

# HAPPY SPRING FESTIVAL AND NEW YEAR!

Too early for Spring and a little late for New Year, you may be thinking! However, the Chinese celebrated their New Year on Monday so really we are wishing you a Happy Lunar New Year for their lunisolar calendar!

The literal translation of Chun Jie (what we have come to call Chinese New Year) is actually, Spring Festival, as the first season in their new year calendar is spring, so in the Chinese spirit of sincerely wishing peace and happiness to everyone, we hope you are enjoying a great Spring Festival too!

The rising global interest in China means that many of you may have been aware that it was Chinese New Year, as was I, but I really didn't have any idea what the celebrations entailed, how long they went on for or how many centuries of tradition and culture they represented and that they were also to mark the end of winter and the arrival of Spring! So having asked around my colleagues at Avicenna, Chinese friends and of course the great resources here in clinic and on the internet, here is a little write-up of the things that intrigued, delighted and fascinated me!



One interpretation of Nian the man-eating, village destroying beast.

For example, another word commonly used for New Year is Guo Nian. According to legend, Nian was a man-eating beast from the mountains that would appear once a year, towards the end of winter to terrorize villagers. Somehow the villagers established that they could scare him away with loud noises and the colour red. Having succeeded in ridding themselves of the beast, by using these techniques, they celebrated their freedom and reaffirmed familial ties and friendships every year with food, festivities, explosions, fireworks and the liberal use of red!

The Chinese Ministry of Culture seems to have capitalised on the growing international interest and at a press conference on January 10th it announced an even bigger campaign to celebrate the Chinese New Year overseas and use it as a springboard to promote China's traditional values. This year it will feature some 300 activities in more than 80 countries around the world – the largest in scope by far, reaching destinations in Africa as well as Europe and America.

Chinese months are reckoned by the lunar calendar, with each month beginning on the darkest day. New Year festivities traditionally start on the first day of the month and continue until the fifteenth, when the moon is brightest. Planning for the Spring Festival starts weeks in advance and culminates with frenetic preparations in the last few days of the last moon. The festivities really commence on the eve of the new moon and come to a close with the full moon, marked by the Lantern Festival. New Year's Eve and the first two days of the New Year are public

holidays. Usually, the Saturday before and the Sunday after Chinese New Year are declared working days, and the 2 additionally gained holidays are added to the official 3 days of holiday, so that people have 7 consecutive days, including weekends, off. Does anyone else feel short changed by the Gregorian calendar?!



Jiaozi Dumplings

Although the traditions and customs vary, according to the different provinces and ethnicities of China, for example: jiaozi, a kind of dumpling, is one of the celebratory foods eaten in the north but niangao, a kind of sticky rice cake, is the most popular celebratory food eaten in the south, it is the most important annual festival for most Chinese, perhaps more synonymous with Christmas celebrations or Eid al-Adha for Muslims (hence the public holidays!).

Niangao Cakes



On the last few days before the new moon families start preparations for the festivities. The preparations for Guo Nian are almost as extensive as the festivities themselves! Stocking up on foods and delicacies, preparing special dishes for the New Year's Eve reunion dinner, buying new clothes, especially for children, getting haircuts, paying off debts and making decorations for the houses. People clean their houses from top to bottom to ensure that any misfortune from the previous year is swept away, making way for the good luck of the New Year. On New Year's Eve, all brooms, mops, cloths and other cleaning equipment are put away. No sweeping or dusting should be done on New Year's Day for fear that the new good fortune will be swept away. After New Year's Day the floors may be swept but beginning at the door, dust is swept to the middle of the room and then moved into the corners of the room. The debris is left in the corners until the fifth day when it can be carried out of the house by the back door. The superstition is that by sweeping dirt across the threshold you risk sweeping one of your family away and by sweeping towards the front door you could sweep the good fortune out of the house but by sweeping inwards and carrying out the dust no harm will befall you or your family!

I can't help but wonder how many households still adhere to this. Our pharmacy at Avicenna is run entirely in Chinese so I am able, over a fair amount of giggling at our translation mishaps, to get some firsthand accounts. The girls had slight variations on their habits, Xiao doesn't clean for 7 days as she grew up believing that if you throw out the dirt you throw out the money you might be making in the New Year and Ning Ning follows the five days theory! It made me quite nostalgic for some traditions (superstitions) that I'd forgotten about and respect the Chinese more for holding on to theirs. My grandmother used to make me walk down the stairs backwards on the first day of the month and then turn around three times at the bottom saying 'white rabbit!' It's certainly been some time since I tried that one!

Following on the red theme from Nian's story part of the preparations involve decorating the doors and windows of houses with red paper-cuttings and Chinese poems or couplets (also, often, written on red paper,) with messages of 'good health,' 'peace,' 'wealth' etc, similar to our new year's wishes. Red also symbolises good luck. The Chinese character *Fú*, meaning 'happiness' or 'good fortune,' is also put up in the centre of the front door.



On the eve of the new moon, New Year's Eve, the celebrations really kick off, with the reunion dinner, a feast with all the meats, fish, sweets and delicious dishes you can imagine. It is the most important time for the immediate family to come together during the New Year's events. People generally stay up at least until midnight when the evening culminates with firecrackers and fireworks (although only in certain areas due to a recent ban in response to too many fires being started) and the New Year officially begins.



The Chinese character Fu

The first day of the lunar New Year is "to welcome the gods of the heavens and earth." People dress up in their new clothes, offering greetings of goodwill for the year ahead to family, visiting and inviting extended family and friends to dinner over the next fifteen days of celebration. Children and teenagers are given red envelopes containing money by parents and older members of the family. Many people abstain from eating meat as it is believed that this will guarantee them long and happy lives.

Over the next fourteen days, leading up to the Lantern Festival, there is an eclectic (to the western eye) mix of celebrations, traditions and customs for each day. I would love to go into each of them now but there is so much I will have to save it for next year! To give you a rough idea of quite how diverse, there are celebrations for in-laws, the birthday of all dogs, worship and firecrackers to attract the god of wealth, the birthday of the king of heaven Yu Hung, the Jade Emperor, a day of veggie light eating to counteract the previous indulgence, a day to stay at home to avoid the god of Anger and much much more! So much so that I think I would probably need a holiday to

recover from the holidays! Such a wealth of traditional and religious customs deserve a write-up of their own!

There are many events taking place across the U.K. that you can get involved in, the largest being the festivities in Trafalgar Square and China Town, which will take place on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January.



The events scheduled are as follows:

10.15am: Parade starts on Rupert Street

11.30am: Parade finishes on Rupert Street

12 noon: Opening ceremony on main stage in Trafalgar Square, where Mayor of London, Boris Johnson and Stanley Tse, President of Chinatown, will perform the Dotting of the Eye ceremony, which will bring the dragons and lions to life

12 noon-5.40pm: Display by more than 100 performers, including the Chen Brothers

5.40pm: Fireworks finale in Trafalgar Square

By Victoria Osterbery