

Part I

(Editor's Note: In this two-part series, Inside Kung-Fu examines the origin of Chinese New Year and how it is interpreted by the Chinese Americans of today.



Chinese New Year: History and Tradition

Festivals celebrating the Chinese New Year have been around for almost 2,000 years. Traditionally, it is a time of settling, of putting one's life in order, of paying homage to family and co-workers. Sadly, most Americans don't understand the significance of this special time; there's more to it than a lion dancing to the beat of drums down Main Street. The beginning of a new cycle is at hand.

By Lou Illar



*Fire in the lake: the image of revolution.
Thus the superior man
Sets the calendar in order
And makes the season.*

— I Ching

Chinese New Year was traditionally a two-month celebration that, through superstition and tradition, included and extended a numerical regulation and order into all phases of Chinese society. From the assessment of family roles to the selection of a mate, New Year has helped perpetuate the necessary fundamental value system of Chinese culture. Even though the event requires the participation of an entire community, it has been regulated to maintain a guarded understanding of focuses primarily upon the relevance of friends, family, and business associates. The Chinese have learned by formality and ceremony that their existence as a culture is predicated upon the survival of the hierarchy of the family institution.

The development of the festival

From the celebration's earliest origins it appears there was a great deal of theater involved. Even though primitive, the earliest records of a New Year's festival occurred in A.D. 400. Chinese history indicates the festival was centered around agrarian interests, which could only be fully appreciated in primitive times. The festival's highlight was its presentation of a unique theater. Although no stage was used and probably no player ever distinguished fantasy from reality, with great seriousness, each donned a mask and dressed as a noted hero or warrior. Once fitted for a fantasy battle with imaginary demons, the players moved up and down the barren fields driving away evil spirits. The idea of exorcising fields within our modern society sounds nearly outrageous. Yet, within their time these "ghost busters" were taken seriously; so seriously, in fact, that their drumming became the foundation of their success or failure. Even today, some believe the more the drums play at New Year, the better the plants will grow. By A.D. 200, the festival had become more formalized. There was a sorcerer with an ax in his hands, and he had his assistants armed with brooms made of millet stalks. The warriors were then played in a more symbolic manner by children dressed in black with red turbans who enacted a mock battle with bows and arrows. The archery sets which they employed were carefully constructed from peach wood. Not only are their colors of dress still popular today as symbols of heaven and luck, but peach wood throughout the ages of China has been emblematic of immortality, marriage, and long life. The children would shoot arrows into the air and these arrows would fall on thousands of demons or spirits.

It is safe to assume that in this period the festival was more theatrical than a superstitious cause-and-effect approach to mysticism. In reality, the royal family already had begun to rely on the fruits of medicine for healing as versed to the magic of "peach wood."

Professional actors were used to characterize animals representing the 12 animal personalities of the Chinese 12-year system. This concept of associating the characteristics of an animal with the personality or tendencies of a year would serve as a guide of behavior for ages to come. The performers were again called upon to exorcise the evil demons. In this case, an actor's performance was based upon the fantasy of eating these demons. The actor was to be believable to the extent that he convinced others he had contacted and devoured an evil spirit. The event became known as the great "no festival." Historical sources provide no explanation for the term, but do indicate that the festival grew in popularity.

By the beginning of the Christian era the festival had taken on a wide participatory note that also reflected the entertainment qualities of literature. During this period actors playing the role of warriors or the 12 animals stalking evil demons cleaned each house. The players would knock on each door and in theatrical movements play out the battle often using kung-fu moves that reflected a dance-like arabesque. They also entertained with song, but nothing was ever free. The host of each home was expected to pay in rice wine, or even money.

Soon afterward, the gentry or ruling class, began to affect not just the New Year festival, but the actual development of Chinese society as well. In the celebration of New Year, it became tradition that the gentry were the poised spectators upon whom all else circled and depended. The gentry usually provided the money for the performances of the now well-developed military kung-fu weapon dances. Despite their amazing attributes and popularity, the performers were considered lower class. It was nearly a contradiction to achieve a high level of artistic achievement or star status only to be shunned from matrimony and social opportunities. It was this fear of exercise and class status that finally left China nearly desperate for athletic competition. Those bearing any visible signs of labor or athletics were seen as low class. They had to marry their own kind, and their children inherited their legacy. The net effect of this inbreeding stifled any significant creativity. Characters from literature, such as the eight immortals, first appeared at the end of the Han dynasty and originally were presented at New Year festivals by actors suggesting spiritual immortality by walking on stilts. They still are characterized in the same fashion.

The calendar

Looking to today's festivities, it should be noted that the controlling consideration for the New Year festivities, as in prior times, is the calendar itself. The festivities may be regulated by the calendar and are dependent upon its divination. The traditional Chinese calendar

Chinese Cycle of Life

- 1989 — Year of the Earth Serpent
- 1990 — Year of the Iron Horse
- 1991 — Year of the Iron Sheep
- 1992 — Year of the Water Monkey
- 1993 — Year of the Water Chicken
- 1994 — Year of the Wood Dog
- 1995 — Year of the Wood Pig
- 1996 — Year of the Fire Mouse
- 1997 — Year of the Fire Ox
- 1998 — Year of the Earth Tiger
- 1999 — Year of the Earth Hare
- 2000 — Year of the Iron Dragon

is far more than an accounting of the days of the week. It is a manifestation of Confucius's *Book of I-Ching or Changes*. Confucius's philosophical presumption was not as philistine or fundamental as the old Western maxim, "History repeats itself." The complexity of the *Book of Changes* dwarfs that concept. The *Book of Changes* or the *I-Ching calendar* is formulated by an astounding configuration of numbers that are based upon an observed sequence of energy patterns — the objective being not merely to record history, but to predict it.

Over the years, the effort took on a complex codification of time divisions and categories. Not only were the years cycled in a pattern of 60, and months broken into 12, but the hours of a day were broken into six daylight hours and six evening hours. For recall purposes the initial primary year pattern was advanced as comparable to the personality patterns of the animals "that visited Buddha." The rat riding the ox's back arrived first; then the ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, serpent, horse, goat, monkey, cock, dog and pig. Each year was described as having trends within it that paralleled the personality of each animal. To simplify a somewhat rather complex set of distinctions, these trends may be delineated as follows:

- Rat years are years of risk and surprise.
- Ox years are years that favor conservation and labor.
- Tiger years are turbulent times of unrest.
- Rabbit years are for momentous change.
- Dragon years are for dreamers of vast success and brilliant victories.
- Snake years are often the times when one of the dreams from the dragon year becomes reality.
- Horse years are to begin new tasks and to work through them.
- Goat years will signify extraordinary ups and downs.
- Monkey years, like dragon years, are gamblers' years — anything may happen.
- Rooster years are years that we should return to our work.
- Dog years provide a sense of insecurity. It is a time of idealism, goodwill and generosity.
- Pig years are times to enjoy people and to believe in the goodness of mankind.

The little New Year or the bitter month

The last month of the year is spent preparing for the New Year festival. This period is identified in different parts of China by two different names. In Peking, the coldest days of the year are usually evident as the last month of the old year. The timing of the Lunar New Year has consistently placed the holiday at the end of the Winter Solstice. Thus, the month before may be termed the "Bitter Month." In Kwantung province, the month before Chinese New Year is busily spent preparing for the festival. Shopping, cleaning and preparing decorations require so much time that this month is commonly referred to as the little New Year.

Because of the distinct family structure for most of Chinese society there are two natural occurrences that can be expected: the first is nearly a disdain for structure or organizational formats, and the second is a tendency to celebrate all festivals privately at home. Both are very much reflected through the New Year festivities. Even though most of the festivities are held behind closed doors within the confines of the family home, China itself is generally changed by numerous outward and visible manifestations of the celebration. Shrines, wells, and in some cases sacred trees, reflect the jubilation of the times, but all of these could not be properly enjoyed without the proper anticipation. Thus, Little New Year has its purpose.

As always the primary concern of the families' activities is money. In times past, New Year was the most important settling day. Debts were collected and paid but only after an incredible game of wits was played out. Seldom was a debt not paid if the collector appeared and requested payment. However, no one seemed willing to pay unless they were so slighted. The ritual was predicated on the supposition that all members of a family had to be home at New Year's Eve. Thus, a shrewd collector would call on difficult debtors on the eve of New Year and attempt to go as far as searching the premises. If the collector did not find his debtor, payment could be withheld until the fifth month or the Dragon Boat festival. The only safe place for a debtor to hide was in the temple. No business transactions were allowed within the temple's confines.

The stress on the family during little New Year was far more significant than at any other time. The holiday required an extraordinary amount of spending. Not only were the debts paid, but gifts were bought for family and friends. All broken or cracked items were removed and replaced, and money was saved to be given to children as "lucky money" or "hung bow." Probably even more strenuous was the task of providing each worker in a family business with his New Year's bonus. It is this period of austerity and fiscal responsibility that sent many to the temples hiding from collectors.

The period is still balanced by a shopping effort that is nearly comparable to our Christmas season. Streets are crowded with peddlers, booths and shoppers searching for the best deal. Sesame, pine branches, flowering shrubs, flowers, and fruit are big items on everyone's shopping taste in Taiwan. Sesame and pine branches are omens of longevity. Usually oranges are bought and wrapped in fancy paper. As a gift they are allotted in numbers anywhere from three-to-12. Usually the numbers four and two are avoided. The fruit itself is probably selected for its gold color, the metal of heaven. Thus, tangerines as well as oranges may be used. Peaches carry a separate significance because they are identified with the famous literary hero and saint Kwan Gung, who took an everlasting blood oath under a peach tree. Pine branches are also considered an excellent way of expressing a wish for longevity. The never-dying white crane always seen on a pine branch is expressed on portraits and vases. These gifts must be given in the right number to provide "luck." Numbers are important to Chinese and usually the numbers one, two, and four are avoided: one, because it does not reflect abundance; two, because it is non-prosperous; and four, because as spoken in Chinese, it sounds like "death." Usually a fish is purchased because the word as spoken in Cantonese sounds like "abundance." Often a carp is purchased for the New Year's second day evening dinner as a symbol of martial prowess and strength, since the Chinese carp has the difficult task of climbing currents to spawn.

Death and luck become a preoccupation with Chinese shoppers during the period of little New Year. Live chickens are often purchased as gifts, not merely because of the freshness which Chinese savor, but because of the avoidance of death. Even the paper the gifts are wrapped in and plaques of affirmations written upon it are carefully selected by color. Blue is avoided. It is usually a sign of mourning. Pink is reflective of a family that has had a death two years ago, and yellow, three years ago. Red is the true color of good luck, and white is the color to be avoided, again a symbol of death mourning.

The last day before New Year's Eve carries most of the excitement for shoppers that Christmas Eve bargains do in the United States. Toys and red envelopes for money are bought for children. Silk and paper flowers are favored over real flowers because of the constant preoccupation with funerals. Attractive pots, teas, dwarf trees and porcelain statues of Chinese saints are purchased. With Cantonese, the most popular of these is Kuan Yin, the angel of forgiveness. It is said that Kuan Yin forgives all no matter how cruel their deed. Perhaps the most important shopping legacy is the purchase of a new portrait of Tsao Wang or as the Cantonese call him "Tso Kwan," the patron saint of the kitchen.

(In part 2, Illar discusses how current Chinese Americans see the New Year tradition.)

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