

THE CHINESE NEW YEAR

Introduction

The narrative concerning China in its multiple aspects is usually filtered through Eurocentric visions joined, depending on the different topics, by veils of exotic fascination or strongly stereotypical readings. The reality is much more complex, as is the country represented in it, which is thousands of years old and stratified by its intimate vocation.

The idea of celebrating the Chinese New Year, the mother of all festivities in the Dragon calendar, was inspired by an attempt to narrate not one but several Chinas that collectively shape and mould contemporary China. A country whose inhabitants, whom we call Chinese, describe themselves as 华人 Huaren, a people united by ancestral traditions that are scattered all over the world. Despite the fact that they live on different continents, during festivities, especially the Chinese New Year, all the members of the community unite in a fraternal and universal fellowship.

Per Prato, which is home to **the most important Chinese community in Italy and one of the most numerous in Europe**, this moment represents a sort of temporal gateway, a portal through which Italians and other communities can get to know Chinese culture while simultaneously turning the spotlight on the history of this city, which has historically witnessed the intertwining of peoples and individuals from very different backgrounds but who, here - in the same way that the warp and weft are intertwined - in the name of progress and prosperity, have ironed out all their differences over the years and focused on shared values, which are the most humane ones, free of all interests and ideologies.

The intention is therefore to enjoy a tale that unfolds starting from the sinuous path of the dragons through the district that symbolises Prato's textile history, Macrolotto Zero, continuing with cultural events, tours, food and wine workshops and creative initiatives, all set on an imaginary stage, on which the sets are the city's museums and monuments, the Middle Ages of the already cosmopolitan merchant Datini, and Michele Dagomari's Holy Girdle.

Cultural aspects of the Chinese New Year

The Chinese New Year, known as *chunjie*, or Spring Festival, marks the start of the new year, and is calculated with reference to the 1st day of the 1st month of the lunar calendar (new moon phase).

The lunar calendar is the oldest calendar in the world (in Chinese 农历 *nongli*, where the first character stands for agriculture and the second for history/traditions).

This year, in keeping with the Chinese calendar, we are entering the Year of the Snake 4722.

The festivity represents the climax of a combination of anthropological traditions rooted in Taoism and Confucianism, the two most important Chinese doctrines. The beginning of spring represents a

time of renewal and purification, the removal of negative waste accumulated during the year. This concept, linked to respect for the cycle of nature and the colour that symbolises celebration, red, represents joy and happiness in Taoism.

Some of the main concepts linked to this holiday:

- **Family Reunion.** New Year's Eve is a significant moment, when families come together to enjoy a sumptuous dinner. This meal represents a time of conviviality and strengthens family ties.
- **Cleaning the House.** Before the start of the New Year, it is traditional to thoroughly clean the house. This gesture symbolises the removal of bad luck and preparation to welcome good luck in the new year ahead.
- **The colour red.** During the New Year celebrations, streets and houses are decorated with red garlands and lanterns. The colour red is considered to be lucky and is used to ward off evil spirits, particularly the mythological monster Nian, which, according to legend, terrorised villages in ancient China.*
- **The Lion Dance:** This dance is a key part of the celebrations and is older than the Dragon Dance, it represents a way to scare away the Nian and bring good luck. Drums and firecrackers are used during the dance to create noise, while a group of performers manoeuvre a large lion-shaped costume, simulating deliverance from evil with contortions and convulsive movements.
- **The Dragon Dance.** In China, the dragon symbolises imperial authority, starting with the Han dynasty (which unified the country territorially, linguistically and culturally in 221 BC). Not only is the dragon a symbol of power, it also symbolises wisdom and benevolence.

During the Chinese New Year, there are several dragons in the main colours, each with a different meaning:

- Green dragon: symbolises the power of nature and is a good omen for harvests.
- Red dragon: represents initiative and vitality in general.
- Yellow dragon: in ancient times, the emperor had his own yellow robe, and no one could wear this colour but him.
- Gold or silver dragon: symbolises prosperity and wealth.

Nine dragons, reminiscent of the wall of nine dragons located in the Forbidden City, are usually displayed. Nine in Chinese numerology is pronounced *jiu*, which also means “eternal”, so infinity.

- **Fireworks and firecrackers.** The latter, known as *bianpao*, are traditionally lit to celebrate the arrival of the New Year and to ward off evil spirits. Although they are less scenic than the fireworks (which are literally called *Yanhua* smoke flowers), the most traditional and ancient ones are represented by a belt of strictly red firecrackers (resembling the Neapolitan “*trac e trac*”) which must be placed on the threshold of your home and set off there to scare away evil spirits with the noise.
- **Exchanging Red Envelopes.** It is customary to give red envelopes containing money, called *hongbao*, as gifts. These envelopes are typically given by the elderly to the young and

symbolise good luck and prosperity. The number of banknotes must be even, as odd numbers are associated with funerals.

- **Yuanxiao Lantern Festival.** It is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, fifteen days after the start of the New Year. During this celebration, families go out with Chinese lanterns, often handmade by the children, creating a festive atmosphere. During dinner, sweets called *tangyuan* (sweet balls filled with sesame sauce and peanuts cooked in osmanthus-scented broth) are used, and these round sweets symbolise the Confucian circle of the family.

Notes: *Nian is a demon from Chinese mythology, according to a tradition dating back to 2000 BC, used to terrorise villages by eating newborn babies. The Taoist monk Hong Jun succeeded in capturing him, using a number of tricks to do so: the colour red, the thunderous sound of firecrackers and drums and the Lion dance, all of which are the basis of the Chinese New Year celebrations. In Chinese, the word for New Year is Guo Nian, which literally means “pass over the year”, year, so it also means defeating your demons.