

Chinese New Year of the Monkey 2004
By Stacey Dean – The Cosmic Reporter

“In two thousand and four, may the Star of Happiness, the Star of Wealth and the Star of Longevity shine on you evermore.” – Stacey Dean

(Dateline Chicago 12/29/03) The Chinese New Year is celebrated on the first day of the New Moon of the Chinese lunar calendar. The first question that probably comes to your mind is, “What’s the difference between a lunar calendar and a solar calendar?” The simplest explanation I can give you is the lunar calendar uses the daily movement of the moon to measure time, and the solar calendar uses the daily movement of the sun.

Most Chinese calendars are based on a *combination* of lunar (moon) and solar (sun) movements. The lunar cycle is about 29.5 days. To “catch up” with the solar calendar of 365 days per year, which is the calendar we follow, the Chinese insert an extra month once every few years (seven years out of a 19-year cycle). This amounts to the same thing as adding an extra day on leap year. This is why, according to our solar calendar, the Chinese New Year can fall on a *different date* each year from as early as January 21st to as late as February 19th. ***Chinese New Year always begins at sunset following the first New Moon after the Sun leaves Capricorn and enters Aquarius (based upon when this occurs in China).*** This year, the corresponding date in our solar calendar for the Chinese New Year to begin is January 22, 2004. It is the Chinese Year of the Monkey Lunar Year 4702.

Of all the traditional Chinese festivals, the New Year is perhaps the most elaborate, colorful, and important. This is a time when the Chinese congratulate each other and themselves on having passed through another year, a time to finish out the old, and to welcome in the new year.

As previously stated, the Chinese New Year celebration always begins with a New Moon. The celebrations end 15 days later on a Full Moon with the beautiful fun-filled, elaborate Lantern Festival. During the 15-day celebration, the Chinese people follow certain traditions and eat certain foods in order to create positive energy to insure a healthy, prosperous new year.

As an interior designer specializing in Feng Shui (fung shu-way), I’ve learned that many of the oriental customs and traditions have a *common sense basis*. Because of this fact, I, and my clients incorporate many of these teachings into our lives and find the results satisfying and rewarding.

Take time to think about what you read in this article and you, too, will discover the *common sense basis* of many of these traditions. If you put them to the test, you will find they do have merit and will yield rewards. While some of these traditions may *appear* to be of no consequence, I suggest that you test them for yourself. What have you got to loose? Bad luck? Well, what are you waiting for?

I am especially grateful to many of my Chinese clients who were kind enough to share this information with me. Information as extensive and detailed as presented below is difficult to obtain. Therefore, I suggest that you study the list and *let your intuition be your guide* as to which of the following traditions and taboos you may wish to observe when celebrating *your* Chinese New Year!

Preparing for the Chinese New Year

Sweeping of the Grounds. The entire house must be cleaned *before* New Year’s Day. Sweeping or dusting should *not* be done on New Year’s Day for fear that good fortune will be swept away.

There is even a *particular* way to clean. In sweeping, there is a superstition that if you sweep the dirt out over the threshold, you will *sweep* one of the family away. Also, to sweep the dust and dirt out of your house through the *front entrance* is to sweep away the good fortune of the family; it must always be *swept inwards* and then *carried out*, then no harm will follow. After New Year's Day during the 15-day celebration period, the floors may be swept but one must begin sweeping at the front door, the dust and rubbish are swept to the center of the parlor, then placed in the corners of the room, and not taken or thrown out until the fifth day of the new year. At no time should the rubbish placed in the corners be disturbed or trampled upon. All dirt and trash must be taken out the *back* door. To take it out the front door is to give away the good fortune of the family.

Food Preparation. Tradition stipulates that all food is to be prepared *before* New Year's Day so that all sharp instruments, such as knives and scissors, can be put away to avoid cutting the "luck" of the New Year.

For the Chinese, probably more food is consumed during the New Year celebrations than any other time of the year. Large amounts of traditional foods are prepared for the family and friends, as well as for loved ones who have passed on.

New Year's Day a vegetarian dish called jai is prepared. Various ingredients in jai are root vegetables or fibrous vegetables, to which superstitious aspects to them are the lotus seed – signifies having many male offspring; ginkgo nut- represents silver ingots; black moss seaweed – for exceeding wealth; dried bean curd – fulfillment of wealth and happiness; (***please note:*** fresh bean curd or tofu *is not included* as it is white and unlucky for New Year because the color signifies death and misfortune); bamboo shoots – "wishing that everything would be well".

Other traditional foods include a whole fish – representing togetherness and abundance; and a chicken – for prosperity. The chicken must be presented with a head, tail and feet to symbolize completeness. Noodles should be uncut, as they represent long life. In south China, the favorite dishes were nian gao (sweet steamed glutinous rice pudding) and zong zi (glutinous rice wrapped up in reed leaves). In the north, man tou (steamed wheat bread) and small meat dumplings were the preferred food. The vast amounts of food prepared during the 15-day celebrations symbolize wealth and abundance for the household.

Personal Preparation. Do not cut your hair on New Year's Day to avoid cutting the "luck" of the New Year. Everyone wears new clothes on New Year's Day, especially the color red because it is a bright, happy color, sure to bring the wearer a sunny and bright future. Appearance and attitude during the New Year celebrations sets the tone for the rest of the year, therefore, everyone does his best to project a positive attitude.

On New Year's Day, it is considered unlucky to greet anyone in their bedroom so that is why everyone, even the sick, gets dressed and sits in the living room.

Also, the first person one meets and the first words heard are significant as to what the fortunes will be for the entire year. It is a lucky sign to see or hear songbirds or red-colored birds or swallows.

Everyone refrains from using foul language and bad or unlucky words. Negative terms or the word death, or conversations about death and dying or ghost stories are totally taboo. Even references to the past year are also avoided because everything should be turned toward the New Year and a new beginning.

If you cry on New Year's Day, you will cry all through the year. Therefore, children are tolerated and are not spanked, even though they are mischievous.

Clearing Out Bad Luck. Shooting off firecrackers on New Year's Eve, as well as during the 15-day celebration, is the Chinese way of driving away evil spirits and sending out the old year and welcoming in the New Year. On the stroke of midnight New Year's Eve, every door and window in the house is opened to allow the old year to go out.

Turning Over a New Leaf. All debts should be paid by this time, nothing should be loaned out on New Year's Day or it is believed you will not have what you loaned out when you need it.

Spring Couplets. Spring Couplets, written in black ink on large vertical scrolls of red paper, are put on the walls or on the sides of gateways. They are also hung in storefronts in the month before New Year's Day, and often stay up for two months. The couplets, short poems written in Classical Chinese, are expressions of good wishes and fortune for the coming year.

Lai-See Envelopes. Money, usually crisp one dollar bills, is put into little red envelopes to be given to children and young adults New Year's Day, much in the spirit as Christmas presents. Presents are also often exchanged between families. Everyone wears new clothes on New Year's Day.

The Tray of Togetherness: The candy tray arranged in either a circle or octagon is called "The Tray of Togetherness". Traditionally, the tray is made up of eight compartments, each of which is filled with a special food item of significance to begin the New Year sweetly. Each of the following items represent some kind of good fortune; candied melon – growth and good health; red melon seed – dyed red to symbolize joy, happiness, truth and sincerity; lychee nut – strong family relationships; cumquat – prosperity (gold); coconut – togetherness; peanuts – long life; longnan – many good sons; lotus seed – many children. After taking several pieces of candy from the tray, adults place a red envelope (lai see) on the center compartment of the tray. Keep a tray full of dried fruits, sweets and candies to welcome guests and relatives who drop by during the 15-day celebration.

Oranges and Tangerines-Wealth and Good Luck: Oranges are symbolic of wealth, tangerines are symbolic of good luck, and when placed together, they symbolize abundant happiness as well. Therefore, these fruits are frequently displayed in homes and stores. Etiquette dictates that you must bring a bag of oranges and tangerines and enclose a lai see (red envelope of money) when visiting family or friends anytime during the 15-day celebration. Tangerines with leaves intact assure that one's relationship with the other remains secure.

Plants and Flowers-Rebirth and New Growth: Live blooming plants and flowers are an important part of every traditional Chinese household. Flowers symbolize wealth and high position in one's career. Lucky is the home with a plant that blooms on New Year's Day, because that foretells a year of prosperity. Grouping an elaborate arrangement of plum blossoms, which symbolize hope and courage, with bamboo and pine sprigs symbolize friendship, reliability and perseverance. The bamboo is known for its compatibility and the evergreen pine evokes longevity and steadiness. Other highly prized flowers are the pussy willow, azalea, peony, and water lily or narcissus - indicates good fortune, especially if it blooms exactly on the day of the New Year.

Ancient Traditions of The 15-Day Celebration of The Chinese New Year

Day One – The first day of the Chinese Lunar New Year is the welcoming of the gods of the heavens and earth. New Year's Eve and New Year's Day celebrations are strictly family affairs, a time of reunion and thanksgiving. The celebration was traditionally highlighted with a religious ceremony given in honor of Heaven and Earth, the gods of the household and the family ancestors.

The sacrifice to the ancestors, the most vital of all the rituals, united the living members with those who had passed away. Departed relatives are remembered with great respect because they were responsible for laying the foundations for the fortune and glory of the family. The presence of the ancestors is acknowledged on New Year's Eve with a dinner arranged for them at the family banquet table. This communal feast is called "surrounding the stove" or weilu. It symbolizes family unity and honors the past and present generations.

Lavish dinners are served on both days. If a family member cannot attend, an empty seat is kept to symbolize that person's presence at the banquet. At midnight, after the New Year's Eve banquet, the younger members of the family bow and pay their respects to their parents and elders. An ancient Chinese custom is to abstain from eating meat on the first day of the New Year because it is believed that to do so will insure long and happy lives for them. This custom has been modified in modern day celebrations.

Day Two – Prayers to ancestors and the gods. On the second day of the New Year, the Chinese pray to their ancestors as well as to all the gods. They are extra kind to dogs and feed them well as it is believed that the second day is the birthday of all dogs.

Days Three and Four – Son-in laws pay their respect to their parents-in-law.

Day Five – The 5th day is called Po Woo. Everyone stays home on this day to welcome the God of Wealth. No one visits family or friends on the fifth day because it will bring both parties bad luck.

Days Six through Ten – Everyone visits family, relatives, and friends freely. They also visit the temples to pray for good fortune and health.

Day Seven – The Seventh Day of the New Year is known as "*everybody's birthday*" because everyone is considered one year older as of that date. (In traditional China, individual birthdays were not considered as important as the New Year's date. Everyone added a year to his age at New Year's time rather than at his birthday.) Noodles are eaten to promote longevity and raw fish for success. This is also the day that Chinese farmers would display their produce. They would also make a drink from seven types of vegetables to celebrate the occasion. Hummmmm, I wonder if that's how V-8 was created?

Day Eight – Have another family reunion dinner, and at midnight prayers to the God of Heaven are offered.

Day Nine – Offerings to the Jade Emperor are made.

Days Ten through Twelve – These are the days that friends and relatives should be invited to dinner.

Day Thirteen – After eating so much rich food so many days in a row, this is the day to cleanse your digestive system by eating only steamed rice or simple rice congee and mustard greens (choi sum).

Day Fourteen – This day is for making preparations to celebrate the Lantern Festival, which will be held tomorrow.

Day Fifteen – Nothing could be more appropriate than The Lantern Festival to end the Chinese New Year celebrations. The entire day is devoted towards celebrating the final hours of this joyous occasion. On the evening of this day, people carry lanterns into the streets to participate in a great parade. The highlight of the parade is the Dragon Dance. The dragon is usually made of bamboo, silk and paper, and might stretch for more than one hundred feet in length. The bobbing and weaving of the dragon and people carrying lanterns is an impressive sight, and forms a fitting finish to the 15-day New Year festival.

While many Chinese people today may not believe in these do's and don'ts, these traditions and customs are still practiced. The traditions and customs are maintained because most families realize that it is these very traditions, whether believed or not, that provide continuity with the past and provide the family with an identity. And so it is... and so it must be.
Happy Chinese Year of the Monkey Lunar Year 4702!

**Babies Born in the Year of The Monkey
(2004, 1992, 1980, 1968, 1956, 1944, 1932, 1920)**

People born in the Year of the Monkey are the erratic geniuses of the twelve-year Chinese zodiac cycle. Monkey people are clever, skillful, practical and flexible; remarkably inventive and original, they can solve the most difficult problems with ease. There are few fields in which these individuals wouldn't be successful but they are known to have the disconcerting habit of being too agreeable. Monkey people can be impatient, and if they cannot get started on a project within their own time frame, they become discouraged and sometimes abandon the project. They are given to detail, but generally have a low opinion of others. They possess common sense and are good at making decisions. Monkey people have a deep desire to obtain knowledge and have excellent memories. They can be strong willed, but their anger cools quickly. They are most compatible with the Dragon and Rat.
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