



Delve a little deeper: CNY Symbolism Explained

Symbolism

Through story telling and mythology to the Chinese language itself, symbolism plays an intrinsic role in Chinese culture. CNY is no exception, with symbolism evident in almost all the traditions of the holiday.

Homophones

Strong importance is placed on homophones in the Chinese language. Linking two similar sounding words together has led to the foundation of many Chinese superstitions and traditions. For example, the number 8 (八, ba) is seen as a very lucky number as it sounds similar to 'prosper/wealth' (发 fa).

Additionally, the word 'die' (死, si) has a very similar pronunciation to the number 4 (四, si) making 4 a very unlucky number.

Family Reunions

CNY is about family. Returning home to loved ones after a year away, celebrating and re-enacting traditions together. This is the most important holiday of the year for Chinese communities.

A time for family - Typical CNY Timeline

Before CNY

Families begin to make the often long journey home to be reunited with their loved ones.

Houses are cleaned from top to bottom in preparation to seeing in the New Year.

Shopping for food, decorations and presents takes priority, as the biggest shopping season of the year takes place.

CNY Eve

Together, families decorate their homes. Red and gold decorations are hung on doors and throughout houses. To learn about the origins of the decorations, read the story of the Nian.

In the evening the family will gather together to have their reunion dinner, made up of traditional dishes each with a meaning behind them. Read the CNY Food section to learn more.

Shou Sui (守岁)

Roughly translated as 'waiting for the year' this part of CNY Eve happens after the family reunion dinner. Family members sit together, sharing stories and reminiscing about the year gone by, while waiting for the new year to start.

Some people believe that if children Shou Sui with their family, it will mean a longer life for their parents.

Although midnight is often the marker for the new year, the hours between 3am and 5am (五更, Wu Geng) are also seen as the hours that separate the two years. A lot of Chinese will stay up the whole night to see themselves through Wu Geng and into the first day of the New Year.

CNY Day 1 - New Moon

CNY day 1 is about relaxing and spending time with family members. As the day goes on people will visit neighbours and friends and present them with CNY gifts.

Markets are also set up on CNY day 1. Decorated in red lanterns they sell food, drink, clothing, fireworks, decorations and small artworks.

CNY Day 2

Traditionally, this day is when married women will visit and spend time with their family.

It is said that on this day the God of Wealth travels back up to heaven, after being offered gifts on previous days.

CNY Day 3&4

If a family has suffered a loss in the last 3 years, these two days are spent visiting graves and paying respects to the dead.

CNY Day 5

Considered the birthday of the God of Wealth, families pay their respects to this god once more on CNY day 5.

Businesses normally reopen on this day, although it is not uncommon for some people to remain on holiday until CNY day 14.

CNY Day 6-13

Although a lot of people are back at work during these days, those who are not will continue to spend time with relatives and visit friends.

CNY Day 14

Today is the day before Yuan Xiao, or the Lantern Festival. Today people are preparing for the festival by hanging lanterns and other decorations around their homes and in the streets, or helping their children to make lanterns.

CNY Day 15 - Yuan Xiao(元宵) / Lantern Festival / Full Moon

Day 15 of CNY is the first full moon of the year. It has two names, Yuan Xiao, or yuan xiao jie, which roughly translates as the first night of the full moon, and the Lantern Festival.

As the last day of CNY, this festival signifies the leading away of lost and evil spirits, and cultivating positive relationships with good spirits and gods who bring the light to the world. The symbolism in this is found with the lanterns, which shape and light mirror that of the full moon, helping guide things to and from heaven.

The lanterns are displayed together and children traditionally form a procession, carrying their lanterns to temples.

The story of Nian and CNY

In Chinese, the word for New Year is Guo Nian. Literally translated it means to "pass over the year" or "overcome the year". Nian means year, but as the story goes, Nian was also a monster who terrorised a small village. One the first day of every year he would rampage through the village, eating crops, livestock and sometimes people. Over time the villagers discovered that Nian was scared of the colour red, loud noises and strange creatures. So they decided to decorate their houses in red, bang drums, let off fireworks and create costumes from paper and wood. Two fearless people wore the costume and danced when Nian appeared, with the rest of the villagers making as much noise as they could. Nian was scared off and the villagers were safe for another year. These traditions continue on today with decorations in red, bright lights, fireworks and the famous Lion dance all continuing to take place over CNY.

Colours of CNY

Red is a lucky colour in China, mainly due to the story of Nian. Like many cultures, gold represents wealth and prosperity. Red and gold are used together at CNY to bring families luck, wealth and a happy life in the new year.

Green is also a colour that holds important significance in Chinese culture and at CNY. Like gold, green represents wealth and prosperity, but it also is the colour of pine which as an evergreen represents a long and happy life.

Black and white are considered taboo colours, due to being synonymous with death and funerals.

Decorations

Upside-down Fu

Fu means good luck, fortune or happiness. The character for Fu is posted upside-down on people's doorways during CNY.

Paper cuttings are an important part of CNY decorations. The most popular form of paper cutting during CNY is the upside-down fu.

福 -> 倒

"Upside-down" (倒, dao), is a homophone for the word "to arrive" (到, dao). So by posting Fu upside-down, it means that good luck or fortune will arrive in the new year.

It is also common to see decorations of upside-down fish, this is because the character for Fu is similar to that for fish (Yu 鱼). To learn more about the symbolism of fish read CNY food.

CNY Couplet

The Dui Lian (对联), is a Chinese couplet or poem normally on doors. While the Dui Lian is permanent, the Chun Lian is temporary, hung on doorways for CNY only.

Chun Lian (春联)

Chun Lian are written in black ink on red paper. Comprising of three lines, the first is hung on the right side of the door, the second on the left and third on top. Traditionally the Chun Lian is a happy, uplifting message about the year to come.

Door Gods

Shen Tu (神荼) and Yu Lei (郁垒) are two Door Gods who guard the gates of hell and are ghost hunters, capturing evil spirits to stop them from harming people.

Men Shen (门神)

During CNY the Door Gods are normally posted on doors to ward off evil spirits and bring peace and luck to the family.

The story of the Chinese Zodiac

The Jade Emperor, the ruler of heaven, decided long ago that he wanted a way to measure time. On his birthday, January 9th, he called all the animals together and told them that they were to race in the river. After the first 12 animals to cross the river would have a year of the zodiac named after them. The cat and the rat, back then good friends, decided to ask the ox if they could ride on his back due to being bad swimmers. The ox, a kind animal, agreed readily. The ox was a strong swimmer and even with the cat and rat sitting on his back was soon in first place. The rat secretly was quite unhappy with his relationship with the cat, as the cat often bullied him. Nearing the finish line, the rat decided to push the cat in to the river so that the cat would have to swim. Just as the ox was about to win, the rat jumped off the ox and crossed the finish line. The Jade Emperor congratulated him as the winner and named the first year of the zodiac after him. The poor ox came second, followed by the tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and the pig. The cat, struggling to swim, finally finished the race but too late to be part of the zodiac. Since then the cat and the rat have not got along, which is why rats scatter whenever a cat comes near.

The year of the monkey

The ninth year in the Chinese Zodiac, people born in 1920, 1932, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992, 2004 and of course, 2016, are all monkeys!

The Chinese Zodiac is not only split into 12 animals, but also 5 elements: earth, gold/metal, water, wood and fire. These combinations change every 60 years and also contribute to personality traits. Birth rates tend to go up during period of the gold/metal element. The most popular animal and element combination is the Golden Pig, which is said to lead a happy and prosperous life.

Earth Monkey

1968, 1908

Frank, optimistic, and fearless.

Gold/Metal Monkey

1980, 1920

Smart, quick-witted, and confident, but also irritable and stubborn.

Water Monkey

1992, 1932

Smart, quick-witted, fond of being in the limelight, but haughty.

Wood Monkey

2004, 1944

Always ready to help others; compassionate, with strong self-esteem, but stubborn.

Fire Monkey

2016, 1956

Ambitious and adventurous, but irritable.

CNY Gifts

Red Envelopes

Hongbao are given as gifts throughout the year but are especially given out from parents and grandparents to their children on CNY.

Hongbao (红包)

Because red is synonymous with CNY, the envelopes are also red so that well wishes, good luck and happiness are passed on to the receiver.

Apples & Oranges

Fruit baskets are a very common gift for CNY. People often give apples or oranges as they signify safety and fortune, respectively.

Pingguo(苹果) Chengzi(橙子)

CNY Food

Fish

Fish (Yu) is a homophone of 'surplus' in Chinese. When fish is eaten for CNY, part is eaten on New Year's Eve and part on New Year's Day, symbolising a surplus of food and therefore lifestyle being transported from one year to another.

Yu (鱼)

Fish is also a homophone for Good luck (Fu) so it is not uncommon to also see upside-down fish decorations adorning doors.

Dumplings

The word Jiao also means 'to change', because of this dumplings are normally eaten at midnight to symbolise the changing of one year to another.

Jiaozi (饺子)

Dumplings also have a shape similar to that of the Chinese Ingot, a boat shaped gold piece that was the first currency in China, because of this the dumpling also symbolises wealth and prosperity for the new year.

New Year Cake

Niangao is a thick, sweet, glutinous rice cake that although is eaten throughout the year is most popular for CNY.

Niangao (年糕)

Niangao also sounds like 'year high' in Chinese, so is eaten to bring about higher income, a promotion, healthy growth of children and generally bring a positive year.

Rice Dumplings

Traditionally eaten during the Lantern Festival at the end of CNY, rice dumplings are made from glutinous rice flour and water and served as a dessert in a sweet soup.

Tangyuan (汤圆)

Tangyuan is a homophone with union in Chinese, so is often associated with family reunions and gatherings, which are the most important themes of CNY.

Spring Rolls

Originally, these were filled with freshly grown spring vegetables and eaten to celebrate the beginning of Spring.

CNY Main London Events

3 Feb-6 Mar Magical Lantern Festival Chiswick House

6 Feb CNY Family festival day National Gallery

10 Feb Deb8 China China Exchange

13 Feb CNY Festival V&A museum of childhood

13 Feb CNY Celebration Rich Mix Shoreditch

17 Feb A Concert of Chinese & indigenous songs and operatic repertoire China Exchange

22 Feb Lantern Festival / Yuan Xiao Official end of the Spring Festival

5 Feb-14 Feb Circle Lines Exhibition China Exchange

8 Feb Chinese New Year Official start of the Spring Festival

13 Feb New Cola Project China Exchange

13 Feb CNY Festival National Maritime Museum

14 Feb CNY Parade & Festival Trafalgar Square

19 Feb Oriental Silk Documentary China Exchange

23 Feb Submit your #snapCNY photo by today to be in with a chance to have your photo displayed at our popup #snapCNY exhibition!

Trafalgar Square Parade & Festival

Over 250,000 people celebrate this free CNY all day event in Trafalgar square every year, the largest CNY event outside of Asia. The day starts with a lion dance parade through the west end, followed by a variety of performances on the main stage in Trafalgar square. The day ends with a spectacular acrobatic monkey themed performance.

Your #snapCNY

How will you celebrate CNY? Share your experiences and photos with us on Instagram using #snapCNY to be in the running to have your picture displayed at our popup #snapCNY exhibition in March.

With heartfelt thanks to @igerslondon for their support.

