

## Chinese New Year Blog

By Brent Luu

Every year when there are signs of swallows flying under the sunny blue sky, while the chilling air of Winter begins to fade, we could appreciate that Spring is finally here. This year the celebration of “春節” [Chun Jié] or Spring Festival will be landed on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024. This date may also be referred as the “Chinese New Year” or the “Lunar New Year”. It is one of the significant celebrations not only for the Chinese but for many Asians around the world because it marks the first day of the Lunar calendar. The celebration is observed in many areas internationally, including Tibet, Singapore, Vietnam, Korea, and Thailand, though each geographical area may refer to the celebration with different names. Additionally, countries within the Western and Southern hemisphere such as France, Germany, the UK, the US, and Australia have also been celebrating Lunar New Year for many decades. According to the lunar calendar, a lunar cycle starts from a full-moon to a full-moon every month. As a result, the Lunar New Year does not coincide on the same date of the Gregorian calendar, but rather it fluctuates between late January to mid-February of each Solar year.

The preparation of the Chinese New Year begins at the twelfth month of the Lunar calendar, which may also be called “臘月” [La` Yue`]. Within this month, the celebration of “臘八節” [La-ba ji`e] for [La-ba festival] occurs on 8<sup>th</sup> of the month. This celebration is being considered as the “prelude” of the new year as it signifies the end of the previous year. Furthermore, it also indicates the celebration of the enlightenment of the Buddha.<sup>1,2</sup> During the La-ba festival, many traditional Chinese families would cook “臘八粥” [La-ba zhou] (see figure 1), a cooking style of porridge that consists of 5-9 different ingredients, including red beans, black beans, sweet rice, black rice, pearl barley, lotus seeds, raisins, dried jujube, and a hinch of light brown sugar, which may be optional.<sup>2</sup> While the weather outside is freezing cold in many locations, enjoying a bowl of warm “臘八粥” [La-ba zhou] could bring much satisfaction and nutrients to all members within the family. Following this celebration, the next excitement of preparation for the Chinese New Year occurs on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of the same month. On this date, the Chinese around the globe carefully clean their ancestor’s worshiping altar and every corner of their house to get rid of the old, unpleasant dust and any unluckiness that have accumulated throughout the year, while welcoming the new prosperities in the upcoming year. We also pray and farewell to the Kitchen God and Goddess (“灶君” [Zao` Jun]),<sup>3,4</sup> who must travel back to the Heaven on this day to provide a report on the family’s conduct during the previous year. This celebration may also be referred as “小年” [Xiǎo Nián] or the “Little New Year”<sup>5</sup> because it

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<sup>1</sup> <https://zh-yue.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%87%98%E5%85%AB>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.asiancookingmom.com/laba-congee-porridge-%EF%BC%88%E8%85%8A%E5%85%AB%E7%B2%A5-laba-zhou/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/festivals/when-chinese-new-year.htm>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.china.org.cn/living\\_in\\_china/spring-festival-2009/2009-01/07/content\\_17070623.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/living_in_china/spring-festival-2009/2009-01/07/content_17070623.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.sohu.com/a/287046959\\_120072403](https://www.sohu.com/a/287046959_120072403)

is as important as the New Year itself. During the praying session, special homemade foods, candies such as “糖瓜” [Ta’ng gua] and joss papers are offered to the Kitchen Gods while traveling back to Heaven. Figure 2 below depicts the multiple versions of the Kitchen Gods from various regions.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1<sup>7</sup>:**

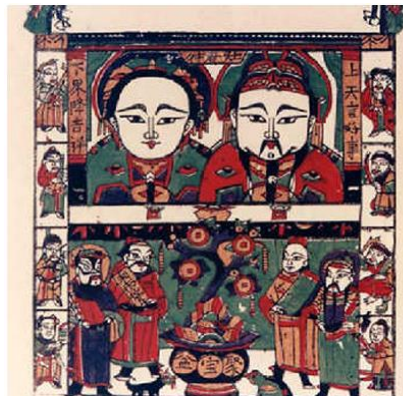


A bowl of La-ba zhou (“臘八粥”)

**Figure 2<sup>8,9,10</sup>:**



Drawing of one version of the Kitchen God



Another version of the Kitchen God and Goddess

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.sohu.com/a/518594534\\_100140727](https://www.sohu.com/a/518594534_100140727)

<sup>7</sup> <https://wapbaike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=d967b9032e2f8a4e4a398271>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.sohu.com/a/287046959\\_120072403](https://www.sohu.com/a/287046959_120072403)

<sup>9</sup> [https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_16441557](https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_16441557)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.yeeyi.com/news/details/2249914/>



Offerings to the Kitchen God on the “Little New Year” day from a traditional family

While celebrating the new year, many traditional Chinese will also read Zodiac signs to predict fortune for the coming year by using “紫微斗数” [Zi Wei Dou Shu]. This is a methodology using Chinese Astrology to correlate the position of the stars from various constellations with the person’s Zodiac sign to predict the positive or negative energy that circulates within the year for that specific individual or age. This practice has been traced back to the Northern Song dynasty in China during 960 to 1127 AD.<sup>11</sup> The representing star is “紫微” [Zi Wei], which may also be referred as the “Emperor Star” in Chinese culture; however, in Western culture, it is known as the Polaris or the North Star.

In the Chinese Zodiac, there are 12 signs represented by different animals, which arranged in a circle starting from the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, then Pig (see figure 3).<sup>12</sup> This cycle is the measurement of time, which may be applied to hours, days, months, and years. Each year is represented by one animal sign. The year of 2024 will be represented by the Dragon, which is a mythical creature that carries the energy of positivity, luck, and strength in the Chinese culture. As one may surmise, the characteristics of the animals in the Zodiac and their behaviors will contribute to the prediction and interpretation of the year. Dragons are known for their leadership, domination, and ambitious spirit. They thrive to deviate from the usual norms and expand their potential to a brighter horizon. People who were born in the year of the Dragon are often described as strong, powerful, independent, smart, ambitious, flexible, and keenest of all the Zodiac signs.<sup>13,14</sup> Do

<sup>11</sup> <https://imperialharvest.com/blog/introduction-to-zi-wei-dou-shu/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://evanstonroundtable.com/2021/10/01/levy-lecture-exploring-the-powers-of-the-chinese-zodiac/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/chinese-zodiac/dragon.htm#personality>

<sup>14</sup> <https://chinesenewyear.net/zodiac/>

you know your Zodiac Sign? Are your character traits consistent with what have been described in these signs? You may look up your Zodiac sign at different websites by searching your birth year. The following website may be used as a resource to look up your Chinese Zodiac sign. (<https://whatismysign.net/what-is-my-chinese-zodiac-sign/>)

**Figure 3<sup>15</sup>:**



(Photo by RootOfAllLight, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons)

During the Chinese New Year celebration, we could enjoy many excitements from the first day of the year until the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the first month. The two activities that we must not miss are lighting of firecrackers and Lion/Dragon dance (Figure 4). These practices have been passed down from many generations for thousands of years. It is believed that the cracking noises of the firecrackers and the motivating drum rhythm from the Lion/Dragon dance could chase away evil spirits as well as bringing luck to the household or businesses. To acclimate to the excitement, children and adults would wear their best outfits on New Year eve and have a family reunion dinner, which is called “團圓飯” [Tuán yuán fàn]. The dinner consists of many symbolic dishes such as fish for “魚” [Yu], which has a homophone as “餘” for “over abundant” or “prosperity”. In addition, one of the desserts that most family will not miss is “年糕” [nián gao], which symbolizes “success or reaching new height in the year” (figure 5).<sup>16</sup>

The celebration continues from the 1<sup>st</sup> until the 15<sup>th</sup> with various daily theme. The 15<sup>th</sup> of the month would mark the “grand finale” to end the celebration. This celebration is also referred as “元宵節” [Yuan Xiao Jie] or Lantern Festival. During this festival, decorative lanterns are

<sup>15</sup> <https://evanstonroundtable.com/2021/10/01/levy-lecture-exploring-the-powers-of-the-chinese-zodiac/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://chinesenewyear.net/>

displayed everywhere from residential houses to business buildings to open flea-markets. Children may also carry their favorite lantern decorated with riddles around the neighborhood or community centers and challenge each other to solve their riddles as way to keep the excitement continues. One of the symbolic desserts that all family would enjoy on this last day of celebration is “湯圓” [Tang yuán], which sounds like “團圓” [Tuán yuán] means “reunited”. The dessert is consisted of the glutinous rice balls that filled with different fillings such as red bean paste, sesame paste, or peanut butter, which are soaked in a sweet syrupy broth. Figure 6 illustrates an example of a bowl of a typical “湯圓” [Tang yuán] as one the highlights of the Lantern festival.

**Figure 4<sup>17,18</sup>:**



Lion dance on the street during Chinese New Year

Source: <https://stock.adobe.com/search?k=chinese+lion+dance>



Dragon dance on the street during Chinese New Year

Source: <https://stock.adobe.com/search?k=chinese+lion+dance>

**Figure 5<sup>19</sup>:**

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<sup>17</sup> <https://stock.adobe.com/search?k=chinese+lion+dance>

<sup>18</sup> <https://stock.adobe.com/search?k=chinese+lion+dance>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theclub.com.hk/zh/campaigns/clubnews-rice-pudding.html>



A loaf of “年糕” [nián gao]

**Figure 6<sup>20</sup>:**



Typical bowls of “湯圓” [Tang yuán]

Throughout the 15-day celebration of the New Year, we greet each other with ample of well wishes even with acquaintances. In the spirit of celebrating the 2024 Chinese New Year, all

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/2020/12/11/unique-holiday-foods-around-world-1550291.html>

Board members of the Sacramento Chinese Culture Foundation (SCCF) would like to wish you a New Year fill with excellent Health, Love, Success, and Prosperity. Cheers!!!

**“新春快樂， 心想事成“ [Xin chun kua'i le`, xin xiǎng shì` shen']**

**Happy New Year!**

**and**

**Much Success in the year of the Dragon!**