

## Teacher's Information File

*This file provides background information on some of the cultural practices referred to in Dragon Dancer and is designed to aid teachers in using this book in the classroom.*

### **Chinese New Year**

Chinese New Year is the most important festival in the Chinese calendar. Unlike in Britain, where New Year is on the same date annually, the Chinese use the lunar calendar to calculate the date of Chinese New Year and the day therefore changes every year. The date of this festival normally falls in either January or February because it corresponds with the new moon.

Chinese New Year celebrations actually last for fifteen days and end on the date of the full moon. In China, three of these days are public holidays.

The Chinese calendar is very different from calendars in other countries. It is made up of a cycle of twelve years, each of these years being named after an animal. Some people believe that those born in a particular year share characteristics with the animal that the year is named after.

Chinese New Year is celebrated by a huge number of people worldwide. In fact, one in six people around the world celebrate Chinese New Year. Although customs vary in different parts of the world, all celebrations share is the prioritisation of family and the desire to wish everyone peace and prosperity for the coming year.

Many decorations used at Chinese New Year are red and gold. Red is seen as a lucky colour and is also thought to scare away the monster Nian who is associated with New Year. The colour gold represents wealth and prosperity.

### **The Chinese Dragon**

Today, the Chinese dragon has become a symbol of China and Chinese civilisation all around the world. Although the origin of the Chinese dragon is not certain, one of the most convincing theories is that the dragon was a totem representing one of the ancient Chinese tribes.

The Chinese dragon is most often depicted as snake-like with four legs. It traditionally symbolises immense power, particularly control over water, rainfall, hurricane and floods. Whereas in Western fairy tales, the dragon is seen as a malevolent character, the Chinese dragon is respected and esteemed for its dignity and ability to do good. It is unsurprising that in a society largely founded on agriculture, a being that could control many aspects of the weather should be so revered.

#### **Did you know?**

The dragon is one of the twelve animals that make up the Chinese Lunar Calendar. It is considered particularly fortuitous to be born in the year of the dragon. So people born in 1976, 1988, 2000 and 2012 can look forward to a long and prosperous life!

The image of the dragon has undergone many changes over the centuries but has become more mighty and beautiful as time has passed. Although Chinese dragons can be seen in many different colours, the most highly revered dragon has always been the yellow one and this explains why Chinese emperors have worn gowns decorated by a yellow dragon pattern.

The Chinese dragon actually combines features of many other animals that Chinese people are familiar with: the protruding forehead of the dragon is a symbol of wisdom; its ox's ears denote success; the tiger's eyes are a sign of power; the eagle's claws are a mark of bravery; a fish's tale implies flexibility and finally, horse teeth are a symbol of diligence.

The elaborate dragon dance is performed at many Chinese celebrations, including Chinese New Year. Communities generally construct their own dragons using hoops made of bamboo covered in colourful fabric and supported by poles, which are held by the individual dancers. These dancers bring the dragon to life by raising and lowering the poles to make it look as if the dragon is moving through the street in an undulating fashion. Sometimes these celebratory dragons can span up to seventy metres!

**Additional reading on Chinese Dragons:**

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_dragon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_dragon)
- [http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/social\\_customs/dragon\\_lion.htm](http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/social_customs/dragon_lion.htm)
- <http://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/article-chinese-dragons.htm>

