

新年平安

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE OF SOME CHINESE NEW YEAR TRADITIONS AND PRACTICES



Introduction

The Americans have their Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November every year in remembrance of God's goodness and faithfulness and the good harvest during the times of the Pilgrim Fathers in the early 17th century when the pilgrim fathers first came to America on Mayflower. In the same vein, the Chinese too has their Chinese New Year celebrations. The Chinese culture has more than 4,500 years of rich human civilization and its mores, beliefs and norms and culture are deeply rooted in symbols, traditions and festivals. The Chinese New Year is ushered in this coming month and will last for the next 15 days and there are some traditional practices that will normally accompany it for most Chinese households. There are some good oriental traditions that we can keep a Christians but some of our Chinese New Year beliefs and celebrations can be superstitions and are earth bound and focus too much on our temporal earthly life and tangible success. As Christians, as much as we value our culture, we must also seek to understand the symbols of our culture in the right perspective and be careful not to practice those elements that do not accord with Holy Scriptures which is the God inspired standard of our faith. We must put God first before our culture, and honour God in the centre of our culture at the same time. It is also important that we do not lose the non-religious part of our cultural heritage as Chinese Christians, while not compromising our celebration with materialistic or religious beliefs and experiences that are superstitious and hence displeasing to God. Let us consider a few of them.

The Chinese Lunar Calendar

Background and Concept. The Chinese animal signs are a 12-year cycle used for dating the years. They represent a cyclical concept of time, rather than the Western linear concept of time (the latter is correct). The Chinese Lunar Calendar is based on the cycles of the moon, and is constructed in a different fashion than the Western solar calendar. In the Chinese calendar, the beginning of the year falls somewhere between late January and mid-February. The Chinese generally have adopted the Western calendar since 1911, but the lunar calendar is still used for festive occasions such as the Chinese New Year. Many Chinese calendars will print both the normal calendar dates and the Chinese lunar dates.

The Twelve Animal Signs and the Chinese Zodiac Chart

Astrology is one of the ancient occultic practices or philosophies still in existence in China. Some estimate it to be more than 3,000 years old but recent study of more esoteric beliefs place it further back into the clouded past of human history. In ancient China, and up till today in many countries, there is a belief that Astrology can be used to predict what will happen to people's lives, fate of countries, the outcome of wars, business and economic trends and much more.

Our calendar is dated from the birth of Jesus Christ, for example, AD 1977 means 1,977 years after the birth of Christ (although Christ was born about 4 B.C.). This represents a linear perception of time, with time proceeding in a straight line from the past to the present and the future. In traditional China, dating methods were cyclical, meaning something that is repeated time after time according to a pattern. A popular folk method which reflected this cyclical method of recording years is the Twelve Animal Signs. Every year is assigned an animal name or "sign" according to a repeating cycle: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Boar. Therefore, every twelve years the same animal name or "sign" would reappear.

From a source, we learnt that Chinese Astrology is organized according to the Twelve Animals Signs. One Chinese legend attributes the creation of the animal signs to the semi-mythical Yellow Emperor in 2637 B.C. According to another legend, a certain deity summoned all the animals to come to him before he departed from Earth. Only 12 animals came to bid him farewell. As a reward, he named a year after each one in the order that they arrived. First came the Rat, then the Ox, the Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. Thus,

we have 12 signs today. There is a belief that the animal ruling the year in which one was born is believed to exercise a profound influence on his or her life. These are all speculative and unfounded myths or legends.

Horoscopes have developed around the animal signs, much like monthly horoscopes in the West which have been developed for the different moon signs, Pisces, Aries, etc. For example, a Chinese horoscope may falsely predict that a person born in the Year of the Horse would be, "cheerful, popular, and loves to compliment others". These religious horoscopes though popularly believed, are not sound or true at all and as Christians, we are saved by grace and the bible teaches that we made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) (and not in the image of animals) we do well to avoid using them and to stop telling people our so-called animal's zodiac signs which are both unbiblical and superstitious in nature and can be misused by some in courting agencies or religious quacks in foretelling our fates.

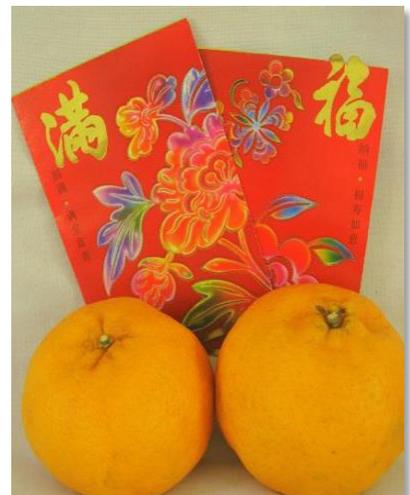
Note that the practice of astrology is strongly forbidden in the Bible, Isaiah 47:12-13 reads, *"Stand now with thine enchantments, and with the multitude of thy sorceries, wherein thou hast laboured from thy youth; if so be thou shalt be able to profit, if so be thou mayest prevail. Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels. Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee."*

The occultic use of astrological charts or pentagram or the worship of the celestial bodies like the moon, sun and stars to predict behaviour, improve businesses, relationships or the future are strictly forbidden in the Bible. (2 Kings 23:5-7) That include the consultation of a geomancer or feng shui master, black magic, tarot cards, witchcraft, bomoh or shaman as well (Deuteronomy 18:10-13). As Christians, let us be careful and not compromised our faith nor propagate a false and superstitious belief or practice that is clearly disallowed in the word of God (Leviticus 19:26-31).

Greetings and "Ang Pows"

In the festive spirit of wishing one another blessed new year, there is the giving of "ang pows" which are red packets with money to children or to our parents or grandparents or other children. This is a good practice of giving, showing love and filial piety that can be continued by believers. In giving "ang pows", it is acceptable as we understand it as a gesture of love, appreciation and gratitude for our loved ones and that we are not distributing symbols of gold and wealth, but that they are meant to show God's grace and blessings in our lives.

The colour "red" is indifferent for Christians and one should not be enamoured with materialistic prosperity, wealth and worldly success. For us as Chinese Christians, we are not obsessed with any colour or the colour "red". In our Chinese New Year greetings, as Christians it is not appropriate or meaningful to wish people "Gong Xi Fa Cai" which is a reference to wishing tangible or financial wealth for that person, but 新年平安 or peace in the new year or eternal joy from God, is more appropriate. We have reason to be joyful and happy because we are blessed of God by His saving mercies and pardoning grace. We have Christ as Lord and Saviour of our lives who died for us, redeemed us and rose from the dead, having destroyed sin and death, and brought everlasting life into our lives. For the Christian, only Christ is the basis and meaning of our new hope in the new year. That is why we have lasting peace, eternal hope and great joy in our hearts today. We are to constantly testify, give thanks and recognize how blessed we are by God Almighty, who is the Giver of eternal life and all good things (1 Timothy 6:17). He is the only source of everlasting hope and even if we should experience pain, failure or tribulations during the year, we know that His grace will be sufficient for us (2 Corinthians 12:9). God must not be forgotten and Christians are to make a conscious effort to honour Him during our Chinese New Year celebration, as Deuteronomy 8:18 says, *"But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day."*



The Christian life is founded on our saving relationship with Christ by faith through grace alone in Christ and not by works or our assets or wealth (Ephesians 2:8, 9). We can exchange or give oranges which do not symbolize "gold" for us but a fruit for eating; the colour "red" is not required in our dressing; "ang pows", which are red packets with money in it, is given to wish the person well. Some others even hang paper pineapples in their homes. Why? Because in Chinese the pineapple is called "ong lai", and this means "prosperity comes to our homes" in Hokkien and we do

not need to practice that or invert the Chinese word for prosperity, "福", upside down on the wall "to bring in the prosperity" as practiced by some. During Chinese New Year, some folks may resort to gambling or card games or mahjong too (now with the presence of the Integrated Resort as well). We often see pictures of gold bars, to symbolize prosperity and wealth. This is forbidden or to be avoided by the Christians as it nurtures a covetous spirit which is warned by God in the 10th Commandment (Exodus 20:17; 1 Timothy 6:6-10).

House Spring Cleaning



On the first day of Chinese New Year, there is a superstition that we are not supposed to sweep the house for it means it will sweep away the "prosperity" or "luck" which is a false notion. The once a year spring cleaning of the house is a laudable practice. This is normally done one or two weeks before the Chinese New Year and one would throw away old unwanted things and spruce up the whole house till it is spick and span and one is ready to receive guests and visitors to the home. It also has the sense of a new beginning, which we do not accept the false belief or superstition by some of getting rid of the "bad luck" of the previous year. Some may hide their brooms because brooms and sweeping are all "bad luck"; they will sweep out the "good luck for the year" which is unnecessary. (Interestingly, some Christians do their house cleaning even into the morning of the first day of the Chinese New Year and there is nothing wrong with that.) Some say that we also should only speak sweet words and eat "nian gao", i.e. sweet cakes, fried with eggs and flour which is supposed to sweeten the mouth of the "kitchen god" who will return to heaven to give a report, according to a popular folklore which is unproven and is not supported by scripture. Some superstitious Chinese

even believe that we cannot break anything on the first day because it will be "bad luck" for the rest of the year and there is no biblical basis to accept this superstition.

Reunion Dinner

We also have the good practice of the Chinese tradition of the family reunion dinner (团年饭) on the Eve of the Chinese New Year where the family gathers to celebrate the reunion and build up the unity of the family (many workers will travel for thousands of miles in China to be with family for this). This is commendable and worthy of our continued observance. The reunion dinner on the eve of Chinese New Year is perfectly in order as it is a celebration of the renewal of our family and communal ties and enhance domestic unity, as all the members of the extended family return for a sumptuous home-cooked meal together (normally at home although now some families eat out in a restaurant too). Family bonding and unity are encouraged in the Bible. These are some of the good traditions that we should keep today as we celebrate Chinese New Year. As for the matter of the "loh hei" or the tossing up of the raw fish dish and the ingredients as high as possible before eating so as to "symbolize that one can get more business in the new year", it is a thing indifferent (for it is not necessary nor an evil), but the eating of the fresh raw fish and its ingredients is fine during the dinner. One may say grace and give thanks to God for your dinner and enjoy your meal too.



Lion Dance and Firecrackers

For some Chinese businessmen, the traditional lion and dragon dance to bring good luck by prancing lions and dancing dragons to chase away the "bad omen" in some business or shops is a must during the Chinese New Year season. As much as we respect others, this is not advisable for Christians as most, if not all of them, have their origins in martial arts groups which are mainly religious in nature.

The use of loud sounding fire crackers (and by tradition, it was believed that it will ward off the evil monster "nian", "年") by young and old is a thing of the past for Singapore, but it is still widely practiced in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and some other Asian countries. The reason why it is banned in Singapore is because there are many accidents

associated with firecrackers that have caused grievous hurt to children and even sparked off fires leading to the untimely deaths of some. It is a thing impractical and from the point of safety and its questionable origins, its practice is not to be encouraged.

Family Visitation

However, we should keep up the good tradition of visiting families and relatives to renew ties; and exchange oranges and greetings, during the Chinese New Year season and exchange "ang pows" for the children, wishing them God's blessings and peace to the home. They are meaningful social family encounters and edifying gatherings of our Chinese culture. When we wish somebody "Blessed or Peaceful Chinese New Year", we are aware of our well-being to depend on the sovereign God and to live in a manner worthy of our calling as Christians as well. For us, it is a seasonal celebration of the deeper meaning of "Xin Nian", "新年", a new year, as it represents a new year of new beginnings, opportunities, hope and joy to serve and glorify God. Why? Because the God of the Bible who is our Redeemer is the reason and foundation of our joy for the new year and we are to depend on Christ alone, "therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Do not be afraid to witness for Christ and give a tract to your relatives or invite them to church if there is an opportunity. Acts 16:31 says, "And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."



Relevant Biblical References

There are some relevant Scriptures to be read and contemplated during this festive season and consider the following:

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31) and give thanks to God. Let us rejoice and offer praise and thanks to God for this blessed season as there are much goodies and cookies to eat during this occasion (and exercise moderation in all things too).

"Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22) in this new year, we are to avoid covetousness, the worshipping of idols or the veneration of the dead, immoral dancing, drinking alcohol or any form of religious or moral compromise.

"Let us not therefore judge one another anymore: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." (Romans 14:13). Do not eat food offered to idols or participate in gambling (i.e. mahjong or buying 4D), drugs consumption, fighting, stealing, smoking or drinking alcohol during the festive season (1 Corinthians 8:9-13, Proverbs 20:1).

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13). We are to remember our accountability to God one day (2 Corinthians 5:10) and to show genuine love and concern for our family and to one another in good spirit during the festive season and let us also remember to worship and honour the Lord first.

"But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:12).

You may have a family member who may be involved in ancestral worship in the past and now he or she may be saved. If we compromise our Christian testimony in eating food offered to idols, we can potentially wound the weak conscience of this brother and thereby, sinning against Christ.

Conclusion

We thank God for our Chinese roots and some of our ancient Chinese fore fathers are affected by Christianity too, dating back to the 7th century BC when disciples of Nestorius first visited China and brought the gospel and a there is evidence that a Chinese emperor (i.e. monotheism) and some govt officials were enlightened spiritually during the Ming dynasty in the 16th century. May our gracious Lord grant us true joy, peace, grace and hope in this Chinese New Year season (which lasts for 15 days traditionally) as we pray for our family, relatives, church and nation and witness to our relatives and friends for Christ with the gospel of salvation (take and distribute a copy of the English or Chinese gospel tract from the church) and share Christ in an edifying manner and to honour Him before men and be a good testimony for Him during the festive Chinese New Year celebrations and the rest of the year till He returns. John 3:36 says "*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.*"

To God be the Glory during our CNY and have a Christ centered fulfilling year ahead!

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(NB. for deeper studies read *Faith of our Fathers, Finding God in Ancient China* by Chan Kei Thong, 2005.)