

# When *hongbao* becomes prohibitive ... it's all about symbolic significance

Wan Lixin

According to a recent China National Radio report, as Chinese New Year or Spring Festival approaches, some grandparents, especially those in rural areas, are apprehensive about the sums they are expected to gift their grandchildren in the form of *hongbao*, or red envelopes.

On the occasion of the biggest Chinese family reunion, the elderly are generally required to give a sum of *hongbao* to their grandchildren or children when the younger generation offers New Year's greetings.

In my hometown in rural Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province, for instance, usually the first thing on Chinese New Year's Day, elderly parents would sit in state, while their children and grandchildren kneel before them by turns, saying something auspicious, and then the old couple would hand out a *hongbao* to each of them.

In the case of my elder sister, she would hand out to each of her four grandchildren an envelope containing a total of 2,000 yuan (US\$280), though she confessed to me that the envelopes were all prepared and stuffed before hand by her daughter-in-law.

Still, the novelty of practicing a largely defunct ritual, aided by the expectation of a windfall, usually helps the younger kids to be dead serious in prostrating themselves, though the red envelopes are handed over to their mother soon afterwards. It has been observed, with some irony, that when the *hongbao* was much less, at about 10 or 20 yuan, the kids usually had a higher chance of using the money on firecrackers or candies.

Li Jiazhun, one of my cousins in a village in Lianyungang,



Hongbao, or the red envelope — IC

said that in the past few years, his parents had been giving each of the seven grandchildren 200 yuan.

"This year, I have already told my parents not to give out any *hongbao*, since they are getting on in years (both over 80), and no longer have the ability to make money," Li noted.

Huang Yan is a native of Mengcheng in Anhui Province, working as a janitor in an upscale compound in downtown Shanghai. Anhui happens to be where the allegedly rising sum of *hongbao* is triggering concerns.

Asked if he needs to give red envelopes during Spring Festival, the middle-aged janitor replied: "No. I will receive some red envelopes, containing from 100 to 300 yuan, but I never give money to others."

It took me some time to realize that he was referring to the small sums of money given to him by property owners during the festival in appreciation of his professional service as a janitor. The sums might be quite a supplement to his 7,000-yuan salary.

He has spent the past six Spring Festivals in Shanghai. When he did return home from time to time, instead of getting

money from his parents, he would give a red envelope to them containing 5,000-10,000 yuan. This is also a quite usual practice for wage-earning children with respect to their aging parents.

I did not inquire if staying away from his hometown during Spring Festival might spare him the complications related to *hongbao* during the season, though in Fuyang in Anhui, following some locals' complaints about this slightly tradition-bound practice of giving out ever higher gift money, the local government responded that it is helping inculcate in local farmers a healthy conception of *yasuiqian* (gift money during the festival), with a view to incorporating the advocacy of a reasonable sum of *hongbao* as part of the general village consensus, though there are doubts as to its efficacy.

With *hongbao* money in the economically lackluster region soaring from 20-30 yuan some years ago to 400-600 yuan now, it is becoming a burden for some farmers without a stable income.

Given China's significant differences in economic and cultural circumstances, the perception of *hongbao* can

be very different in different regions.

In Shanghai, if the elderly have good pensions, given the scarcity of grandchildren today, some grandparents would gladly offer a thick red envelope to their grandchildren during Spring Festival and other occasions, even though the latter are usually spared the ritual of kneeling down.

This sum is usually specific to each family, and doesn't lend itself to emulation.

The situation is a bit nuanced among middle-aged relatives. While theoretically the gains in *hongbao* can be offset by the sums handed out, the situation can be more complicated with regards to couples who have no children, or grown-up children who are well beyond the traditionally proper age of *hongbao* from aunts and uncles.

Many years ago, during Spring Festival, I attended a gathering of extended family, and at the sight of a distant relative who I had not seen for a long time, I made a move to take my kindergartener son to say hello to the person, only to see her take a preemptive move to evade us. It took me a while

to realize that she was afraid of giving a *hongbao* without getting any in return, for her daughter was already grown up and not present anyway.

To avoid such complications, many enlightened households in urban as well as rural areas have agreed that they would have a feast together, but would not give or receive any red envelopes, thus sparing some the unease of ending up a loser in the intricate network of gives and takes.

While giving *hongbao* on Spring Festival is part and parcel of the festival, as pointed out by professor He Huili from China Agricultural University, "Gifting *yasuiqian* was originally an auspicious gesture to extend good wishes to kids. It is important to constantly remind us of the original aspiration of this cherished ritual, and be contented so long as the function of expressing wishes has been fulfilled.

"So some elderly parents' tendency to give ever greater sum goes against the original aspiration and is a cause for social concern, hence the need for rectification. There is also a caveat here: When the sum becomes significant, it easily leads to grumbling over 'the pittance'."

There are also marked regional differences. In southern Guangdong Province, for instance, very small amount of gift money is usually generously given out to acquaintances and relatives during the festival. Thus, even the sum due to a grandchild could be within 100 yuan. This adherence to the symbolic significance of expressing good wishes is salutary, and worthy of emulation by, for instance, Putian in neighboring Fujian Province, where a *hongbao* could be a prohibitive 12,000 yuan.