

The Story Behind *Surviving the Nian*

Hong Kong: The Manhattan of East Asia

Hong Kong, which means “fragrant harbour,” takes its name from the fragrant wood products and incense once traded around Hong Kong Island. The modern name refers to a territory including Hong Kong Island, Lantau Island, the Kowloon (“Nine Dragons”) Peninsula, and the more rural New Territories and its hundreds of islands and islets in the South China Sea.

After having been a Crown Colony of the United Kingdom since 1842, Hong Kong became a special administrative region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China following a transfer of sovereignty in 1997.

Since 1990, the World Bank has cited Hong Kong among the 25 richest member countries, and it remains one of the world’s major commercial and financial areas. It boasts four of the top 15 skyscrapers in the world and the world’s longest cable-stayed bridge carrying both road and railway traffic.

Despite these testaments to modernity in the “Manhattan of East Asia,” the citizens of Hong Kong adhere to cultural traditions in everyday life. Chinese markets and temples fogged with incense are tucked between skyscrapers. In a city that produces and sells the latest in computer technology, one can still see people using the abacus. And an exhibition on New Year’s Eve featuring the latest in video equipment will likely be festooned with red paper lanterns to welcome the gods through the door in the traditional manner.

The ancient and the modern are not merely juxtaposed, but often meet at awkward intersections. One of Hong Kong's best-known buildings is I. M. Pei's Bank of China Tower, completed in 1990. The structural expressionism adopted in the design of this building resembles growing bamboo shoots, symbolizing livelihood and prosperity. The building attracted heated controversy, as its sharp angles were said to cast negative *feng shui* energy into the heart of Hong Kong. *Feng shui* (“wind” and “water”) experts, with the aid of astrological tables, calculate the forces of the elements, i.e., wind, water, sky, earth, river and the sun’s rays, and thereby decide on the best placement of a building. It is believed that the Bank of China Tower resembles a sword or a cleaver, intended to slice down the nearby HSBC building. In order to counter this, an object resembling a cannon was situated at the top left of the HSBC tower.

In Repulse Bay on Hong Kong Island, high-rise flats were to be built directly in front of a mountain thought to be inhabited by a dragon. According to *feng shui* principles, the view of the bay was to remain unobstructed to allow the dragon an unobstructed view of the sea. The architect agreed to construct a large gap in the building, sacrificing 22,000 square feet of prime real estate.

The Nian Myth

In Chinese folklore, there are no fewer than six creation myths and at least five myths that recall the origin of the Nian or Spring Festival, better known in the West as the Chinese New Year. The version of the Nian origin myth featured in *Surviving the Nian* is perhaps the most elegant of its contemporaries: a small village is attacked once a year by a ferocious beast named Nian who lives in nearby mountains.

When Nian attacks he is merciless consuming men, women, children, and crops, spreading destruction, fear, and chaos. One year the town joins together and knowing that the Nian fears the color red and loud noises, dresses in red clothing and lights firecrackers to scare him away. The plan is successful, and every year the process is repeated to scare off the beast and ensure good luck. “Nian” is not only the name for the beast but the Chinese word for “year.” To welcome in a new year is then to “survive the Nian.”

The Nian myth is an archetypal narrative: an individual (or a whole populace) rises to defeat a great beast, an agent of chaos and disorder. Examples of this archetype can be found in mythologies as diverse as Sumerian (Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Bull of Heaven), Greek (Oedipus and the Sphinx), and Anglo-Saxon (Beowulf and Grendel). The grand theorists of mythology have written at length about the deeper meaning these archetypal beasts hold. Joseph Campbell writes that monsters that are not killed but quelled—as in the Nian myth—represent powerful forces of nature which man integrates into his existence.

It is notable that the story of Nian does not involve divine intervention. Instead, reason defeats chaos. A premium is also placed on the presentation of unity, sometimes at the expense of truth. This theme can be found throughout the traditions of the New Year’s celebrations: the scrupulous cleaning of houses for the New Year (which normally are not in such a state of cleanliness); the feeding to the kitchen god of moon cakes to either seal his mouth so he cannot report badly on the family or so he has only sweet things to say; and perhaps most telling, the custom on the first day of the New Year to not speak ill of anyone. These rituals promote unity on a social level and good luck on a spiritual one, but what price exactly does this unity exact?

Chinese New Year

The new year is marked by the first day of the first month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar and thus is also referred to as Lunar New Year and Spring Festival. It is the most important of the traditional Chinese holidays and consists of a series of celebrations lasting for fifteen days.

Chinese New Year continues to be celebrated internationally by ethnic groups who were strongly influenced by Chinese culture in terms of language and philosophical worldviews, such as Confucianism. These groups include Japanese, Koreans, Hmong, Mongolians, Vietnamese, Tibetans, Nepalese and Bhutanese. Chinese New Year

coincides with the largest annual human migration, when Chinese people living overseas return home on the eve of the new year to have reunion dinners with their relatives. This dinner is usually held at the home of the oldest, most senior member of the family.

Day 1 is a day of celebration within the family. Family members gather in the morning and senior members give red envelopes containing money to junior members of the family. It is considered an art to know how much money one should give to children. Day 2 is the day for sons and daughters in-law to visit their parents-in-law. This day is also believed to be the birthday of all dogs, so people are extra kind to their dogs on this day.

On Day 3, it is inappropriate to visit family members because of the belief that this is the time when arguments can easily ensue. Day 7 is the common man's birthday. This is the day when it is acknowledged everyone has grown one year older. For many Chinese, this is a day for avoidance of meat and to enjoy a vegetarian meal. Some people eat noodles to promote longevity and raw fish for success. Day 9 is celebrated with a tea ceremony giving thanks for the past, praying for a good future, and seeking blessings for one's parents, children, siblings, education, and career. Day 13 is meant to purge the system from all the rich food of the previous days by having a meal of rice congee and mustard greens (choi sum).

Finally, with Day 15 comes the Lantern Festival. It is also Chinese Valentine's Day. In ancient times, this was one of only a few days when young men and women could go out to meet each other, sometimes with the assistance of official matchmakers. As an ice breaker, the lanterns that decorated the streets on this day would contain riddles whereby potential couples could test the cleverness and education of their potential mates. The lanterns are symbols of good luck and hope and can be found throughout Hong Kong, adorning homes, storefronts and, most dramatically, Victoria Harbour.

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