

Lai See for Luck

One of China's oldest customs is about more than money



With the new year comes renewed wishes for happiness and good fortune. As the Year of the Dragon approaches, we take a look at one of the most well-known symbols of that blessing—*lai see*.

The red envelopes (紅包), alternatively known as *lai see* or *hong bao*, are ubiquitous during the Lunar or Chinese New Year. In Hong Kong, they are commonly known by the Chinese name, *lai see* (利是), which loosely translates as 'everything is good', but they can also be referred to as *lai see* 利事 ('good things').

Whichever name you use, *lai see* in Chinese culture is the appropriate way to give a monetary gift during festivals or at special occasions like weddings. However, the small envelopes are more than just money carriers.

Gratitude & Good Fortune

While the custom of giving *lai see* is practical—a way to exchange money discretely—it's also emotional—an expression of hope and best wishes.

Many centuries ago, as the story goes, an evil spirit called Sui was roaming the land during the new year and attacking people while they slept. To keep their son awake, one family gave him shiny gold coins to play with. The brightness of the coins repelled Sui and kept the boy safe.

Soon after, parents began to thread gold coins on a red string and place them under their children's pillows, warding off evil spirits and thus bringing safety and good fortune to the home.

As the years went by, string turned to paper, coins to dollar bills, but the sentiment remained. The gifting evoked a blessing. A sense of protection, from one to another.

Friendship & Respect

Lai see giving follows many rules, starting with the envelope itself. Red is the preferred color for the envelope as it symbolises energy, fortune and happiness. Gold is another auspicious color found in envelope design, along with more modern shades of pink or yellow. 'Unlucky' colors such as black, blue and white are never seen in envelope design.

The money that goes inside the envelope is often a small amount but can be larger. Bills, not coins, should always be new and crisp. A monetary amount of eight (meaning: become rich) or nine (sounds like longevity) makes for very auspicious *lai see* while the number four is to be avoided since its pronunciation sounds like the word for death.

Before Hong Kong started producing it as a coin, the \$10 note, known locally as the 'green crab' was a popular *lai see* choice. Nowadays, *lai see* recipients are likely to find a rainbow trout (\$20) in their packet, or if they're especially fortunate a big cow (\$500), or golden bull (\$1,000).

You can also deliver *lai see* digitally through banks and other payment platforms. Choose your amount, add some animation and a custom greeting, and send away!

Family & Connection

While some *lai see* customs are shifting with the times, the tendency is still to give: big to small, senior to junior. So, parents will give to children,

married folks to unmarried, and bosses to staff. Adult children will also give to parents, and married family members will give to elderly relatives.

In Hong Kong, *lai see* is also given to security guards, doormen, drivers, helpers, and the cleaning and maintenance staff of buildings. You might even give *lai see* to single colleagues and subordinates, or your favorite hairdresser, manicurist, waitstaff or barista. For many recipients in Hong Kong, *lai see* serves as their yearly bonus.

The *lai see* 'season' runs through the first 15 days of the Lunar New Year, and you should give when you see someone for the first time during the new year.

If you are fortunate to receive *lai see*, don't open the envelope in front of the giver as this is seen as impolite. Always offer, or receive, the envelope with two hands and don't forget the greeting!

You might recognize the classic Chinese New Year greeting '*Gong hei fat choy*' (恭喜發財), which translates as 'Wishing you a happy and prosperous New Year', but you can also say '*Sun nin fai lok*' (新年快樂), meaning 'Happy New Year'.

There is even a special blessing if you're handing out *lai see* to children: '*Hok yip jun bou*' (學業進步), which is a wish for good academic progress.

Whatever greeting you choose, keep in mind that the exchange of *lai see* symbolizes connection—an expression of gratitude and a wish for good fortune for the new year and beyond.



Design Harmony

Graphic Designer Kelvin joined the Club’s Marketing Department in August 2023, and took the lead in designing our Club-specific Centennial-branded lai see envelopes. He shares his thought process behind this year’s design.

Q: Can you tell us about your design for this year’s Club lai see? What inspired you?

A: The design originated from a thorough exploration of the values embodied within Chinese characters with a focus on our Centennial logo and color palette. Through a visual transformation of their deep meanings of wealth, unity, and prosperity, the design showcases intricate patterns inspired by Chinese motifs. The first pattern representing ‘wealth’ draws inspiration from the abstract

shapes found in glutinous chicken rice, symbolizing abundance. The second pattern symbolizing ‘unity’ is formed by abstract shapes of flowers coming together, representing the coming together of friends, and family in harmony. Lastly, the third pattern embodying ‘prosperity’ takes the form of abstract circles resembling coins, signifying the bestowal of good fortune and success.

Q: What do you think is most important to convey with the envelope?

A: The envelope serves as a vessel to convey three essential pillars of Chinese motifs: Wealth, Unity, and Prosperity. These values hold utmost significance and serve as a representation of our identity. By incorporating them into the design of the envelope,

we impart blessings and well-wishes to our beloved recipients, ensuring that our intentions of joy and contentment are transmitted with every exchange.

Q: What do you enjoy the most about designing?

A: Designers have a knack for selecting just the right elements, like finding the perfect puzzle piece that fits snugly into place. We have a sixth sense for composition, creating a harmonious dance of shapes, colors, and typography.

Q: What’s your Chinese zodiac symbol? Do you think it matches your personality?

A: As a proud representative of the Year of the Horse, I’ve got a keen eye for observation and a personality that’s as spirited as a wild stallion. Get ready for some horsing around!

The Club Centennial-branded lai see will be released in January. Take a guess which of the designs was the winner!

Ahead of the Chinese New Year, the Club would like to add this reminder of our House Rules:

Section I – General. 19

Tipping. No person shall give gratuities, directly or indirectly, to any Club Staff. Members may make a contribution to the Staff Gratuity Fund. An exception during Chinese New Year is that members may distribute red packets to Club Staff and/or contractor at their sole discretion.

For the latest news on the Club’s Chinese New Year celebrations, check out our weekly digital news.