

Chinese New Year: Facts, Myths and Superstitions

Bianca Sorminis (February 08, 2013)



SHANGAI ...In this period the grayness of this city is lit up by the red decorations: paper lanterns, good luck scrolls, zodiac animal signs...homes and buildings made up to look their best, like a woman going out on a date....

GOING HOME

It's happening in China right now, it lasts about 40 days and it repeats itself every year: it's the world's largest human migration.



Millions of Chinese migrant workers leave the big cities to return home to their families, for what is in most cases the only opportunity they have in the whole year to spend time together. Shanghai in the last week has slowly been drained of its vital pulse... the streets gradually becoming emptier, the shops closing or cutting down the opening hours, the bustling city turned into a dormant giant...

There is one documentary film that sums it all up. For me watching it was a revelation, even though after living here for a few years I thought I knew what Chinese New Year meant to the people of this Country....

LAST TRAIN HOME

It explores the drama of migrants working hard in the cities in very difficult circumstances, the exhausting queues that often last for days and nights to get train tickets to then face an even more exhausting trip back home, packed like cattle in train carriages, the parents finally reuniting with their children who, being raised by their grandparents, don't recognize their authority anymore nor appreciate their sacrifice.

I remember what a young woman told me one day: she was giving me a foot massage and I had my 6 years old daughter sitting next to me. The massage girl said her daughter was about the same age as mine and living back in her province with the grandparents, and she was soon to go and see her during the Chinese New Year Holiday : "You must be so happy!" I said...And she replied, with a hesitant look on her face that clearly revealed her mixed feelings: " I am...I hope she would like to sleep with me this time, every year a bring her sweets and presents, but when night comes she doesn't want me, she wants her grandma"....

RED DECORATIONS, HONGBAO AND NUMBER 4

Red is the colour usually associated with fire, which is traditionally thought to burn off bad luck.

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And red is the envelope with money, the hongbao ... The older family members give it to the youngsters, the employers to their employees... the fuller the happier, providing that the amount does not include the number 4 as the word four, when pronounced, sounds like the word for death, and therefore brings bad luck. Many hotels in China don't have 4th , 14th, etc floors or rooms with those numbers (I was just reading about a month ago that the Australian Hotels catering for the growing wave of Chinese tourists are now ensuring no rooms with number 4 are being assigned to them).

CHINESE ZODIAC

According to legend, Buddha once asked all animals to meet him for the New Year. Twelve animals came and as they turned up he named the years after each one of the animals...



The first Chinese New Year I experienced here was the Year of the Rat, literally...

During the holiday break I was putting the groceries away in the kitchen and I thought I could smell something. It was a foul odor. (Small digression: even though God has been generous with the size of my nose, it hasn't been as good at making it work as it should...so yes I have a big nose, but no, I can't normally smell anything, good or bad. So for me to say that there was a bad smell, it must have been really bad).

A little while later I opened a drawer and saw a few black things scattered around, like black rice grains...

I called my mum and asked what she thought, she wasn't sure, I then asked Lan, the ayi who had just started working in our home the day before. She was quiet for a few seconds and then started talking, in mandarin of course...., and the one word that kept on repeating was laoshu, laoshu,.... I obviously had no idea, I had only just arrived in China, but my mum at a certain point said...what if it's a mouse, and I shuushed her saying ... "how could a mouse have gotten into this 5th floor apartment..." So the ayi started cleaning it up, being very careful at not touching that stuff with her hands, and using huge amount of disinfectant (I remember thinking..."I'm really pleased, she seems to be very clean")...but then called someone on the phone, spoke for a minute and then handed it over to me... and through the phone came the translation for LAOSHU, the first word I learned in mandarin, the word I had not dared saying but that my mum had guessed, MOUSE.

Yuuuuuuk, disgusting...the poor ayi and a man sent from the compound management closed themselves in the kitchen looking for this mouse, I refused to even walk passed the closed kitchen door fearing an improbable resurrection of the mouse running for his (second) life...my mum was wandering around shaking her head and muttering " Oh mio Dio, oh mio Dio....com'e' possibile, al quinto piano, e dov'e' adesso, e come faro' a dormire stasera con un topo in casa.." (Oh my God, how is it possible, on the 5th floor, and where is it now, and how am I going to sleep tonight knowing there is a mouse in the house"). The only one that was having a ball, of course, was my daughter who couldn't understand why all this fuss for Mickey Mouse and entertained herself looking for it with dad's torch.

I then decided to look for myself, and after a few minutes between the washing machine and the kitchen bench...I saw something...it looked like a piece of string...maybe a tail...

Found it. And it wasn't moving.

Got two people to come up and get rid of it...which they did and proudly showed me their trophy on the way out...(yuuuuuk), and as I walked back in the kitchen... My God the stench! I could have no nose and I would have still been able to smell it!

I then rang up my husband, who was pleasantly working in his RFO (Rat Free Office) and told him the story, and he went:

"Well this is the Year of the Rat after all, well and truly!"

We are now entering the Year of the Snake and I don't expect to find any in my kitchen (in the same way in the past few years I didn't find any oxen, tigers, rabbits or dragons)....

According to the Chinese Zodiac, people share some characteristics of the animal whose year they are born in.... for example if you are born in the Year of the Snake you should be intuitive, introspective and refined, exciting and dark at the same time...

Out of curiosity I looked at the animals and characteristics of my family.... We are a family made of a rat, one tiger, one sheep and two dogs....just picturing this unlikely combination sends shivers down my back... if I had to believe that we share the characteristics of each animal associated with us, this is pretty much what the scenario would be.



My 3 years old son, the tiger, with his courage and self reliance, vanity and intelligence, competitiveness and unpredictability would practically annihilate his 10 years old sister who, being a sheep, is supposed to be quiet, reserved nurturing and soothing. She would probably be caressing him while he is elbowing her to get to the dinner table first.

In the meantime the two dogs, my husband and middle daughter, would take turns at trying to take control of the situation alternating opposing states of mind, swinging between an anxious sense of responsibility and a somehow despairing duty of compassion.

If that was the case it would leave me, the rat, doing what rats do best, RUN!

'BITE' YOUR GOOD FORTUNE

There is a lot of symbolism associated with the food eaten at this time of the year...

If you are looking for wealth eat bamboo shoots, egg rolls and oranges...noodles and peanuts for long life, eggs and seeds for fertility. But if your marriage is shaky or your children rebellious and you don't want your family to fall apart then the secret is sticky foods as the stickiness is said to hold the family together.

And let's not forget about the fish, in itself a symbol of abundance, that is cooked and served whole with head and tail attached to symbolizes good beginning and ending for the coming year.

But don't turn it over or it'll bring you bad luck!

FIREWORKS

New Year's Eve: at midnight in the temples across the Country the bell rings...it's the end of the old year and the beginning of a hopefully prosperous one.... At the same time the whole Country is rattled by the explosion of fireworks and firecrackers, meant to scare the evil spirits away.

Fireworks were invented in China, everybody knows that... What I didn't know was how much Chinese love firing them and that the celebrations (therefore the deafening and nerve wrecking noise) lasts for over two weeks...

In this Country not only everybody is allowed to buy them, apparently everybody has a moral duty to fire them everywhere, and relentlessly, day and night.

For us foreigners this is pretty much how it goes:

Day 1 : Oh, this is exciting, WOW... what a festive atmosphere....

DAY 2: OK.... they really love their fireworks

DAY 3: We got the message, you like your fireworks, but wouldn't it be nice if we had a break???...

DAY 10: I know now why all the foreigners left for the holidays!

DAY 15: It's finally over, thank God!



The day after....noooooo, someone still has a few spare ones to fire , ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

FUN FACTS

Apparently no one should be crying on New Year's Day, otherwise they'll be crying all year long...so children are never to be spanked on that day... (if I was one of those children who regularly get spanked I would turn that day in my Revenge Day....)

According to tradition on the seventh day of the New Year all people in China become one year older.... which gives a whole new meaning to the words: aging population!

On this topic, did you know that in China when you are born you are already 1 year old (age is calculated from the time of conception)? So let me do some math...if a baby is born just before the Chinese New Year, and is therefore 1 year old, and soon after, on the seventh day of the New Year ages 1 more year, together with the other 1.3 billion Chinese, does it mean that he is considered to be 2 years old when effectively he is only 2 months old??? Math has never been my forte...

There is a lot of pressure on Chinese young people to get married and have a child. Going back home every year without the good news of a possible life partner can lead to nagging questions and family arguments. The latest trend is to rent a partner to take home for the holidays, to share family events with, have a chat with the elders and, for an extra charge, be shown some affection, maybe a kiss or two...

I wonder if they also have special deals like...rent two months, get the third half price, or end of season sales...or rent one partner, get the second one free...

HAPPY NEW YEAR OF THE SNAKE

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