

# How we count a person's age in old China

## *A Red Envelope Show & Tell*

Today, February 10, 2024, is Chinese New Year. In the lunar calendar, it's "January 1<sup>st</sup>" (the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month), with the zodiac animal Dragon. One aspect that you may find interesting is that in the olden days in China (actually till fairly recently, like when I was born in 1941), *everyone's age increased by one year on this New Year's Day* – as everyone does here on their respective birthdays. The New Year tradition of giving red envelopes containing money to youngsters, called *Ya-Sui-Qian* (壓歲錢), is associated with this. The 1<sup>st</sup> character, *Ya*, is a Chinese word that can be interpreted to mean "to anchor", the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Sui*, is the word for "age," and *Qian*, "money," the phrase *Ya-Sui-Qian* (壓歲錢) translates as "*anchoring money for the year ahead*" namely, "*the money-gift for increased age.*" There are other stories/interpretations, too. It should be pointed out that this traditional way of counting produces an age one or two years more than our familiar way of counting, the real age.

In this show & tell, we will learn the different ways of counting age in (old) China. They say, "It's counting according to the lunar calendar." This is only partially true. Yes, the days can follow the lunar calendar -- so while I was a child, each of us had two birthdays: one according to the Gregorian calendar (we just say the Western calendar) and another to the lunar calendar, but the different way of counting one's age is not because one uses a lunar calendar. It has to do with the different forms of counting.

When a baby is born, let's say, yesterday – the day before New Year, according to this old system, s/he is counted as a "one-year-old," or in Chinese, *Yi-Sui* (一歲), which is "Age One," instead of "the zeroth year" as we would do here. It means in this counting system, one uses *ordinal numbers* (first, second, third, ...) to count. "One year" really should be translated to "the first year." By "first year" of course, it means "the first Chinese year" (namely, "the first year of the baby"). At the next Chinese (lunar) New Year, in our example, it is today, the baby (born in the year of Rabbit) would be in his/her second year, thus *Liang Sui* (兩歲), namely, "two years old." This form of counting the *Nth* year of one's life as "Age-*N*" also means that everyone increases one year of age on Chinese New Year; consequently, everyone's Chinese age would be at least one more than their Western age. On New Year's Day, everyone (unless you were born on NYD) would have their Chinese ages *two years greater than their real ages* -- until their respective birthdays catch up when they would revert back to the one-more-year category.

Take my own case as an example. I was born on November 26, 1941. I celebrated my 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday last November in 2023. So, I am 82 years old. But according to the old Chinese counting, I was "83 years old, ... until today", the Chinese New Year's Day, when, like everyone else, I got to add a year to my Chinese age – so now I am "84 years old," two years

greater than my real age, ... all the way till the coming November, when I celebrate the birthday of my 84th (lunar) year – or we say simply “my 84-year-old birthday.” Of course, on your birthdays, you add a year to your age, but you do not add a year to your Chinese age – that would be double-counting! BTW, I have simplified the story by considering only one birthday, 11/26/2023, my real 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Let’s now give some details of “the two birthdays feature” that I mentioned at the beginning; the day I was born in 1941 was November 26, but on the lunar calendar, it was “October 8” (the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month), so that’s my lunar birthday. You can look up this year’s lunar calendar to find that lunar October 8<sup>th</sup> falls on November 8. I can celebrate my birthday on 11/26 this year, but also on 11/8 as well.

When I was growing up in China, most old people only knew their lunar birthday, and it was not easy to look up one’s “other birthday.” (These days, one can simply Google it!) I know that everyone in my parents’ generation simply uses their lunar birthdays as their Western calendar ones (for instance, on their passports or driver's licenses).

In short, in old China, one counts one’s age

- instead of by # of birthdays that one has had: 0, 1, 2, ...
- but by # of (lunar) years that one has lived: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, ...

In this way, the traditional Chinese age (sometimes called one’s “fake age” 虛歲 *Xu Sui*) is always at least greater by one year than the real or the “solid age” 實歲 *Shi Sui* – because one system of counting starts with ‘one’ and the other with ‘zero.’ Plus, everyone increases by one year of age on New Year’s Day before their birthdays, which results in a *fake age* two years greater than the *solid* one – until their birthday.

The custom of giving youngsters red envelopes *Ya-Sui-Qian* (壓歲錢) as “birthday gift money” has other interpretations. The first character, *Ya*, has the most commonly-used meaning of “to suppress.” In this way, *Ya-Sui-Qian* (壓歲錢) literally translates as “*Suppress-Age-Money*.” Is this supposed to mean “the money to stop one from getting older”? But, according to Leslie, who is much more knowledgeable in such matters, another, entirely different story is associated with this expression. It’s *Ya-Sui-Qian* (壓祟錢), as the middle characters 祟 and 歲 are both pronounced as *Sui*. But instead of 歲 age, it’s the name of a demon 祟, and the phrase *Ya-Sui-Qian* means “the money to suppress, to ward off, the Demon Sui”. A simple search (<https://chinesenewyear.net/red-pockets/>) would confirm this story. “...there is a demon called Sui (祟). On New Year’s Eve, it would come and pat children’s heads while sleeping. His touch was tainted. To protect their children, parents would stay up the entire night, guarding them.”

You may be interested to know that Japan (and Korea) followed the same traditional system – until Japan changed to the modern way of counting by law in 1902. Apparently, the practice still persisted until 1950, when additional legal actions were adopted to complete the transition.