

by Gerald Schmidt



China is red. More than just in the flag, more than in its political philosophy. Traditionally, red is the color of luck. The color of the clothes people marry in. The color on many temples. The color of the banners and charms put up around New Year. No wonder, then, that the chile peppers' role in culture comes to a high point in China: In many sizes, many forms, in rare cases even in a few colors, one finds the chile pepper as part of good luck charms.

One of the first questions one learns when eating out, whether in restaurants or on the street: Do you eat chile pepper? (And it's not just the foreigners who get asked that!) I teach at a university. I once asked my students what they did when they felt unhappy. One reply: I eat. Not chocolate, but hot and spicy food. Chile peppers even made it into a Chinese/Tibetan medicinal treatise that was written (for the greatest part, actually, painted) between 1750 and 1800. It suggested taking chile peppers and honey, hailing that concoction a drug to prolong life. Hot food is a good point also considering that China does not have heating south of the Yellow River. What one hears in winter, contrary to the popular theory about the chile pepper's great role in hot regions, cooling us off by making us sweat: they are heavily consumed in the cold months, for heating up. Of course, they are also widely eaten during the hot months. Here and there, chile peppers hang outside like ristras. And there are the good luck charms which look like them. Sometimes, aside all the red lanterns, one wonders what design the Chinese could possibly have used on their decorations and charms before the chile peppers were introduced.