

Traditional Chinese New Year Customs, Part 2

February 03, 2006

(Minghui.org)

Open-door Firecrackers

On Chinese New Year's Day in the morning, the first thing people do after opening the door is set off firecrackers to bring great luck for the new year. This is called "open-door firecrackers." Pieces of red firecracker paper cover the ground like a brocade. This is called "full house red." The streets are covered with red, which creates an auspicious and jubilant atmosphere.

Bai Nian--Paying New Year's Call

Another important traditional activity is to visit friends, relatives and neighbors, to convey New Year greetings. This is called "Bai Nian"- paying New Year's call. This tradition is from the Han Nationality, which started in the Han Dynasty and became very popular during the Tang and Song Dynasties. Those who do not visit in person may use cards to send their greetings. From the time of the Ming Dynasty on, many families placed a red paper bag on the gate of their house to collect greeting cards. This is called a "gate book."

According to social conventions, there are perhaps four categories of reciprocally paying New Year's calls:

The first is visiting relatives. One must take presents on Chinese New Year's Day to one's parents-in-law's home. After entering the house, each person must first kowtow, three times, to the Buddha's statues and ancestors' pictures and memorial tablets. Then one

kowtows to every older family member. One may stay there for meal and play.

The second category is the courtesy visit. For example, when visiting at a friend or colleague's home, one only kowtows to the Buddha's statue. If the visitor and the host are of the same generation, one only bows with hands clasped. If the host is older than the visitor, the visitor should take the initiative to kowtow while the host should leave his seat to raise him up by the arm and repeatedly say, "forgo formalities," to show humility. This kind of visit should be brief. After exchanging conventional greetings the visitor should take his or her leave. The host should then choose a date to pay a return visit.

The third category is a visit of appreciation, which is to take an opportunity to deliver New Year's greetings and presents while visiting those who have done one a favor in the past year. They include teachers, doctors and others.

The fourth category is a drop-in visit. Neighbors who usually don't have much contact customarily go into each others' yards during the Chinese New Year and offer greetings, with hands clasped saying, "Wish you great wealth!" "May everything be smooth in the New Year!" The visitor only stays briefly in the host's house without exchanging excessive courtesies.

In ancient times there was a difference between paying a New Year's call (Bai Nian) and extending New Year greetings (He Nian). Paying a New Year's call is to deliver greetings to one's elders, while extending New Year's greetings is the reciprocal greeting among people of the same generation.

Paying a New Year's call is a traditional Chinese custom. It is a way for people to discard the old for the new, and mutually express their best wishes. In ancient times, "paying new year's call" originally meant to greet and celebrate the new year with one's elders, including kowtowing to the elders, wishing them a happy new year, good health, good life and so on. When meeting relatives and friends of the same generation, one should salute and greet them as well.

In ancient times, if there were too many neighbors, relatives and friends to personally visit in turn, a person might have dispatched a servant to deliver cards to pay New Year's calls. These are known as "flying cards." Families usually placed a red paper bag by the main house gates with the words "meets the luck" written on the front of the bag to collect the "flying cards." This custom started with the upper classes in the Song Dynasty. Rich people use a "gate book" to record visitors' information and "flying cards" received. Today, people send New Year's greeting cards, which is a variation of the original "flying card" delivery of ancient times.

The upper class literary intelligentsia used cards to send New Year's greetings to one another. At that time the literary intelligentsia was a wide circle of friends. It was time and energy consuming to pay all the New Year's calls in person. A special way existed to contact those with whom they were not too close; they used a specific kind of writing paper, printed with a plum blossoms design and cut into two-inch wide and three-inch long cards. They wrote the recipient's name, address and congratulatory words on it, and asked servants to deliver this personalized card instead of paying a personal New Year's call. In the Ming Dynasty, people used greeting cards to pay their respects, which took the place of paying a personal New Year's call. Greeting cards are a convenient

and practical way to send regards and keep in touch, one that is still popular today.

Probably from the Qing Dynasty on, paying a New Year's call added the formality of "group respect" in which people gathered in groups to celebrate and salute one another at the beginning of the New Year.

Paying New Year's calls lasts until the Lantern Festival, which is January 15 of the lunar calendar. Visiting others' homes at night to express New Year's greetings is called "paying a night call."

Paying a New Year's calls after January 10 of the lunar year is called "paying a lantern call." If for some reason one cannot pay a New Year's call in time and one pays a makeup visit later, it is called "paying a late New Year's call."

Predicting the coming year

In old times people predicted the outcome of the year by the weather of the first few days of a new year. This is based on a book, "Year Prediction" by Dongfang Shuo of the Han Dynasty. It counts the first eight days of a new year. The first day is the day of the chicken, the second day is the dog, the third is the pig, the fourth is the sheep, the fifth is the cow, the sixth is the horse, the seventh is human, the eighth is grain. If the day is sunny, then the corresponding things will breed well and prosper in the coming year; if the day is cloudy, the corresponding will not prosper. The descendants follow this custom and think it is auspicious if the weather for the first ten days of a new year is clear and bright, without wind or snow. The descendants also developed a series of sacrificial offerings and celebrations. The custom includes no killing of chickens on the first day, no killing of dogs on the

second day, no killing of pigs on the third day, etc., and no execution of a death sentence on the seventh day.

Posting Pictures of Chickens

In ancient times people drew pictures of chickens on doors and windows to disperse ghosts and evil spirits. A book in the Jin Dynasty speaks of the heavenly chicken on Dushuo Mountain. When the first sunshine arrived at a big tree, the heavenly chicken crows. As soon as it crows, worldly chickens start to crow as well. Therefore, a paper cut of a chicken displayed during a new year actually symbolizes the heavenly chicken. Ancient myths also told that a chicken is a transformation of the Chongming bird. During Emperor Yao's time, a neighboring country paid tribute to the Chongming bird. The Chongming bird is said to exorcise evil spirits. Everybody welcomed the arrival of the Chongming bird. Nevertheless, the tribute ambassador did not arrive every year, so people put engraved wooden or brass casts of the Chongming bird on the gateway, or drew an image of the Chongming bird on windows and doors, to drive away the evil spirits and ghosts. Because the Chongming bird looks like a chicken, later on people gradually changed it to the picture of a chicken or chicken paper-cut and pasted it on windows and doors. Legend has it that this is how the art of paper cutting originated.

Ancient Chinese people especially valued the chicken and called it "bird of five virtues." It has a crown, which represents the virtue of art; its feet are good for fighting, representing military virtue; a chicken dares to fight the enemy, which represents courage; a chicken summons others after finding food, which is the virtue of kindness; a chicken reliably announces the dawn, which represents the virtue of trust. People not only use a paper-cut chicken as part

of New Year's celebration, but they also call the first day of the New Year "chicken day."

Gathering Wealth

There is another saying, that the first day of the New Year is "the broom's birthday." On this day one cannot use the broom; otherwise one might sweep away luck, suffer unexpected financial loss and bring in "the comet" which causes bad luck. If one must sweep the floor, one must sweep from outside to inside. This day one cannot splash water or dump trash, either, fearing that it brings suffering and unexpected financial loss. Today, many places also preserve this custom. People do a thorough cleaning on New Year's Eve, and on New Year's Day they do not use the broom or dump the trash. They prepare one big barrel to hold waste-water without splashing it outside.

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