

Tiger and Tigress

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“Hu Lai La”! “The tiger is coming to get you”! Right away I would stop misbehaving. As a child growing up in Northeastern China, known for its famous Dong Bei Hu—China tigers -- I learned to revere tigers early on.

Now as the Tiger (pronounced “Hu” in Mandarin) is near, Chinese around the world are getting ready to celebrate the arrival of the Year of the Tiger.

The start of the Chinese New Year is determined by the Chinese lunar calendar; usually falling between the end of January and the end of February on the Gregorian calendar.

This year the Chinese New Year arrives on February 14th—Valentine’s Day! In China, people use the Gregorian calendar for daily life and the Chinese calendar for traditional festivals and the celebration of seniors’ birthdays.

Twelve Animal Cycle

Twelve animal names are used in the Chinese Lunar calendar to represent a twelve year cycle. This year’s animal, the Tiger, is the third in the cycle, following the Rat and the Ox. Nobody knows for sure why animal names were used, or why these twelve animals were selected and others forever excluded from the list.

There are a few legends about the twelve animals in the zodiac. This is my version based on a Chinese children’s story.

Once upon a time, the king of the animal kingdom held a race. The first twelve animals were to be remembered by their names, so all were excited. The rat, though small in size, was the cleverest of all. He knew his weaknesses. To get to the Palace, his biggest obstacle was the Long River. How would he get across the rough water? He needed help. Among all the animals, guess who he picked to be his “running” mate? The Ox! Though the Ox may move more slowly than most other animals, he has endurance and strength—and a deep reserve of fortitude! The rat, a great motivator, convinced the Ox that they could win the race together if the Ox would carry him on his back across the mighty river. It was a perfect match. Together they reached the Palace first! The rat was awarded first place for his superb leadership, and the Ox second for his extraordinary strength.

What about the Tiger? It is a mystery why he placed third, but it does not matter. We are thankful that a year is named after him. (Following the Tiger are the Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig).

Year of the Tiger

A Tiger’s appeal is universal. His beautiful physique and ferocity were perhaps best described by William Blake in his well known poem “Tyger (Tiger)”:

“Tyger! Tyger! burning bright

In the forests of the night,

What immortal hand or eye

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?...

And what shoulder, and what art,

Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

And when the heart began to beat,

What dread hand? And what dread feet”?

What William Blake does not describe are the extraordinary markings on the forehead of the tiger. They strongly resemble the Chinese character Wang for “King”!

My Guardian Tigress

The tiger, king of animals, is revered in Chinese culture. Some Chinese believe that if you have a tiger in your family - that is, if someone in your family is born in the Year of the Tiger - you are protected. I don't consider myself superstitious but I believe this is true because I have had the great fortune to live with a tigress! She was my grandma. Born in the year of the Tiger, she would have been ninety-six this year.

My grandma was my role model, my angel. She was the pillar of the family during the hard times, and the light for all of us during the dark days of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960's.

We were a “politically incorrect” family: my paternal grandfather was a rich landlord and a head of a small city. Being rich was a sin those days, and he was arrested when the Liberation Army came and he died in prison years later. My grandma raised her three children on her own. My maternal grandfather was a member of the Politburo, and purged by the late Chairman Mao. He was later reinstated by Deng Xiao-ping, who spearheaded the reform in China in the 1980's. Back in the 60s, my parents were under tremendous political pressure and at times had to fight for their lives. While doing chores my grandma often prayed intensely for my parents' safe return at the end of the day.

Despite the political turmoil outside, inside our home was a safe and warm haven thanks to grandma. I always felt loved and cared for; and she was always there for me and my brother. On her bound feet she worked from morning till night, cooked three meals from scratch, sewed our clothes, hand-washed them, and fed the chickens and ducks. Grandma was humble and kind. She never raised her voice or quarreled with anyone. She often gave food to the crippled neighbor and those who had even less than we did. We did

many chores together after I came back from school, and at night the two of us shared the same “Kang”, a brick heated bed used in Northern China. She would tell me stories and hum tunes of Henan local plays. She admired such legendary heroes such as Mu Lan.

She passed on in her sleep after the first day of Chinese New Year in 1991. I know when I look up to the sky there is a tigress watching over me.

How the Chinese Celebrate Chinese New Year in China

The celebration is one week long, although the New Year season can last a month. It is a time of family gatherings and feasts so people travel from afar to return home. This makes the Chinese New Year the worst time of the year to travel in China. While customs differ from one region to another, on New Year’s Eve many families make jiaozi—dumplings—together. On New Year’s Day, people visit each other, exchange gifts, and pay their respects to the elderly by giving them warm “Bai Nian” (greetings in the form of head bowing). In return the elderly give the children “hong bao”, red packets containing coins.

In Canada, for many Chinese newcomers and immigrants, this can be a lonely time as they are far from their loved ones. Celebrations held in the workplace, schools, and the community are appreciated.

Red Colour

Legend (the Chinese love legends) has it that there was a beast called Nian (which means "year"). Nian would come to prey on people on New Year’s Eve. Then people learned that Nian was afraid of the colour red so they filled their houses with red decorations and the children would wear red clothing to scare away the beast. Eventually, the colour red (especially when combined with the colour gold) became a symbol of good luck and prosperity. In Canada, the colour also brightens up the long winter.

In 2010 the Year of the Tiger and Valentine’s Day coincide to bring double happiness to many red tigers and tigresses!

Common Expressions:

--Kung Hei Fat Choi (In Cantonese), or Gong Xi Fa Cai (in Mandarin)—Wishing You A Prosperous Year!

--Niu Nian Kuai Le!—Happy the Year of the OX!

--Chun Jie Kuai Le--Happy Spring Festival! Chinese New Year is also considered the beginning of spring.

Kung Hei Fat Choi! Gong Xi Fa Cai

May this year bring you good luck and prosperity!

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