

Chinese beliefs and customs

Star 21/1/12 MS 3.

Many observe rituals to please the gods and gain longevity, wealth and prosperity



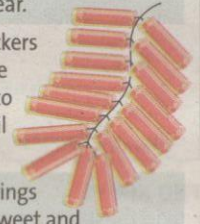
Ho: Those born under the Dragon zodiac are passionate, brave and self-assured.

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Photo by **ELLIS KHAN**

CNY superstitions and customs still widely practised



- ▶ No sweeping and cleaning during the first day of the New Year, doing so means you will be sweeping away all the good fortune for the Year 2012.
- ▶ Pamper your children to ensure that they do not cry on the first day. Otherwise, you may end up with whinning children all through the year.
- ▶ Repay all your debts before the New Year. Otherwise, you will be owing others all through the year.
- ▶ Set off fire crackers to welcome the new year and to chase away evil spirits.
- ▶ Chinese employers usually give bonuses to their workers.
- ▶ Put some offerings consisting of sweet and sticky cakes in the kitchen so that the Kitchen God will only have sweet things to report about the household to the highest deity.



THE Year of the Dragon is to welcome longevity, wealth and prosperity and to eliminate any negative *chi* from the past, said Mother of Dragon (Lung Mu) Temple chairman Ho Sai Chong.

"The first day of the Lunar New Year is to welcome the gods of the Heavens and Earth and many abstain from meat on the first day because it is believed that this will ensure happiness and longevity for the families," said Ho.

He said on the second day, the Chinese prayed to their ancestors as well as to all the gods.

"The third and fourth days are for the sons-in-law to pay respect to their parents-in law," he said.

Ho added that the fifth day was called Red Mouth Day (Po Wu) where people stayed home to welcome the God of Wealth and no one would visit families as it was said it would lead to quarrels.

"On the sixth to the 10th day, the Chinese visit their relatives and friends freely and visit the temples to pray for good fortune and health. The seventh day is everyone's birthday and noodles are eaten to promote longevity and raw fish for success," he said.

On the eighth day, the Fujian people have another family reunion dinner and at midnight they pray to Tian Gong, the God of Heaven. The ninth day is to make offerings to the Jade Emperor, the ruler of heaven.

The 10th to the 12th days are for inviting friends and relatives for dinner. After so much rich food, the 13th day is for people to have simple rice

congee and mustard greens (choi sum) to cleanse the system.

"Preparations to celebrate the Lantern Festival (Deng Jie) are made on the 14th day and celebrated on the 15th night, the last day of the New Year celebrations when all families perform ancestral worship once more," said Ho.

He said those born under the Dragon zodiac were passionate, brave and self-assured.

"People under this animal sign are pioneers. Dragons are generous and are blessed with good fortune. They are enterprising, smart and have a wicked sense of humour. Most of them have a natural flair for fashion and are the people to consult if you want to catch up on the latest trends," he said.

Ho added that Dragons were able to channel their personal charisma into leadership qualities.

"Popular figures born under this zodiac sign are Ringo Starr, Al Pacino and Matt Dillon," said Ho who is the honorary citizen of Zhao Qing and Shunde district in China.

Ho, who is also the president of the Federation of Kwong Siew Association of Malaysia, said there is a Cantonese saying "wash away the dirt on *Nin Ya Baat* (eighth day of Chinese New Year)" but that the practice is not usually restricted to just that particular day.

"After the Winter Solstice, all Chinese families carry out spring cleaning and prepare for the great day.

"Little New Year (Xiao Guo Nian) is reached on the 24th day of the twelfth moon when the Household Gods ascend to heaven to perform their

annual pilgrimage to the almighty and to report on the worldly affairs," he said.

"The first burst of firecrackers, heralding the New Year, is when families give offerings to bid farewell to the Household Gods.

Altars and statues are cleaned thoroughly and decorations from previous years are removed and burned a week before the New Year.

Ho said a paper effigy of the Kitchen God or God of Heart, *Zao Chun*, takes care of the family's well-being.

"The Kitchen God is usually represented by only a piece of red paper on which is written the name *Zao Chun* and stuck over the fireplace. It is burned to report to the Jade Emperor of the household members' transgressions and good deeds.

"Although the kitchen is traditionally a housewife's domain, it is the men who worship the Kitchen God and not the women.

"I think men and not women, worship the Kitchen God, because for hundreds of years stories have been told of how the Kitchen God has reported the hardships and sufferings of the man of the household to the Jade Emperor," he said.

Ho said whether it was myth or truth, the Kitchen God was seen as the unifying figure in a household.

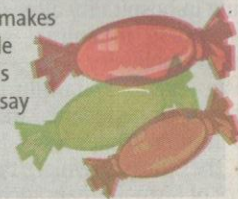
Between the day the Household Gods ascend to Heaven and the last day of the twelfth moon, new clothing for family members, especially children, must be bought and sweet meats, cakes and the *nian gao*, a cake made of glutinous rice flour and sugar prepared, he said.

Nian gao means "year cake", *gao*

> Don't wash your hair on the first day (for some it is for the entire first 15 days of the new year) because you will be washing away all your good luck.

> Sleep past midnight on new year's eve to ensure your parents will have longer life.

household to the highest power for the past year. If the stickiness of the cakes makes him unable to open his mouth to say anything, so much better.



Food eaten for CNY reunion dinner

> Fish - a must because it sounds like 'surplus' in Chinese. There is also this Chinese saying "May there be surpluses every year." That is why fish is a must item on the menu.



> Prawn - this seafood sounds like 'ha' or laugh in Chinese. So, it symbolises happiness for the coming year.



> Dried oyster - the pronunciation of oyster in Chinese is similar to 'good things'. May the year be filled with good things happening.

> Vegetables - this is normally a vegetarian dish topped with 'fatt choy' which are black hair-like moss. In the Cantonese dialect, this food item sounds like 'prosperity' and is commonly served.



> Noodles - they have to be uncut to signify longevity.

> Nian gao - this is actually a brownish steamed cake made with rice flour. Nian means year while gao means cake but gao also sounds like 'high' in Chinese. So, this represents a 'high' year ahead.



Source: Mother of Dragon (Lungmu) Temple Malaysia

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having the same sound as the word for "high" symbolising a cake that portends high position in the New Year.

"New Year's Eve is for a reunion dinner. Families from near and far will gather once a year for this. A dish consisting of fish which sounds like

'surplus' is served.

"After dinner at about 11pm, some families go to the temple, hours before the New Year begins, to pray for a prosperous year ahead but in modern times youngsters hold parties and even organise countdowns," said Ho.