

Strange Chinese customs

Name _____ Date _____

Text adapted from <http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01351/numbers.htm>



There are many strange customs that the Chinese follow that may seem different to those in the UK. They have lucky and unlucky numbers unlike our own, a completely different type of horoscope with animals based on the year you were born, strange red envelopes, a three legged money frog, fire crackers, a kitchen god and shark's fin and bird nest soup.

These are just a few of the things you can find in Chinese tradition that may make you curious about their origins.

Numbers

The roles that numbers play in Chinese customs, beliefs and culture are second only to food. This strong belief in numbers reflects very clearly the Chinese **affinity** with **homophones**. It is believed that numbers can determine a person's fate – for example in the naming of a child.



Certain numbers are considered lucky, some are 'neutral' (meaning that they do not possess any significant meaning), and others plain unlucky.

Lucky Numbers

In Chinese communities around the world, eight is considered the most fortuitous of numbers, making it much **coveted** for addresses, phone numbers and bank accounts. This is because Chinese and Cantonese pronunciation for eight (*ba* for Mandarin and *paat* for Cantonese) sounds similar to the word that signifies prosperity.



To **staunch** followers of Chinese beliefs this number not only **implies** good luck and wealth, but literally as well. This is because the number eight can be 'sold' for hundreds or even thousands of dollars. For example, in Hong Kong, a personal license plate with the number eight can cost millions of dollars and a single eight on a license plate gives one status.



	
Meaning:	EIGHT PROSPER
Mandarin:	Ba ¹ Fa ¹
Cantonese:	Baat ² Faat ²

Since the 1970s, with the **influx** of moneyed immigrants to California from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the traditional luck associated with the number eight has moved beyond the gates of Chinatown, to become an American suburban fact of life. Most Chinese home - buyers who were residing in

California routinely look for an eight in a street address, viewing it as an added value. Some try to have their home address changed to include an eight, while many pay to get as many eights as they can in phone, fax and license numbers.

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Unlucky Numbers

Like the number thirteen to us, four is a very unlucky number in Chinese because it sounds like their word for 'death'. Hence, the Chinese, sticking to custom try to avoid the number four in, for example, car number plates, house addresses, bank accounts etc.

Seven can also signify death, and one - loneliness.



However, the unluckiest number in Chinese tradition is considered by many, to be fourteen, which is widely **infamous** for corresponding to the phrase, '*guaranteed death*'. It is claimed by many as the Chinese's identical twin to the Western World's **iniquitous** number thirteen.

Application of Numbers

Numbers influence many Chinese people when buying almost anything, because they feel that the numbers must represent something good like health, luck and fortune.

During the New Year, when relatives and friends go visiting, every household would present their **tidbits** in an octagonal container. The container will be divided into eight portions, where each portion will be filled with a different tidbit.

The number eight doesn't have the same appeal to the Japanese or Koreans--whose cultures have been influenced by the Chinese, but all three cultures are united in their avoidance of the number four.

Because of this, many buildings in Asia do not have a fourth floor. This practice is more commonly found in hotels than commercial buildings.

Many people become the victims of Chinese numerology when they are unable to sell their property in areas where the district codes contains a four in it. However, many others gain from the **consequence** of this **phenomenon** when they are able to inflate the price of their properties which have the digit 8 on its address.

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A. Answer these questions

1. Name four different customs that the Chinese have.
2. Why are numbers important to the Chinese?
3. What number do the Chinese consider the luckiest?
4. Name all four of the unlucky numbers.
5. Give three examples of number related things that the Chinese try to avoid.
6. During the Chinese New Year, what is the shape of the container that visitors bring on visits?
7. Which two countries from the Far-East do not share the Chinese belief in the luckiest number?
8. Which numbered floor in Asian hotels is normally avoided?
9. Give three examples of numbered things that Chinese people like to have their lucky number included in.
10. Which two numbers (one lucky and one unlucky) can often affect the sales of houses owned by Chinese people?

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B. Vocabulary

Look up the meaning of the words highlighted in bold, write the meaning below and select an appropriate replacement word (synonym).

affinity

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homophones

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coveted

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staunch

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implies

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influx

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infamous

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iniquitous

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tidbits

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consequence

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phenomenon

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The Chinese Animal Zodiac



The Chinese animal zodiac is a rotating cycle of 12 animals, a different one for each year. These recurring animals represent a concept of time, traditionally used for dating the years in China. The beginning of the Chinese year falls somewhere between late January and early February.

Although China adopted the western calendar in 1911, they still celebrate the Chinese New Year, giving them a double celebration. Most Chinese calendars have the dates for both the Western and the Chinese New Year printed on them.

Order of Animals Legend

According to one Chinese legend, the twelve animals argued over the order of the cycle. They agreed to ask their gods to decide and to abide by the decision. The gods decreed that the animals would race across a river, and that each animal's position in the cycle would be set by its place in the race.

The rat, sneakily, jumped on the Ox's back and hitched a free lift across the river. Just before the Ox reached the other side the rat jumped off and managed to get across the river first. The rat is the first sign in the Chinese animal zodiac.



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C. Find your animal sign, by looking for your birth year.

The Year of the Rat

1900	1912	1924	1936	1948	1960	1972	1984	1996	2008
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Those born in the year of the **Rat** are said to be ambitious hard-workers who are usually successful in achieving their goals. They also tend to be financially cautious perfectionists. They get angry easily, and enjoy gossiping. They are sometimes noted for being charming and attractive to the opposite sex. Rats are said to be most compatible with those born in the year of the Ox, Monkey and Dragon.

The Year of the Ox

1901	1913	1925	1937	1949	1961	1973	1985	1997	2009
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Those born in the year of the **Ox** are said to be easy-going, though they can sometimes be bigoted and stubborn, with furious tempers. They hate failure and don't like to be challenged. At their best they are quiet and patient, with a tendency to inspire confidence in others. Oxen are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Rat, Snake and Rooster.

The Year of the Tiger

1902	1914	1926	1938	1950	1962	1974	1986	1998	2010
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Those born in the year of the **Tiger** tend to be indecisive, often missing a good opportunity by taking too long. They are also sensitive, deep thinkers and can be sympathetic. However, they have a tendency to be very short-tempered and a little antiauthoritarian, although they are respected by others. Tigers are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Dog, Horse and Dragon.

The Year of the Rabbit

1903	1915	1927	1939	1951	1963	1975	1987	1999	2011
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Those born in the year of the **Rabbit** (also known as the Hare) are said to be frequently financially lucky. They would make good gamblers, but are wise enough not to gamble. As well as being articulate, they tend to be talented and ambitious in business - they never back out of a contract and rarely lose their temper. They are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Dog, Goat and Boar.

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The Year of the Dragon

1904	1916	1928	1940	1952	1964	1976	1988	2000	2012
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Those born in the year of the **Dragon** are said to be brave and sensitive, and to inspire trust and confidence. They are energetic and healthy, though they have a tendency to be short-tempered. They don't borrow money or make fluffy speeches, but do have a soft heart. Dragons are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Rat, Snake, Rooster and Monkey.

The Year of the Snake

1905	1917	1929	1941	1953	1965	1977	1989	2001	2013
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Those born in the year of the **Snake** are said to have great sympathy for those less fortunate than themselves, though they are also vain, selfish and thrifty with money, which they never have to worry about themselves, being financially lucky. They tend to be passionate and intense with strong determination and a hatred of failing. They prefer to rely on their own judgment, having little faith in the judgment of others. Snakes are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Ox and Rooster.

The Year of the Horse

1906	1918	1930	1942	1954	1966	1978	1990	2002	2014
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Those born in the year of the **Horse** are said to like entertainment and large crowds. They are talented and wise, skilful, cheerful and good with their hands - and their tongues too, as they tend to talk too much. They tend to have a weakness for those of the opposite sex, and also to be hot-blooded and impatient. Possessing an independent streak, they rarely listen to the advice of others. Horses are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Dog, Tiger and Goat.

The Year of the Goat

1907	1919	1931	1943	1955	1967	1979	1991	2003	2015
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Those born in the year of the **Goat** (also known as the Ram or the Sheep) are said to be very religious and pessimistic. They tend to be awkward in speech, puzzled about life and shy. Talented artists who enjoy the simple pleasures of life, they are compassionate, gentle and wise. Goats are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Horse, Boar and Rabbit.

Strange Chinese customs



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The Year of the Monkey

1908	1920	1932	1944	1956	1968	1980	1992	2004	2016
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Those born in the year of the **Monkey** are said to be good at problem-solving and making decisions. They are skilful and clever with a desire to learn and have excellent memories. However, they can be impatient and give up on projects if they are unable to start them immediately. Monkeys are said to be compatible with those born in the year of Rat and Dragon.

The Year of the Rooster

1909	1921	1933	1945	1957	1969	1981	1993	2005	2017
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Those born in the year of the **Rooster** are said to be deep thinkers who always think they are right, and they usually are. They tend to be a bit eccentric, and have difficulty in relationships with others. They are also capable and talented and give the impression of being adventurous - however, they can also be emotionally cold. Roosters are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Snake, Dragon and Ox.

The Year of the Dog

1910	1922	1934	1946	1958	1970	1982	1994	2006	2018
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Those born in the year of the **Dog** are said to have an intense sense of loyalty and honesty. They inspire confidence in others, make competent leaders, and are good at keeping secrets. However, they can also be emotionally cold, selfish, stubborn and sharp-tongued, finding faults with many things. Dogs are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Tiger, Rabbit and Horse.

The Year of the Boar

1911	1923	1935	1947	1959	1971	1983	1995	2007	2019
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Those born in the year of the **Boar** (also known as the Pig) are said not to say much, though they have a thirst for knowledge. They don't have many friends, but those friends they do have are friends for life and they are exceptionally loyal to them. They tend to be chivalrous and gallant and they loathe arguments, despite their quick tempers. They face the problems of life head-on, and solve them with fortitude and honesty. Boars are said to be compatible with those born in the year of the Goat and Rabbit.

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Red Envelopes



The red envelopes normally contain money and are given by grandparents, parents or married couples to their children, siblings and unmarried people.

According to Chinese beliefs, as soon as one is married, one has sufficient money and hence can share it (considering the cost of a Chinese wedding, this might be true). In return, the children or receiving person might present oranges/ tangerines to the giving person.

The symbolic meaning is to wish for good fortune and wealth in the new year, at times it might be used to pay off debt, though it is not to be compared to the western style of giving money to allow someone 'to buy something nice'.

The envelopes will most likely be decorated with lucky symbols and good wishes.

The colour red is the most auspicious colour, not only representing bridal status, but good luck, and expansive motion in all aspects of life such as blossoming, reaching upwards, celebration, happiness, joy, vitality, long life, creativity, luck and fame.

Before Chinese New Year, new clothing in red colours will be bought and worn for the first three days of the New Year Celebrations.

This tradition is to do with the legend of *Nian*, a terrible monster living in the mountains. *Nian* would come down from the mountain at the end of the year and terrorize and kill people and animals. It was discovered that the monster was frightened by loud noises, bright lights, and the colour red, hence children were given red paper to protect themselves should they come into contact with the monster.



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The Money Frog



According to legend, Money Frog was the wife of one of the Eight Immortals. She was being punished for stealing a peach from heaven. Naturally greedy, she craves for money and wherever people see a Three Legged Frog, there is a bed of money surrounding it.

For generations since ancient China, this mythical Money Frog is one of the Chinese holy creatures that protects against misfortune and brings to household bigger enrichment in wealth.

Being considered the divine fruit of the Gods, peaches symbolize long life and are associated with immortality. The Three Legged Money Frog is also sometimes associated with the same symbolism, especially in Feng Shui beliefs.

The Kitchen God



The Kitchen God (*Zao Shen*) is a popular deity most Chinese people would worship every year. Many Chinese homes have a paper image or picture of the deity hung throughout the year near the family's stove.

The Kitchen God not only watches over the domestic affairs of a family, but he is also a moral force in the lives of all the family members.

Households will offer a sacrifice called '*Nian gao*' to the Kitchen God a week before the Chinese New Year. On that day, the Kitchen God ascends to Heaven to present his yearly report about each family member's behaviour to the Jade Emperor.

According to the report, the Jade Emperor rewards or punishes each household accordingly.

'*Nian gao*' is a lotus root-like sticky cake made of sugar and honey, a typical Chinese traditional candy. By smearing sticky sugar and honey onto the Kitchen God's mouth, family members try to "close his lips", sealing them and "bribe" *Zao Shen* into presenting a "sweetened" version of the report to the Jade Emperor, The Emperor of Heaven.

Zao Shen's ascent to heaven is accomplished by burning his image; the smoke rising to the heavens symbolically represents his journey to the Emperor of Heaven, while fire crackers are lit to speed up *Zao Shen's* travel.

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Fire crackers



Fire crackers are used by Chinese communities around the world during holiday celebrations and festivals. Chinese celebrations are accompanied by a lot of noise. The sound of fire crackers chases away the terrible monster 'Nian' and other evil spirits, particularly those causing sickness, and hence, the sound brings good fortune. Furthermore, it is believed that the fire cracker's noise awakens the deities and guardian spirits who are the custodians of good health, good fortune and prosperity. They will watch over the well-being of the people in the community.

Shark Fin

Shark fin soup is a Cantonese cuisine delicacy commonly served as part of a Chinese feast at special occasions as a symbol of wealth and prestige. Shark Fins are sold dried or frozen. The "finning" of sharks required to make this soup has been highly controversial. Some have called the practice brutal, and it is also named as a primary contributing factor in the global decline of many shark species.



Bird's Nest



Bird's nest soup is a delicacy; the edible bird's nests are among the most expensive animal products consumed by humans. The nests have been traditionally used in Chinese cooking for over 400 years, most often as bird's nest soup. The soup is said to have high levels of calcium, iron, potassium and magnesium and believed to strengthen the immune system, raising the libido and aiding digestion. The nests are produced by male cave swifts with the help of the bird's saliva during mating season. Due to high market prices when harvest, the swiftlet population has dropped, so that the birds are now on the protected species list.

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D. Find an example of the following parts of speech in the text.

Noun

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Verb

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Adjective

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Adverb

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Pronoun

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Conjunction

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Article

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E. Answer these questions

1. Between which two months does the Chinese New Year traditionally fall?
2. What year did China adopt the Western calendar?
3. Which animal jumped on the Ox's back?
4. Which animal is 3rd in the cycle?
5. What do receivers of Red envelopes traditionally give back?
6. What is the symbolic meaning of Red envelopes?
7. Name three things that the colour Red represents in Chinese culture.
8. What is the name of the legendary terrible monster living in the mountains?
9. What did the money frog steal from heaven?
10. How many legs did the frog have?
11. What is the kitchen god's Chinese name?

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12. Who does he report to once a year?

13. What do Chinese fire crackers help drive away?

14. In which cuisine is sharks fin soup a delicacy?

15. For how many years has birds nest soup been traditionally used in Chinese cooking?

F. Write antonyms of the following words.

Punishes

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Noise

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Wealth

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Good fortune

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Different

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