

Chinese galloping into Year of the Horse

Tomorrow will be the first day of the Year of the Horse as Chinese people say a goodbye to the Year of the Snake. Below, China Daily staff reporters Yu Nan, Wang Shanshan, Jin Bo, Zhou Wanfeng and Lu Chang report on how the Chinese people celebrate Spring Festival, explaining the traditions and idioms related to the horse. Four people born in the Year of the Horse also discuss their new year wishes.

'High-spirited' animal carries tradition

In Chinese folklore, a dozen animals are used to symbolize the 12 Earthly Branches. They are the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig.

Every year is assigned an animal in a 12-year repeating cycle. The last Year of the Horse was 1990, and the next one will arrive in 2014.

Legend says that in ancient times, the Emperor of Heaven summoned all animals to meet him on Chinese New Year. Twelve came, and he named a year after each one. He also announced that the people born in each animal's year would have some of that animal's personality.

Despite idioms based on the perceived characteristics of some animals — such as "short-sighted as a rat," "lazy as a pig" and "narrow-minded as a chicken" — all of them receive considerable respect in the year of their role.

Furthermore, nowadays the animal signs often serve as a way to indirectly ask people their age.

The horse is representative of a male god. In ancient times, people regarded the horse as a symbol of bravery, as they believed the mounted fighters' bravery would lead to victory in war. They used to keep small wooden or iron horse figurines at home for protection.

The horse also played an important role in the mythology of early China. It was closely associated with the dragon, as both were thought capable of flight and of carry-

ing their riders to the "home of the immortals." The ability to fly has been associated with many stories of survival throughout Chinese history.

People born in the Year of the Horse are considered popular and talented. Usually they are passionate, cheerful, faithful, skillful, prosperous and perceptive, although they sometimes talk too much. It is believed that they are independent and rarely listen to advice.

The Year of the Horse used to be thought of as a bad year for the birth of a girl, as people were afraid of "ruining the family" by having a much too high-spirited daughter. However, such biased thinking has largely passed.

Another custom involving the horse was the riding of a white horse as part of a wedding ceremony in China. The bridegroom always went to the bride's house riding on a white horse. This was connected to beliefs about a heavenly horse and the god of the sun. The horse represented the sun, and the sun represented masculinity.

Horses and heroes

According to an old Chinese saying, "Steeds and beauties always belong to the emperors." Consequently, the stories of the steeds belonging to many historical figures were recorded for many years.

Xiang Yu (232-202 BC), the king of Xichu (206-202 BC), had an extraordinary horse named Wuzhuima which he rode for years and used when he fought enemies in his triumphal battles. As time passed, a deep love be-

tween the two developed.

In a five-year battle (206-202 BC) between Xiang Yu and his longtime rival Liu Bang (256-195 BC), who afterwards became the emperor of Western Han (206 BC-AD 24), Xiang Yu was defeated and chased to the side of Wujiang River.

Since he had nowhere to escape after crossing the river, Xiang decided to commit suicide. But he didn't want his favourite horse to be left as a trophy for his enemy. He asked one of his soldiers to use the only boat he had and carry the horse across the river and care for it. But just a few minutes after the boat started to make its way across the river, the horse suddenly sprang out of the boat and plunged into the torrential water.

Some horses have even been worshipped by ordinary people as deities for thousands of years. The red steed of Guan Yu, a brave general in the Three Kingdoms period (AD 220-280), is an example.

Guan Yu's favourite horse Chitu died from sadness after Guan Yu's death. Its faithfulness touched people so much that it was regarded as a god later on.

Owning extraordinary horses in ancient times sometimes reflected the greatness of an emperor. The famous Qinshihuang Emperor (259-210 BC), the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), loved horses deeply. He had hundreds of rare steeds in his stable and he even had more than 500 war "horses" put in his tomb to accompany him after his death.

Wishing the best for the New Year

By YU NAN
China Daily staff



Zhuxia, 36, an experienced newspaper editor, said at her age one reaches the end in one's life.

"This point could be a new start leading me to greater success."



Yuan Xiaotong, 60, a retired officer, has a practical wish in the Year of the Horse, without any major pressure, wish the whole family is well in the new year.

"I wish the whole family is well in the new year."

For people born under the sign of the horse, the year 2002 is ironically considered to be a year of bad luck.

Tradition-conscious Chinese people would advise these "horses" to wear a red cloth band believed by many to possess certain "magic power" that will protect one from bad luck.

But times have changed and the younger generations dislike these superstitious beliefs.

For example, Wang Yue, 24, a graduate from Tsinghua University who is now working for an accounting company, said: "I will not buy any red stuff for myself because I don't buy a single word of the old sayings. But I will buy a red tangzhuang (a traditional Chinese jacket) for my girlfriend as a gift for her in the Year of the Horse. I like the way she looks when she wears red clothes."

Yu Tian, 60, a retired officer in Beijing, said, there are altogether four "horses" in his family.

"What a coincidence! I am already an old 'horse' in my family," he said. "But looking at the other three energetic 'horses' in the family, I am sure the year 2002 will be an excellent Year of the Horse for them."

Different people born in the Year of the Horse have totally different wishes based on their age, condition and experience.

But one thing for sure is that all of them express the hope that the coming Year of the Horse will be one filled with good luck and great happiness.



Yuan Xiaotong, 12, a sixth grade primary school student, wishes she could succeed in the entrance exam for middle school. She said: "I wish I could study in one of the best schools in Beijing."



Jin Bo, 24, who has been working for a newspaper for two years, said his greatest wish in this Year of the Horse is "to find the right girl in my life and get married."

Legends of horse

There are lots of idioms and legends related to the horse which are often quoted by the Chinese people today. One example is *laoma shitu* (the old horse knows the way), which means an old hand knows the ropes.

Bo Le is a well-known name for a man who is good at scouting talent nowadays. The term actually comes from the period of the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BC). During this period, a Bo Le was a man reputed to spot good horses. It was said that he could recognize whether the horse was a good one at first sight.

The Western saying, "Misfortune may actually be a blessing," also has its corresponding idiom in Chinese which tells another story involving the horse.

An old man name Saiwong in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) lost his mare one day. His neighbours all went to comfort him but Saiwong said, "Who could have guessed it was a blessing in disguise?" A few days later, the lost mare came back home, bringing along with it another fine horse for the old man.

Saiwong didn't feel any happiness and just said, "Who could have guessed it was a misfortune in disguise?" As expected, his son fell down from the horse later when riding and broke his legs.

But the fall ultimately rescued the life of his son because he was not able to join the army and fight against the invasion of the Hu people in which most of the soldiers died.

BEIJING: "The most important thing is that my mom and I stay together to celebrate the traditional Chinese New Year Festival," said Li Yang, a Senior Two Hongzhi (meaning ambition in Chinese) Class student at Guangqumen Middle School. "That is enough to make me happy."

Li's father died of a cerebral haemorrhage and her mother is unemployed, which makes life quite difficult for the family. Since her home is in a suburban county of Beijing, she can only go home once every month.

But she was lucky to be chosen to study in the Hongzhi Class at Guangqumen Middle School, a key middle school in Chongwen District in Beijing. The Hongzhi Class is specially designed for excellent students from poverty-stricken families.

Students in the Hongzhi Class are exempted from all costs. They also can receive 120 yuan (US\$14) for living costs every month. The main source of the funds comes from donations.

Yao Xi, a classmate of Li Yang, has a family background similar to Li's. Yao's father died six years ago, and her mother, a proof-reader, raised the girl on her own.

Yao's mother missed the family reunion dinner last New Year's Eve because she had to work.

"But she will not miss this year's reunion dinner," Yao said cheerfully, explaining that her mother would not go to work during this year's festival.

"My grandparents and aunts are also going to join us. I feel very happy although I will not be given gift

money or new clothes," Yao said.

NANJING: Chen Zhigang and Yan, the newly wed couple, are to Paris and spend their honeymoon in Europe during the Spring Festival. "We have long dreamed to see the best time of our life in Paris city of romance. Maybe we will have a wedding in the cathedral there is often seen in the movies," said an air hostess of China Eastern lines Jiangsu Ltd.

The couple also plans to visit Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries during their 15-day trip in Europe. They long to see the "excellent environment for living and wonderful public facilities there," according to Cai. Chen, a local securities dealer said he chose Paris as their first destination partly because it is easier to get a visa to France than to other nations.

"My application for a visa to United States has been turned down three times, and certainly I don't want a fourth time to spoil my honeymoon," he added.

Chen and Cai are among 20,000 Nanjing citizens who spend the Chinese Lunar New Year travelling abroad, according to statistics provided by the Nanjing Municipal Tourism Bureau. Most of these travellers will visit Thailand, South Korea, Japan and Europe.

During the Spring Festival, Zhongnanhai will be selling his home-made lanterns at the lantern fair in Confucius Temple area along Qinhua River in this capital of China's Jiangsu Province.

"The lantern fair during the Spring Festival has been a local tradition ever since the Six Dynasties Period (AD 222-589), and my forefathers have been making lanterns since the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)," Zhang claimed.

In preparation for this year's fair, Zhang's family has been making lanterns since July. They will showcase more than 15 kinds and a total of 1,000 lanterns at the fair.

According to Zhang, many local lantern makers, including his family, gave up the craft of lantern making over time because of low profits. The fair along Qinhua River used to be dominated by lanterns from Southwest China's Sichuan Province.

Since last year though, the local government has been inviting a number of local craftsmen to participate in the fair, and the number of visitors to last year's fair was estimated to have exceeded 300,000.

SHANGHAI: Dining out on the eve of the Lunar New Year has become the "in" thing to do among Shanghai people.

Reservations for nearly all of the renowned restaurants must be booked two months in advance.

"Shanghai people are keen on leading a relaxed life style, and preparing dinner for the festival at home is too complicated and tiring for us," said Wang Quanyu, a customer lucky enough to clinch a table for 10 relatives at Meiyuancun Restaurant, one of the most famous eateries in the city.

About 350 tables were booked within just a few weeks. The holiday

meals range in price from 800 yuan to 1,500 yuan (US\$98 to US\$183).

Most restaurants have prepared set menus with 10 courses for 10 persons, including cold dishes, stir-fried dishes and fruit, costing less than 1,600 yuan (US\$195).

Although prices are double or triple that amount at five-star hotels, tables there are also sold out. The hotels mostly serve Cantonese and Shanghai dishes.

"By eating out, we save ourselves the time of preparing dishes and cleaning up after a large family dinner and have more time for entertainment," Wang said.

Festival traditions have changed much over the years — and it shows in people's dining tastes.

"It's not like 10 years ago when most Chinese looked forward to the Spring Festival because it meant they would have a good meal. Good meals can be had more often now. What's more important is how to spend the holiday comfortably," said Liu Andi, another customer.

Hangzhou-style restaurants are some of the hottest spots because their prices are much lower than that of Shanghai and Cantonese restaurants.

That's because Hangzhou-style dishes are cooked with regular ingredients while Cantonese cuisine requires rare and expensive ingredients, such as shark's fin and belly.

Most Chinese start off the Lunar New Year with a good meal, believing a good beginning will bode well for the rest of the year.

A fine choice is Club Jinmao, on

the 86th floor of the Grand Hyatt Shanghai. It offers exquisite Shanghai dishes.

"Although Shanghai people are keen on trying novel flavours, local courses are still the favourites," said Shen Wei, master chef at the club. "And Shanghai dishes have absorbed many cooking methods from other cuisines, especially Western food."

Steak and fish braised with butter — a favourite among Shanghai people — was adopted from Western cuisine. Since Shanghai has many immigrants, restaurants offering Sichuan and Hunan cuisine also will be crowded. But they are too spicy for the taste buds of most locals.

To make all of these meals entertaining, some hotels will have Chinese lion dancing and traditional Chinese opera shows.

SHENYANG: Tan Xiaojun, a senior military officer with Shenyang Military Command, could not help but feel excited when he talked about the coming Spring Festival.

The 41-year-old Tan has been thinking of making a trip to Southwest China's Yunnan Province with his family during the holiday.

"I have been working far apart from my family for four years and during each of the past Spring Festivals, my wife and son had to come to the camps as I had to stick to my post," said Tan. "But now I have been transferred to work in my home city. What's more, I am able to enjoy the public holiday with my family. The

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Gallop: Running Horses, ink and brush, by Zhang Qingbao, an artist from Shanxi Province.