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Happy 牛 Year!

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By Christopher C. Heselton
On January 25, 2009, Lunar New Year’s Eve, millions of Chinese watched Zhao Benshan’s comedic stylings on the Spring Festival Gala, but for many, when they turned to check the inbox of their cell phone, they found it full of dozens of unread text messages. No, they weren’t advertising cut-rate travel packages to the latest tourist paradise – for the most part at least. They were messages from friends, family, significant-others, co-workers, and acquaintances congratulating the recipient on the “Happy Year!” (a play upon “niu,” the Chinese word for ox or cow, sounding similar to the English word “new,” of course).

Eating dumplings, setting off fireworks, watching the Spring Festival Gala on CCTV, and now – wait, what’s this? - sending a hoard of text messages on your cell phone? That’s right: sending text message greetings to close ones on Chinese New Year has rapidly become the new New Year’s thing to do. In fact, text message greetings have become a tradition for nearly every Chinese holiday and special occasion: Mid-Autumn festival, Western New Year (now celebrated with great fanfare in China, though not nearly as much as the other one), even birthdays. Of course, this trend is mostly among young and middle-aged cell users. It has yet to be a popular venue of “new year obeisance” (拜年) with those over forty. Between January 25 and January 31, Chinese users sent a mind-boggling 18 billion text messages according to the three largest telecom companies in China. Over half of those messages were sent on January 25 (Chinese New Year’s Eve) as many sat down watching the Spring Festival Gala. To put it in context, that’s fourteen messages for every Chinese citizen, averaging thirty messages sent from each cell phone and representing one in every forty text messages sent in a year!

These holiday messages are often full of word-plays and poetic rhymes ranging from the witty to the cheesy, the hilarious to the innocuous, the inane to the heartfelt. They often involve the Chinese zodiac animal of the year and perhaps national themes; last year, many of these messages made references to the Olympics, such as ones that played off the fact that the characters for Olympics also mean “mysterious luck.”

This year, as expected, the prevalent theme is the ox (牛). One typical rhythmic message I received read:

The ox’s twisted horn always faces forward; the ox’s big round eyes look at the pieces of fortune; the ox’s heavy body is healthy and strong; the ox’s tail sweeps clear to welcome in happiness; the ox’s thunderous call beckons spring’s return; the ox’s hooves stamp intentions into shape. Wish this Year of the Ox to be more prosperous. The flourishing ox carries forth prosperity to fill the heavens. Great luck in year of the ox!

Others made humorous word plays off the word “ox.” One such message I received used a vulgar Chinese expression, “the cow’s vagina” (屄), which is roughly equivalent to English terms such as “awesome” or “bad ass”:

I wish for your endeavors to be like an ox/awesome! Your work like an ox/awesome! Your health like an ox/awesome! Your wealth like an ox/awesome! Your fortune like an ox/awesome! Yourself like an ox/awesome! Your entire family like an ox/awesome! Your year of the ox like an ox/awesome! Every year like an ox/awesome! Everything all like an ox/awesome!

祝您事业牛!工作牛！家庭牛！身体牛！财运牛！福气牛！个人牛！全家牛！牛年牛．年年牛!一切皆牛!
Another used black humor to make light of the recent tainted milk scandal by claiming to deliver me several bovine products, including "a milk cow to send you no health" (奶牛为你送不康). The message continued on to say that they sent me "a Red Bull to make your work prosper" (红牛让你事业旺), a reference to the energy drink, and "a cow herder looking to the length of your love-life" (牛郎望你爱情长) – a reference to the ancient Chinese myth of cow herder boy and weaver girl, a pair of, literally, star-crossed lovers.

If all this is news to you, these messages may seem a quaint, creative, or an ingenious incorporation of new technology into the marking of an age-old holiday, but for many these messages are something else – an enormous annoyance! Many people receive thirty, sixty, even ninety messages in a single night, with each requiring a response out of appreciation or mere propriety. The messages also, with rare exceptions, lack sincerity. Most of the ones I received were copied from the Internet, and this is routine. Many are pulled off the web and sent indiscriminately to everyone in a person’s cell phone book. Some people do resist this trend by single-handedly – or should I say “single-thumb-edly”? – writing personalized messages to each friend, but this can take an hour or so, hence the common use of shortcuts.) The idea is a nice enough one, to show that you are thinking of someone fondly during the holiday season although you may not be able to pay a “new year obeisance”; however, the likelihood that one is simply receiving a mass-produced greeting may mean that few bother to actually read what comes onto their screen.

Despite the irritating ring of the cell phone during Chinese New Year, the trend has been ever more popular with the number of text messages increasing at least 50 percent every year, and this year, according to The Northeast News Net, 85 percent. So, although many may be looking to watch this year’s skit by Zhao Benshan, it’s more likely they’ll be spending that time sending text messages to everyone they know, thus furthering their own holiday anguish.