



CHINESE NEW YEAR

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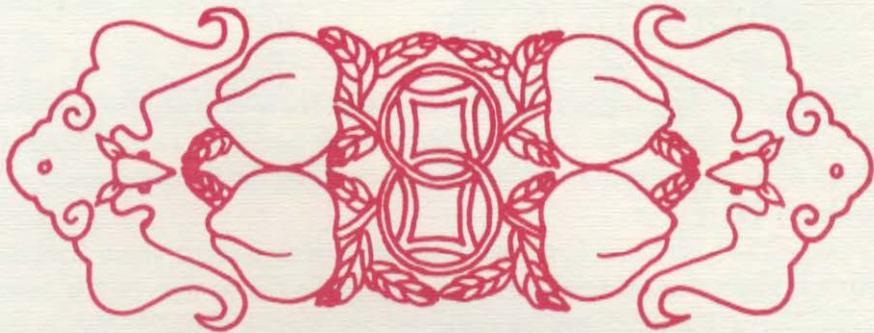


INTRODUCTION

This book was written to try to help foreigners understand the basic meaning of the Chinese New Year Season, rather than viewing it as a mish-mash of exotic practices with dragons and fire crackers.

It was also written for Chinese Americans who view their background with mixed feelings. As one girl said to me "Chinese New Year? Eat a lot and get screamed at, that's what." Eat a lot, of course; get screamed at because you don't know what's going on, so your grandmother gives you what-for. This book explains some of the content of family customs, so that their meaning will not be forgotten, or laughed at.

The stories and practices in this book are first hand experiences of a wide variety of people, young and old, from different parts of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and New York City. They represent the range of belief, not the "Right Way." China is an enormous country with 4000 years of recorded history, many different kinds of people and many different local customs, so there is no one way to celebrate New Year; there are thousands.



Lunar New Year is the greatest of the traditional Chinese holidays. It is a very happy time, with a feeling of warmth and richness (as much as possible) in every home. It is a family celebration, when as many of the family as possible will be together, traveling long distances to be under one roof. For children, New Year is a very special time, full of good smells from the kitchen, new clothes, and excitement. The habitual reserve of many families is set aside; the children can see the love for them that is usually hidden under strictness and formality. Everyone makes a big fuss over them, and scoldings are rare.

Lunar New Year does not now have a single religious meaning like Christmas, Ramadan, or Passover. It is a celebration of continuity and family life, a practical holiday for finishing old business and preparing for the future. New Year festivities are dedicated to good luck and good fortune, trying to make sure that the next year will go smoothly for the whole family.

The customs used to celebrate Chinese New Year come from many sources. Some of them are very old—the magical practices of farmers who depended on nature for their living. Over the millennia, China has also had at least three different state religions: Confucius' teaching 儒教 Daoism 道教 (often spelled Taoism) and Buddhism 佛教. Bits and pieces of each one became part of the beliefs of the people, and show up in Lunar New Year and other holidays.

Lunar New Year is a holiday season, rather than just one day. It can be said to begin on the 8th of the 12th month, and end on the 2nd day of the second month (lunar dates), with New Year's Day in the middle. The idea of such a long holiday season comes from the old days of farming. For 4000 years, most of the people in China were farmers; traditional Chinese customs and religious practices are all tied to farming beliefs and needs. In the winter, people could not work on the land because of the weather. They mended clothes, fixed tools, did hand work, and hoped their food would last until spring. So the whole two-month time was a sort of vacation, although few families could afford to actually celebrate so long. Now, it is only the time between New Year's Eve and Lantern Festival which is celebrated.

LEGENDS

There are several folk tales connected with Chinese New Year which explain how it came to be.

The basic idea behind New Year seems to be that the time of passing from the old year to the new is risky and full of danger. Actually the Chinese do not call it New Year but 過年 passing the year, or getting past the year.

There is one very ancient belief that there was a monster called Nien年 (which is the word for year), who came up, maybe from the ocean, at this time to destroy villages. One story says that people used to flee from their homes to avoid the monster, but a god in disguise stayed in a deserted village that night and frightened Nien away forever. But still people have the idea to stick together to keep Nien away—families stay home with the doors closed, so that Nien, if he is around, will pass them by at midnight.

The end of the year is also supposed to be the time when all the hundreds of gods go up to heaven to report to the Jade Emperor on earth's affairs. People always made sacrifices to the gods so that their report would be favorable. But once, one of the smallest of the gods, the God of the Lamp Frame was angry because people always ignored him in their sacrifices. So he went to heaven and told terrible lies about earth to the Jade Emperor. The Emperor

became so angry that he planned to destroy the world. All the people were in fear and expected to die that night. But at midnight the temple bells began to ring; the world was saved by Kuan Yin 觀音 the Goddess of Mercy. New Years celebrations commemorate this escape from destruction with a mixture of thankfulness and fear. This story is Buddhist in origin.



CUSTOMS

Many of the special things that people usually do during the New Year Holidays are actually clever ways of making good luck.

Red is the special color for good luck for the Chinese. Brides are always married in red, women and children wear red for the New Year celebrations, and all the special things for New Year's are red: cards, lucky money envelopes, paper for writing lucky sayings etc.

During the New Year season, people are extra aware of all the possibilities for puns in the Chinese language. They are careful to say the right things and avoid those that sound unlucky. They also chose foods that look or sound like something lucky.

People write many kinds of lucky sayings on red paper and put them on the walls of the house. 祿 (prosperity) and 福 (fortune) are the most popular. The character 福 is often put on the wall upside down so people will say "Oh, 福倒了" meaning "fortune is upside down" but which sounds the same as 福到了 meaning "fortune has arrived." Longer lucky sayings are also put in important places around the house. 常滿 which means "Always full" may be put on the place where the rice is kept. 出入平安 which means "In and out in peace" would be put on the doors. There are also many traditional lucky couplets 春聯 which are written on red paper and pasted on the door posts.



The Door Gods keep evil from entering the household.

On New Year's Eve the children will write 財神到 (the god of riches arrives) on pieces of paper and go to all the houses and knock on the door. Of course, no one would tell the god of riches to go away again, so everyone opens the door and has to give the children money. Or sometimes people will just write 福 (fortune) on a piece of paper and go to the houses and ask if people want to buy "fortune." Naturally everyone buys.

Flowers are an important symbol of good luck. In many cities, especially in the south where the weather is warm, great flower markets open with potted plants and flowering branches for sale. In Hong Kong there are also enormous flower shows with prize plants on display. People believe that the size and abundance of the flowers will foretell their luck for the year. Everyone has flowering plants at home. Businessmen especially take care to have many plants with big flowers in the store or office. Favorite plants are the narcissus, and flowering branches of plum or peach.



A custom very popular with children and young people is the practice of giving **紅包** red envelopes of lucky money called **壓歲錢** "press on the year money" or **利市**. All the married people have to give lucky money to their unmarried relatives. The parents give the red envelopes to their children on New Year's Eve. In some parts of China, the money and a tangerine should be kept under the pillow until Lantern Festival on the 15th of the first month. But often children do not wait; they just spend the money and eat the tangerine.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

TWELFTH MONTH 十二月

The whole 12th month is the time for paying back debts, and collecting money owed. Everything must be paid by sunrise on New Year's Day. If a person can not pay, he can try to avoid his creditors, even by leaving town. If the money has not been collected by New Year's Day, he is safe until the next collection time. New Year's was very hard for most people in the old days, because all the poor farmers lived on credit.

TWELFTH MONTH, EIGHTH DAY, LAH BA 臘月, 臘八

"Lah" is the old name for the twelfth month. It means "hunting"; after the farm work was finished, people would hunt animals to get some meat. This month is the time for preserving and smoking meats. The Chinese have many kinds of preserved meats like: lah chang 臘腸, a yummy anise-flavored sausage, preserved duck and chicken, pigs' ears and feet and so on.



TWELFTH MONTH, TWENTY-FOURTH DAY

This is the day that the stove god is sent to heaven to report on the family. The stove god is one of the most important household gods. The built-in brick stove, big enough for the whole family to sleep on in winter, was the center of life in a traditional house. The stove god is represented by a colored woodcut of a handsome young man, or sometimes just a square of red paper with 灶君 (stove god) printed on it. He is supposed to take care of household luck for the family. On this day, the family eats things made of 糯米 (sticky rice). They offer some to the stove god hoping that since it is so sweet and sticky it will keep his mouth all stuck together so he can't make a bad report. Sometimes they offer him wine to make him a little drunk.

The old picture of the god is taken off the wall and taken outside and burnt. Sometimes it is put in a little straw model of a carrying chair and burnt; sometimes hay is burnt so his horse will have something to eat on the trip. Sometimes this is done by the man of the house so the god's wife won't be jealous. The fire is lit again from the ashes of the picture. The god comes back to the house on New Year's Eve.

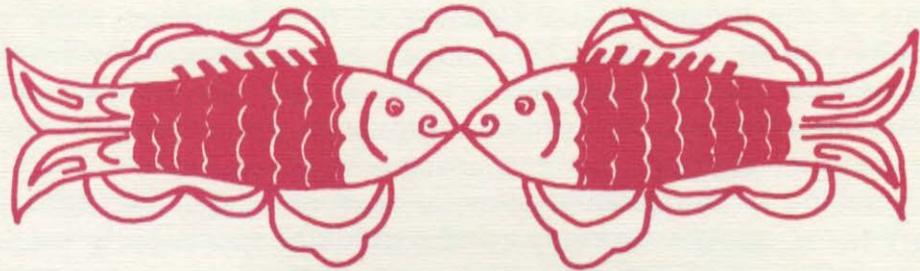
SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE NEW YEAR

The last few days before New Year's Eve are very busy. This is the time of the biggest house cleaning of the year; everything is washed, swept and tidied. This, of course, is so the house will look its best for all the company, but also so that the gods can be welcomed back in honor. No cleaning can be done during the first few days of the year.

Cooking for the holidays often takes several days. The Chinese love to eat, and they are very good at it. All the special lucky foods must be prepared for the big dinner on New Year's Eve. There must also be pastries and sweets to offer all the visiting relatives and guests in the first 2 days of the year.

Foods are considered lucky either because they look like something desirable (such as money) or because they are a kind of eatable pun (their name sounds like a lucky word).

People eat 餃子, a boiled meat pastry, because it looks like 元宝, the old Chinese silver money. Tangerines are one of the main lucky foods, because their name sounds like 吉, meaning lucky. Apples are also good, because their name 蘋果 sounds the same as peace.



People eat special New Year's cakes because to say 年糕, (every year there is cake) sounds just the same as 年高 (every year things are getting higher, better.) People always eat fish, because to say 年年有魚 (every year we have fish) sounds like 年年有餘 (every year we have extra . . . food, money, happiness etc.) There is a soup to eat on New Year's Day which has four special things in it:

紅棗 (sounds like 早, meaning early, or soon)

花生 (生 means to give birth)

桂圓 (sounds like 貴 meaning precious)

蓮子 (子 means son)

So when you put the four sounds together, it means "soon to give birth to dear son."

Some of these things are included on the trays of sweets and nuts and put out for guests to nibble on. The trays usually have 9 compartments, because nine sounds the same as 久 meaning a long time.

NEW YEAR'S EVE 除夕

The house cleaning and cooking must be completed. Some families go in the afternoon to the flower markets or flower shows.

The stove god is welcomed back by installing a new picture in the kitchen.

The ritual of offering to the spirits of the ancestors begins. It varies a lot from family to family. The head of the household will go outdoors and shoot fire crackers to frighten evil spirits away. Then he will burn incense and paper spirit money to call the spirits of the ancestors. The paper money is so that the spirits can buy the food and clothes they need to live in the spirit world. Some families then seal the doors with strips of red paper which are not broken until the next day. Then, indoors, the family will set up a spirit tablet which is a piece of wood with the names of the ancestors (on the father's side) written on it. They will burn incense or red candles in front of it to call the spirits inside. All the dinner food will also be put on this altar as an offering to the ancestor's spirits. The family, starting with oldest down to the youngest, will bow in front of the altar to thank their ancestors for giving them life. Sometimes the father will go back outdoors and burn more incense and shoot more fire crackers to take the ancestor spirits outdoors again. If the family lives in an apartment, instead of going outdoors to call the spirits, they might burn incense in front of an open window so that the spirits can smell it and come to the altar.



Then the family takes the food off the altar and eats it for dinner. This is the biggest dinner of the holidays, called 年夜飯 or 團年飯. It welcomes the New Year with plenty, so that the rest of the year may be plentiful too. The dinner should be ten courses, or at least an even number. There is always chicken; it should be whole, since it is first used as an offering. And there must always be a fish. There must be enough for leftovers which is lucky; also the family will not have to cook the next day.

The family will stay up until midnight and at that time will bow to the grandparents or head of the household to thank them for giving them life, and then bow to each other. This can be a very formal occasion with each person in turn going before the household head, and making 3 bows and 9 kowtows 叩頭 (a deep bow with the head all the way to the floor.)

At midnight, everyone goes outside and shoots off fire crackers.

Waiting up till midnight is called 辭歲 "saying goodbye to the year." Then after midnight begins 守歲, meaning "holding back the year." In the old beliefs this was the time when the monster Nien 年 was most likely to come. So the family stayed together with the lights on until dawn to keep Nien out.

NEW YEAR'S DAY 初一

On New Year's Day the first thing people should say should be some lucky words like 恭禧恭禧 (congratulations) 過年好 (The year passed well), 恭禧發財 (congratulations and good fortune) or 萬事如意 (ten thousand things will be as you wish.)

If the doors were closed with red paper the night before, there is a family ceremony to open them with fire crackers. There is often a ceremony outside to welcome the gods back to earth. Many families go to a temple the first thing in the morning to make offerings.

People believe that whatever happens on this day will set the pattern for the whole year. If the day is happy and prosperous, the year will be also. If there is any trouble, it will keep happening all through the year. So people are very careful not to say anything unlucky. It is bad luck to talk about death or sickness or to argue or fight. There is always a problem with the children, who are too young to be careful. If something bad is said, then you should say 大吉大利 (good luck and good fortune.) Sometimes parents will keep tissues to wipe the children's mouths, in case they say anything unlucky.

People must be especially careful not to break things. If something does break, there are lucky words to say like 碎碎平安, which means "pieces in peace," but sounds exactly like 歲歲平安 which means "every year is peaceful." Breaking a mirror is the worst

thing that can happen, because mirrors are usually round — the symbol of harmony and togetherness.

People do not clean house or, especially, throw any garbage out for fear of throwing luck out with it. Another reason for not cleaning is that this day is the Broom's Birthday, so it gets to rest all day.

All scissors and knives are supposed to be put away, so that the good luck won't be cut by mistake.

There is no cooking on this day. Some families eat no meat, so that no animal must suffer. They eat vegetables and the leftovers from New Year's Eve.



New Year's Day is the day for visiting relatives on the father's side. If the head of the house is the oldest son, then his family stays home and all the relatives come to visit them.

When people go out to visit on New Year's Day, it is good luck to walk or drive in a big circle. This is called 行大運 which sounds the same as "good luck."

Visitors always bring presents of sweets and fruits. The trays of sweets and pastries that were prepared by the family are put out, and everyone eats and drinks a lot.

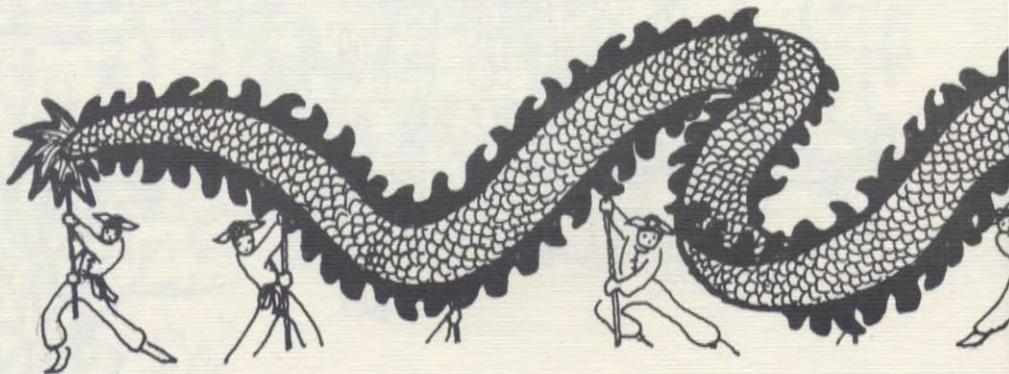
Everyone wishes everyone else good fortune. When the relatives say 恭禧發財 (hope you will get rich), the children and unmarried people can say 利市掂來 (give me the good things) and the relatives will have to give 紅包, the red envelope of lucky money. Relatives may say "Hope I do not have to give you this next year," to the unmarried people. This is a humorous way of wishing that they may get married soon.

In the old days in villages and towns, there was an exciting part of the celebrations called the New Year 廟會 which is like our church bazaar. Several times during the year, there were big bazaars around the temple lasting for several days. This was an opportunity for the people to buy pretty things not usually available, to meet friends, and get some entertainment. There were martial arts demonstrations, medicine men, puppet shows, story tellers, musicians, many different kinds of food and trinket peddlers. The children would love to go to see all the things and to eat, the young men looked at the girls, the adults socialized and spent a little money. The entertainers and peddlers were not local people, but some of old China's many unemployed, trying to make money any way they could, travelling from place to place. Nowadays, these bazaars are dying out.

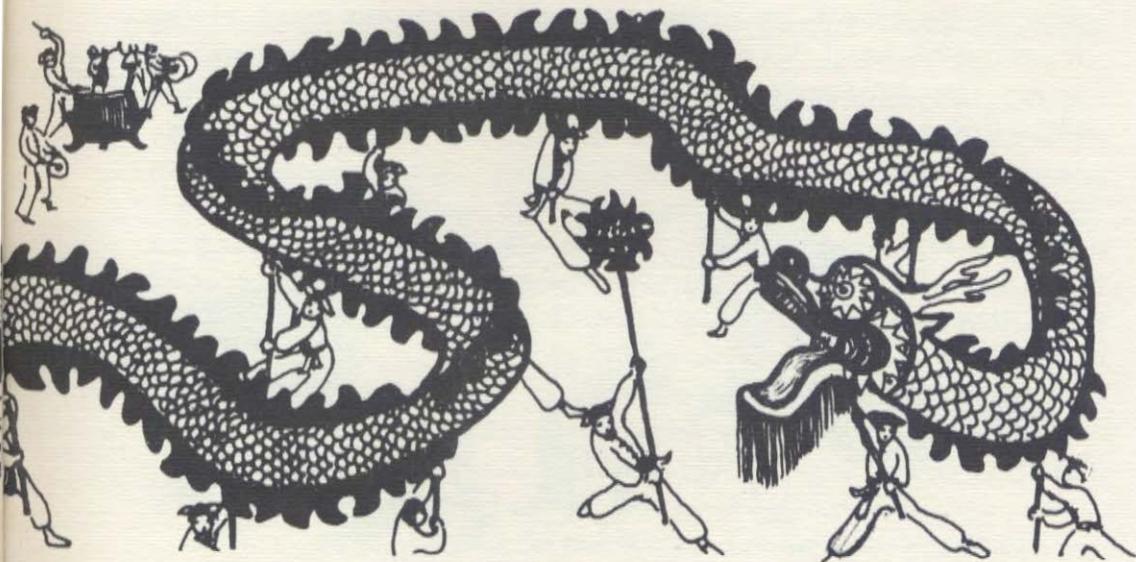


In the afternoon, in big cities and towns, are the big parades on the streets. Thousands of fire crackers are shot off, until the streets are red with the red paper wrappings. The noise from the fire crackers is supposed to drive away evil things and bad luck.

The parades include lion and dragon dances, as well as bands and characters from folk stories. A common sight is a person dancing with a little boat hanging around him, called 走旱船. This is from the saying - 帆風順 which means "one sail, a favorable wind" —smooth sailing in the New Year. There are often people dressed as a clam and bird from a moral tale about these two animals who were enemies and were both captured by a fisherman as they fought. Sometimes there is a giant on stilts 七爺 and his companion, a very small man, 八爺.



The most popular, of course, are the dragons and lions. The dragons are rarely seen in America, because they are very large and take many men to play them. The body is held up on sticks and rhythmically swung back and forth so that the dragon writhes down the street, chasing a glowing pearl or fire ball carried by another man. As many as one hundred men are needed to play the dragon; so it is often done by military associations.



The lions are the ones seen every place, in the parades or by themselves; they are often mistakenly called dragons, because the head is very stylized and does not look like a real lion. The most common kind in America and Hong Kong is the southern lion which is played by 2 people. One man is partly inside the huge papier maché head, and the other man handles the tail which is a long piece of decorated cloth. The lion chases his "teaser", a man in a round papier maché head, carrying a fan, who represents 弥勒佛 a fat and happy Buddhist divinity who loved animals. The lion dances to certain rhythms on a big drum and cymbals. He looks around the crowd, he rushes forward, raising his head, retreats lowering his head, his mouth opens and closes, his eyes and ears move. The steps are very stylized and the patterns are fixed. Playing a lion well requires a lot of training and practice.



The northern lion is quite different and looks more like a lion. Both men, the head and the tail, wear a costume covered with long shaggy hair forming the body. The lion is very playful, and does tricks led by his teaser, usually a small boy.

Lion dancing is a form of martial arts. There are often many lion clubs in a big city, and martial art schools will always have them. Chinese martial arts Wu Shu 武术, or Kung Fu 功夫, is a very dignified and sophisticated form, quite different from the grunting and bone-crunching now associated with Karate. There are empty hand forms, weapons forms, the lion dance and other forms.

On New Year's Eve, many lions roam the streets, dancing in front of stores. The shop keeper likes to have them come, because the lion brings good luck. The lion will dance to the noise of drums and fire crackers, and then the shop keeper will give them a red envelope of lucky money. Sometimes it is made difficult for the lion to get his money. He may have to dance on some piled up tables, or do a form called 採青, picking the green. A cabbage with a red envelope inside is hung from a second story window; the head of the lion has to jump onto another man's shoulders (without using his hands which are holding the heavy head), grab the cabbage in the lion's mouth, pretend to chew it, throw it up in the air and catch it. Everyone cheers and the drums beat a great roll.

Many lions may come by the stores during New Year's Day, so the shopkeepers have to pay quite a lot for their good luck. Also there are a lot of beggars in the streets and at homes who should

not be turned away. It would bring bad luck to be cheap on New Year's, and there are stories that the Gods travel in disguise on this day. The married also have to give lucky money envelopes to all the unmarried. So New Year is an expensive time for the shop keepers and married people, and a noisy and wonderful time for the young.

SECOND DAY 初二

This is the day that families go to visit the relatives on the wife's side. A young wife may take her children and stay with her parents for several days to pay respect.

THIRD DAY 初三

People should stay at home and not go out. This is the special day for the god of anger, and it is very easy to get into fights on this day.

FOURTH DAY 初四

All stores will have been closed for at least this long, and some open for business on the 4th day. Many businesses will be closed for several weeks for annual vacations and redecorating.

SEVENTH DAY, EVERYONE'S BIRTHDAY. 人日

Everyone knows about this day, but no one seems to know what it means. Usually people have a big dinner with family and friends. For many, this is the end of the New Year Festivities.



FIFTEENTH DAY, LANTERN FESTIVAL. 上元節·元宵節.

This is a very big celebration in some parts of China. Its date is the first full moon of the year. Lanterns are made, contests and parades held. The lanterns usually show famous historic or patriotic scenes and are carefully painted on silk. The special food for lantern festival is 元宵, dumpling of sticky rice with sweet filling.

SECOND MONTH, SECOND DAY. 二月二.

The last event which is thought of as part of the New Year season is the second day of the second month 龍抬頭 "the dragon raises his head." This is supposed to be the day of the first thunder of the New Year. After the thunder will come rain; the dragon means rain. This is the time when things start to grow again.

CHINESE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS.

Chinese beliefs do not seem to be a religion in the simple sense of the word. There is no one church, priesthood, or dogma. Rather there is a very complex assortment of popular beliefs which are the Chinese way of relating to the great human questions of right behavior, continuity, and death. In addition, Chinese thought is closely related to the needs of China's agricultural people. Many philosophical ideas have become more magical to fill their needs for weather prediction and divine propitiation. So Chinese beliefs have changed over the centuries to accept pieces from one belief, and pieces from another, retaining the ideas and practices necessary to farmers.

Through Chinese history, 3 different religious systems have been important. They can be distinguished in this way:

Confucius's teaching, not really a religion, is about social order, and how men must act in order to have a peaceful and just society.

Daoism is the philosophy begun by Lao Tz   and is concerned with reaching harmony with nature. Its popular form is a magical system of fortune-telling and alchemy.

Confucius and Lao Tz were contemporaries in the 6th century B.C., the time of Warring States. Confucius' teaching became one of the most important state doctrines as China became unified into one country under the Han.

Buddhism came to China from India in the 6th century A.D. Buddhists believe that a person may eventually be born again as an immortal, and escape from the cycle of earthly care, by practicing self-denial, and compassion.

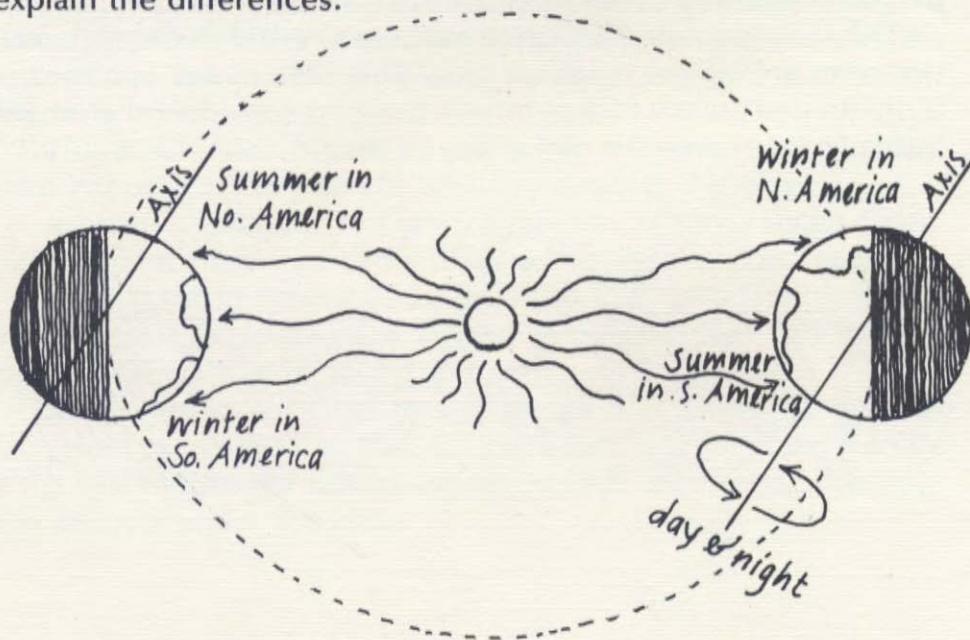
In addition, there is one idea which is uniquely Chinese. This is the idea of veneration for one's ancestors and elders, which we call ancestor worship. The feeling that one's highest duty is to those people, stretching back into history, who made one's life possible and that one's guiding principle must be to avoid shaming them is the central Chinese religious idea. This idea is not confined to those limited areas which people in the west consider religion, but instead, determines an entire way of life.



THE CHINESE CALENDAR

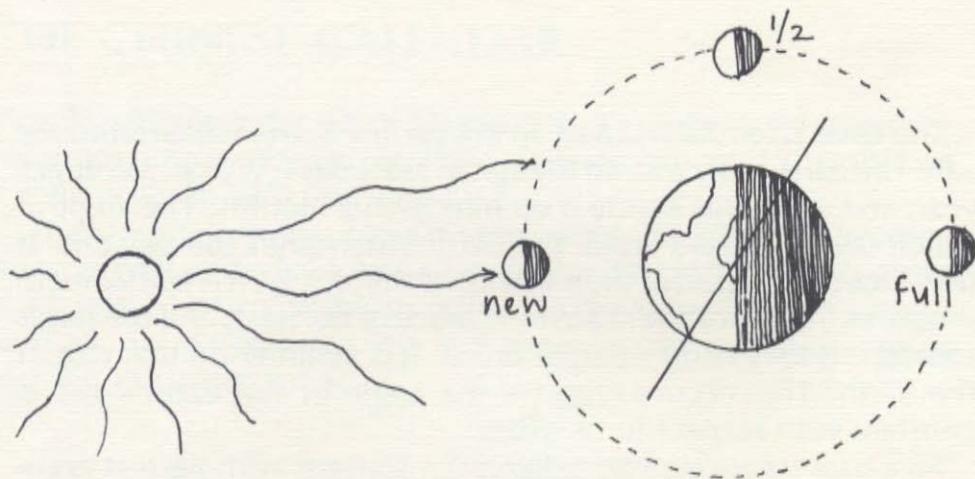
People often wonder why Chinese New Year seems to come at a different time every year. In 1976 it falls on January 31, in 1977 on February 18, in 1978 on February 7.

The reason is simple. The Chinese, and some other Asian countries, as well as the Jews, use a lunar calendar, and the West uses a solar one. The two calendars follow different natural phenomena and so, act differently. This is a short lesson on astronomy to explain the differences.



The solar calendar is based on the earth's movement around the sun. The earth goes around the sun in $365\frac{1}{4}$ days. We call 365 days a year, and arbitrarily divide it up into twelve months. The angle at which the sun's rays strike the earth determines the seasons. If they hit a certain part of the earth in a slanting way, it is winter there (because the atmosphere absorbs more of the heat, and the day is shorter). If they come straight down, it is summer on that part of the earth. This occurs because the angle of the earth's axis is constant with respect to its orbit.

So a true solar calendar reflects the seasons with perfect accuracy. But the change in the length of day, and of the angle of the sun's rays is difficult to observe without some fairly sophisticated measuring equipment. Witness the fact that the solar calendar is only about one thousand years old. What did people do to keep track of time in the thousands of years before that? They used a lunar calendar.



The lunar calendar is based on the visible movements of the moon circling the earth. The moon circles the earth, changing from new moon to full moon to new, in about $29\frac{1}{2}$ days. However, twelve lunar cycles produce only $12 \times 29\frac{1}{2} = 354$ days. That is, the lunar year comes out $11\frac{1}{4}$ days shorter than the solar year, and has no relationship to the seasons. You can imagine what would happen if the lunar calendar was allowed to fall behind the solar year at the rate of $11\frac{1}{4}$ days per year. In three years, you would lose $33\frac{3}{4}$ days, or more than a month, and March's winds would come in calendar April. In a dozen years, May's flowers would be blooming in calendar September, and the whole calendar would be useless. It certainly didn't take people using a simple lunar calendar very long to figure this out.

To make the visible lunar cycle fit in with the seasonal solar cycle, the Chinese use a leap year solution, just as we do. We only need to add an extra day every four years to use up the accumulated quarter days ($365\frac{1}{4}$ days is the actual length of the earth's orbit). The Chinese wait 30 lunar months, and add a whole month. The leap month 閏月 may come at any time during the year except the 11th, 12th, or 1st month, and is just a repeated month. (Fifth Month, Leap Fifth Month, Sixth Month, . . .) So the leap year is thirteen months long.

This leap month technique keeps the lunar and solar calendars approximately together, thereby keeping the visible and seasonal cycles in harmony. The size of the periodic adjustment used, the Leap Month, explains why Lunar New Year moves around so much with respect to our calendar.

Although the lunar calendar may appear complicated, it is actually much more useful in an illiterate agricultural society. It does not require a printed calendar, nor people who can read one, in order to predict when the weather should get warm, or when to plant. It also predicts the tides. Any farmer or fisherman can look up into the sky, tell if the moon is new or full, and keep track of twelve of these cycles. The only special equipment required is a local wise man to announce when a leap month must be added. (The wise man, of course, got his information from the Imperial Observatory.)



The Chinese calendar consists of twelve months, some of 29 and some of 30 days, with an occasional repeated month in Leap Year. The month names are First Month, Second Month, and so on. There were also traditional descriptive names for the months which are no longer used. The months were not divided up into weeks.

There were 24 solar dates added into each year's calendar to mark the equinoxes, solstices, and in-between times with names like Clear and Bright 清明, Grain Rains 穀雨, Summer Begins 立夏. These functioned as weather markers, and were a later refinement in the calendar, dating from the Chin Dynasty 秦代 (2nd century B.C.).

Many people know that each year in the Chinese calendar has an animal from the Chinese zodiac associated with it. 1976 is the Year of the Dragon, 1977 the Year of the Snake, 1978 the Year of the Horse. There are twelve of these animal symbols; their proper order is Rat 鼠, ox 牛, Tiger 虎, Hare (Rabbit) 兔, Dragon 龍, Snake 蛇, Horse 馬, Sheep 羊, Monkey 猴, Cock (Rooster) 雞, Dog 狗, Boar (Pig) 猪.

This designation is also useful for referring to other years: "In the year of the Rat we moved to the city". Traditionally, there was no assigned reference point for the calendar (like the birth of Christ), so one could not say "In 1972 we moved to the city."

There is another system of numerology which the Chinese use for counting hours, days, and years. This is a cycle of sixty arrived at by combining two counting systems: the ten Heaven's Stems 天干, and the twelve Earth's Branches 地支. (The Branches also correspond to the animals of the zodiac.) The cycle of sixty years 甲子, is used for keeping track of time on a large scale, as we use "century".

As you can see, the Chinese Lunar Calendar is the basis of a fabulous complex of seasonal, historical, astrological, poetic, and religious information. Its use is dying out as life becomes more city-oriented. Now it is mainly consulted as an almanac for determining lucky days.



