

GEORGE'S GUIDE TO CHINESE NEW YEAR



by George Ding

It's amazing how many people still believe that Spring Festival is about new beginnings and the importance of family. Those quaint concerns might have been paramount for past generations, but we modern, sophisticated people know that the Spring Festival is about one thing and one thing only: money.

GET THAT MONEY

To capitalize on this once-a-year opportunity, you're going to have to use your head. Literally.

Kowtow before every Chinese person you see: every co-worker, every passerby, every sidewalk hobo. You never know who might toss you a red envelope stuffed with cash. Prime targets include your co-workers, Chinese teacher and *chuanr* guy. Kowtow early and kowtow often. By the end of the Spring Festival, your forehead should be more calloused than a devout Muslim's.

Some polite phrases to say while kowtowing:

恭喜发财 (gōngxǐfācái)

"May you be happy and prosperous!"

万事如意 (wànshìrúyì)

"May all your wishes come true!"

可口可樂 (kěkǒukělè)

"Delicious and pleasing!"

If you've got relatives in China, jackpot!

Make sure to attend Spring Festival Eve dinner and start genuflecting as soon as the dishes are washed. You want to get the cash and get out before you're forced to watch the Spring Festival Gala. No amount of money is worth that.

Remember: Profit equals revenue minus cost.

While you're cashing in on older relatives, you also have to avoid giving money to younger ones. Tell your freeloading cousins/nephews/nieces that you were robbed on the way to dinner. If they're young enough, they'll believe you.

NOTE! Some families will only give you *yasui qian* if you don't have a job, so look and act unemployed.

TRAVELING

You've probably heard the advice, "Don't plan to go anywhere over the holiday unless it's by plane or dirigible." But I'm here to tell you that there's no better time to travel.

Pack lightly and fill the rest of your suitcase with basic necessities like bottled water and adult diapers. When you find your car or train stuck in the inevitable inter-provincial traffic jam or world-ending blizzard, start selling your supplies for ten times the asking price. Before you know it, the trip will have paid for itself.

TIP: If you need to go, don't touch those diapers. Use a bush and leaves instead. Never get high on your own supply.

If you happen to be in Beijing for the holidays, congratulations! Spring Festival is the only time of year when Beijing is remotely hospitable. The skies are clear, there's no traffic and it's quiet, oh so quiet.

That is, until Spring Festival Eve rolls around. Then it might as well be downtown Aleppo.

To avoid inner ear damage from the constant explosions, steal a pair of noise-cancelling ear muffs from a shooting range or tie a stuffed animal around your head.

FIREWORK SAFETY

This wouldn't be a very helpful guide if I didn't say a word about safety.

Spring Festival is the Chinese Black Friday – every year somebody's gotta die. But instead of being trampled to death for a cheap flat-screen, some poor bastard's going to blow his Water Cubes off with a weapons-grade firecracker.

Tip number one: Never light the fireworks yourself. Always let your kid, cousin or fiancée do the honors. If you don't have any of these and are playing with fireworks by yourself, my god, what are you doing with your life?

When setting off fireworks, it's preferable to hang out with someone who smokes. This way, they're the one with the lighter and matches and you can continue to use your hands to count to 10. If you don't know anyone who smokes, now might be a good time to teach your kid, cousin or fiancée.

If, for some reason, people are looking to you to light a box of fireworks, be safe and extend the fuse to its maximum length. Once it catches, run screaming in the opposite direction. How loudly you scream should be in proportion to the size of the firework: a light yelp for a Roman candle; a prolonged wail for a box of aeries; indecipherable shrieking for a bandolier of 10,000 firecrackers. It doesn't matter if you miss the firework itself. Safety is number one.

Also, never tip a box of aeries over to see if you can light dry grass on fire. If that's your aim, use gasoline and sparklers – it's way cheaper.

BE CREATIVE

Fireworks can be used for much more than childish enjoyment. Buy a bunch of aerial shells (those fireworks that are nothing more than a loud BANG!) set your alarm for 4am, and aim them directly at your neighbors' window. That'll teach them to call the police on your parties.

DID YOU KNOW? Traditional Spring Festival decorations include the upside-down fu character and *duilian*. If you don't know any Chinese couplets, use rap lyrics instead.

Don't be afraid to use superstitions to your advantage. Some families like to clean the house before the New Year to get rid of all the bad luck. But if you've had a good year, why not brush up all that luck dust and keep it in a sack next to your bed?

Then there's the custom of wearing a red string bracelet or belt on your birth year. Ladies, what better way to disguise your age than making a guy round to the nearest multiple of 12? Thirty-nine suddenly becomes 36, 28 passes for 24. (Do not attempt this if you're much younger than you look – there's always a chance he'll round up.)

Another popular belief is that getting a haircut in the first month of the Lunar New Year will kill your uncle. This is bad. Unless you hate your uncle. If you hate him and he's superstitious, you can extort a few red envelopes from him in exchange for growing your hair out.

After all, what good is family if you can't get some money out of them?