially amid industrialized food systems and shrinking domestic time. Moreover, as Desai (2014) cautions, tradition itself—especially when embodied—must continually navigate new vulnerabilities as it adapts to modern bioethical and social shifts. While these solstice meals can offer profound psychological and communal comfort, they also risk deferring or obscuring deeper structural issues. For example, the symbolic act of consuming red-bean porridge as a ward against illness, though meaningful, may coexist with—and occasionally conceal—the historical absence of equitable public health infrastructure, as Raju and Manasi (2024) note in similar food-based religious coping mechanisms. Thus, while these food rituals foster resilience, they also reveal the limits of symbolism when material vulnerabilities persist unaddressed.

Based on the findings of this study, there is a pressing need for cultural preservation policies that recognize and support the continuity of intangible, food-based heritage—particularly those rooted in oral and embodied traditions. National and local cultural agencies should move beyond the conservation of monumental heritage and develop inclusive frameworks that treat domestic culinary practices—such as winter solstice food rituals—as vital forms of cultural expression. This could include documenting endangered recipes, funding intergenerational cooking workshops, integrating seasonal food rituals into school curricula, and offering grants for community-based cultural events centered around traditional solstice meals. Moreover, in response to the identified risks posed by urbanization and industrialized food systems, policymakers should promote food sovereignty initiatives that prioritize local ingredients and traditional preparation methods. Public health campaigns could also

draw on the cultural symbolism of these rituals to bridge modern healthcare with ancestral wisdom, fostering culturally resonant well-being strategies. By embedding these actions within broader cultural sustainability agendas, states and communities alike can ensure that the hearth remains not only a site of nourishment, but a living archive of cosmological meaning and collective memory.

Conclusion

From the winter solstice day until the summer solstice day, the daylength gradually increases, pushing back the boundaries of nightfall day by day. Our ancestors perceived this astronomical phenomenon as an auspicious sign to the whole humanity. Our study of winter solstice folklore and culinary customs reveals a dynamic interplay between observing nature and creating fantasies. These activities work together, leaving enduring imprints on folk culture. Though less significant today, winter solstice culinary customs once held deep meanings tied to everyday concerns and afflictions. These traditions reflect attempts to find solace from daily predicaments, even in imagination. To preserve their basic meanings, we must explore the relationship between reality and fantasy in winter solstice folklore and culinary practices. This approach will deepen our understanding of the profound lessons in our cultural heritage.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. This study focuses primarily on winter solstice folklore and culinary customs traditionally held in China, Korea, and Japan, which may not fully capture the diversity of contemporary practices across other regions and cultures worldwide. Additionally, the reliance on historical texts and secondary sources presents limitations in terms of accuracy and comprehensiveness. Further empirical research involving primary data collection could provide deeper insights into the evolution and significance of winter solstice traditions, globally.

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