



LEGENDS OF THE SPRING FESTIVAL

By Ian Anderson

Living in Malaysia we are privileged to experience so many festivals every year, but there is none so dramatic as the Spring Festival and its legends which we share with the Chinese world-wide.

The Spring Festival, better known as Chinese New Year (CNY) or Lunar New Year, is the greatest celebration of the year for the Chinese and like all things Chinese it is surrounded by myths and legends. But first of all one must understand the history behind the different names for the same festival.

It is said that CNY originated as a Lunar, year-end, religious ceremony during the Shang Dynasty (1766 BC - 1122 BC). However some will tell you that it actually started under Emperor Yao and Shun (~2300 BC). Whatever the truth is, it could not have followed the Lunar New Year until Emperor Wu (157 BC - 87 BC) of the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220) established the Lunar calendar and the first day of the year. However, with the Chinese revolution led by the Kuomintang in 1911, China adopted the Western (Gregorian) calendar on 1 January 1912 and from then on celebrated their New Year accordingly, renaming the traditional celebration "The Spring Festival" and celebrating that in exactly the same way as before.

But then came Communism led by Chairman Mao and things changed dramatically for in 1967 the Communist Party leadership announced the cancellation of the Spring Festival's three-day holiday in an effort to push forward the Cultural Revolution. Thus for a decade the festival was celebrated in a "revolutionary way" with no firecrackers, no feasting and no gifts which in practice meant no festival. Nonetheless, as years went by the festival again appeared on the calendar with all the trimmings of family feasting, new clothes, red packets (ang paws) and firecrackers. But where have these traditions come from? Where else but from the legends from the past.

The Legend of Nian

Nian, was a ferocious creature with the body of a bull and the head of a lion. He lived in water but ate on land. Regularly at the end of winter when food was scarce, the monster would terrorise small villages eating livestock, crops and even children. To protect themselves, the villagers would run into the woods and hide until the creature had left. But one year an old grey-haired man (some say he was a beggar) came to the village and asked to stay the night. The villagers warned him about Nian but he told them that if he stayed he would frighten the beast away and they would never be bothered again. Calling him stupid, they left for the woods.

That night Nian arrived, growling and roaring as usual, but as he entered the village he was surprised to see the old man dressed in a red suit and carrying a lantern. He came closer already enjoying the thought of his meal when a most

deafening noise assailed his ears. The old man was burning firecrackers. Terrified by the noise Nian turned tail and fled. In the morning, when the villagers returned, both Nian and the old man had gone, but the evidence remained. From that day, every year the villagers lit firecrackers, lanterns and wore red clothes, as they still do today.



Hokkien New Year

Just as today's CNY celebrations appear to be waning the ninth day arrives with renewed enthusiasm, but as most of us know, only for the Hokkien people. But why the ninth day?

The Legend of the Ninth Day

This legend dates back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) when it is said the Hokkiens were attacked by bandits and to save themselves they hid in a sugar cane plantation until the ninth day when they were sure it was safe to return home. The day also happened to be the Jade Emperor's birthday; they had been saved by his divine intervention and the protective cover of the sugar cane stalks.

Having missed the traditional CNY celebrations they celebrated their salvation that day and ever since then, the Hokkien dialect group have regarded this date as a symbol of their survival and a time for a major celebration every year.

Chinese Lions

An important part of the CNY celebration is the Lion Dancers, which dates back to the Han Dynasty (205BC – 220AD) but how can that be as lions are not native creatures of China? History tells us that Lions came to China along the Silk Road due to the spread of Buddhism and became highly valued by the Chinese on par with the Tiger and the Phoenix. But why dancing lions? Of course there is a legend.



The Legend of the Lion Dance

There are several popular legends of the Lion Dance, but my favourite is called "The Mythical Lion": The Lion, a mischievous creature, is said to have come from heaven and one day played a practical joke on the Jade Emperor who was so annoyed he beheaded the lion as punishment and threw the head and body down to earth. Kwan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy) took pity on the lion and sent down a long red ribbon to bind his head and body together and a mirror to place on his forehead to ward off evil spirits. She then told the lion to find Ling Chi grass in the Buddha's garden, bow three times and to eat it to restore his powers. He also had to bow three times, to the left for heaven, to the right for earth and to the front for man. Having done as he was told the lion slept and when he awoke he was so excited that he had his powers back he danced and jumped with joy. He has not stopped dancing and jumping to this day!

Sometimes the Lion Dance also includes a Little Buddha character who is said to represent the Shaolin monks who, it is believed, trained the first lion dancers. Also known as the big headed monk, he can often be seen directing the Lion's movements.

So this year when the Spring Festival arrives, do get out and about the Kinta Valley and experience the joy of the Chinese celebrating their most important festival of the year. They will welcome you with open arms.

Gong Xi Fa Cai!