



Forum: Chinese Things English Way

Topic: Some terms about Chinese new year in English

Subject: Lunar New Year in Taiwan

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(Lunar New Year in Taiwan)

The Lunar New Year is the most significant festival for ethnic Chinese around the world, wherever they come from. It is a very jubilant occasion mainly because it is the time when people take a break from work to get together with family and friends.

The origin of the Lunar New Year Festival can be traced back thousands of years, involving a series of colorful legends and traditions. One of the most famous legends is Nian, an extremely cruel and ferocious beast that the ancients believed would devour people on New Year's Eve. To keep Nian away, red-paper couplets are pasted on doors, torches are lit, and firecrackers are set off throughout the night, because Nian is said to fear the color red, the light of fire, and loud noises. Early the next morning, as feelings of triumph and renewal fill the air at successfully keeping Nian away for another year, the most popular greeting heard is gong xi, or "congratulations."

Even though Lunar New Year celebrations generally last for only several days, starting on New Year's Eve, the festival itself is actually about three weeks long. It begins on the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth lunar month, the day, it is believed, when various gods ascend to heaven to pay their respects and report on household affairs to the Jade Emperor, the supreme Taoist deity. According to tradition, households busily honor these gods by burning ritualistic paper money to provide for their traveling expenses. Another ritual is to smear malt sugar on the lips of the Kitchen God, one of the traveling deities, to ensure that he either submits a favorable report to the Jade Emperor or keeps silent.

Next, "spring couplets" are hung up around the house. Spring couplets are paper scrolls and squares inscribed with blessings and auspicious words, such as "good fortune," "wealth," "longevity," and "springtime." The paper squares are usually pasted upside down, because the Mandarin word for "upside down," dao, is a homonym of the word "arrival." Thus, the paper squares represent the "arrival" of spring and the "coming" of prosperous times

On Lunar New Year's Eve, family members who are no longer living at home make a special effort to return home for reunion and share in a sumptuous meal. At that time, family members hand out hong bao, or "lucky money" in red envelopes, to elders and children. They also try to stay up all night to welcome the New Year, as it was long believed that by doing so on New Year's Eve, their parents would live a longer life. Thus, lights are kept on the entire night--not just to drive away Nian, as in ancient times, but also as an excuse to make the most of the family get-together. In addition, some families even hold religious ceremonies after midnight to welcome the God of the New Year into their homes, a ritual that is often concluded with a huge barrage of firecrackers.

The first order of business on Lunar New Year's Day is offering ritual homage to one's ancestors. Reverence is then paid to the gods, followed by younger family members paying their respects to their living elders. New clothes are worn, and visits are made to friends, neighbors, and relatives to

exchange good wishes of gong xi fa cai ㄅㄨㄣˋ ㄒㄩˋ ㄈㄚˋ ㄘㄞˋ ㄘㄞˋ, which means "congratulations and prosperity." As an occasion for reconciliation, it's a time when old grudges are cast aside amidst an atmosphere of warmth and friendliness.

One of the most spectacular sights during the Lunar New Year Festival is the dragon and lion dance. The heads of these fearsome beasts are supposed to ward off evil, and the nimble movements of the dancers provide a grand spectacle enjoyable to everyone.

The second day of the Lunar New Year Festival is the day that married daughters return to their parents' home. If she is a newlywed, her husband must accompany her and bring gifts for her family. According to a charming legend, the third day of the Lunar New Year is the day when mice marry off their daughters. Thus, on that night, people are supposed to go to bed early so that the mice can perform their wedding ceremonies.

On the fourth day, the fervor begins to ebb. In the afternoon, people prepare offerings of food to welcome the return of the Kitchen God and his retinue from their trip to the Jade Emperor's court. The Kitchen God's return signifies the end of freedom from spiritual surveillance, hence the popular saying: "It's never too early to send off the gods, and never too late to invite them back."

Day five almost brings the Lunar New Year festivities to a close. All offerings are removed from the altars and life returns to normal. Finally, on the ninth day, numerous offerings are set out in the forecourt or central courtyard of temples to celebrate the birthday of the Jade Emperor, who was believed to have been born immediately after midnight on the ninth day.

As in all such festivals, food plays an important role throughout the Lunar New Year Festival, and dinners tend to be especially lavish. Many of the dishes made at this time are served because they are regarded as symbols of good luck. For instance, fish (yu) represent "having enough to spare," garlic chives (jiou cai) stand for "everlasting," turnips (cai tou) mean "good omens," and fish balls (yu wan) and meat balls (rou wan) represent "reunion." Auspicious refreshments are also prepared at this time, such as glutinous rice flour pudding (nian-gao), which is said to make people "advance toward higher positions and prosperity step by step." People usually have dumplings (shuei jiao) too, which look like shoe-shaped gold and are supposed to help those who eat them to amass fortunes and wealth

The Lunar New Year Festival is not all freewheeling fun, however, and certain negative superstitions and taboos at this time have never quite lost their pervasive force. For example, people believe it is unlucky to sweep the floor during the first five days of the Lunar New Year, because one might accidentally sweep one's good luck and wealth out of the house. Bad language and talk of death are severely frowned upon. If a dish is broken, it is vital to say sui sui ping an ㄙㄨㄟ ㄙㄨㄟ ㄆㄩㄥ ㄢㄢ, which means "peace throughout the year," as quickly as possible. Joss sticks and altar candles must be kept burning day and night to encourage longevity; and in some households, knives and scissors are put away so that no one will accidentally cut the "thread of good luck" in the year to come.

A few of these superstitions and rituals have a spiritual aspect to them, and all of Taiwan's temples are usually very busy during this time of year as large numbers of people crowd into them with elevated incense sticks to pray for good luck. Indeed, some of the major temples close their main gates before midnight on Lunar New Year's Eve as noisy and expectant crowds gather outside. At the stroke of midnight, the doors are thrown wide open and people surge forward in an attempt to be the first to place their incense sticks into the censer, as another long-standing tradition states that the

first person to do so will be blessed with good luck throughout the coming year.

Although some of the Lunar New Year's magic has worn off in Taiwan because of the island's steady march toward industrialization, the festival and accompanying celebration are still unrivaled in importance. Long before the holiday, street vendors have already begun to seek out the best sites to display their "spring couplets." Shopping for Lunar New Year's fare also begins early and is still one of the holiday's most characteristic activities in Taiwan. For instance, Taipei's Dihua Street in an older part of town, which is renowned for its foodstuffs, often bustles with people buying groceries for the Lunar New Year Festival. Familiar songs and traditional music associated with Lunar New Year are broadcast through loudspeakers in department stores, many of which hold year-end sales to attract wage earners, whose pockets are weighted down by the traditional annual bonus that is always paid at this time of year.

Thus, several days before Lunar New Year's Eve, people living far away from their families begin to prepare for their journey home. In an attempt to beat the traffic jams, many hit the road on the previous day. Those relying on public transportation will often camp out in sleeping bags at airports, train stations, and bus terminals to ensure that they get reservations for the dates they want, as tickets are usually snapped up the second they go on sale. Trains, buses, and planes are always packed.

No matter how grueling the journey may turn out to be, though, all of the inconveniences are considered to be worth it once the family has gathered around the table to eat their Lunar New Year's Eve dinner, the most important meal of the year. Indeed, no matter what changes may occur over time, the notion of getting together with the family will always lie at the heart of Lunar New Year celebrations.

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