



BURT WOLF TASTE OF FREEDOM CHINESE NEW YEAR



Almost every major celebration has its origin in something that is happening in nature either on earth or in the heavens. In China, the most important celebration of the year is the one that takes place on the first day of the first lunar month—it's Chinese New Year, and it usually starts at about the same time as the western month of February.

THE LUNAR CALENDAR

The calendar that we use in the western world is based on the sun. And the passage of a year is measured by the time it takes the Earth to make a single orbit around the sun, which turns out to be 365 and a quarter days.

In some parts of the world you often find two calendars in operation at the same time. Because big business is international and there is a need for as much uniformity as possible, the western sunbased calendar is the world's "commercial clock." The traditional calendar used in most Asian cultures is based on the moon. A year is measured by the time it takes the moon to make 12 orbits around the Earth. A single orbit is measured from new moon to new moon and takes 29 and one half days.

The moonbased calendar was developed to meet the needs of a farming society and was used for thousands of years to tell people what had to be done at a particular time in order to have a successful harvest. What you had to do often came as a specific set of instructions sent directly from the gods and timed according to the position of the moon. To this day, much of Asia's religious and cultural life is based on what is happening with the moon.

The Chinese lunar calendar is based on a twelve-year cycle with each year being devoted to a specific animal—The Dragon, the Snake, the Pig. And it's

thought that the animal of the year in which you were born will influence your life. I'm a tiger myself, and though I've noticed a few stretch marks, as yet I haven't seen any stripes.

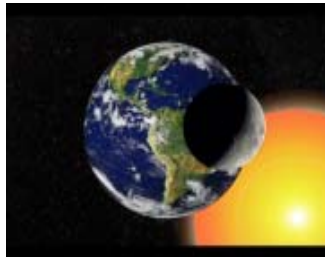
CHINESE NEW YEAR RITUALS

Chinese New Year falls at the very beginning of spring and involves the Chinese equivalent of spring cleaning. Everything in the house gets a thorough cleansing. And the scrubbing, sponging, polishing and sweeping not only gets rid of the grease and grime of daily life but because of an ancient, powerful and secret ingredient it also removes any evil spirits that may have taken up residence in the house during the past year. It's Mr. Clean on steroids.

A table is set up and covered with offerings for the gods. The three main meats—pork, chicken and fish are present. Oranges, which are a symbol of good luck are always included, along with rice cakes and spirit money. Candles are placed in a shrine. Incense is burned. Family prayers are offered.

When the incense has burned down about halfway, the gods are considered to have had their meal. Nice thing about these gods is they don't actually eat or drink what is being offered to them. They just take a good whiff and inhale the essence of the food. At that point, the food is to be taken home and eaten by the family. It's a win-win situation.

The Chinese, like many ancient cultures, believe that what you need and enjoy in this world will be needed and enjoyed in the next. And the way to send things from one world to the other is to reproduce them on special paper, and then burn the paper. The physical aspect of the thing disappears in the heat of the fire. The essence of the object goes into the smoke and the smoke goes up to the other world, where it is received





by the spirit to whom it was sent.

It's the supernatural equivalent of Federal Express with a guaranteed same minute delivery. To send something to the other world that was made of stone or metal would be difficult, wasteful and expensive. To do it with paper is a cinch. Throughout China there are giant furnaces devoted to transferring stuff from here to there.

New Year's is also the time for "lucky money." Real currency goes into red envelopes that are given to children in order to increase their ability to acquire money. In Chinese culture, red is always the color of happiness and good fortune.

It's a good idea to pay off as many of your debts as possible before the New Year begins.

And having new clothing for New Year's is important. Chinese folklore says that in ancient times "Year" was a fearsome beast who normally lived in the mountains. But on New Year's Eve, he would come into town and look for someone to eat. As a result, a number of anti-fearsome beast precautions are put in place. Ideally, you should stay up all night so you can keep a lookout and not end up being nibbled while you're napping. It's also a good idea to put a few strips of red paper on your door. The monster hates red and tries to avoid it whenever possible. He thinks it makes him look fat. And finally, produce as much noise as you can. The monster is subject to migraine headaches which are set off by loud noises. As soon as the monster feels a headache coming on he starts heading back to the quiet and solitude of the mountains.

On New Year's morning, everyone goes around congratulating everyone else for not having been munched by the monster. A ritual offering of respect is made to one's ancestors who are considered to have played an important role in your survival.



The traditional offering consists of luxury foods and since ancestors are on a diet that is similar to the one used by gods, all they want is a deep smell of the offering. After which you are expected to take the food home and share it with your friends and family.

There's always a visit to a temple where incense is burned to venerate the gods. At which point, it's time

to begin a round of visits to friends and relatives to offer your best wishes for the New Year.

PAPER GODS

In almost every Chinese home or restaurant there is a little space that belongs to the kitchen god. It's usually occupied by a small shrine or a paper print of the kitchen god's image.



The kitchen god comes in two forms: family style and industrial-strength. Family style is used in the home and comes either as a god or a goddess. Industrial strength only comes as a god.

One of the primary tasks of the kitchen god is to keep an eye on the family and to make note of how

CHINESE LUNAR CALENDAR

THE CHINESE LUNAR CALENDAR IS BASED ON A TWELVE-YEAR CYCLE WITH EACH YEAR DEVOTED TO A SPECIFIC ANIMAL

RAT:	1900, 1912, 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996
OX:	1901, 1913, 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997
TIGER:	1902, 1914, 1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1986, 1998
HARE:	1903, 1915, 1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999
DRAGON:	1904, 1916, 1928, 1940, 1952, 1964, 1976, 1988, 2000
SNAKE:	1905, 1917, 1929, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1977, 1989, 2001
HORSE:	1906, 1918, 1930, 1942, 1954, 1966, 1978, 1990, 2002
SHEEP:	1907, 1919, 1931, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, 2003
MONKEY:	1908, 1920, 1932, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992, 2004
FOWL:	1909, 1921, 1933, 1945, 1957, 1969, 1981, 1993, 2005
DOG:	1910, 1922, 1934, 1946, 1958, 1970, 1982, 1994, 2006
PIG:	1911, 1923, 1935, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983, 1995, 2007

they behaved during the year. Just before New Year's the kitchen god goes back to the other world and reports to the Jade Emperor on what's been going on in the house. As a general precaution, the kitchen god's mouth is rubbed with honey in the hope that he will say only sweet things.



The Jade Emperor likes to know when you've been sleeping and when you were awake, and if you have been bad or good. So be good for heaven's sake.

The Chinese like to keep the images of their gods close at hand. Some images are carved out of wood and stone; some are molded of clay; some are cast in metal. But the most common images of Chinese deities are those that are made of paper. They are an essential part of Chinese culture and the most popular paper images are the ones that are printed for New Year's.

Paper gods are available in many shops, but you don't actually buy one. It's considered impolite to try and "buy" a god. After all, these are not Olympic judges or major accounting firms. These are gods.

So, what you do is invite the deity to come over to your place for a visit. And then you pay the shopkeeper for assisting you with the invitation. You are also allowed to buy the candles and incense from the shopkeeper who helped you with the invitation.



The tradition of decorating your home with lucky prints goes back to the 10th century. The most traditional and beautiful examples are printed from wooden blocks that have been carved with intricate designs. The prints vary in size, depending on where they will be in the house, and how much detail is needed to express the essence of the god's personality. The materials and production processes are usually inexpensive. When it comes to sacrificial offerings, it's really the thought that counts.

THE MANY DAYS OF NEW YEAR'S

Unlike a western New Year's celebration, which tends to be limited to New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, Chinese New Year festivities take place over two weeks.

On the second day of the New Year everyone honors the god of wealth. For most paper gods, you must stop in to your local dealer in order to pick up the image. But in the case of the god of wealth, there is a home delivery option. Vendors walk through the streets offering them

for sale.

The third day of the New Year is considered a time of bad luck, so many people stay home. For certain animals, however, the third day is filled with good luck. That is especially true for field mice, who are thought to get married on the third day of the New Year. Some people go out into the fields and scatter rice in order to take part in the ceremony.

The gods, who exist in an economy that is perpetually in good shape, always take a vacation over New Year's— returning to earth on the fourth day of the year. They are welcomed back with firecrackers and offerings of spirit money. The welcoming ceremonies often take place at the end of the day, because no one wants to offend a god who might be getting back to town a little late.



On the sixth day, there are spectacular lion and dragon dances. In China, the dragon is the mythic symbol of water. They control the rain from the sky and the flow of water on the Earth. Together with the symbol of the sun, which runs in front of the dragon, you have two of the essential elements of life—sun and water— both of which are need for the rebirth of agriculture in the spring.

The seventh day is the anniversary of the creation of mankind, and is marked by a seven dish dinner and the lighting of seven candles. Interesting to note that there are seven candles on the German candlestick that was the forerunner of the Christmas tree, and there are seven candles used during the African-American celebration of Kwanzaa.

The days of the New Year's celebration come to an end with the rituals of the Lantern Festival, which has been part of Chinese New Year celebration for over 2,200 years. The people of ancient China believed that the



first full moon of the year sent out a magic light that made it possible for people to see the heavenly spirits as they moved around on earth. Torches were added to the ceremony to make the job easier and eventually the torches became lanterns.

At some point, the Lantern Festival turned into a special event for children. Probably because the date of the first full moon of the year is often the date on which children go back to school after the New Year's

holiday. Parents began to construct elaborate lanterns that their children would take to school. Their teachers would light candles inside the lanterns to symbolize everyone's hope that the children would turn out to be bright students. As the traditions that are part of the Lantern Festival developed, people began coming together to march through the streets with the lanterns. Fireworks were set off, and riddle guessing contests were introduced.



The traditional food of the Lantern Festival is a round sticky rice cake called *yuan hsiao*. It symbolizes both the new moon and the unity and completeness of the family. Some people believe that these rice cakes contain the power that controls aging, and that you will not gain the year of age that comes with the New Year until you eat this cake.

Of all the festivals involved in the cycle of the lunar year, none is as dramatic or as ancient as the celebration of the Chinese New Year.

THE FOODS OF CHINESE NEW YEAR

Like the foods of western New Year, many of the foods of the Chinese New Year have been selected because of their symbolic value. Lotus seeds, peanuts and pomegranates represent a hope for the birth of children during the coming year. The use of fruits with many seeds is a common representation of the desire



for many offspring. Grapefruits, oranges and tangerines show up because of their association with good luck. And there are lots of candies and sweet foods

in the hope that they will produce a year filled with sweetness.

Similar to the Christmas foods of Europe, many of the foods of Chinese New Year are green or red. The green foods promise the return of the growing season and the red foods represent warmth and good fortune at a time when the fields are still empty and the weather is still cold.

The Chinese word for *fish* rhymes with the Chinese word for *surplus*. Accordingly, if you eat part of a fish dish on New Year's Eve and the rest on New Year's Day, you may be able to transfer a surplus of good luck from one year to the next.

There are a number of egg dishes because eggs are always a symbol for rebirth, that's why they are so important at Easter. And round foods are important

because they illustrate completeness. A round omelet is perfect for New Year's. Chicken dishes are common because chickens are associated with good luck.

The dumpling is another New Year's food with important symbolic meaning. On New Year's Eve, the women of the family gather in the kitchen to make special dumplings. They undertake the task according to a set of ancient rules. Children are not allowed in the kitchen during the dumpling-making because they might say something that could interfere with the development of the good luck which is developing inside the dumpling. Custom demands that if there has been any disharmony



between the women in the family, now is the time to work things out. It's widely believed that the New Year's dumplings will not cook properly if there is any ill will among the members of a family. If anyone says anything unpleasant, the dumplings will be stolen from the pot by an evil spirit. And never count your dumplings while you are still making them. The more you count, the poorer you will be in the coming year. In addition, the dumplings must be wrapped in bamboo leaves so they don't come apart during the cooking. If a dumpling breaks up in the boiling water, the whole year could be filled with unpleasant experiences that will break up your happiness.

In Chinese societies, people try to go home at New Year's. They renew family ties, find out what's been going on, and share a reuniting meal. It's also a time when employers give banquets to thank their employees for working hard during the past year.

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THE NEW CHINATOWN

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