

NEW YEAR, 2017 NEW OPPORTUNITIES

BY JACOB HARBORD



TOSSING YU SHENG



LION DANCE

The 紅包 (hong bao) have been given out. The 魚生 (yu sheng) tossed. The 舞龍 (wu shi) danced. That's right, **Lunar New Year has been and gone, and we're ready for that time-honoured agency tradition of examining how different brands engaged with the festivities.** Of course, at Ipsos we're always trying to push ourselves one step further, and this year we've added some extra goodies to the 盆菜 (pen cai).

We're passionate about unpacking cultural phenomena and we enlisted our long-suffering colleagues across Southeast Asia to conduct an auto-ethnographic study of the festival. By documenting and reflecting upon the celebrations, we've unpacked its core meaning and spotted several new opportunities for brands across Singapore and Malaysia. What better way to wish you 年年有余 (nian nian you yu)?

CORE MEANING

Fundamentally, all festivals are about strengthening communal bonds. Understanding the meaning of a specific festival therefore means examining how that universal need is expressed and where it sits in relation to other cultural concepts.



'Welcoming good fortune' is the central thread running through the entire Chinese New Year (the flipside of which is to avoid bad luck). Celebration itself is framed as a means of doing just that – by enjoying the previous year's prosperity, celebrants can start on the right foot and ensure a bountiful year ahead. 'Welcoming good fortune' also underpins several facets of the social landscape, from the pressure to perform traditional roles (e.g. observing hierarchy) to maintaining family harmony, both of which are believed to ensure future success.

BRANDS

Now we've outlined the meaning, let's look at what different brands did in Singapore for the year of the rooster, before going into potential new opportunities.

MAC COSMETICS



When it comes to **attracting customers in retail or transport**, most brands chose to simply offer promotions. This arguably helps consumers welcome good fortune and celebrate prosperity, but brands are at a disadvantage if they don't make the connection explicit. Those who managed to stand-out with more innovative approaches. **Uniqlo** had a tombola lucky draw outside their Orchard Road store which connects very strongly to 'good fortune'. **MAC Cosmetics** surely helped consumers co-ordinate an auspicious outfit by redesigning their stores to coincide with their CNY collection. **Grab** had the innovative idea of allowing passengers to give digital hong baos coupled with tips for auspicious travel times, destinations, and directions.



GRAB



BRANDS

When it comes to **TVCs / online videos**, we see a couple of clear themes emerging. The standard approach has been to pull on the heart strings – such as this tear-jerker by **Guardian** or this one from **Changi Airport**. While these address that universal need to bond, they touch less upon the unique meaning of Lunar New Year, which is potentially more important for markets like Singapore or Malaysia where several nationally observed festivals vie for attention.

We feel three adverts did particularly well in breaking new ground, all of which used humour to highlight the realities of Chinese New Year. **Coca Cola** was surely a hit among single 20-30 year olds dreading an encounter with meddling aunties and eager to ensure a harmonious reunion.

Starhub addressed the pressure to be the perfect host and observe tradition, whilst showing that being with family is ultimately more important than following all the rules. Finally, the **Health Promotion Board** pulled out all the stops to encourage moderation during the festive period, with fight-scenes that were more *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* than *Eat Well, Live well*.

These three **adverts presumably strengthen cut-through by taking an unusual and humorous approach, and build resonance by addressing specific festive pain points**. How this actually plays out within the context of family homes across the Lion City is of course hard to predict - might a message of moderation clash with the desire for abundance, generosity, and spontaneity? Regardless, what they certainly demonstrate is that there are many ways for brands to 'go mahjong', and through our auto-ethnographies we've identified a few more potential communication opportunities.

EMOTIONAL HIGHS & LOWS

While nagging aunties and complex traditions are interesting new directions, they are only two of the many untapped marketing opportunities. To identify more of these, we asked our colleagues to conduct an auto-ethnographic study over the holidays – taking photos, recording video, and performing short tasks. **What emerged is a picture of the emotional journey which celebrants go through, the highs and the lows, the challenges and the delights.**

FOOD

When it comes to Chinese New Celebrations themselves, we must surely begin with food! Yu sheng stood out as the main highlight across Singapore and Malaysia – this can be the only time the whole family comes together for a single activity and is the srescendo of each gathering. It also reveals an unusual feature of CNY, **with many ingredients chosen because they sound like fortuitous phrases** (e.g. abalone is popular as it sounds like ‘guaranteed surplus’).



FESTIVE DISHES & SIGHTINGS

TRADITIONS

Aside from the yu sheng, it’s the older generations who maintain many traditions, such as not wearing white and not sweeping (so as not to brush away good fortune). **When their knowledge is lost, the unique character of the festival can go with them.** The absence of such traditions be poignant, and seeing them revived a great source of joy. Our colleague was very excited to see a neighbour following the Taoist tradition of leaving a light on overnight before the first day of the lunar calendar, and immediately began sharing pictures on social media.

EMOTIONAL HIGHS & LOWS

CHILDREN

Concerns about traditions being lost are particularly relevant for the younger generations, who may **only look forward to hong bao and understand less about the wider cultural meaning**. We even have pictures of children *googling* the correct Mandarin phrases to say thanks for their gifts.

This **lack of understanding** by the young drives another major pain point – boredom! Many activities like mah-jong are geared towards adults, leaving children to entertain themselves. This can be particularly true for young Malaysians traveling to rural hometowns and finding themselves cut-off from the internet!

GREETINGS & WISHES

ONE. HAPPY NEW YEAR! 新年快樂.
SUN NIN FAI LOK.

TWO. WISHING YOU A PROSPEROUS YEAR. 恭喜發財.
GOONG HAY FAT CHOY.

THREE. WISHING YOU SAFETY AND PEACE WHERE EVER YOU GO. 出入平安 CHUT YUP PING ON.

FOUR. WISHING YOU GREAT LUCK AND PROFITS. 大吉大利 DAI GUT LEI.

FIVE. WISHING YOU GOOD HEALTH. 身體健康 SUN TAI GEEN HONG.

SIX. WISHING YOU HAPPINESS AND CONSTANT LAUGHTER. 笑口常開 HOW SHEUNG HOY.

SPECIFICALLY FOR BUSINESS MINDED PEOPLE

THIRTEEN. WISHING YOU PROSPEROUS SUCCESSES IN YOUR BUSINESS. 生意興隆 SAAN YEE HING LOONG.

FOURTEEN. WISHING YOU THAT THE RICHES AND PROSPERITY WILL FLOW IN. 財源廣進 CHOY YUEN GUANG JUEN.

FIFTEEN. WISHING THAT EVEN A LITTLE INPUT (CAPITAL) WILL TURN INTO A HUGE OUTPUT. 一本萬利 YUT BOON MAAN LEI.

SIXTEEN. WISHING YOU STEADY ADVANCEMENTS UP (CAREER). 步步高升.

SPECIFICALLY FOR ELDERLY

EIGHTEEN. WISHING YOU TO BE HALE AND HEARTY; FULL OF VITALITY. 龍馬精神 LOONG MA JING SUN.

NINETEEN. WISHING YOU A LONG AND HEALTHY LIFE. 長命百歲 CHEUNG MANG BAK SHUI.

SPECIFICALLY FOR THE AUNTIES

TWENTY. WISHING YOU THAT YOU STAY YOUNG AND LOOK YOUTHFUL FOREVER. 青春常駐 TSING CHUEN SHEUNG JU.

source: thesmoodiaries.com

BAI NIAN - ELDERLY ARE GREETED, FOLLOWED BY GIFTING OF RED PACKETS.



TRAVELING & EXHAUSTION

Finally, travel is a major part of Chinese New Year in both countries – Singaporeans must **visit extended families across the city** (sometimes as many as 18 houses over 4 days), and Malaysians must **return to their home towns**. Extended travel time, plus the celebrations themselves, leaves many feeling exhausted.

UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES



FOOD

With many foods and ingredients chosen for consumption because of fortuitous Mandarin homophones, perhaps brands could emphasise any such similarities among their existing portfolio? For instance, the Mandarin for 'cheese' 起司 (qi si) sounds similar to 'knowledge' 知识 (zhi shi), and dairy brands could use this to develop a festive mental development proposition for children and career-driven adults.

TRADITION

The loss of traditions and efforts to revive them is surely an emotive territory begging to be picked up by brands. This could tie in with the broader trend towards nostalgia which we see across Southeast Asia.

CHILDREN

Brands could address the lack of appreciation and boredom among the next generation by launching edutainment campaigns that aim to help children learn about their culture (e.g. Chinese zodiac word games printed on packages)

TRAVELING & EXHAUSTION

There may be an opportunity for brands to help celebrants stay energized throughout the festivities, particularly for energy drinks or anyone who can offer long-lasting fullness

There are of course many other countries celebrating Chinese New Year, not least China itself, and we can only claim to have scratched the surface of potential new initiatives. **We're currently developing a range of techniques to explore festivals across Southeast Asia, from auto-ethno to VR and semiotics, so drop us a line at ipsos.sg@ipsos.com or Jacob.Harbord@ipsos.com if you're interested in hearing more!**