Gift-giving in Chinese culture

• Gifts are very important in Chinese culture.
• Gifts are generally given at Chinese New Year, weddings, births, and, more recently, birthdays.
• It is very important to know what constitutes a good gift. It is also essential to know what might be regarded as a ‘bad’ gift.
What traditionally makes a good gift?

- The Chinese like food. Fruit such as oranges and mandarins are very popular. Chocolate is also well received.
- Good quality tea is appreciated.
- Peanuts, dates, peaches and lotus seeds are popular too. Peaches symbolise a long life.
红包 hóngbāo

• The traditional gift for both birthdays and Chinese New Year is a 红包 (hóngbāo). It is usually given to young children and to unmarried adults.

• 红包 are red envelopes which contain money. How much is in the envelope depends on the child’s age and their relationship to the giver. However, the notes should be new.
What not to give

• Do not give scissors, knives or other cutting tools as they imply the severing of a relationship.
• The word for umbrella, 伞 sǎn, also implies a severing of ties as it sounds the same as the word 散 sǎn, which means to break up or become loose. So umbrellas are not a good gift.
• The word for pear, 梨 lí, is a homonym for 离 lí, which means to leave or separate, so avoid pears too.
• Do not give flowers, as they are given to the sick and are used at funerals.
What else to avoid?

• Do not give clocks or handkerchiefs as they are associated with funerals and death. The phrase 送钟 sòngzhōng (give a clock) sounds the same as 送终 sòngzhōng (the funeral ritual), so they are especially taboo.

• Mirrors are easily broken and there is a belief that they attract malevolent spirits or ghosts, so they are not a good gift choice either.
What else should you remember?

• Do not wrap the gifts in white, blue or black paper as these are mourning colours.

• Red, pink and yellow are the best options for wrapping since they are regarded as lucky and happy colours.

• Make the wrapping elaborate.
Be aware of number superstitions!

• Four is regarded as an unlucky number so do not give four of anything.

• Eight is the luckiest number so if you give eight of something you are bringing luck to the recipient.

• Do not give odd numbers as they are also considered unlucky.
Gift-giving etiquette

• Give and receive gifts with both hands.
• Gifts may be refused three times before being accepted. This shows that the recipient is not greedy.
• Gifts are not opened immediately but usually only after the giver has left.
The Changing Face of China

Cultures change over time and Chinese culture is no different. With the growing influence of Western ideas, it is becoming more common for Chinese families to celebrate birthdays with a cake and age-appropriate presents.