

Take a Bao if You Are Not Superstitious

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Abstract

Introduction: Singaporeans are superstitious, and medical staff are no exception to the rule. We conducted a survey to determine the prevalence of superstitious beliefs and practices amongst doctors, nurses and medical students in Singapore. **Methods:** Internet and face-to-face surveys of 68 respondents, all of whom completed the survey after being threatened with curses and hexes. **Results:** Sixty-eight doctors, nurses and medical students responded to our survey. Only 11 admitted to being superstitious, yet 31 believed in the ill-fortune associated with eating *bao* or meat dumplings, 6 in the nefarious powers of black (5) or red (1) outfits on call, and 14 believed that bathing (6 insisting on the powers of the seven-flower bath) prior to the onset of a call portended good fortune, in terms of busy-ness of a call. Twenty-four believed in “black clouds”, i.e. people who attracted bad luck whilst on call, and 32 refused to mouth the words “having a good call” until the day after the event. We discovered 2 hitherto undescribed and undiscovered superstitions, namely the benefits of eating bread and the need to avoid beef, for the good and ill fortune associated with their ingestion. **Discussion:** Superstitious practices are alive and well in modern-day Singapore, the practice not necessarily being restricted to the poorly-educated or foolish.

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“Superstitions are, for the most part, but the shadows of great truths.”

Tryon Edwards

Introduction

Superstition, defined by Webster’s dictionary as “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation”, has not, even now, been eradicated, despite the best efforts of our missionary founders. Predicated on the belief that unseen forces take an active part in our lives, superstitions lead to quaint, sometimes bizarre practices in an (often futile) attempt to wrest control of our destinies.¹

Singapore, with its *mélange* of peoples, is understandably rife with superstitious practices. The Chinese propensity for numerology often manifests at road traffic accident sites, with rubberneckers furiously transcribing 4-digit car registration numbers instead of proffering their services as rescuers or stretcher-bearers. These same faces can, soon

after, be seen queuing up to place their 4D (4-digit) bets, fervently hoping that the bad karma of the deceased victims will translate to good luck (when betting on horse races) for them. So prevalent is the belief in the mystical properties of numbers that car owners in Hong Kong, China and Singapore are willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars to ensure that their car registration plates (and hence fortunes) read 168 (which, in Cantonese, translates phonetically to *ya luk fatt* or 一路发, the *fatt* being short for *fatt choy* or 发财) rather than 164, which tragically translates to *ya luk seh* 一路死, or the road to death. Indeed, Alfa Romeo’s poor choice of moniker for the 164 sedan in the early 1980s almost led to its demise, until it was hastily renamed the 168. Numerology aside, phonetics also plays an important role in Asian society, words which sound like gold (*kum* or *jing*, 金) or fortune (*fatt* 发) being revered over words portending ill fortune. The number 5, on the other hand, serves as a nullifier, being read as *uhm* in Cantonese, and meaning 不 or no. Hence, the good fortune associated with 168 (一路发) can be reversed with the addition of a 5, 1658 spelling the

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road to no fortune, 一路不发. Even gift giving can be a trap for the uninitiated, e.g. giving a clock as a birthday gift can signal your wish to see that person's life end prematurely.

The medical profession, despite being rooted in science and logic, is not immune to superstition. Fox and Davies¹ reported how the number 13 is taboo in British hospitals, Friday the 13th being thought to be a particularly bad day, with increased admissions for road accidents. Japanese patients in one hospital were reported to refuse to be discharged on unlucky days, losing it 7.4 million yen (\$98,000) a year.² Psychiatric patients in Singapore, irrespective of educational level, were wont to attribute their illness to spirit possession.³ A survey of British doctors revealed several superstitious beliefs and practices, among which were the inadvisability of stating that a call was quiet (lest "the Q word" be taken as an invocation to the fates to supply work to avert boredom), rituals to ensure a good call, such as laying out of clothes prior to turning in for the night (in the mistaken belief that this readiness to work would mean having no bleeps in the night) and avoiding duties with "black clouds", i.e. staff with a bad reputation for attracting work.¹

Rare is the fledgling Singaporean medic or nurse who has not been initiated into this cult of superstitious practices. We are told not to mention how good one's night duty is (akin to not saying the Q word), never to eat steamed dumplings called bao (包, Fig. 1) on the same day, lest we bao ka liao (包裹了 or "have the lion's share of") all the cases, or worse, have to bao (包, or wrap) corpses in their shrouds later that night. Those with bad luck (NB: the Asian versions of "Black Clouds") are told to "bathe in the seven flowers", though which flowers to use in the concoction are never elucidated. Presumably, it is the fragrance which engenders good fortune, thus explaining the propensity for some doctors to bathe before every call. To date, no study has been performed assessing one's fragrance or tendency to pong with good or bad luck whilst on call.

Methodology

Not being aware of the study by Fox and Davies, but being fully cognizant of superstitions amongst Singaporean doctors and nurses, we set out to survey our colleagues.

First, we determined the ITT (intention needed to "tio"), "tio" being Hokkien for "tio beh pio" or "strike it rich". We vacillated between 28, 68 and 168 as being particularly auspicious numbers to aim for, but were intrigued by the possibilities suggested by 56, which could be interpreted in Cantonese as "will not descend" (*uhm luk*), portending ascent (i.e. promotion) for us all. In addition, one of us (RS) pointed out 56 in Hokkien was *gor luk*, which sounds like "got luck", making the number doubly auspicious.

Traditionalists all, we opted for the magic number of 68.

Next, we conducted a market poll to suss out common superstitions, worthy of investigation. In addition to the ones already mentioned, we came across a few interesting beliefs that we felt were interesting and worthy of inclusion in our survey form (Appendix 1). These included eating *mee siam* (Fig. 1), a Malay dish, purported to *siam* (i.e. chase) bad luck away, *soon kuay* (Fig. 1), symbolically (顺) bringing smooth sailing (一路顺风) to the ingestor, and chocolate, simply because we like chocolate in any form, and felt that whatever was good enough to buoy Harry Potter's spirits after contact with dementors should be good enough to protect against the nefarious elements that bring bad luck to those on call.⁴ Not being fully *au fait* with other superstitions, we resolved to let our respondents educate us about hitherto neglected or unknown practices. We designed our anonymised survey form to obtain demographic information from our respondents, to determine if they had heard of or believed in our listed superstitions, and whether they had any others to add.

We carried out our survey after consulting our self-appointed feng shui master, who perused his almanac, peered into the *ba gua* (from Bee Chun Heng, no less!) and determined that we should coerce... uhm... invite our respondents to answer our survey in the month of October between the 1st and 31st, but not on any day with a 4 in it. On 28th October 2006, we fired up our computer, newly painted a golden (金) hue and emailed 28 of our colleagues. 5 of our surveyors then approached the first 8 doctors, nurses or medical students we encountered, threatening them with the evil eye should they decline participation. All 68 completed our questionnaires.

Results

Sixty-eight respondents (inclusive of 2 who only agreed after the mysterious appearance of warty excrescences on their faces) agreed to participate in and complete our survey. Approval was granted, both by our hospital's ethics committee and (via Ouija board) by the denizens of the nether-world.

Forty-one male and 27 female medicos, of whom 54 were doctors, 9 medical students and 5 nurses, of mean age 32 years (range 22 to "old enough to have enjoyed disco" to 58), completed our survey. Fifty-nine were of Chinese, 2 Malay and 5 of Indian extraction, with 2 of either Filipino, Caucasian or Eurasian extraction (better known to Singaporeans as the "Others"). Most (57 out of 68, 83.8%) of the respondents disclaimed a superstitious nature, yet a significant number avoided items purported to confer bad luck during a call, such as *bao* (31 out of 68, 45.6%) and items of black (5 out of 68, 7.4%) or red (1 out of 68, 1.5%) clothing. One respondent believed in the fortune-enhancing

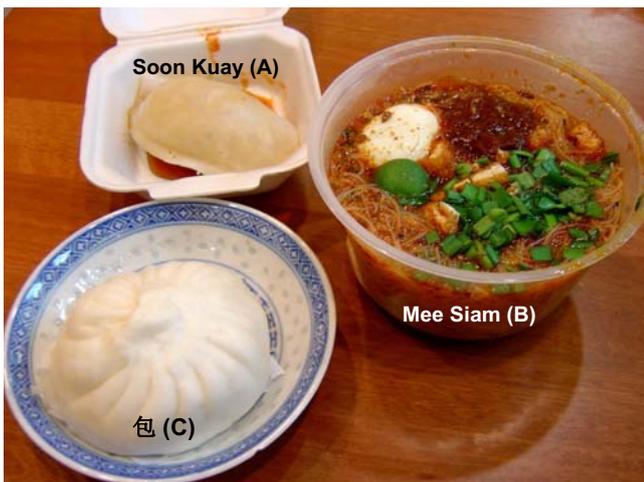


Figure 1: Luck (Good and Bad) to Go – Soon Kuay (A); Mee Siam (B) and Bao, 包 (C) – purported to bring good (A & B) and bad (C) luck



Figure 2: A group of Singaporean neurologists and neurosurgeons (牛肉) enjoying a pleasant day out

properties of mee siam, whilst 1 erstwhile Harry Potter fan was an avowed believer in luck-by-chocolate. Although only 6 believed in the powers of the “bath of the seven flowers”, 14 made it a habit to bathe prior to a call, in the belief that this protected them against a bad one. Fourteen (20.6%) prayed before going on call, but this appeared to be consistent with a religious temperament rather than a superstitious nature. Thirty-two (47%) believed that anticipation of a good call portended a bad one. Twenty-four (35.3%) admitted to acting on their superstitions.

We were not disappointed in the haul of new, hitherto undiscovered superstitions. One of our neurosurgeon respondents reported that he avoided eating beef on the day of his call, because beef, or *niu rou* 牛肉, sounds like

“neuro” (Fig. 2), and hence would jinx a neurology or neurosurgical call. Another, an oncologist, reported his belief that eating bread, or mian bao 面包, protected one from *bao ga liao*-ing (because *mian* is Hokkien for “no need”).

Although such a study would be completely *wu liao* (无聊), it might be interesting to conduct a randomised study examining the disparity between a doctor’s perception of a call and actual level of busy-ness (number of admissions and number of bleeps to one’s pager) after eating either *bao*, *mee siam*, *soon kuay* or chocolate. A similar survey can also be carried out amongst dentists, who may foster a belief that eating bean sprouts, *dao gei* 豆芽, might be good for dental hygiene as avoiding them in meals (*bo dao gei*) might lead to toothlessness (*bo gei*, 无牙). Then again, loss of teeth might be perceived to be good for business.

Our results demonstrate that: 1) superstitions are not the province of the uneducated or the foolish 2) we are more superstitious than we care to admit 3) we, of Chinese extraction, spend far too much time thinking up things to scare ourselves with (多关闲事) and 4) Asian people love word games (a form of clang association?). At best, these irrational, charming beliefs are what makes us distinctive and interesting, but may reflect a deeper primal fear of the unknown that needs to be addressed.

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Disclaimers: The authors apologise for any errors in the Chinese language. Three of us are from mission schools (ACS and MGS) and 1, a Malaysian, studied Malay as a second language.

Appendix 1. Survey Form Distributed to Medical Personnel Fortunate/Unfortunate Enough to be Identified as Respondents

Survey: Superstitions amongst doctors/medical personnel

Thank you for participating in this short, albeit slightly ridiculous, survey. Your replies will be kept confidential. Please answer all questions. NB: It is NOT bad luck to answer this survey

	1	2	3
A PERSONAL BACKGROUND			
1 Gender	Male	Female	
2 Age			years
3 Ethnicity	1. Chinese	2. Malay	3. Indian 4. Others
4 Medical background	Doctor	Nurse	Others
Nurse	Yes	No	
House Officer	Yes	No	
Medical Officer (circle year)MO1 MO2 MO3 MO4 MO5 MO>5	Yes	No	
Registrar	Yes	No	
Assoc Consultant/Consultant/Senior Consultant	Yes	No	
General Practitioner (GP)	Yes	No	
5 Current posting/specialty			
6 Would you describe yourself as being superstitious ?	Yes	No	Not sure
6 Do you avoid items purported to bring “bad luck” before going on call/on duty?	Yes	No	Not sure
7 What items do you think bring bad luck? Please tick all that apply			
1. Pao 包 (Chinese bun) : because you pao ka liao (包了) all the cases			
2. Black clothes			
3. Red clothes			
3. Others – please state			
8 Are there any items/rituals that bring good luck? Please tick all that apply			
1. Mee siam (to siam all the bad luck away)			
2. Chocolate (to ward off dementors a la Harry Potter)			
3. Taking a bath before going on duty			
4. Taking a bath in the “seven flowers”			
5. Wearing perfume			
6. Eating “soon kuay” (because 顺 = smooth, therefore eating it will ensure your call is “smooth sailing”)			
9 Do you believe that some people/colleagues should be avoided on call/duty because they bring bad luck?	Yes	No	Not sure
10 Do you believe that saying that a “call is going well” will bring bad luck – i.e. cause you to have a lot of cases/work to do?	Yes	No	Not sure
11 Do you believe that certain days are more unlucky (e.g. Hungry Ghost Festival) or lucky (e.g. Chinese New Year) than others?	Yes	No	Not sure
12 Have you ever prayed before going on duty?	Yes	No	Not sure
13 Do you believe that it is bad luck to anticipate a good call – as it will lead to bad luck?	Yes	No	Not sure
14 Have you ever acted upon your superstitions?	Yes	No	Not sure
15 <i>Answer this only if you have heard of/believe in these superstitions.</i> How did you hear of/believe in these superstitions?	Seniors Colleagues	Common knowledge Parents	Common sense Non-medical friends
16 Do you know of any other superstitions?			