

SOHO CLARION

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Chinese New Year

The Year of the Pig began on Sunday 18th February 2007. The Chinese use the lunar calendar, so the date of Chinese New Year varies, corresponding to the arrival of the new moon in late January or February. The calendar is made up of a cycle of 12 years, each named after an animal, so the next Year of the Pig will be 2019. Other Years of the Pig are 1911, 1923, 1935, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983 and 1995. It is predicted that everyone will enjoy a year of goodwill and prosperity in 2007.

A lot of the old rituals and customs are not adhered to in this modern time, but I came from a village in Hong Kong, where friends grew up together and similar age groups would try to observe as much as possible. These are some of my memories.

In the Twelfth Moon (or month) of the Old Year, families come together to make preparations for the New Year. Around the eighth day of the Twelfth Moon, women start to make cakes, dried fruits, sweetmeats etc. The making of savoury rice cakes stands out as the novelty for me. Every family has a different set of cake moulds made from hardwood. After lunch, all the women, followed by children, would go from house to house to a long bench placed in the most spacious area in the house. They sat down and started pounding on the moulds filled with rice and minced ingredients. Normally around 20 to 30 women would do this. Two or three women would then bake the cakes and we children ran around, stuffing ourselves with rejects. Some

families could require 1,000 pieces of cakes or more, and the preparation would continue until every household was properly stocked.

Sweet rice bars, with cane sugar, were more of a mystery to me, as these were made after dark when the children were asleep. My sister and I were once found peeping by our mother. For some reason, she could not bake to her usual high standard, so she blamed us for upsetting the Kitchen God. I was deeply remorseful.

To see the Old Year out, all books must be balanced and debts called in. All sweeping and cleaning must take place before New Year, as this is forbidden on the first and second days of the festival. All food must be pre-prepared before the New Year too, as implements such as scissors and knives must be put away to avoid cutting the 'luck' of the New Year. More euphemistic language is desired, and words which are thought to bring bad luck should not be uttered at all. The most common New Year decorations are red lanterns, and auspicious inscriptions signifying good luck, happiness, wealth, good health, prosperity, safety etc. Red and gold are the main colours. If you wish to upset a Chinese, use or wear white or blue.

We all used to sit up the night before to welcome in the New Year (*Shou Sui*) and bid farewell to the Old Year (*Tse Sui*). By doing that, we hoped to give longevity to our parents. We would wear new clothes and shoes, and bow to family members who would hand us children the Red Packet, full of lucky

money. The dinner at this time is for family only.


The first day of New Year is a fast day with no meat at all. (I still vigorously observe it, despite being a carnivore.) It's also a day to stay at home, with no visiting allowed. The celebrations began on the second day. Firecrackers dangled on a pole from the roof-top. When the lunch banquet was about to start, everyone - the family, friends and other guests - would gather outside the house and my father would put a lit match to the fuse. The noise, the sparkles and red debris descending, would send us children dancing around in excitement. Everyone was totally unaware of fire and health issues, and I cannot recall one single dangerous incident in all those years. I only remember laughter.

The seventh day is everybody's birthday. The fifteenth and last day is the Lantern Festival when every house would light brightly coloured lanterns. It's also a time for young ladies to go looking out for suitable young men. If one is spotted, she does not approach him but tells the family, who would then make the contact...


The China in London programme throughout the capital takes place until the end of March. Copies of the programme can be collected from Y Ming, 35-36 Greek Street.

Kung Hei Fat Choy/Gong Xi Fa Cai
(wishing you prosperity and wealth, in Cantonese and Mandarin)

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