

# FESTIVALS OF THE LIVING

ONE

## *The New Year Festival*

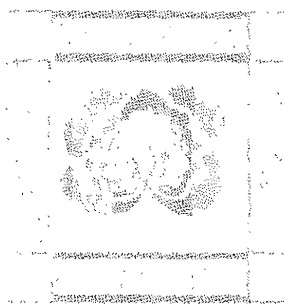
*(1st day, 1st moon)*

*Xin Nian*

The most colorful, sensational, and joyous of all Chinese festivals is the Lunar New Year. Everywhere in China and overseas, Chinese communities and families prepare for a series of celebratory events that can last anywhere from one to three days to two weeks.

During festival time, marketplaces are bursting with color—plum blossoms, red azaleas, oranges, and tangerines fill streetside stalls. Sidewalk tables are covered with bright red paper couplets expressing good fortune, window decorations, lunar calendars, and almanacs. Whole roast pigs are on display in restaurant windows, and candied kumquats, lotus nuts, and melon seeds are available in grocery stores for the eight-sided Tray of Togetherness.

As the New Year festivities progress, people inside giant colorful lion and dragon masks dance through the streets to the sound of exploding firecrackers, the rhythmic beat of drums, and the loud crashing of cymbals. At this time of year more than any other, the primary concerns of family, friends, and relatives are to ensure good luck, pay respects to the gods and spirits, and wish good fortune for the coming year.



The New Year of the Chinese lunar calendar is a movable feast, usually falling somewhere between January 21 and February 19, depending on what date the new moon appears. In their day-to-day lives, the Chinese treat January 1 as the official New Year's Day, following the Gregorian calendar. Their traditional New Year celebrations, however, continue to follow the lunar calendar, beginning with the new moon, which marks the first day of the first lunar month, and ending on the 15th day with the brilliant lights of the Lantern Festival. Still, there are exceptions—some New Year events don't coincide with the first day of the lunar month or even the first of January. And the Yi people, for example, one of China's ethnic minorities, celebrate the New Year in the 10th lunar month. There are no hard and fast rules as to when a particular event occurs—the timing differs from place to place as do particular customs. One should just bear in mind that the New Year is really a multi-layered festival with many local variations, but that each distinct aspect celebrates the common idea of a new beginning. *(For further discussion of the calendar system itself, see the Appendix.)*

## The End of the Year: Some Thoughts on the Calendar

Even the sky seems to proclaim the arrival of the New Year, as the old calendar scrolls toward the last page, to say nothing of the villages and towns lying expectantly underneath. Pallid clouds loom overhead, intermittently brightened by flashes of firecrackers set off to bid farewell to the Hearth God. Faint whiffs of gunpowder already fill the air before the ears can recover from the ringing echoes of the deafening bangs.

—THE NEW YEAR SACRIFICE, by Lu Xun (1881–1936) (translated by the authors)



## PREPARATION AND PROTECTION

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### Sweeping Out the Old, Welcoming in the New

The onset of the New Year provides an opportunity to send away the misfortunes accumulated from the past and to prepare for starting afresh.

This is the time the positive *yang* forces become dominant and “inauspicious breaths” (*huiqi*) are swept away. There is much to be done in the home to invite good tidings, starting with pasting up colorful New Year paper charms and posters. Folk prints, pictures of door gods, and red luck-bringing couplets decorate the home with auspicious imagery. Sacrifices to the Hearth God are made, the figure of Buddha is cleansed, and the Soup of the Eighth Day is consumed.

Each day is filled with anticipation, imbued with both a sense of spiritual protection and boisterousness, and colored with symbolism, offering people what they long for most: happiness, riches, and good health.

### Soup of the Eighth Day

Prior to the New Year, on the 8th day of the 12th month, everyone cooks the “Soup of the Eighth Day,” or *labazhou*. The word *la*, meaning “together,” is the name of an ancient Chinese ceremony that took place shortly after the winter solstice. Sacrifices were made to all spiritual powers—heaven and earth as well as one’s deities and ancestors. Accounts from the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) record villagers on the 8th day of the 12th moon beating waist drums and wearing masks to disguise themselves as the Buddhist deity Vajra for the purpose of chasing out epidemics and averting disaster.<sup>1</sup> The day of *laba* marked the interval between the outgoing year and the incoming year, and its customs and practices culminated in a festival of exorcism, renewal, and thanksgiving.

### Laba Gruel

*Laba* gruel is a very thick porridge that resembles mince pie or plum pudding. It consists of various whole grains and/or rice topped with dried

## Customs and History

Folk tradition dates the preparation of *labazhou* as far back as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220). The custom of eating the porridge became especially widespread during the Tang dynasty (618–906), when Buddhism had already come of age in China and the Buddhists had fully incorporated the consumption of *labazhou* into their remembrance feast for Sakyamuni. By the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) cooking *laba* was a standard custom in the kitchens of the imperial court, Buddhist monasteries, and village homes. During the Kangxi reign (1662–1722), the emperor bestowed this special dish as a gift to ministers, officers, and abbots of leading monasteries. Eunuchs also distributed the *laba* to households throughout the empire, receiving in return lavish gifts.

At the same time, families distributed the gruel to relatives and friends after first making a dedication to Buddha, often presenting *laba* with an accompanying dish, usually of pickled cabbage. The cabbage was carefully cultivated in shallow pits or root cellars and its delicate and tender shoots were considered of incomparable quality. It was said that the future prosperity or decline of the household could be predicted according to whether they turned out sweet or sour.

## Beijing-Style *Laba*

*Laba* varies considerably from province to province. In the North it is salty, in the South it is sweet. Some epicureans consider Beijing-style *laba* the most authentic since Beijing's culinary traditions span five dynasties of imperial cooking.

The basic recipe uses at least five grains—millet, maize, sorghum, glutinous rice, and barley—as well as red beans. An assortment of dried fruits is added to the simmering grain mixture, the most important being jujube or red dates. The dates are skinned and pitted, with the skins being used to make an exceptionally piquant broth that is later poured into the soup. Next, dried lily and lotus seeds are tossed in, with the remaining ingredients—dates, chestnuts, and pine seeds—added at the very end.

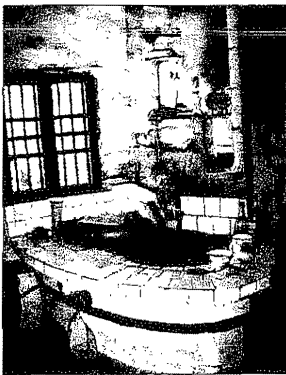
Hazelnuts, almonds and walnuts used as toppings are soaked in sugarwater before serving to prevent them from drying out. To sweeten the *laba*, brown sugar (not white sugar) may be added. It is customary to sip the *laba* from individual bowls. No utensils are required for eating this simple but wholesome and nutritious meal.

If the cooked *laba* is not eaten all at once, the remaining porridge can be poured into jars and stored without refrigeration in unheated pantries. The frigid winter climate of the North solidifies the *laba* and prevents any spoilage, and all one has to do to make a meal of *laba* is to slice a chunk off and warm it up.

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## SENDING OFF THE KITCHEN GOD

*Ascend to Heaven and speak of good things;  
Send blessings down to the world below . . .*



*A kitchen stove in a typical  
Chinese country home  
(Beijing).*

### Stoves

The standing mud-covered brick stoves in a traditional Chinese kitchen are huge. They are built up from the floor against a wall of the kitchen and look something like altars and, in fact, they are. The family stove, apart from its functional importance, was believed to house the Kitchen God, also called the Lord of the Hearth (Zao Jun), one of the oldest gods worshiped in China. (The Kitchen God has a little niche behind the cooking stove for incense and offerings, but his special center of interest is regarded as the hearth itself.)

The stove is considered the soul of the family. In sociological terms, the stove identifies a family as a cohesive entity and represents its corporate fate. In diviner's terms, good stoves will guarantee peace in the family, while bad ones bring strife.<sup>2</sup>

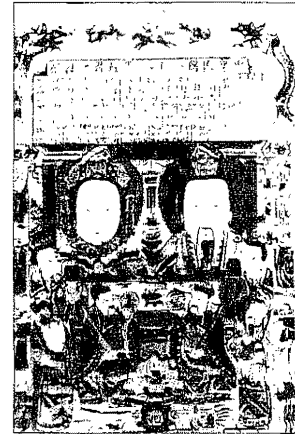
## Kitchen God Ascends to Heaven

Within the bureaucratic pantheon in Heaven, the Kitchen God acts as a minor guardian, much like the neighborhood Earth God (Tudigong). But, whereas the Earth God governs an entire community, the Kitchen God is identified with a single family. To further explain the difference, some claim that the Earth God acts something like a policeman who reports to the provincial City God, while the Kitchen God performs more like a plain-clothesman who reports to the highest spiritual being, the Jade Emperor (Yuhuangdi).

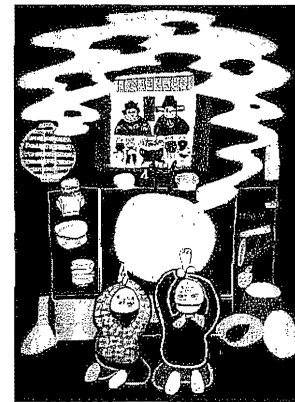
As an agent of heavenly authority, the Kitchen God spends the whole year with the family, seeing and hearing everything. Once a year, on the 23d of the last month of the lunar year (the 24th in the South), he ascends to heaven to make his annual report. At this time, commonly called the "Little New Year" (*xiaonian*), the family gives him a farewell dinner with offerings of sweet cakes and preserved fruits. In some areas of China, the deity's mouth is smeared with honey or sticky rice. This is so he will say only sweet things, or, according to some, because it makes his mouth so sticky he will not be able to utter a single word.

Next, a woodblock print with the god's image on it, along with a horse made of paper (in some cases sorghum stem), is set on fire. The burning of the image releases the god for his "ascent" to heaven. As the Kitchen God soars to heaven on his steed, paper spirit money (called *qianchang* or *yuanbao*) is thrown into the fire along with straw for the horse. Peas and beans are tossed onto the roof to symbolize the clatter of the horse's hooves.

In most prints the Kitchen God, wearing the robes and hat of a noble magistrate, is seated next to his wife and attended by several immortal lads and maidens. Vases and flowers surround the Kitchen God's offering table and usually there is space on the upper portion of the print for a calendar. Sometimes a rooster and a dog are also pictured as domestic symbols of a rural household. Although the style and imagery of the prints vary from locality to locality, certain aspects are the same—everywhere the Kitchen God is depicted as a compassionate deity associated with the warmth of the hearth, family, and good fortune.



*Folk print of the Kitchen God and his wife.*



*Worshipping the Kitchen God (contemporary Chinese folk painting).*

## Master of the Household

As a Taiwanese temple keeper put it in an interview, the Kitchen God is considered to play a crucial role in “rewarding good, dispersing calamity and accumulating good fortune, admonishing the world and enlightening the people.”<sup>3</sup> For members of the household this means that since he keeps the domestic register, he is the one who determines the fortune of the family. He is honored as “master of the household” (*yichia zhizhu*).

There are a great number of legends about the origin of the Kitchen God. A story popular in south and central China tells of a poor mason destined to remain penniless all his life. The hard-working but luckless man was unable to support his wife and therefore the couple eventually had to separate. Many years later, the mason went to work for his former wife’s new and prosperous family. The wife, whom he did not recognize, hid a few pieces of gold in the sesame cakes she made for his journey home. Unfortunately, he sold the cakes and never found the gold. When he later discovered the truth about the cakes, he became despondent and ended his own life. Upon hearing this sad story, the Jade Emperor made the mason God of the Hearth for his goodness and honesty.<sup>4</sup>

According to another tale, the human deified as Kitchen God (whose historical family, the Zhang, is described in the Tang dynasty compendium, *Youyang Miscellanies*) didn’t possess any virtuous characteristics, but was a spendthrift who deserted his wife for a young and lazy concubine. He squandered his entire fortune on her, and the concubine eventually married someone else while Zhang begged for food throughout the countryside. One cold winter day a kindhearted widow gave him food, clothing and shelter. When Zhang recognized this woman as his former wife, he felt so ashamed that he crawled into the kitchen stove in an effort to hide himself and was burned to ashes. His ex-wife, realizing he was her first husband, died from grief a few days later. Since Zhang admitted his wrongdoing in the end, he was deified as the Kitchen God and his wife became the Kitchen Goddess.

Today, sending off the Kitchen God is still a favorite custom and one that has been observed in the People’s Republic of China despite official edicts prohibiting the hanging of his picture over the hearthplace.

## SEQUENCE OF TRADITIONAL NEW YEAR EVENTS

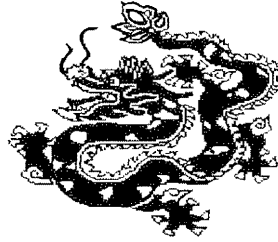
### MOON 12

#### DAY 8

Offering of *labazhou*.

#### DAY 23 OR 24

Kitchen God ascends to Heaven.



#### DAY 30

New Year's Eve. Offerings to gods and ancestors are made, family reunion meal takes place, elders distribute "money of the passing year"; everyone stays awake to safeguard the year; family members paste spring scrolls on doorways and gates.

### MOON 1

#### DAY 1

New Year's Day. Pay respects to elders, set off firecrackers, burn incense and worship deities; call on friends and relatives.

#### DAYS 1-5

Beginning of New Spring. Worship the God of Wealth; married women visit natal homes, sweep houses to send off poverty, keep an open house for visiting friends and relatives; temple astrologers predict fortunes.

#### DAY 7

Birthday of Humanity. The first 10 days of the New Year are dedicated to animals, foods, and humans; the first, the day of fowl; the second, of dogs; the third, pigs; the fourth, ducks; fifth, oxen; sixth, horses; seventh, humanity; eighth, rice; ninth, fruit and vegetables; tenth, wheat and barley.

#### DAY 15

The Lantern Festival Day. Parades in San Francisco and other major cities are set as close to this date as possible.



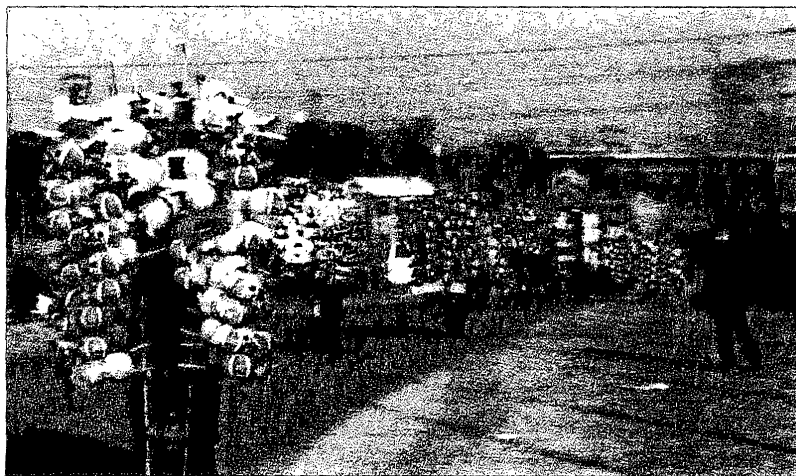
## The Color Red and the Festival Mood

The cheerful bright red couplets and papercuts, complemented by plates of oranges, red *hong-bao* envelopes, and red luck candies that are displayed in homes, offices, and businesses during the New Year, immediately convey a festive mood of joy and good tidings. Aside from being an auspicious color, however, red was also once painted on doorways to frighten away demons.

As with so many other common elements of Chinese culture, there is a story to explain how the color red became so popular and powerful. In ancient times, according to legend, there was a horrible creature called *nian* (the same as the word for “year” itself) that appeared at the end of the year. The beast attacked the people and their livestock, and even though the villagers fought fiercely together, they never succeeded in destroying the creature.

After many failures, the villagers discovered the *nian* monster had three weaknesses—it was frightened by noise, it disliked sunshine, and it was terrified of the color red. So, at the end of the year, the people built a huge bonfire outside the village, set off hundreds of firecrackers and painted the doors of their homes red. Upon seeing the commotion, the *nian* monster became so panicked that it covered its head in fear and ran away. And this is how, some say, that bright red became the color of the New Year.

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*Transporting bundles of firecrackers on bicycles (Beijing).*

## **FAMILY AND FOOD**

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### **A Time of Reunion and Celebration**

New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are celebrated as a family affair, a time of reunion and thanksgiving. The celebration was traditionally highlighted with a religious ceremony given in honor of Heaven and Earth, the gods of the household, and the family ancestors. The head of each household presents incense, flowers, food and wine to ensure continued blessings and good fortune.

The sacrifice to the ancestors, the most vital of all the rituals, united the living members with those who had passed away. Departed relatives were remembered with great respect in the past as they still are today because they were responsible for laying the foundations for the fortune and glory of the family.

The presence of the ancestors is acknowledged on the eve of the New Year with a dinner setting arranged for them at the family banquet table. The spirits of the ancestors, together with the living, celebrate the onset of the New Year as one great community. The communal feast called "surrounding the stove" (*weilu*) symbolizes the unity of the family and honors the past and present generations of the lineage.

Such celebratory occasions were greatly missed by many early Chinese immigrants to the United States, the majority of whom were single men. For many, clan associations (a type of social club or lodge) functioned as a substitute for family, and in place of family banquets, clan associations developed a tradition of spring banquets. Today, spring banquets are still held at restaurants in major Chinese communities such as San Francisco's Chinatown, although such gatherings are now attended by several generations of families, with husbands and wives, children and grandchildren, all assembled together at one table.

### **Auspicious Foods**

At these affairs and throughout New Year's Day, everyone peppers their speech with words and phrases suggesting auspicious things. No unpleasant words or thoughts are permitted to be spoken. This idea is carried through to the reunion meal where every dish has a name which symbol-

izes in some way health, honor, and riches. One specialty served is called “Broth of Prosperity,” a chicken soup filled with “gold and silver ingots” (egg dumplings and pigeon eggs). Seasoned pork shoulder is called “Mist of Harmony.” A combination of sea cucumber, squid and seaweed is named “Jade of Ink, Gold of Darkness.” Thin, semi-transparent strands of bean vermicelli are referred to as “silvery threads of longevity,” platters of chicken wings imply “to soar one thousand miles,” and dishes of pigs’ trotters invite the diner to “tread the azure clouds of good fortune.”

Winter bamboo shoots, because they grow so tall, suggest the phrase

“lions’ heads,” and hard-boiled eggs (one for each member of the family) symbolize happy reunion because of their round shape. Chicken or fish is served whole with head and tail to suggest “a favorable start and finish.”

After the feasting is over, parents give their children small red envelopes (*hongbao*) that contain “lucky” money. This is called “money of the year that is given away” (*yasuiqian*).

### *Jiaozi*

Another popular New Year dish made in family kitchens throughout northern China are small meat dumplings called *jiaozi*. Wrapped in a thin layer of dough, the filling consists of chopped pork and cabbage, ginger, shrimp, black mushrooms, scallions, garlic, and ground pepper. Some portion of the hundreds of dumplings made in a single household were traditionally stuffed with copper coins, pieces of gold and silver, or even precious stones to suggest a prosperous year ahead. Edible surprise fillings included peanuts because the words for “peanut” (*sheng*) and “life” (*sheng*) are homonyms. In addition, dates (*zao*) and chestnuts (*lizi*) were considered auspicious since the combined words for these nuts sound like “early son” (*zaozi*).

To cook *jiaozi*, the chef drops them in a large pot of boiling water for a couple of minutes, then removes the pot from the heat and leaves the *jiaozi* in the water for about 15 minutes. If they are pan-fried, the dish is called “pot stickers” (*guotie*). Both styles of dumplings are eaten with a variety of communal dipping sauces such as soy sauce, vinegar, chili bean sauce, or chili oil.

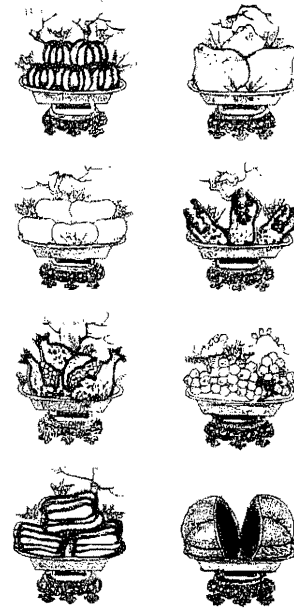


*Street-corner vendor selling New Year food (Beijing).*

## Fruits and Nuts

For the next few days a steady stream of friends and relatives visits the home, and a number of sumptuous meals are prepared. Before guests sample the main dishes, however, a variety of snacks in the form of fruits, nuts, and seeds are first offered. Almonds, sliced red dates, hazelnuts, red bayberries, pomegranate seeds, pears, apples, candied tangerines, honeyed jujubes, peaches and apricots—all these convey wishes for fertility and long life.

Some of the more popular candied delicacies are presented in an eight-sided tray called “The Tray of Togetherness” (*henian quanhe*). Each of the items displayed invokes good fortune. For example, kumquats symbolize prosperity because the first Chinese written character for “kumquats” means “gold,” while coconuts will promote togetherness. The Chinese word for lotus seeds sounds like the words for “many children,” and the word for “lotus beans” suggests a full wallet. All of these snacks are economical, distinctive and special, making a tasty contribution to the feasts of the New Year.



*New Year fruits: grapes, pomegranate, persimmon, watermelon, winter melon, hard citron, peaches, and pumpkin.*

## Guest Foods

After enjoying the array of preserved sweets, friends and relatives are invited to sample some of the specially prepared guest foods.

Of all the food staples for the New Year festival, wild game is indispensable. Families living in rural areas often prepare such delicious courses as pheasant stewed with fermented melon or wild rabbit soaked with five-spice sauce. Accompanied by a hearty red wine, these meat dishes make excellent holiday entrees. Other favorite New Year courses that are at once rich and not too greasy include fried white fish, stewed pork stomach, and crispy golden carp with scallions.

Additionally, Guangzhou (Canton) sausage and cured meat (which must be cooked, usually by steaming), and Hunan pork stewed with dried fish can also be served. If families are in a particularly festive mood, they can prepare these delicacies themselves, or buy a portion from stores specializing in the foods of Guangzhou and Hunan, a whole month in advance. In the cold climates of North China, sausages are hung outside under the

edge of the roof to dry. During the frigid winter season, there is little concern about spoilage.

Around New Year's time, another essential dish for the holiday table is stir-fried salty vegetables. Southerners refer to this dish as "the plate of 10 fragrances," which probably should be interpreted as a combination of at least 10 different kinds of vegetables. Indeed, the number is often even higher.

The main ingredient is yellow bean sprouts, which are probably chosen because of the sprouts' resemblance to a certain kind of jade ornament signifying good luck. They are combined with carrots, dried lily buds ("golden needles"), black mushrooms, dried bean curd, salted ginger, winter mushrooms, and salted mustard leaves.

To make this dish, carrots are cut into thin slices and partially fried. The carrots are set aside, and then the bean sprouts are cooked along with the other ingredients (which have been cut ahead of time into thin slices). Next, the carrots are mixed with light soy sauce, salt, sugar, and cooking wine, and combined with the vegetables. In the South, hot pickled tubers and celery are added. Simple as the method may be, tastes vary tremendously from region to region. The key to success is that whatever dried or fresh vegetables are used, they must be sliced thinly and evenly so that the sauce can completely permeate the ingredients.

Crispy fish makes an excellent appetizer with dumplings and wine. It is made with fresh, whole small- to medium-sized golden carp. Four or five carp are optimal for one serving. After cleaning and scaling, the fish is marinated in soy sauce, rice vinegar, cooking wine and sugar for about 40 minutes. There should be enough sauce to cover the entire serving. The fish are fried in hot oil in a heated wok and then set aside. Next, in a separate pot, a thick layer of scallions and sliced ginger is used to cover each of the fish, which are then stacked in layers like pancakes. The marinade used earlier is poured over the assemblage which is then cooked over medium heat for about an hour and a half. When the dish is ready to be served, a few drops of sesame oil are sprinkled over the top of the fish. It is preferred when served cold.

As ordinary as "shrimp paste" sounds, it takes a master to achieve the real flavor of this dish. Baby shrimp (which have been cleaned and shelled), together with a small portion of thinly sliced lean meat (pork or beef) are fried with scallions and ginger. This mixture is then combined with sliced winter bamboo shoots and fried with heavy Chinese bean paste.

(Beancurd, peanuts or sweet sauce should not be used as additional ingredients or substitutes.) Chinese hot sauce is an optional garnish to produce what food lovers from Shanghai refer to as “eight-jewel hot sauce.”

During the New Year in cold climates like Beijing, cabbage that has been preserved in root cellars is sweet in taste and crunchy in texture. Easily prepared, steamed cabbage can make an excellent side dish for New Year *jiaozi* with a dipping sauce of heavy vinegar. To make this recipe, cabbage hearts are first soaked in water and cut diagonally, then covered with a sauce of Chinese mustard, sugar, and vinegar, and steamed until tender.

Popular novels such as *The Golden Lotus* (Jin ping mai) provide numerous descriptions of food in a variety of activities during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). According to this novel, some of the delicacies typically enjoyed by the merchant class during the New Year season might include pork, ice-fish (*salanx cuvieri*) and steamed shortbreads with fruit and vegetable fillings. Exchange of food and gifts with nearby temples could be especially elaborate, depending on one's relationship with the head priest. Offerings might include as much as “ten catties of official candles, five catties of incense, two rolls of brocade, two jars of southern wine, four live geese, four live chickens, a set of pig's trotters, a leg of mutton and ten taels of silver.”<sup>10</sup>

## Niangao

In South China, during the New Year, there are many sweet pastries to try (more so than in the North). Sweet pastries are not normally consumed in the traditional Chinese diet, but they are considered special treats for festive occasions. Small sweets—which are easy to make and inexpensive—make a holiday memorable, especially for children who eagerly look forward to such mouth-watering edibles as nine-layer cake, fried dough, or date-filled pastry.

The most popular New Year dessert is *niangao*, a sweet steamed glutinous rice pudding. When people eat this dish, they preface their first bite with the phrase “promotion step by step” (*bubu denggao*) because the word for cake also sounds like the word for “soaring high.” Like *jiaozi*, the pudding may be filled with date paste, walnuts, or preserved egg yolks because these items represent long life, harmony, and many children. For

decoration, the top of the pudding is ornamented with pine and cypress branches, which symbolize longevity.

The distinctive qualities of glutinous rice, from which *niangao* and other New Year specialties are made, is described in a 14th-century book entitled *Essential Knowledge for Eating and Drinking* (Yinshi xuzhi). The author Jia Ming states, “its flavor is sweet; its character is warm.” But, he warns, “eaten in excess it causes fevers, and it impedes the action of the pulse. Horses eating it develop stumble-feet. If young cats and dogs eat it, their legs will become bent so they cannot walk.”<sup>11</sup> Jia Ming lived to be over one hundred years of age and attributed his longevity to the exercise of caution over what he ate and drank.

Connoisseurs of Chinese food regard the New Year cake made in Ningpo (Zhejiang Province) as the very best because it uses a glutinous rice flour made from the winter harvest. *Niangao* from Ningpo is not sweet but salty in taste, with vegetables, shredded meat, cabbage, turnip, or spinach being added to the mixture. The *niangao* from Jiangsu Province is considered noteworthy because it is made from reddish-purple rice which gives the finished cake a natural redness. The addition of pine seeds, walnuts, and sweet osmanthus, give it a distinctive flavor much appreciated in the central provinces of China.

New Year cake can be served warm or fried—every region has its preference. Some versions of this recipe use thin slices of glutinous rice cake simmered in a clear broth to which celery and shredded winter bamboo shoots are added. Epicureans consider *niangao* a wonderful main dish that is best served by itself, accompanied by a glass of fine wine.

### Shepherd's Purse from the Old Village

A few days ago, my wife came back from grocery shopping in the Xidan Markets and told me that shepherd's purse was for sale there. That reminded me of the days when I lived in eastern Zhejiang. For folks there, the wild vegetable was a staple served during spring. In the villages and small townships people could pick them in their backyards. Women and children squatted on the ground, each equipped with a pair of scissors and a tiny “seed basket.” The work was engaging and full of fun. In those days children used to sing:

*Shepherd's purse sprayed over the head,  
charming sisters are about to wed.*

There have been some literary references revolving around this tiny plant. Gu Lu, writer from the Manchu dynasty, noted in his Qingjia Records: "The locals refer to the shepherd's flowers as the wild grass flowers. Since superstitions hold that on the third of March armies of ants would ascend the mountain of the stove, all the folks would place the flower around the edge of their stoves to fend off the ants. By daybreak, the streets would echo with the cries of village children selling the flowers. Because many women wear the flowers in their hairclips in the hope of improving their eyesight, the flower also came to be known also as "bright-eye flower."

But the real villagers I knew of paid no attention to this gibberish. They just mixed the flowers in their dishes, or squashed them into the glutinous rice cakes and ate them.

—BOOKS FROM A RAINY DAY, by Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) (translated by the authors)

## Imperial Dining

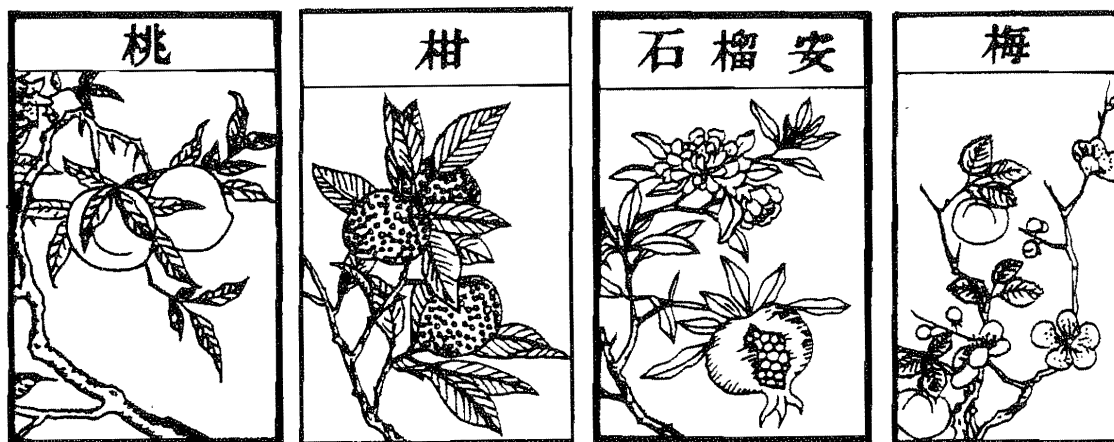
A discussion of New Year festival foods wouldn't be complete without a historical note on the elaborate dining habits of the imperial family during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

In the Ming courts the feast of the Great Banquet (the first of four levels of imperial banquets) was given at the New Year festival when foreign envoys were at the palace and able to attend. The rites for ceremonial visits and festive occasions were intricately complex, as one might imagine. Ranking court officials and military officers assembled outside the palace gate. Officials of the fourth rank or above were accommodated within the imperial hall. Palace guards stood on duty at the gates. Pennants were hung, the imperial dais was set in place, and service stations were arranged around the imperial dining area. As the emperor entered, wearing the royal robes and the royal crown, he received greetings from his officers and generals. The propitious phrase "may you live one thousand years"



*New Year print showing preparation of an imperial banquet.*





New Year fruits: peaches, orange, pomegranate, plums.

(*wansui*) was chorused by all attending officials. Dining commenced around midday and continued through the afternoon.<sup>12</sup>

As for the imperial New Year's Eve banquet in Qing times, the ceremony was as elaborate as it was in preceding dynasties. Participants took their seats inside the Forbidden Palace at the Hall of Preserving Harmony. Ninety tables, seating two each, were set with wine and dishes of food. After the emperor entered, all present took their seats. During the banquet, music played—there were Tibetan songs, Mongolian instrumentals, and Manchurian melodies, reflecting the foreign origins of the Qing dynasty emperors and many of the high officials. Clown performances, acrobatics, and lion dances were all part of the entertainment. Finally, after the food was served, the music performed and the guests had prostrated themselves for the last time in front of the emperor, the feasting ended. Officials formed ranks and filed out and the attendants were then allowed to take away the remaining sweets and fruits, known as “snatching the banquet delicacies” (*qianyan*).<sup>13</sup>

## Flowers

Chinese plants have always played an important role in Chinese culture. Poetry and prose abound with the symbolic and expressive allusions to flowers. During the New Year, in the south of China, plants and flowers can be seen everywhere. Flower markets are filled with blossoms just opening, which signify the fresh and invigorating hopes for a prosperous New Year. A few favorite plants traditionally used to ornament one's home during the New Year are:

Narcissus (*shuixian*)—good fortune and prosperity

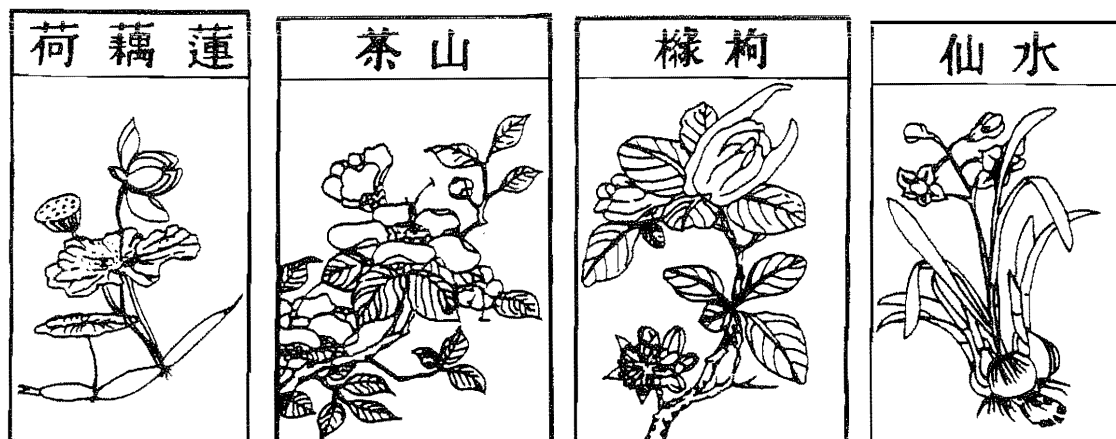
Camellia (*chahua*)—springtime

Evergreen (*wannianqing*)—ten thousand years

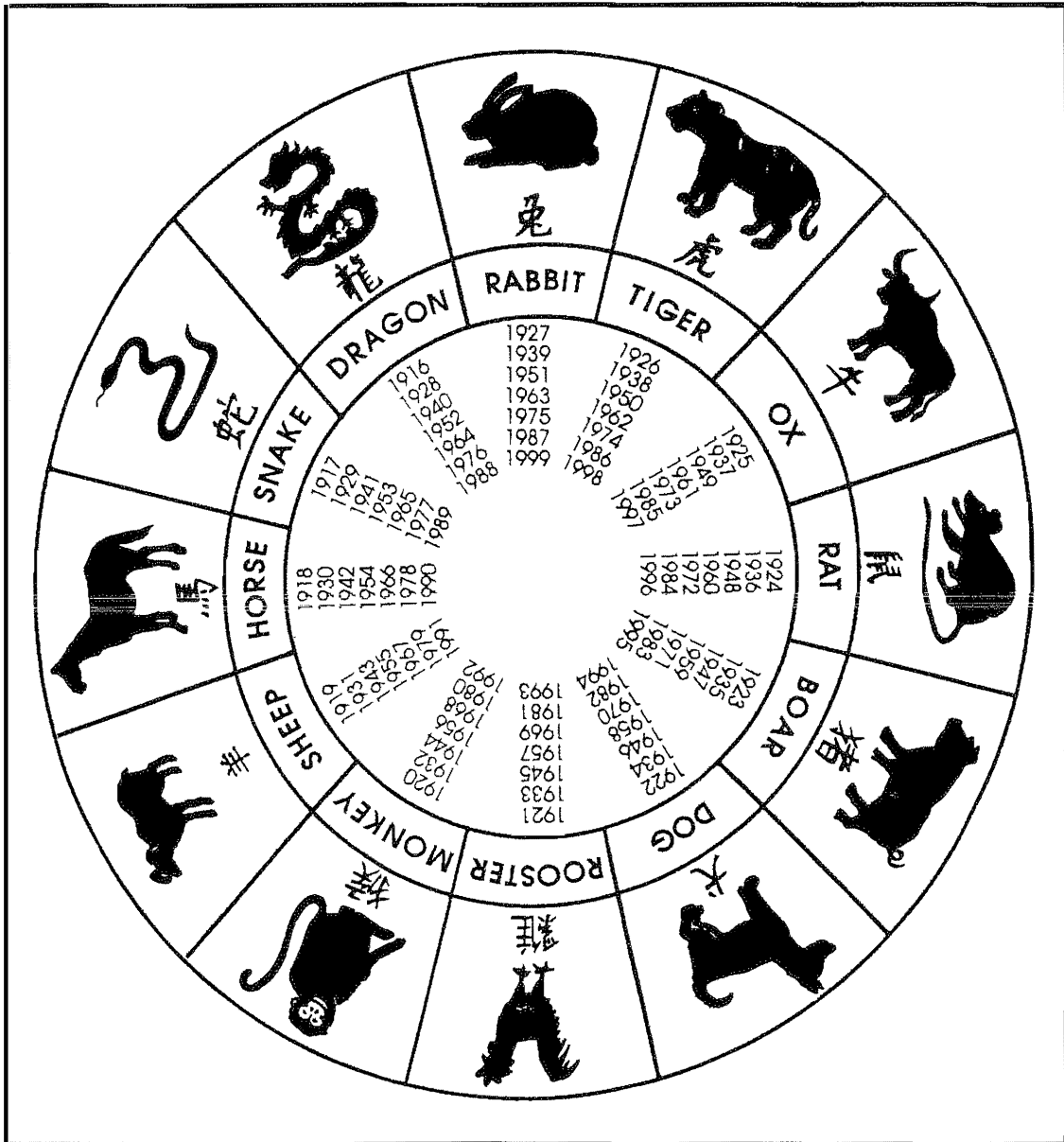
Peach (*taozi*)—longevity

Buddha hand citron (*foshou*)—happiness and longevity

Quince (*tiegeng haitang*)—flower for the Chinese New Year in San Francisco



New Year flowers: lotus, camellia, hand citron, and narcissus.



### Building a Spring Ox

(Geng wu, 1990—Year of the Horse)

The Spring Ox is four feet high (to represent the four seasons) and eight feet long, of clay or papier mâché. The tail is 12 inches long (to represent the 12 months of the year). The color of the head, horns, ears and tail are white; the lower leg, black; belly, yellow; body, red; hooves, yellow. The tail is facing left (indicating the year belongs to the male principle, *yang*). The mouth is open (also indicating the year is *yang*). A red ramie cord tied through the cow's nose is made of mulberry wood.

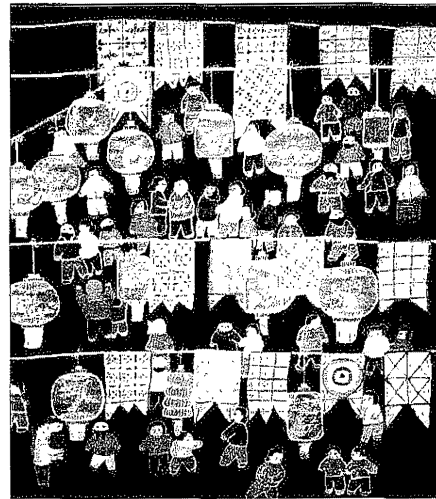
Mang Shan stands three feet six-and-a-half inches high (representing 365 days of the year). He is wearing a yellow coat with a green sash. His hair is combed in two bunches on top of his head. He covers his ear with his right hand (meaning thunder claps will be minimal). The willow branch in his hands is 24 inches long (representing the 24 divisions of the year). He is standing behind the ox (because the inauguration of spring took place more than five days after the New Year), on the left-hand side (since Mang Shen is standing behind the ox, the planting will occur late in the New Year).

### The Lantern Festival

The climactic night of the New Year holiday is the Lantern Festival (*deng jie*) or the Feast of the First Full Moon (*yuanyao jie*) and is celebrated on the 15th day of the first month. The streets are filled with spectators viewing hundreds of lanterns and following gay processions of clowns, stilt walkers, lion dancers, and actors in festive costumes and painted faces.

The origin of this holiday is unclear, but it seems that at its inception, over a thousand years ago, the Lantern Festival focused on fertility. In ancient times, devotional ceremonies were conducted to usher in light and warmth after the cold of winter and to pray for plentiful spring rains.

Popular tradition for the most part ignores the ritual content of the festival and concentrates instead on stories and legends about patriotism. A tale widely circulated in a Zhejiang village tells about the defeat of the ruling Mongols, regarded as foreign invaders by the indigenous Han nationality, on the



Lantern Festival  
(contemporary Chinese folk painting).

15th day of the first month. Another folktale describes the ruin of the despised Lu clan by Emperor Wen of the Han dynasty—an event that also occurred on the 15th day of the first month. According to the story, every year thereafter on the 15th, the emperor would leave his palace in ordinary dress and parade with a host of courtiers on the streets to celebrate the occasion.

The display of elaborate lanterns was a main attraction of the festival. As early as the sixth century A.D., public viewing of fancy lanterns had become a common practice. Historical accounts tell of the emperor's eloquent praise for colorfully decorated oil and lacquer lanterns. By the Tang dynasty (618–906) the Lantern Festival had become a three-day holiday, and nighttime curfews were lifted so that commoners and nobility alike could enjoy the ceremonies. In the Song dynasty (960–1279) the festival became more elaborate, the lanterns were becoming more spectacular, and the event was extended from three to five nights. When there was imperial approval of the festival, the processions and displays served to validate the prosperity of the realm and confirm the people's joy over a peaceful and prosperous reign.<sup>14</sup> [See color plate 2b.]

The brilliant display and wide variety of lanterns retained its popularity through the Ming and Qing dynasties and continues to be a highlight of the New Year festivities to this day. The dazzling variety of lanterns in the streets of Beijing in 1927 must have been a sight to behold:

The varieties displayed are infinite—all shapes, materials, decorations, sizes and prices, and all alight in the open shops. Wall-lanterns to put on either side of the front door are offered in pairs. Others are sold in sets, eight or sixteen, intended to be hung together and thus form a complete picture. "Guest-lanterns"—large white silk moons decorated with the purchaser's name and lucky bats—intended to light visitors across a courtyard to the reception hall, stand ready on bamboo tripods. Cheap paper lanterns cunningly made to copy living creatures hang from the ceiling; fantastic crabs with moving claws, dragon-flies with flapping wings, birds with swaying necks. Glass or gauze panels painted with historic scenes, mounted in carved wood frames, are displayed in great variety. Inside the shops there are many special lanterns for special purposes. Of such are those in the shape of little boys, intended for presents to childless families; "heavenly lanterns" to be hoisted on a high pole in

the courtyard and decorated with fir branches; round toy-lanterns made to roll on the ground like a fire-ball; lanterns set on wheels; red paper lamps pricked with tiny pin-holes to form a lucky character, like "happiness" or "prosperity"; "*tsomateng*" (*zouma-deng*) or horse-racing lanterns which consist of two or more wire frames, one within the other, "arranged on the principle of the smoke-jack so that a current of air sets them revolving"; and, finally, crossword puzzle lanterns with riddles pasted on their sides intended to hang outside a scholar's home for the amusement of his literary friends.

—THE MOON YEAR, by Juliet Bredon and Igor Mitrophanow

Nowadays, candlelit lanterns are often replaced by wall lamps, but a blending of old and new traditions still exists. In the industrial city of Harbin in northeast China, fantastic lanterns continue to be carved from large blocks of river ice—beautifully illuminated with colored electric lights and left standing, as they have for centuries, until the ice melts away with the arrival of warmer weather in the spring.

## Food

During the Lantern Festival every household consumes sweet-tasting glutinous rice flour balls called *yuanxiao*. They are often eaten in a light soup named *tangyuan*. *Yuanxiao* are symbolic of the first full moon of the year and family reunion because of their perfectly round shape. *Yuanxiao* have many fillings—pastes of hawthorne, black bean, date, dark and white sesame or sweet osmanthus. In the South, pork, chicken, and vegetable fillings are popular. Although there are regional differences in taste, there is only one way to cook dumplings, which is to heat them just long enough so that the outer skin has a delicate and slippery consistency.

In the North, custom requires that *yuanxiao* be made on the seventh day of the New Year and sold on the eighth. One can buy these treats in restaurants throughout the Lantern Festival until the 18th of the first month. After that date, the dumplings are no longer available.

Other versions of *yuanxiao* include Mongolian butter dumplings, which are mildly sweet with a creamy aftertaste. In Tianjin the fillings are made with a mixture of honey and white grapes. Shanghai dumplings excel

in both salty and sweet categories, and Zhejiang is noted for its crabmeat dumplings.

### *Yangge*

Aside from viewing festive lanterns and snacking on rice-flour dumplings, there are many types of dances, songs, variety acts and short plays to enjoy which are particularly popular during the Lantern Festival.

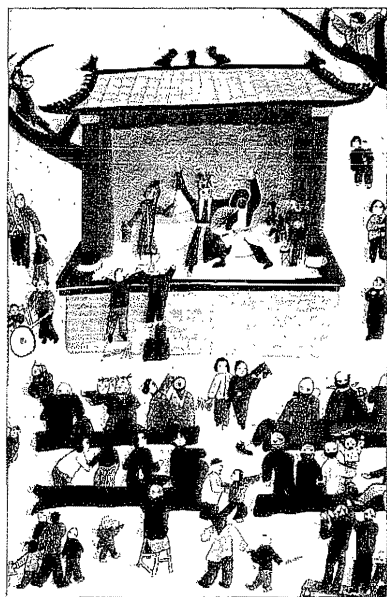
Especially popular are the folksong and dance productions performed by amateur actors and musicians often called "rice-sprout songs" (*yangge*). This particular name suggests that this tradition originated with farmers, both men and women, who sang songs as they transplanted young rice shoots in the fields. From such melodies, different localities in the North and South produced a variety of music and dance forms including lion, dragon and donkey dances, stilt performances, juggling, pole climbing, umbrella processions and "one-female, one-clown" skits. In some areas drama was emphasized, in other places dance was highlighted. [See color plate 3a.]

But the name varies from region to region, leading some scholars to suggest that *yangge* began as a religious ritual whose origins can be traced back to the Great Exorcism, or *No* Festival.

The Great Exorcism or *No* Festival of Han times probably developed from rituals of expulsion and placation common to popular religions of many cultures. In China, the first ritual gesture is designed to rid the countryside of marauding ghosts and evil demons through martial performances such as the lion dance. Then, through folkplays and songs, one placates the inhabitants of the sacred world, receiving from the souls of ancestors and spirits of gods blessings for the new year.

The invigorating performances of dynamic and lusty *yangge* song and dance acts, along with other spirited New Year theatricals, and such practices as saying only auspicious things, were directed to this invisible audience of the dead to show them fertility, fortune, and reproductive energy, and by this means receive their assistance to ensure prosperous times ahead. The ritual

mystery and spiritual vitality of *yangge* is still retained in some areas of China, but in most places the "sacred" aspects have disappeared, having gradually evolved over the centuries into popular secular entertainment.<sup>15</sup>



*Local opera troupe performance (contemporary Chinese folk painting).*

By the time of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) there were a large number of amateur dance and entertainment troupes, and each village and city guild had its own dance group for festival occasions. This type of “village music” from Southern Song Lantern Festivals set the precedent for the stylistic development of *yangge* in the Qing dynasty. In addition to music and dance, Song dynasty dance troupes also staged a variety of street fare acts, with storytellers, wrestling contests, acrobatics, shadow theater, puppet shows, poetic music dramas and comic acts.

### Dry Boat Plays

One of the special features of these variety shows, and still popular today, is the “dry boat” (*hanchuan*) play. Traditionally, village boys dressed up as girls and sat alluringly in a boat that never touched water. An accompanying boatman holding a bamboo pole pushed his passengers around an imaginary lake. Such scenes were meant to be imitations of romantic boating outings where the couple spent a leisurely afternoon in a boat picking lotuses. The boat is actually a cloth construction that covers the performer's legs and feet to make it look as if he is sitting in it. To make the illusion more lifelike, an extra pair of “dummy” legs is visible on top of the boat.

To represent the boat crossing the water, the performer uses a series of smooth dance steps; to show rocking, he faces the rower and trades off rising and falling movements. While engaged in “rowing,” the boatman and seductive “girl” exchange a medley of charming folk songs.



*The dry boat performance (Beijing).*

### Lion Dance

There is still more to see, especially in the realm of dance. The most widespread of all dances is the lion dance and dragon-lantern dance. At festivals, men in gigantic, colorful, papier-mâché lion heads and bodies clear the pathway for parades. Two performers skilled in this special art



perform the dance—one man handles the papier-mâché head decorated with tinkling bells, painted eyes, movable jaws and lolling tongue, and another manipulates the hindquarters, all to the accompaniment of drums and gongs. The lion is in constant motion, crouching down and leaping up, bowing low and hunching his back. In some parts of China the lions are in pursuit of a ball or “pearl.” In other parts, performances focus on “lion tamers” teasing the lions, or a single lion frolicking with its cubs.

Probably because the lion is not indigenous to China, the King of Beasts took on a mythical aura and a stylized form of representation many centuries ago when the lion dance originated in China. At least as early as the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), embassies from the kingdom of Arsaces (ancient Persia) brought lions to the court as tribute. These rare and powerful animals were highly valued and symbolically associated with purity and protection. East-West contacts at this time also brought acrobats, jugglers, musicians, and conjurers into China who dramatically influenced palace entertainment.

With choreographic innovations incorporated into the dance during the Tang dynasty, this performance became increasingly vivid and expressive. Especially popular was the “Lion Dance of the Five Directions” featuring five lions costumed in different colors and standing over three yards tall. Their heads were wooden, their tails were of silk, their eyes were gilded, and their teeth were plated with silver. Twelve “lion lads” carrying red whisks teased the lions, providing an amusing and lively form of entertainment.

Nowadays the lion dance is still performed at auspicious occasions such as weddings and store openings, and is often promoted as a fundraising event for various charities. During the New Year, lucky lions are visible everywhere, prancing along shop-lined streets, promising good luck to merchants in exchange for red *hongbao* packets filled with money.

### The Dragon Parade

Unlike the lion, the dragon appears far less frequently, saving his awesome image for one appearance only, which usually occurs on the last day of the Lantern Festival. Dozens of people are needed to carry the imposing wily serpent that stretches for at least 20 or 30 feet. It is constructed of bamboo rods and satiny cloth in sections of three or four feet and was traditionally

illuminated by candles. Each “limb” is on a pole carried by one person who, together with the other participants, manipulates the dragon, making it sweep and wind gracefully through the streets.

The dragon is a mythical creature symbolic of vigor, fertility and spring rain, and was also an imperial emblem from the Han dynasty onward. It is a composite creature described as having the head of a camel, horns of a deer, eyes of a rabbit, ears of a cow, neck of a serpent, belly of a frog, scales of a carp, and talons of a hawk—it seems to express the life force by being a powerful summation of all these animals.

In San Francisco, the dragon, all 160 feet of him, is the highlight of the annual Golden Dragon Parade. He follows a globular ornament representing the sun, the source of his power. Accompanying the dragon is a procession of carnival-like characters. There are the Eight Immortals and the popular foursome of Monkey, Pigsy, Tripitaka, and Sandy from the novel *Journey to the West*. There's also the Big-Headed Monk dallying with the flirtatious Liu Cui, characters mentioned as early as the Yuan dynasty and later in Ming “poetic dramas.” [ See color plate 1a,b.]

In addition, there are more than 50 floats, marching bands, dance troupes and bell-and-drum corps featured in the parade, making it the largest event of its kind in the world. Mixing Chinese and U.S. parade themes and credits, there are floats featuring deities and creatures such as the God of Wealth (sponsored by the California Lottery) and racing horses belonging to the legendary Generals of the Five Directions (sponsored by the Golden Gate Fields and Bay Meadows race tracks).

The San Francisco celebration, which began in 1953 as a minor parade to complement the Miss Chinatown beauty contest, adds a new dimension to the traditional Lantern Festival. There's really nothing quite like it in China. Although the dragon dance and promenade of immortal celebrities are adopted from the Chinese festival, the parade itself is a purely Chinese-American invention. We have seen the birth of a new custom in the festival tradition, with a change in the ritual occurring just as other changes have through the millennia. In all likelihood, such a widely recognized and publicized event (more than one million television viewers and some 400,000 spectators) is here to stay. It will continue to herald the beginning of the New Year for many years to come and, through the image of the dragon, convey to the viewer the much sought-after traits of strength and courage.



*"Dry Boat" performers from a northern Chinese village.*