

The Year of the Sheep

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It's Spring Festival time again. In 1911, the Chinese began to refer to the Lunar New Year as the Spring Festival since spring follows shortly after, and signals nature's rebirth and renewal. Whatever it may be called, it is for Chinese everywhere the most important and widely celebrated feast of the entire year. This festival is so important that people in the urban areas enjoy at least three days' holidays, and those in the countryside, an even longer break.



A time to renew family ties

The Spring Festival is a time for family reunions. Children who have been living far away, who left their family for work or for other purposes, are expected to come back to spend these most important days with their family. It is a time to renew friendships, to relax, to enjoy life, and to be renewed in mind and body.

Preparing to celebrate the New Year

One of the ancient customs in preparation for every Lunar New Year, and one that is still in practice today, is giving the house a thorough cleaning before the New Year celebrations begin. In olden times cleaning meant giving the house a good sweeping. This sweeping originally was meant to sweep out of the house all of the misfortune of the past year.

No Lunar New Year celebration is complete without food, drinks, flowers and lucky money. On New Year's Eve, most people stay at home in the evening, have the family meal together and usually often stay up very late. After dinner they watch television, or

play cards or mahjong into the wee hours of the morning. Some, late in the evening will make their way to the Flower Market to buy flowers at drastically reduced prices.

Celebrating the New Year

The first day of the Lunar New Year is really for special feasting and visiting relatives. The main meal is usually taken at the house of the parents. Since the woman upon marriage becomes an integral part of the husband's family, the main meal is usually taken at the home of the man's parents. On the other two days, friends visit each other and exchange their good wishes. There is also often an exchange of gifts. Tradition dictates that certain snacks are a must to have in the house for friends who might come to visit: lotus seeds, coconut strips, melon strips, and melon seeds. Sometimes today, these traditional sweets are substituted for chocolates and other sweets. It is also customary for business people to give their customers gifts. Some of the most common gifts are sausages, fresh fruit and wine.

The Chinese love flowers and a trip to the Flower Market means coming back home with the traditional Lunar New Year favorites: peach and orange trees. Flowers are a sign of good luck, provided of course, they open before the actual New Year's Day.

Another custom, cherished by children especially, is the giving of lucky money. Married people give lucky money in small red packets to all the children who often manage to collect quite a sum.

The Year of the Sheep

This year we celebrate the Year of the Sheep (yang), also called the ram, or the goat. The sheep is the eighth creature in the Chinese zodiac. It is the symbol of filial piety (xiao) since it kneels when being suckled by the mother. People born under the eighth sign possess the special blessings of prosperity and serenity.

Tradition holds that the Sheep is a symbol of tranquility and a lover of harmony. The Year of the Sheep at this time is good news for our world. If the Sheep lives up to its reputation, the year will bring peace to the world in spite of the many rumors of war all around us. The doves among ruling parties seem to get the upper hand during the Year of the Sheep and help to silence the warmon-

gers. With peace in the world and in our families, the Year of the Sheep foretells a year of closer family ties.

Creativity and art are signs of the Sheep

The sheep is also the patron of the arts. Those born in the Year of the Sheep are apt to be lovers of art and to be artists themselves. This characteristic is easily borne out by the many famous artists in various fields who were born in the Year of the Ram. Perhaps the most famous among these is Michelangelo, born in 1475. Then, there are numerous famous authors: Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, James Michener, Miguel de Cervantes, to name but a few. The Sheep can also boast of famous artists in the theatrical field: Laurence Olivier, Diana Ross, Rudolph Valentino, Catherine Deneuve, Federico Fellini, Elton John, Mick Jagger and many others. The sheep is also noted for its inventors like Orville Wright and Thomas Edison.

Other characteristics of the Sheep

Things are likely to slow down during the Year of the Sheep since the sheep is known for quiet ways and introspection. The sheep is shy, sincere, gentle, compassionate and easily overcome with emotion. He is, therefore, seen as the most feminine of all the signs of the Chinese zodiac. The Chinese believe that fortune smiles on those sheep people because of their kind heart.

The sheep is also a good provider. This gentle animal possesses all the essentials for anyone who comes to it in want. It can provide meat, cheese, milk, clothing and shelter. Sheep people are said to have a special lucky charm. They are loved by their wife or husband and equally popular with their in-laws.

The sheep, however, also have a mind of their own. Although tradition says that sheep people detest fighting,



they will get stubborn and silent in an argument and end up winning the day! Sheep don't always let you in clearly on what they may be thinking or what may be bothering them. They are often taken advantage of since they let people make unreasonable demands on them. They are kind and good-natured on the whole, being passive by nature they can't stand confrontation and legalities.

Compatibility and Sheep people

Sheep people get along well with the rabbit, monkey, dragon, rooster, snake and other sheep. Sheep people should avoid marrying serious, austere and unapproachable people like the ox and the dog who is too practical to put up with the sheep's slow, introspective ways and unimportant woes.

Christ as the Lamb

As a symbol of compassion, meekness and kindness, the sheep is also a symbol of Christ. He is both the Lamb and the Good Shepherd.

Allusions to sheep can be found throughout the whole of the Bible. Sometimes we are the sheep or the lambs, and sometimes Jesus is the Lamb or the shepherd. The symbols of the lamb and the caring shepherd are a rich source of biblical and theological imagery. The Bible gives the impression that sheep are vulnerable creatures. Sheep must be protected from wild beasts, bad weather and theft. Jacob speaks to Laban, "That which was torn by wild beasts, I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. Of my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or night (Gn 31: 39-40).

The Old Testament also describes the lamb as a sacrificial victim. In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, in a reference to Jesus, we read, "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (Is 53:7).

In the New Testament Jesus is the Lamb of God, "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (Jn 1:29). Jesus is also the sacrificial victim, the Paschal Lamb and the Victorious Lamb, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or

moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.” (Rev. 21:22-23). This is only one of the 28 references to Jesus as the Lamb in the Book of Revelations.

Sheep need to be led. Here we, the followers of Jesus, are the sheep and Jesus becomes the Good Shepherd leading the sheep, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9: 36).

We are the flock and Jesus is the Shepherd who cares for his sheep. “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mk 6:34). Jesus expects his bishops to be loving, compassionate, caring shepherds of his flock “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him a third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’... Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:16).

May the Year of the tender, compassionate Sheep bring all of our readers the blessings of peace, harmony and good fortune.

*I am nature's child
I trust and am rewarded by trust.
Fortune smiles upon my countenance
All things blossom
In the gentleness of my love.
I strive to find beauty in all I behold.
I am fair of face
And full of grace.
I am the sheep.*