The Story of the Red Envelopes.


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This is one of a series of elementary readers written in Cantonese and English and designed to familiarize children with the traditional major Chinese festivals celebrated by the Chinese in America. This booklet describes in narrative form the meaning of the red envelopes given with money gifts at Chinese New Year and other festivities. A page of notes in English explaining the custom is also provided. (CLK)
THE STORY OF THE Red Envelopes

Gordon Lew
It is with pleasure that the Chinese Bilingual Program, ESEA Title VII, disseminates this information about a specific custom in the celebration of Chinese New Year. Due to "assimilation", much of the content within this booklet has either been taken for granted or has been forgotten by many within the Chinese community. May this be the beginning of many attempts to bring into focus a very rich heritage – one of America's total heritages.

February, 1971

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Chinese New Year is here!

新年到了！
May and Ming get up early.
They greet their grandparents on New Year's Day.
Grandparents give them red envelopes.

Ming is very happy.

He yells: "Oh boy! Money!"
Ming opens the envelope, takes out the money, and...

...便開信封寄明
...throws away the red envelope!
May said “Ming, don’t throw the red envelope away. You’re supposed to keep it.” “Why?” asks Ming. “Because along with the money is a wish from our grandparents. Look! There’s something printed on the envelope.”
This one has a bat on it. It means blessing because the Chinese words bat 蝙 and blessing 福 both sound and look alike. Look! You've broken the bat's wing!
This has a fish on it. It is a wish that in the coming year there will be plenty of food. The words fish, 禮, and plentiful 餘 (surplus) have the same sound "yue."
This has peaches on it. It is a wish for long life. The Chinese use the peach as a birthday fruit.
Some have old Chinese coins printed on them. It is a wish for a prosperous year.

Some have the Chinese words 大吉 on them to wish a New Year full of good news and good thoughts.
Some have bamboo on them.
It is a wish for peace.
Ming says “Wow! There are so many good wishes printed on these red envelopes. I guess I will save my money as well as the envelopes. Thanks for letting me know.”
NOTES:

1) Red envelopes are used at Chinese New Year and other festivities. They are used to express gratitude, to send good wishes, or as gifts.

2) Red envelopes with a printed design should be treated as greeting cards. It is considered bad manners for children to take out the money and throw away the envelope in front of the giver or out on the street.

3) The giver could put any amount of money into the envelope. Children should learn that it is the thought that counts.

4) Red and gold are the lucky colors in China. It is a tradition to use red envelopes on happy occasions and white envelopes at funerals.

5) Red envelopes with any good-wish designs could be used during the Chinese New Year, with the possible exception of the “double-happiness” 紅包 one, which is traditionally associated with weddings.

6) Married adults are the givers of the red envelopes. Children and single adults (who are considered children) should not give out red envelopes.