

"Easy to Prosper and Prosper Forever"

by

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The Chinese community in Singapore, much like its counterparts in Hong Kong and elsewhere, is highly superstitious. The practice of *fung shui*, the Chinese geomancy system that determines the layout of physical spaces, is widespread there, as it is in Hong Kong. Childbirth is likewise strongly influenced by superstition—it is believed that children should ideally be born in the Year of the Dragon, followed by the Year of the Goat. As a result, there is a dramatic surge in births in Dragon Years; many Chinese couples in Singapore plan their marriage dates accordingly. A female marketing executive says, "We don't generally believe in horoscopes, but why leave it to luck when it comes to children?"

Mr. Chan, 30, a financial analyst, planned for a Goat baby because it "would not clash with our horoscopes." He is an Ox, his wife a Rabbit. "We married last year, and since we were already too late to try for a Horse baby, we decided we wanted a Goat, because we didn't want to smart the family with a Monkey." All this was said with complete seriousness. This is the year of the Golden Goat, which only comes once in 60 years, and Singapore is experiencing an unforeseen baby boom, exceeding even the numbers from the last Dragon year in 1988. "A child born in the Year of the Golden Goat is supposed to be determined and courageous. If we are lucky, we may even have a Dragon child in the year 2000!" For now, though, the sanguine Mr. Chan and his wife will try for a Goat baby.

Superstitions also extend to numbers. The number `4' in Mandarin sounds like the word for death. Likewise, the number `8' sounds like the word for wealth. In Hong Kong, a car license plate with the number "8" sold for US\$400,000 — a record which is now in the Guinness Book. "Prestigious" or "lucky" car registration numbers are bought and sold in the open market. The newspaper offers the following: ES2868 (which means "easy to prosper and prosper forever," SM88D (a "prosperous number" for \$20,000), and many others. Phone numbers with 3's and 8's are prized, while a run of 4's is dreaded.

The government had made rather uncharacteristically feeble attempts to wean the population from such superstitions. Education officials assure parents that they are planning ahead for the cohort of Dragon babies born in 1988 when they become of school-going age in a few years. The ever-pragmatic government has now actually started to cash in on superstition: the state-run Singapore Telecom now invites bids from the public (minimum bid: \$1000) for various "lucky" phone numbers; often, these can fetch upwards of \$10,000.