LUNAR NEW YEAR: TRADITIONS AND TABOOS

A compilation by the Inclusion & Integration Unit, Student Affairs Office

Auspicious Fish The Mandarin word for “fish” (yu, 魚) is a homonym for “surplus” and is often served during the Chinese family reunion dinners held on the eve of Chinese New Year. During this meal, the fish must be served whole; the head and tail signify a beginning and an end and therefore represents completeness or togetherness. Often the last dish to be served, fish is symbolic of the host wishing his/her guests continual abundance.

The Teochew Chinese consider the rabbit fish (Siganus canaliculatus) – baitu yu, 白肚鱼 in Mandarin, or pek thor her in Teochew – as auspicious as it signifies good luck and prosperity. The rabbit fish breeds only once a year, coinciding with the seasonal Chinese New Year celebrations in January or February. Hence the silver-grey female fish, heavy with delicious roe, is a Chinese New Year delicacy.

Another popular Chinese New Year dish is raw fish, or yusheng (魚生), which signifies a wish for extra life and abundance. The dish is also eaten for good luck and prosperity on the seventh day of Chinese New Year, which is known as renri (meaning “day of man” or “day of humanity”). The fish is thinly sliced and tossed together with a mixture of shredded vegetables in a sweet, piquant sauce.

Financial matters Old debts are repaid before the eve of Chinese New Year, as it is considered shameful for one to start the New Year with any unpaid debts. After closing accounts for the year, traditional Chinese bosses may hand out bonuses to their workers.

Striking gold Mandarin oranges, or tangerines, are popular gifts during Chinese New Year. They are called kam in Cantonese, which is a homonym for “gold”. Its mandarin pronunciation sounds like ji, 吉 (lucky) and means “gifts of good omen”. Even numbers of oranges, representing good luck, are given to friends and relatives when visiting them.

Taboos to avoid during the Lunar New Year

Mind your language  The Chinese refrain from using foul language or speaking inauspicious words such as “die”, “bad luck”, “lose” or “sick” to prevent misfortune befalling members of the family. Some Chinese believe that if children are punished by their elders for bad behaviour during the New Year period, then they would be inclined to be boisterous and rebellious throughout the year.

No sweeping  The home is to be swept and cleaned by New Year’s Eve; bamboo leaves are traditionally used to sweep the floor as it is believed that this would drive evil spirits out. Sweeping on New Year’s Day is an absolute taboo as it is akin to having good luck swept out of the house. It is customary not to sweep, mop, scrub or wash on the first day of the Lunar New Year lest the good luck be swept away, with some even hiding their brooms.

Black is bad  Associated with bad luck and death, the colour black is avoided at all costs. Red, on the other hand, is deemed an auspicious colour and is worn by many women on New Year’s Day. Homes are splashed with crimson, with red hues appearing in the decorations, flowers, food containers, cushion covers and calligraphy scrolls.

Look out for our U.n.I Bite in 2020, where we cover the aspects of Family, Respect and Red Packets for Lunar New Year!

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