

Chinese Traditions Folk Art, Festivals and Symbolism

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Abstract

China is the most populous nation in the world, with close to 1.3 billion people. The majority of Chinese people belong to the Han group (about 92%), but there are also 55 ethnic minority groups that live mostly in the west and along the southern border. Symbols may be seen in pictures, words, art, architecture, and common household items. Symbols are another way of communicating the thoughts, meanings, and hopes of a particular cultural group. Symbolism representing luck, prosperity, long life, happiness, and wealth are all important aspects in Chinese culture. Symbols representing these virtues are often seen in everyday life and appear during holidays and festivals. There are also deities that represent some of these virtues: The God of Luck, the God of Prosperity, and the God of Longevity, to name a few. Many Chinese hope to increase good fortune in their lives by surrounding themselves with items that represent these lucky signs.

Keywords : Chinese Traditions, Heritage, the arts, Festivals, Language, and Symbols

Introduction

Chinese civilization is one of the oldest known cultures in the world. Chinese history extends almost 5000 years, for most of which there is a written record. Until the 20th century China was organized according to dynasties and imperial rulers. China was united for the first time during the Qin dynasty (pronounced “Chin”) in the 2nd century BC. The massive Great Wall was constructed in this era to keep out enemies from the north. The Chinese writing system was also standardized during this time. The written characters that make up the Chinese language are pictographs, which were created to look like pictures of things in daily life. The Chinese language influenced the development of symbolism. Chinese is a tonal language, therefore, depending on how a word is pronounced it could mean several different things. For example, the words for good fortune and bat are pronounced the same way although they are written with different characters. As a result, bats symbolize happiness and good luck in China. When five bats are seen together, they are said to represent the five blessings: health,

long life, wealth, love of goodness, and death by natural causes.

Chinese folk arts are not only beautiful, but also important to Chinese religion and beliefs in the countryside. Many items show pictures of gods and spirits along with heaven and earth. In China people believe that pictures have a lot of power to change events in life. Folk arts are used both to decorate homes and to wish for good fortune in all aspects of life. Throughout China's long textile history, embroidery has been as important as the arts of weaving and dyeing. Pieces of cloth with stitched designs have been found in China as far back as 2500 years ago. During this early time some popular embroidery designs included: plants, flowers, animals, dragons, mountains, and the moon and stars. Each year Chinese people celebrate the Lunar New Year Festival (Xinnian). This is an exciting and cheerful time of year and everyone greatly looks forward to this celebration. It occurs annually on the first day of the first new moon, and often lasts up to two weeks. Chinese people celebrate January 1st as the official New Year Day, but traditional New Year festivities follow the lunar calendar.

Chinese Folk Art, Festivals, and Symbolism in Everyday Life

The People's Republic of China is the third largest country in the world, after Russia and Canada. It is slightly larger than the United States and includes Hong Kong and Macau. China is located in East Asia. The capital city is

Beijing, which is in the northeast part of the country. China is a country of great geographical contrasts. There are grasslands in Inner Mongolia, snowy mountains in Tibet, and wide plains in the Gobi Desert. China is the most populous nation in the world, with close to 1.3 billion people. The majority of Chinese people belong to the Han group (about 92%), but there are also 55 ethnic minority groups that live mostly in the west and along the southern border. The official language is Mandarin Chinese, though people tend to speak Cantonese in the south and in Hong Kong.

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Other notable dynasties are the Han (206 BC–AD 220), when Buddhism began to flourish, the Tang (618–907), commonly regarded as the most glorious period of Chinese history, the Song (960–1279), during which Marco Polo visited China, and the Ming (1368–1644), when

Beijing became the capital of the country. China is a country with many religions. For thousands of years China was an agricultural society based around ancestor worship. Even today, Chinese people believe that ancestors have a close relationship with the living. The two most common religions are Buddhism and Daoism. Many Chinese practice a combination of Buddhism, Daoism, and ancestor worship. Throughout different time periods in China's history, many Chinese have emigrated from China to other parts of the world due to various economic or political circumstances. Today, Chinese populations exist in North America, Southeast Asia, Europe, South America, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, and Russia. Over 1.6 million Chinese live in the United States, making it the largest Chinese population outside of Asia.

SYMBOLISM

Symbolism is present throughout all cultures. Symbols may be seen in pictures, words, art, architecture, and common household items. Symbols are another way of communicating the thoughts, meanings, and hopes of a particular

cultural group. Symbolism representing luck, prosperity, long life, happiness, and wealth are all important aspects in Chinese culture (Hann, M. 2013). Symbols representing these virtues are often seen in everyday life and appear during holidays and festivals. There are also deities that represent some of these virtues: The God of Luck, the God of Prosperity, and the God of Longevity, to name a few. Many Chinese hope to increase good fortune in their lives by surrounding themselves with items that represent these lucky signs.

The Chinese language influenced the development of symbolism. Chinese is a tonal language, therefore, depending on how a word is pronounced it could mean several different things. For example, the words for good fortune and bat are pronounced the same way although they are written with different characters. As a result, bats symbolize happiness and good luck in China. When five bats are seen together, they are said to represent the five blessings: health, long life, wealth, love of goodness, and death by natural causes.



When five bats are pictured with the character for longevity as seen above, it combines to form a strong and potent symbol for long life and good fortune. 9–15907

One of the most widely seen Chinese characters in China is *fú* 福 the character for good fortune or luck. You see it painted as a decoration everywhere: on wind chimes, paintings, lanterns, pots and posters. A look at its origin gives a feel of the complexity and longevity of symbols in Chinese culture. It also represents the God of Fortune (Fu) who is part of the good luck trinity of [Fu, Lu and Shou](#). The character for good fortune consists of the radical for auspicious or heaven sent to the left. The separate right-hand symbol for wealth or abundance also pronounced *fù* 富 but with a falling [fourth tone](#) itself comprises of three elements. At the top is a roof, underneath is the abbreviated form of the character for high and at the bottom is the symbol for field 田 *tián*. Taken together the three elements have the meaning of storing produce piled high from a good harvest; the most ancient and potent indicator of wealth and good luck. It is usually written in black ink on [lucky red](#) paper.

Upside-down

Fu is widely seen on [Chinese New Year](#) posters. In many cases the poster is deliberately hung upside down. This needs a bit of explanation as there are several stories explaining how this came about. Firstly, if you look at the character fu there is a certain vague

resemblance to the character for upside down dao. The character dao can mean both 倒 *dǎo* upside down or fall and 到 *dào* arrive only differing in tone. Combining the meaning of dao and fu gives the idea of good fortune raining down from the [heavens](#). So placing fu upside down is increasing the possibility of good fortune. It may also have something to do with bats (see following) that hang upside down. This is somewhat similar to the European custom of lucky horseshoes; it is a symbol for good luck one way up but if placed upside down is an ill omen as the luck falls out of the horseshoe.

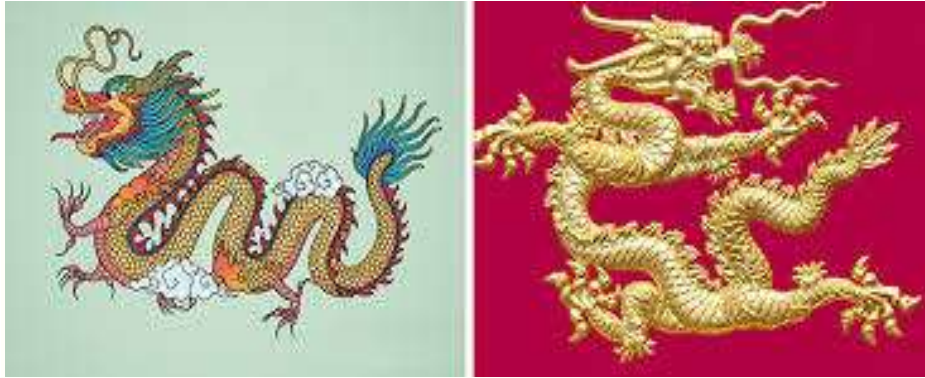
The Chinese love puns. Another character that is pronounced the same way as fu (in the Beijing dialect) is *fú* 蝠 for bat. So drawings of [bats](#) in a design bestow a wish for good fortune. The character consists of *fù* 富 wealth with the radical *chóng* 虫 for insect - as bats eat insects. The good luck motto 蝠子天来 *fú zǐ tiān lái* literally ‘bats come down from the sky’ means ‘let good fortune come down on you’. The [five](#) bats in a design represent the five lucky gods and the five blessings: long life, wealth, health, virtue and peaceful death. The central bat is placed on top of another widely used good luck symbol, this is *shòu* 寿 the symbol for the [god of longevity Shouxing](#).

Here is another design including a bat in a less obvious way. Beneath the bat dangles the “[endless knot](#)” a Buddhist symbol for long life;

eternal love and friendship. For more on bats

see our [Chinese symbolism section](#) [1].

Chinese Dragon Facts, Culture, Origins, and Art



Chinese dragons are **powerful and benevolent symbols** in Chinese culture, with supposed control over watery phenomenon, e.g. summoning rain during a drought. Dragons are everywhere in China in legends, festivals, astrology, art, names, and idioms. Dragons are seen as **lucky and good** quite different to the evil, dangerous, fire-breathing dragons of most Western stories (Hann, M. 2004).

- Chinese dragons don't exist factually there is no evidence to prove that they are real creatures.
- The Dragon is one of the twelve Chinese zodiac signs.
- Emperors in ancient China were identified as the sons of dragons. And, at that time, ordinary people were not allowed to have items with pictures of dragons on them.

- Chinese dragons are symbolic of being lucky, propitious, powerful, and noble; not as monsters as they are portrayed in Western stories.
- Most Chinese dragons' pictures have long bodies like snakes and sharp claws like hawks less like dinosaurs than Western dragons.
- Chinese dragons live at the bottom of seas, rivers, lakes, or anywhere with water.

Ancient Chinese Dragon Symbols

Dragons are found in many aspects of Chinese culture from legends about Chinese ancestry to modern mascots, from festival events to astrology to idioms.

Ancestor of the Chinese People

It was said that thousands of years ago, Yandi (a legendary tribal leader) was **born by his**

mother's telepathy with a mighty dragon.

With the help of the dragon, and allied with Huangdi (a legendary tribal leader), they opened the prelude to Chinese civilization; so Yandi and Huangdi were considered to be **ancestors** of the Chinese people. As time has gone by, Chinese people refer to themselves as the descendants of Yandi and Huangdi, as well as the descendants of the Chinese dragon.



A dragon dance

Dragon dance: The dragon dance is performed at many celebrations, e.g. Chinese New Year. Generally, there is a long dragon, spanning up to 70 meters, that is constructed using hoops made of bamboo covered with glistening fabric, and held by dancers. Dragon boat racing: Dragon boats are decorated like a Chinese dragon. This activity usually attracts many people to appreciate the custom during the traditional Dragon Boat Festival.

A Spirit of 'Unrelenting and Pioneering' Dragon has transformed from an imaginary prodigy to a **mascot** from ancient times to the present. It **represents** the Chinese people's **unrelenting and pioneering spirit** of keeping pace with the times. Not only is the dragon prevailing in China, but it's also very **popular among the Chinese people living overseas**; it has become the symbol of China and of Chinese culture.

The 9 Types of Chinese Dragon

According to Chinese myths, the dragon has nine sons with different characters, and their images are widely used in architectural decoration, especially in the imperial palaces. The nine sons are often used in buildings' decorations and sculptures.



Names of the 9 Types of Dragons in China

- Bixi (赑屃 Bìxì /bee-sshee/) — eldest, turtle-shaped with sharp teeth, fond of carrying heavy objects; often on graves/monuments
- Qioniu (囚牛 Qiúniú /chyoh-nyoh/) — yellow scaly dragon, likes and excels in music; often adorns musical instruments
- Yazhi (蜃眦 Yázì /yaa-dzrr/) — snake belly and leopard head, keen on fighting/killing; often decorates sword grips
- Chaofeng (嘲风 Cháofēng /chaoww-fnng/) — instinctively adventurous; often adorns palace roof ridges
- Pulao (蒲牢 Púláo /poo-laoww/) — known for loud crying; often on bell handles
- Chiwen (螭吻 chīwěn /chrr-wnn/) — lives in the sea, harsh-voiced, delights in devouring creatures; often on palace ridgepole ends
- Bi'an (狻猊 Bì'àn /bee-an/) — likes lawsuits, often stands by jail gates
- Suanni (狻猊 Suānní /swann-nee/) — lion-shaped, delights in sitting cross-legged and smelling incense; often on Buddhist temple incense burners and seats
- Fuxi (负屃 Fùxì /foo-sshee/) — most Chinese dragon-like; often on stone tablets

The Chinese Zodiac Dragon [Chinese zodiac sign of the Dragon](#): Every year within each **12-year cycle** of the lunar calendar is represented in Chinese mythology by one of 12 animals. People born in the year of 1940, 1952, 1964, 1976, 1988, 2000, 2012, or 2024 belong to the Dragon zodiac sign.

The Origin of Dragon in China –Ancient Tribal Totems

A number of legends concerning the origin of the dragon emerged in the course of Chinese history, of which the Totem-Worship Theory is more popular than the others. The Yellow Emperor (Huangdi, a legendary tribal leader) launched a series of wars against nine tribes on the Yellow River Valley, and

incorporated the other tribes' totems into his own dragon totem after defeating them.

This explains why the dragon has attributes belonging to nine other creatures: eyes like a **shrimp**, antlers like a **deer**, a big mouth like a **bull**, a nose like a **dog**, whiskers like a **catfish**, a **lion's** mane, a long tail like a **snake**, scales like a **fish**, and claws like a **hawk**.



Chinese Dragon Decorations- Buildings, Costume, and Opera Shows

Chinese dragons don't exist in real life, but you can see many dragon elements in China. The following three suggestions are just a few examples of where Chinese dragons "exist". You may discover more dragons by yourself. In Ancient Imperial Buildings Like the Forbidden City. The Chinese dragon symbolizes the sovereignty of emperors, and everything related

Fish

to it was exclusively for emperors in the Chinese feudal society. The ancient emperors called their sons "seeds of dragons", their robes were "dragon robes", and their chairs were "dragon chairs". When you enter **the Forbidden City**, you can see elements of Chinese dragons nearly everywhere: the nine sons of the dragon on the golden roof, on the stone floor, the imperial chair decoration, wood sculptures on pillars, and handrails, etc [2].



The Chinese character for *fish* written in the traditional form is 魚 while the simplified form is 鱼. Regardless of what form it is written in, the word for fish in Chinese is pronounced, yú. The pronunciation of fish in Chinese, yú, is a homophone for “affluence” or “abundance” Two fish paired together symbolize marriage, happiness. This phonetic similarity has led to fish becoming a symbol of abundance and

prosperity in Chinese culture. As such, fish are a common symbol in Chinese art and literature, and they are particularly important in Chinese mythology. Asian carp (as they are known in the United States), for instance, are the subject of many Chinese lyrics and stories, the character for which is 鲤鱼 pronounced lí yú. Pictures and depictions of fish are also a common decoration for Chinese New Year [3].

What does a Phoenix represent in Chinese culture?



Of the many divine and heavenly birds of Asia, the Chinese phoenix, or “凤凰” (Feng Huang),

is one of the greatest. Generally translated into” 凤凰”, however in Chinese “凤” is male and

“凰” is female. Both are the divine birds bringing happiness and fortune to the world. These days people put it together with dragon “龙” and simplify the Phoenix into female birds while dragon represents the male. Dragon and Phoenix are the most sacred combination in Chinese. In the culture of China, the Phoenix is the king of all birds, and is the symbol of high virtue and grace. Traditionally, the males were called Feng (凤) and the females Huang (凰) but during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 AD), the Phoenix has become the symbol of femininity. The Feng Huang has five colors, black, white, red, yellow, and green. The Chinese Phoenix first appeared on pottery over 8000 years ago and was said to live atop the Kunlun Mountains. Traditionally, the Feng Huang represented the empress and appeared on her clothing and jewellery. The phoenix is still revered in China today [4].

Deer



Deer are among the most frequently seen animals on charms. The Chinese character for deer is 鹿 which is pronounced *lu*. The Chinese

character 禄, which refers to the salary a government official receives, is also pronounced *lu*. A picture of a deer is therefore expressing a wish for a top government office with a high salary. The Chinese believe the deer lives to a very great age and, as a result, has become a symbol for long life. The deer is traditionally believed to be the only animal able to find the magical [lingzhi fungus of immortality](#). The deer is often seen by the side of [Shou, the God of Longevity](#). The deer often is used as a verbal pun to refer to the [God of Prosperity](#) which has the same pronunciation (*lu*). The deer as a symbol used on charms may be seen at the following: [Men Plow, Women Weave, Eight Treasures](#), and [Auspicious Inscriptions](#) [5].

Horse



The Chinese character for the horse used today derives from a pictograph of a rearing horse with its front legs in the air and its mane flowing in the wind. Using your imagination, you can still recognize the shape of a horse when looking at the [traditional character](#) for horse, 馬. The horizontal strokes that make up the upper half of the character look like the

horse's mane. The four shorter strokes at the bottom represent four legs. And the stroke on the lower right that looks like a hook is supposed to be the horse's tail. However, the simplified form replaced the four legs with a single stroke and removed the horizontal lines on the top. In its simplified version, the character for a horse in Chinese looks like 马. As one of the symbols in the [Chinese zodiac](#), the horse in [Chinese culture](#) is equated with [Gemini](#), and represents practicality, [love](#), endurance, devotion and stability. Throughout history horses have symbolized power, pride, vitality and speed. Horses also symbolize freedom, ambition, spirituality and strength in working together in a team. The horse represents victory. This is especially great for anyone involved in some kind of competition. This could be sports, business or education.

Chinese Folk Arts



Embroidered gourd pouch. Gourds and bamboo both symbolize long life. Gourds are also a sign of fertility. Collected in Beijing, China, 1944. 9–21266

Folk arts in China have developed over a thousand years. They include the arts of papercuts, woodblock prints, and embroidered textiles. These objects have been made for centuries by peasants. Paper, wood, cotton, and scissors were used to create these items. In the past, the upper classes in China laughed at such simple art, preferring calligraphy and landscape painting. They gave a name to Chinese folk arts: *diao chong xiao ji*, which means “the small skills of carving insects.” This term was used to poke fun at the folk art of the peasants. However, peasants did not have brushes on hand like the upper classes. They used scissors and knives instead since they were household staples needed for such things as making a family’s clothing. Chinese folk arts are not only beautiful, but also important to Chinese religion and beliefs in the countryside. Many items show pictures of gods and spirits along with heaven and earth. In China people believe that pictures have a lot of power to change events in life. Folk arts are used both to decorate homes and to wish for good fortune in all aspects of life.

Paper Cut



Traditional papercuts are made at home with scissors or knives from very thin sheets of coloured paper. In the past, people enjoyed making designs from paper because it was quick and did not require many tools. Girls as young as six years old were taught how to cut paper by older family members. Sometimes designs are only cut once. Other times a pattern is used over and over again by placing it on a clean sheet of paper and putting a smoking oil lamp beneath it. When the smoke has made its mark, it is removed and the outline that is left behind can be cut.

Usually paper cuts are pasted on windows or hung on doors, especially during holidays and festivals. The most important time to make and

display papercuts is during the New Year Festival. Each part of China has different styles of paper cuts. However, many paper cuts share two common themes: protection from evil forces and the health and well-being of the family. Papercuts designs can be pictures of anything, including lucky Chinese words, animals, children, or illustrations of popular stories. They are often made with red paper, since red is the color that represents happiness in China. A part of China known as Shaanxi Province is well known for making some of the most beautiful paper cuts. During the winter each household in Shaanxi pastes colourful paper cuts known as “window flowers” (chuang hua) on each window in its home.

TEXTILES AND EMBROIDER



Textile arts in China include weaving, dyeing, and embroidery. China's most famous fabric is silk. Silk has been produced in China for thousands of years. It even found its way to India and Rome hundreds of years ago through the trade route known as the Silk Road. At one time the method of making silk was a highly protected secret. Two thousand years ago only noble families and officials were allowed to wear clothing made of silk. Even after these rules changed, most Chinese people still wore clothes made of cotton because silk was too expensive. The most common of all fabrics in China is cotton. People began planting and producing cotton in the mid-13th century. Soon, weaving cotton cloth and creating clothes from it became very popular all around the country. Chinese groups in the south use natural vegetable dyes on cotton cloth to form bright blue design patterns such as flowers and butterflies (Wilson, V. 2005).

Throughout China's long textile history, embroidery has been as important as the arts of weaving and dyeing. Pieces of cloth with

stitched designs have been found in China as far back as 2500 years ago. During this early time some popular embroidery designs included: plants, flowers, animals, dragons, mountains, and the moon and stars. In the past, young women were taught to weave, dye, and embroider so that they could make pieces to add to their marriage dowry. Such pieces included pillowcases, quilt covers, and other items used in the home. Young women were often chosen for marriage based on their embroidery skills rather than their beauty. Often peasant women were hired by the upper classes to embroider their clothing and other personal items. These embroidery projects helped supplement their income.

Chinese embroidery often uses the "five colors" that are thought to represent the different natural forces in the world. Yellow stands for the earth; blue for wood; white for metal; red for fire; and black for water. When these five colors are used together in embroidery, they are known as the "threads of life on cotton cloth." These threads are thought to protect the wearer

from harm. Some of the most popular gifts for children in China include embroidered clothing and toys made by hand. Many hats and shoes for children are made in the shape of pigs and dogs, which are thought to fool spirits and protect children. Tigers are often sewn onto children's clothing to scare away ghosts and help children grow up to be strong and fearless.

WOODBLOCK PRINTS

Perhaps the most common of all Chinese folk arts are woodblock prints. They are called nianhua in Chinese. This means "New Year's pictures," because they are always put up around the house during the New Year Festival. Woodblock prints are very bright and colourful posters, with thousands of different kinds of designs. They have been made since the 11th century. People in China use them for two reasons: to bring good luck and for decoration. Chinese people call buying nianhua "inviting in the gods" because pictures of gods are some of the most popular kinds of prints. In the past woodblock prints were made by men during the winter. First an artist would draw a design; the design was then carved into a piece of wood. Next, the wood was used to stamp the design and other wood blocks were used to press different colors of ink onto pieces of paper. Now they are made in large factories and millions are sold every year.

There are two types of popular prints. One popular print has pictures of gods that people use in religious ceremonies. These are often

burned at the end of the ceremony as an offering. In the past people also used woodblock printing methods to make paper money (or "spirit money") to be offered to gods, ghosts, and ancestors. Other woodblock prints are used to decorate homes and bring good luck. Some of the images represented include: people working, famous Chinese tales, lucky kinds of fruit, and wholesome children holding coins. They are displayed all year long until the start of the New Year when new prints are posted.

LUNAR NEW YEAR'S FESTIVAL

Each year Chinese people celebrate the Lunar New Year Festival (Xinnian). This is an exciting and cheerful time of year and everyone greatly looks forward to this celebration. It occurs annually on the first day of the first new moon, and often lasts up to two weeks. Chinese people celebrate January 1st as the official New Year Day, but traditional New Year festivities follow the lunar calendar. It always begins on the evening before the first day of the lunar month, and ends on the 15th day with the Lantern Festival. At this time of year, people pay respects to numerous gods and spirits. Many take the time to do some "spring cleaning," making sure their homes are cleaned spotless. They also make sure that any old debts are repaid. Lucky money is distributed to children by elders in red envelopes. The Chinese also view the holiday as an opportunity to begin anew with the hope of a fresh start in the year to come.

During the New Year Festival markets are filled with special foods, and vibrant decorations adorn windows. Fireworks are a bright and electrifying part of this holiday. People gather to watch exciting lion and dragon dances accompanied by lively music. Families decorate their doors with posters that contain lucky symbols, gods, and other popular figures. During this holiday season people wish for happiness, riches, and good health for their families and friends. New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are a time for families to come together and give thanks. Many friends and relatives visit one another's homes to celebrate. There are lots of lucky foods at this time of year. Chinese people honor their ancestors at the family banquet table by having a big feast called "surrounding the stove" (weilu). Before the main dishes arrive, guests treat themselves to different snacks such as fruits, nuts, and seeds. The most popular snacks are put in a special tray with eight sides (because eight is a lucky number in China). Each snack represents good fortune in a different way, with items such as kumquats (gold), coconut (togetherness), and lotus seeds (children).

The most special holiday foods are prepared for banquets. During the New Year people eat chicken soup, pork, stir-fried vegetables, and whole fish along with many other delicious dishes. Fish served during the New Year symbolizes the hope for wealth and abundance year after year. Another popular food are small meat dumplings called jiaozi. Thin layers of dough are filled with chopped pork, cabbage,

garlic, ginger, and other ingredients. Jiaozi are cooked in large pots of boiling water and eaten with dipping sauces made from soy sauce, vinegar, and chili oil. The most popular holiday dessert is called niangao, which means "New Year cake." It is a sweet, sticky pudding made from rice. Niangao is made differently in various parts of the country; sometimes it is fried and other times it is steamed. Tangerines and oranges, along with flowers such as plum blossoms and narcissus, are popular in markets and homes around this time of the year because they symbolize good fortune.

DOOR GODS

People decorate their gate posts and door panels with door gods (menshen) on the last day of the 12th moon. Since the second century AD, Chinese people have put up door gods during the New Year festival in order to protect their families and homes from harm. People paste pairs of door gods in the centre of their door panels. In ancient times there were two gods, named Shentu and Yulu, that people carved or painted on peach wood and hung on their doors for good luck. These fierce-looking gods were guardians of the underworld who were thought to protect homes from demons. Beginning in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), people began to draw these images in ink on red paper.

Door gods are still popular today, and there are many different types of guardians. Animals like roosters and tigers, along with famous military generals from hundreds of years ago, are some

of the more recently displayed door gods. In the past, door gods were always made by hand; however, today they are usually made in factories.

SPRING COUPLETS

Spring couplets (chunlian) are poems that are hung up in pairs on New Year's Eve, one on each side of an entryway. Each one usually has four, five, or seven Chinese characters, although some are 500 words long! These poems are hung outside homes and businesses. They wish for wealth, good fortune, and long life to those inside. Like other New Year decorations, they tend to be written on red paper, the luckiest color. They are difficult to write. Each half of the couplet must use the same exact grammar and match the other half perfectly. People also hang a third piece of paper across the top of their doorways. This paper has four Chinese characters on it that sum up the meaning of the spring couplet.

Spring couplets are often pasted on the gates of companies or restaurants to greet customers or to make a wish. The spring couplets above say: Business is so prosperous to extend to "four oceans" (the whole world) Profits are pouring in from all quarters to reach "three rivers" (the whole country). Chinatown, San Francisco, California, 2004. Photograph by Elisa Ho. Pair of spring couplets black ink on red paper. Collected in Beijing, China. 1942.9-21360a,b. The spring couplets say: May a thousand good omens gather like clouds, and one hundred

kinds of happiness combine here; May you smoothly enter into a new spring and everything follow your heart's desire.

STOVE GOD

For about 2000 years Chinese people have worshiped the Stove God. He is very important because he protects the home and the family from harm. A poster of the Stove God is often hung above the stove in Chinese kitchens. The Stove God watches over each family throughout the year. On the 23rd of the last month of the lunar year he reports to the Jade Emperor on each family's behavior. Families offer the Stove God many sweet foods before his departure. Often candles and incense are lit at this time; sometimes an offering of paper money is burned. Many families then seal the mouth of the Stove God's poster with honey so that he will be able to report only sweet things about them. Others believe that the honey acts as a seal, so the Stove God cannot say anything at all. The Stove God is said to return to families' homes on the first day of the New Year.

DIVINATION & THE CHINESE ZODIAC

During the New Year festival, people like to have their fortunes told outside of the local temple. The diviner asks the person for the hour, day, month, and year of their birth (all according to the Chinese calendar). It is also important for the diviner to know one's zodiac sign in order to give a good prediction. The diviner then uses complex divination charts based on nature and the laws of the universe to

describe what one can expect in both their work and private life. In Chinese fortune telling, there are twelve zodiac animals used to mark each year: the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Ram, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig. Every year there is a new animal, and the cycle repeats after twelve years. Chinese people believe that those born during the same year have certain personality traits in common.

THE LANTERN FESTIVAL

The Lantern Festival (dengjie) is celebrated on the last night of the New Year holiday, which is the 15th day of the first month. The streets are filled with people surrounded by hundreds of lanterns. Street performers abound to entertain the crowds. This holiday has taken place at the end of the New Year festival as early as the 6th century AD. Lanterns come in all shapes, materials, and sizes; some are made of paper, others of glass, gauze, or wood. In the city of Harbin, which is very far north, beautiful lanterns are made each year out of ice from the river. Some lanterns have historic scenes or Chinese characters painted on them. Others that are made in the shape of animals, like crabs or dragonflies.

During the Lantern Festival the lion dance (shiwu) and dragon dance (longwu) are performed. Men disguise themselves in huge, colourful lion heads and bodies made of papier-mâché. As drums and gongs play, one man moves the head. The other man shifts the back of the lion, making sure it is always moving. The dragon is

made of bamboo rods and colourful cloth, and it stretches for at least 20 or 30 feet. Each part of the dragon is held up on poles. Many people are needed to help make the dragon move through the streets.

The most famous dragon dance takes place not in China, but in San Francisco. In the Golden Dragon Parade, begun in 1953, the dragon is 160 feet long. There are also many floats, musicians, and dancers in the parade. Every year, almost half a million people come to watch this parade. During the Lantern Festival, on the last night of the New Year holiday, every household eats rice balls called yuanxiao. They are perfectly round, and symbolize the first full moon of the year. Usually they are sweet and filled with date or sesame paste. Sometimes they are salty and are filled with chicken, pork, and vegetables. Yuanxiao are only available for sale a few days a year during the holiday season.

CLEAR BRIGHTNESS FESTIVAL

The Clear Brightness Festival, also known as Qingming Jie, or Tomb Sweeping Day, marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring. It usually takes place on April 4, 5, or 6. It is a time to remember those who have passed away and visit their graves. Although it might sound sad, this is actually a cheerful holiday. It is important to keep in mind that in China the dead are still very involved with the living. Ancestors are thought to have the power to help or harm the living, so it is important not to forget them.

Ancestors are treated like living beings; this is a practice called ancestor worship. Chinese people believe that ancestors can become angry if they do not receive enough attention. Although ancestors are not as powerful as gods, they do have the power to punish their offspring if they are not happy with the way they are being treated. Ancestors must try to help the living if they are asked. If the ancestor does not help the living, the living may choose to ignore the ancestor, who will have no choice but to become a ghost wandering eternally in search of food.

On the day of Clear Brightness relatives go to sweep family graves, adorn the graves with flowers, and burn paper spirit money at the grave. People also bring food and wine to offer to the dead. Each large family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins often has its own private gravesite. Coffins are buried above ground in tombs made of mounds of earth, called burial mounds. The Chinese began building burial mounds around the 5th century BC.

FEAST OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

Chinese people believe that during the seventh lunar month the underworld opens up and all ghosts come to the earth to enjoy themselves for a brief time. The Feast of the Hungry Ghosts (Gui Jie) is different from the Clear Brightness Festival, which celebrates one's family's ghosts and ancestors. This festival is meant to make peace with the ghosts of strangers and the dead

who are not cared for by their families. When people die their families are supposed to continue to take care of them so that they remain at ease and happy. If spirits have no relatives to care for them they become gloomy wandering ghosts (gui). The Chinese do not want these unhappy ghosts to enter their homes, so they leave food and presents outside their doors in hopes of soothing their sad souls. On the 15th of the seventh lunar month, the community has a celebration where priests chant and perform rituals outside, offering small gifts, such as incense and spirit money, to the lingering ghosts. Next, the priest throws candy and other treats to the lost souls which many children try to catch and eat. After this ceremony the mischievous spirits are said to return the underworld.

DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

The Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu Jie) started about two thousand years ago in southern China as a ceremony in honour of the Dragon God, who controlled rivers and rainfall. During the ceremony people wished for rain to feed rice plants. Today the Dragon Boat Festival is an exciting event which marks the beginning of summer. The day is celebrated across China with river parades, dragon boat races, and special foods. It occurs on the "double fifth" (fifth day of the fifth moon), usually around June 21. The Dragon Boat Festival is also a time to remember one of China's most famous patriotic poets, Qu Yuan.

Dragon boat races are one of the liveliest parts of the festival. People bring their boats to the local lake or river to compete against their neighbours every year. The long, thin boats are very large and are made to look like dragons. These boats can carry as many as 80 rowers. Rowers paddle together while drums and gongs play in order to help keep the rhythm of the rower's steady. The fifth day of the fifth month is considered a dangerous time. Dragon boat races are one way to guard against evil. At the end of the contest, boat crews throw offerings into the water so that all things evil can be carried downstream. On this day, many households tie together different plants like garlic, sweet-flag, and mugwort, and place them on their front door in order to protect themselves from evil. They also carry sachets called xiangbao, full of sweet-smelling herbs and flowers for the same purpose.

MID-AUTUMN MOON FESTIVAL

The Mid-Autumn Festival (Zhongqiu Jie) celebrates the full moon that rises around mid-September. It also is a time to celebrate bountiful fall harvests. The moon is closer to the horizon during this time, so it appears even bigger and rounder than usual. During this festival people take time from their busy lives to relax and gather with loved ones to watch the moon.

The moon festival honours the female goddess of the moon, named Chang E. The women in the family are the ones that prepare for the

holiday since the moon festival honours the female goddess of the moon. Posters made of bamboo and paper called "moon papers" (yueguang ma'er) are hung on doors. These posters are usually split into three parts. At the top is a picture of Chang E, the moon goddess; in the centre shines a moon; and below is a picture of the Jade Rabbit, who is also said to live on the moon. Chinese people often buy sculptures and statues of rabbits to put in their homes at this time of year.

During the Mid-Autumn festival many kinds of offerings and special foods are made. The most popular holiday food of the Mid-Autumn festival is the round moon cake (yue bing). Moon cakes are flaky pastries with different kinds of sweet fillings. These fillings include pastes made from walnuts, dates, and mashed-up beans. Moon cakes in the south of China are very popular. They are filled with lotus seed paste, coconut, and have a round egg yolk inside to symbolize the moon. Mooncakes are about the size of a large muffin. Families eat these on the night of the moon festival.

Discussion

China is one of the Four Ancient Civilizations (alongside Babylon, India and Egypt), according to Chinese scholar Liang Qichao (1900). It boasts a vast and varied geographic expanse, 3,600 years of written history, as well as a rich and profound culture. Chinese culture is diverse and unique, yet harmoniously blended — an invaluable asset to the world. Our

China culture guide contains information divided into Traditions, Heritage, the arts, Festivals, Language, and Symbols. China has several traditional festivals that are celebrated all over the country (in different ways). The most important is Chinese New Year, then Mid-Autumn Festival. China, with its "55 Ethnic Minorities", also has many ethnic festivals. From Tibet to Manchuria to China's tropical south, different tribes celebrate their new year, harvest, and other things, in various ways. Chinese is reckoned to be the most difficult language in the world to learn, but that also must make it the most interesting. It's the world's only remaining pictographic language in common use, with thousands of characters making up the written language. Its pronunciation is generally one syllable per character, in one of five tones. China's rich literary culture includes many pithy sayings and beautiful poems. Every nation has its symbols, but what should you think of when it comes to China? You might conjure up images of long coiling dragons, the red flag.

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