

Year of the Snake

Resources to help your school
celebrate Chinese New Year

Primary education pack

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Introduction

According to the Chinese Lunar Calendar, we enter the Year of the Snake on January 29th 2025. This education pack for primary schools contains information and activities to help teachers and pupils learn more about this important spring festival and explore Chinese language and culture.

Your pupils can read a traditional Chinese folktale about the legend of Lady White Snake and discover some facts about these fascinating reptiles. They can also find out about Chinese festivals, learn vocabulary linked to celebrations and get creative making paperchain snakes and delicious leaf wrapped rice dumplings.

The resources are designed to be flexible and adaptable. They can be used as starting points for individual lessons or activities, or form part of a larger cross-curricular project with a partner school overseas. Teachers will know best how to adapt these activities for their pupils, and there are many opportunities to provide additional support or extend the activities for the students in your classes.



Spring Festival Chūn Jié (春节)

Celebrated from the first day of the first lunar month, the Spring Festival is regarded as the most important festival of the year in Chinese culture. During the festival, people hold family reunions and honour their ancestors. The lion dance is performed in public and red envelopes of money are placed in the lion's mouth for good luck. It is traditional for grandparents to give their grandchildren red envelopes with money inside; this is called *yā suì qián*. These days the envelopes are just as likely to have cartoon characters on them as traditional symbols.

**Are you going to celebrate Chinese New Year with the Year of the Snake pack? If so, we would love to hear from you. If you have any stories, photographs or film clips, share them on social media and tag us X – @schools_british
Facebook – British Council Schools**

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The Story of Lady White Snake



The Legend of the White Snake Lady Background Information

Snakes often appear in Chinese tales as fantastic beings associated with magic and shapes shifting. This is the case in *The Legend of the White Snake Lady*, which is one of China's most famous folktales. It is the subject of many folk operas, plays and TV shows, as well as a spectacular live show on the waters of West Lake in Hangzhou. There are several different versions of the story, but this is the most common one.

The following list will help with pronunciation of the main characters' names:

Bai Suzhen - Bye Soo-jen

Xiao Qing – Hsiow Ching

Xu Xian – Hsoo Hsien

Fahai – Fa-hi

Xu Shilin – Hsoo Shr-lin

Leifeng (Pagoda) – Lay-fung



Learning Objectives: To engage pupils with a traditional Chinese story and carry out activities to deepen their comprehension, understanding and engagement with the text.

Curriculum Links: English, Drama, Art and design, Computing.

Core and transferable skills: Creativity and imagination, collaboration and communication, digital literacy.

Preparation and Resources: You will need: a copy of the story, large pieces of paper, pens and scissors, copies of the character sheets, magazines, internet access.

The Legend of the White Snake Lady

Way back in the time of myths and legends, a white snake spirit called Bai Suzhen (Bye Soo-jen) spent a thousand years studying magical arts until the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea turned her into a real woman who took the name Lady Bai. Bai means “white” in Chinese. Lady Bai went out into the human world to travel around performing acts of kindness.

One day she came across a beggar threatening to kill a green snake with his stick. She chased off the beggar and used her magical powers to turn the snake into a real woman like herself. The snake girl was so grateful that she promised to serve Lady Bai for as long as they lived. Lady Bai was delighted to have a companion and called the girl **Xiao Qing, (Hsiow Ching)** which means “**Little Green**” as a reminder of her origins.

The two human snake spirits travelled around the country, until one day they came to the beautiful **West Lake** in the city of Lin’an, which is now called Hangzhou. There they met a handsome young man who offered Lady Bai his umbrella, when they got caught in the rain on a ferry across the West Lake. The young man’s name was **Xu Xian (Hsoo Hsien)** and he and Lady Bai immediately fell in love and soon after got married.



The Legend of the White Snake Lady

Xu Xian did not know about his wife's magical origins until a Buddhist priest, called **Fahai, (Fa-hi)** who was the abbot of a local temple, recognised Lady Bai for what she really was. He tried to tell Xu Xian, but Xu refused to believe him. Fahai didn't give up and eventually persuaded Xu Xian to test his wife by getting her to drink a certain kind of wine- traditionally served at the **Dragon Boat Festival**. Fahai knew that if Lady Bai drank the wine, she would change back into a snake. This is exactly what happened! Xu Xian was so shocked and scared that he dropped dead on the spot!

Lady Bai was grief-stricken but used her magical knowledge and travelled to the heavenly mountains to steal a magic herb that brought Xu Xian back to life!

Xu Xian was still very scared about being married to a snake goddess and went to Abbot Fahai at the Jinshan Temple to ask what he should do. Fahai told him he must stay in the temple for the rest of his life if he wanted to be safe, and Xu Xian agreed.

Lady Bai and Xiao Qing tracked him down to the temple and tried to persuade him to leave, flooding the temple and almost destroying it in the process. Xu Xian refused to go with her when Lady Bai fled from the temple but later realised that his wife must truly love him, even if she was a snake goddess.

He escaped from the temple and was reunited with Bai on the Broken Bridge on West Lake in Hangzhou - a real bridge that is a popular tourist spot today.

Lady Bai and Xu Xian lived happily together and had a son called **Xu Shilin (Hsoo Shr-lin)**. However, Abbot Fahai had not forgiven Bai Suzhen and eventually tracked the couple down. After another terrible fight, Abbot Fahai defeated Lady Bai and imprisoned her under the **Leifeng (Lay-fung) Pagoda** on the shores of West Lake - another place you can still visit today. Xu Xian was left alone with his son, and Xiao Qing (Little Green) fled swearing that she would have her revenge.

Twenty years later, Xu Shilin returned home in triumph after coming top of the Imperial examinations. At the same time, Xiao Qing came back to Hangzhou after spending the intervening years learning new magic powers. She was now powerful enough to take on Abbot Fahai!

He was finally defeated in one last ferocious battle and fled the scene. Xiao Qing then freed Bai Suzhen from under the Leifeng Pagoda and the family was reunited to live happily together.

Bai Suzhen



Xiao Qing



Xu Xian



Fahai



Activity 1

Taking part in drama and creative activities can help children to engage with the narrative and vocabulary of a story and retell it more confidently.

With this in mind, read the exciting story of Lady White Snake to your pupils in a large space and pause at some of the most dramatic parts of the narrative. This might be the moment where Lady Bai drinks the potion at the Dragon Boat Festival or one of the ferocious battles between Farhai and Lady Bai.

Ask the children to work in pairs to create freeze-frames or still images of the action at these breaks in the story without touching each other. Then at a given signal – perhaps using a musical instrument, invite the children to bring their freeze-frames to life, each saying one sentence to show what their character might be thinking or feeling at this pivotal moment of the legend.

Activity 2

Back in the classroom, challenge the class to help you make a list recalling the settings and sequence of events in the story and then suggest adjectives which might be used to describe the characters of Lady Bai, Xiao Qing, (Little Green), Xu Xian and Fahai. These can be mounted on a working wall display.

Choose members of the class to then take part in a ‘hot seating’ activity where they answer questions from the rest of the class ‘in role’ as one of the characters they portrayed in the freeze-frames.

Activity 3

In the following session ask members of the class to work together to use the class notes on the working wall and character sheets from the pack to create storyboards or comic strips illustrating the main plot points of The White Snake Lady on large pieces of paper. Encourage them to draw the events or cut out pictures from the character sheets and magazines and use speech bubbles to show the characters saying the spoken words that they devised in the drama session.

Your pupils could then come up with a memorable title for their visual versions of the story and possibly use their storyboards to help them retell it to another class using their own words and actions.

Extension activity

West Lake – the setting for key events in the story remains a popular natural beauty spot today for people visiting China. Divide your class into groups and ask them what they can find out about this area of the country and give each group the name of another other well-known scenic tourist destination to research. These could include:

- Li River, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region
- Three Gorges on the Yangtze River, Hubei Province/ Chongqing Municipality
- Wulingyuan Scenic Area, Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province
- Longji Rice Terraces, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region
- Huangshan (Yellow Mountain), Anhui Province
- Lijiang, Yunnan Province
- Qinghai Lake, Qinghai Province

Invite the students to present their research to the other groups and devise an advert or tourist brochure containing persuasive language to encourage visitors to their popular Chinese destination.

After the presentations, take a vote to decide which place the class would most like to visit and why.

Partner school activities

If you are working with a partner school, you could:

Exchange images of your storyboards and tourist brochures with each other. Did you both select the same place or different beauty spots for your ideal tourist destinations? Share the reasons for your choices with each other.

Fascinating Facts about Snakes



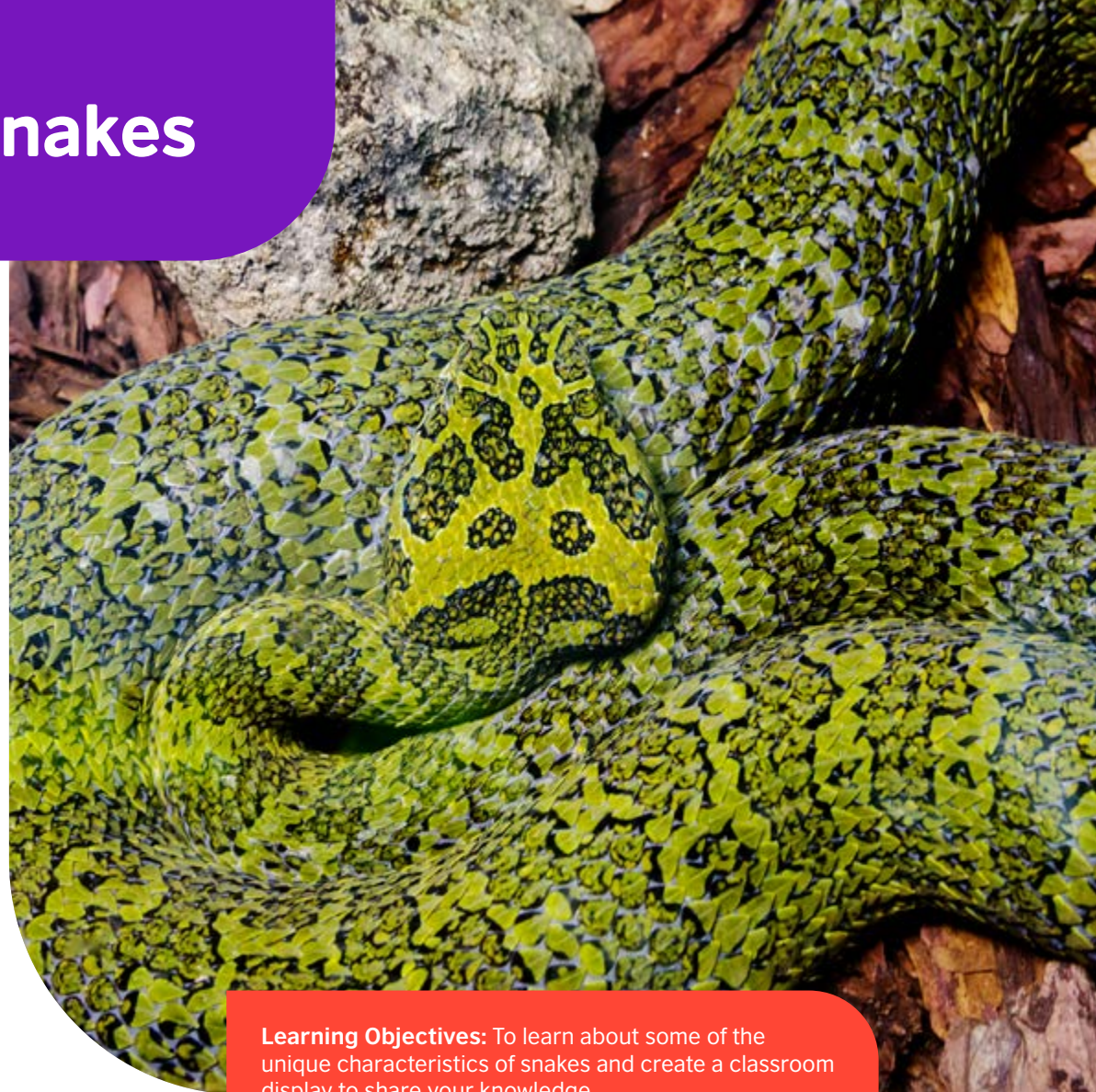
Information to share with your pupils

The Snake is the sixth animal in the Chinese Zodiac following Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit and Dragon. In the story of the Great Race arranged by the Jade Emperor, the horse was galloping quickly towards the finishing line and didn't notice that the snake had curled around his hoof. When they neared the end of the race, the snake slithered off the hoof and ahead of the horse into sixth place!

Share some more slithery facts about snakes with your pupils so that they can amaze their friends and family with their knowledge.

Did you know...

- Snakes are **reptiles** with scaly skin and are **ectothermic**. This means their body temperature goes up and down with the temperature of air and water around them.
- The Chinese character for snake is 蛇 – **shé**
- Many species of snake can be found across China. These include the Mangshan Viper which has beautiful camouflage patterns. This helps to keep them hidden in high forest habitats.



Learning Objectives: To learn about some of the unique characteristics of snakes and create a classroom display to share your knowledge.

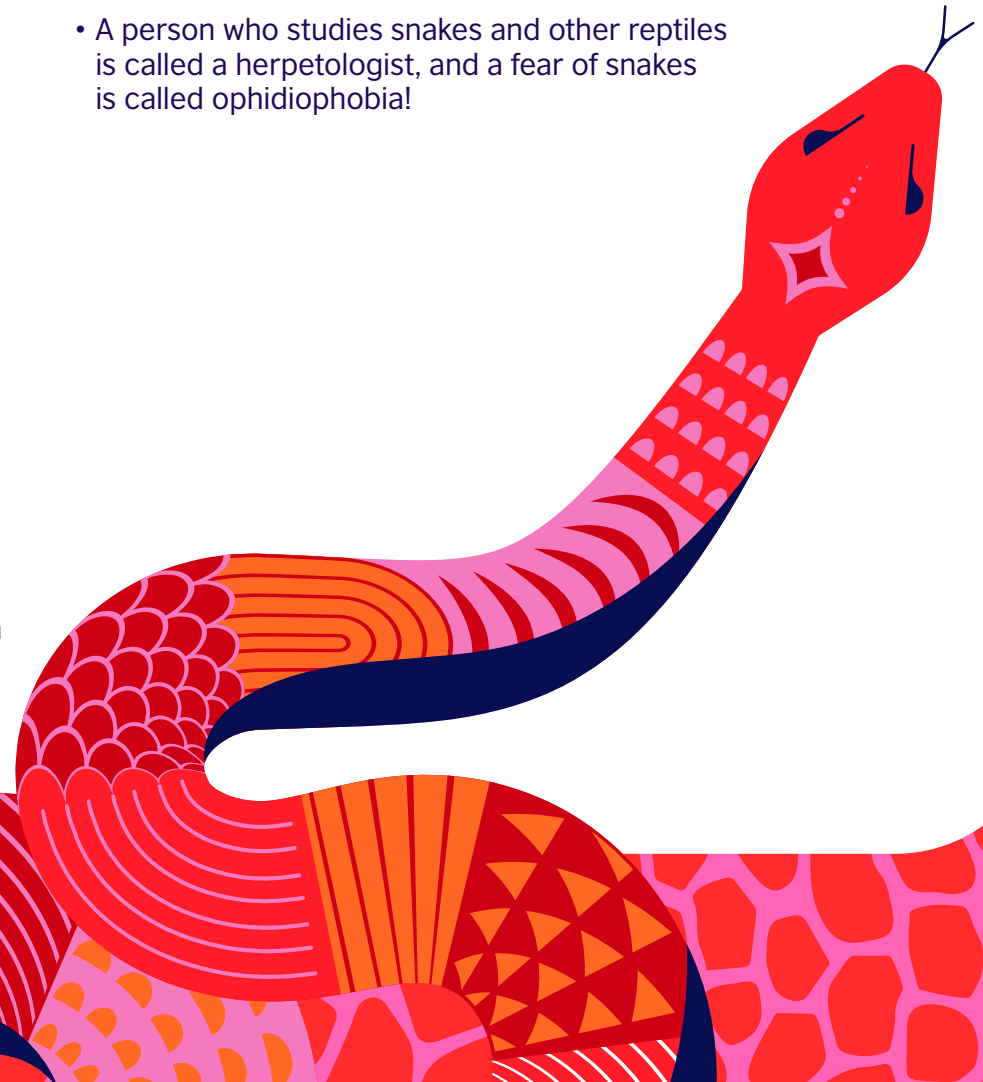
Curriculum Links: Science, Art and design, English.

Core and transferable skills: Digital literacy, Creativity and imagination, Collaboration and communication

Preparation and Resources: You will need: Construction paper or thin card, pens, glue sticks and craft materials including googly eyes.

Fascinating Facts about Snakes

- The world's longest venomous snake can also be found in China. The King Cobra can grow up to 5.4 metres in length! Try measuring that distance along your school corridor.
- Snakes are amazing creatures with very good hearing and a good sense of smell which they pick up using their forked tongues.
- Snakes don't have eyelids to protect their eyes, Instead, they have a transparent scale covering each eye. This means they do not blink.
- Snakes shed their skin several times a year. When a snake grows, its skin gets tighter until it wriggles out of its old skin to reveal a new, bigger version underneath.
- Some snakes can swim and can stay underwater for hours, and others appear to fly as they glide between trees over distances of up to 24 metres! Another distance you could measure across the playground.
- Snakes are predators. Some produce venom to kill their prey and protect themselves. However, scientists have discovered that they can also use snake venom to make certain types of medicine.
- Snakes have detachable jaws which allow them to swallow prey much bigger than they are. It can sometimes take snakes anywhere between days and weeks to finish their meal!
- Several species of snake including the Mangshang Viper are endangered and under threat of extinction because their natural habitats are being destroyed.
- A person who studies snakes and other reptiles is called a herpetologist, and a fear of snakes is called ophidiophobia!



Ask your pupils to carefully watch the animated formation of the Chinese character for snake 蛇, and then practice writing their own version carefully with pens or paint and brushes, until they can make it fluidly without looking.

Click to play

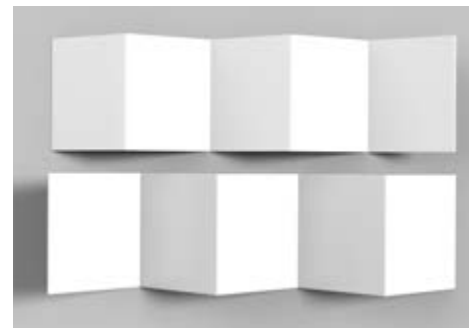


Divide your class into pairs and ask them to discuss with their partner what they find most interesting about snakes. Invite them to then choose a way of recording and sharing this information with others for a classroom display.

They could for example make an illustrated concertina book or fact file decorated with the character 蛇 and include their favourite facts or true or false questions with the correct answer hidden under a flap.

Alternatively they could use their knowledge to create a snake poem. This might be in the form of a shape poem or kenning or an acrostic spelling out the word snake.

For inspiration you could watch former children's laureate Joseph Coelho's poetry prompt at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EmqznuYCH4>



Make a paperchain snake

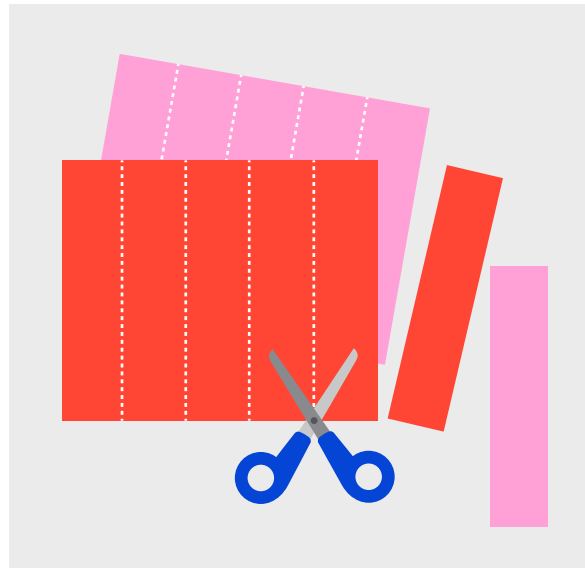
There are lots of creative ways to make decorative snakes to enhance your Year of the Snake display. Why not try this simple paperchain version using coloured paper strips?

You will need: coloured paper or thin card cut into strips for the snake's body - 13cm x 3 cm works well; and additional pieces for the head and tongue.

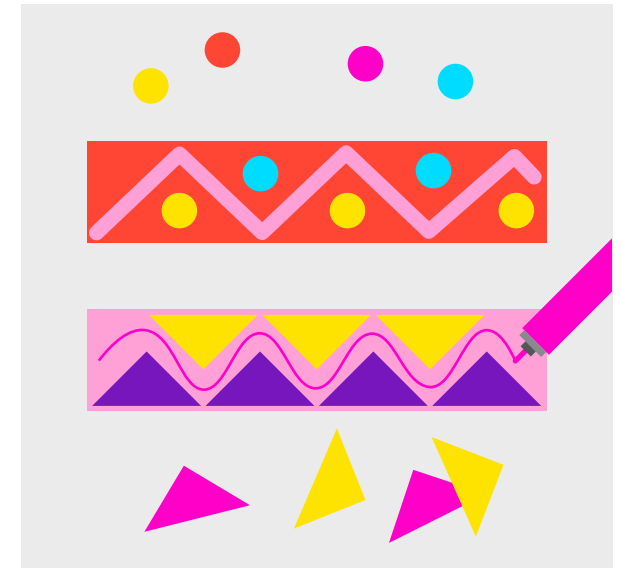
You will also need glue sticks, scissors, coloured pens, and craft materials,

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You can find other ways to make different types of snakes using paper, card or paper plates in the Find Out More section at the end of the pack for your slithery snake display.



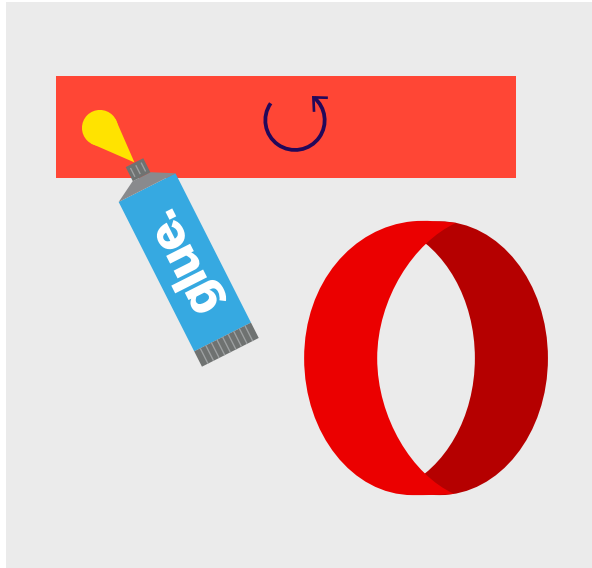
To make the body of the snake: measure and cut out the strips of coloured paper or thin card. You can make as many as you like depending on how long you would like your snake to be, and two different colours works well.



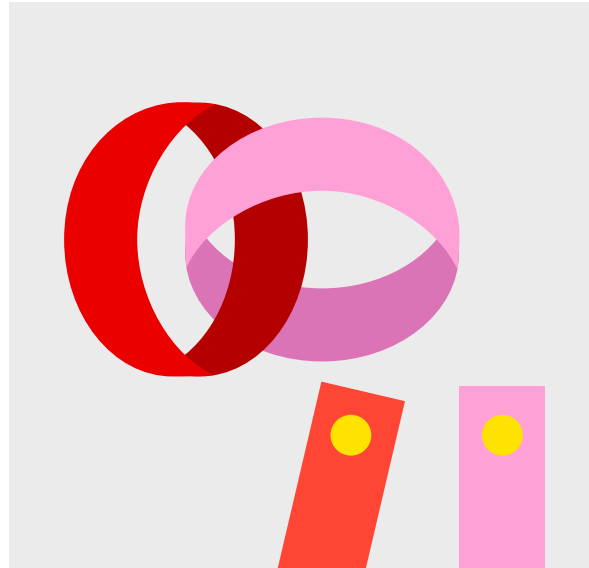
Experiment with colouring or decorating patterns for your snake's body on the paper strips using pens or craft materials.



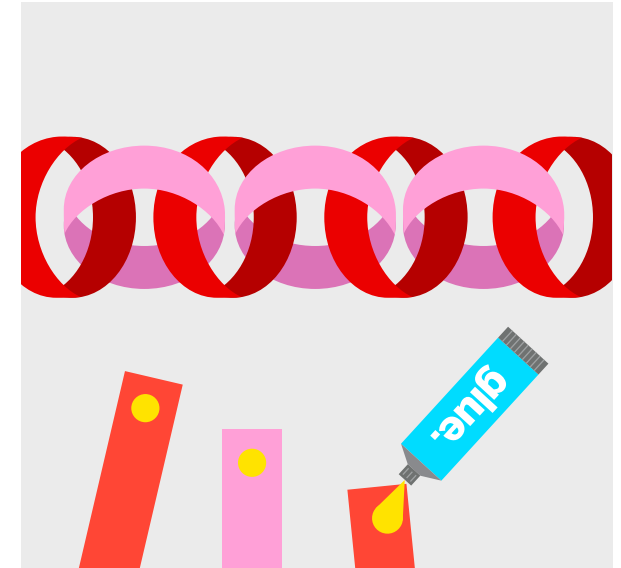
Make a paperchain snake



Apply a dab of glue or tape to the end of the first strip to make a loop and hold the two ends of paper firmly together.



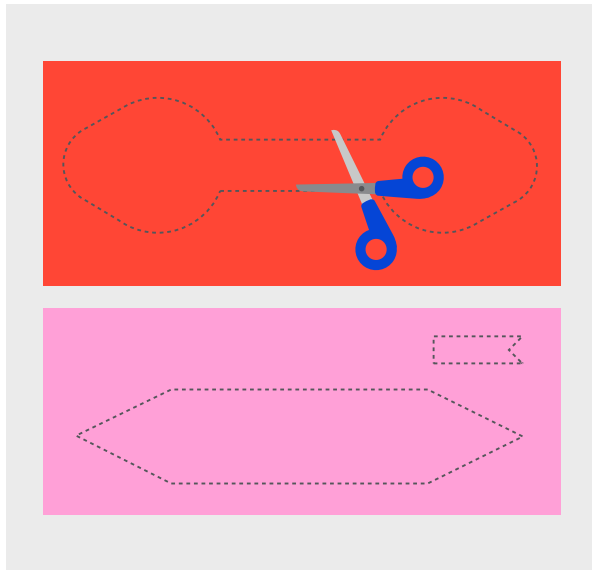
Insert another paper strip through the first loop. Again, join the ends of the strip together to begin a paper chain, alternating colours.



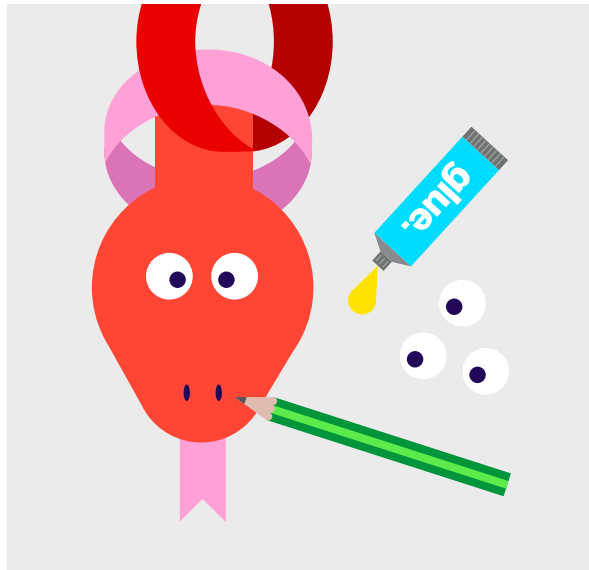
Continue until you have reached the length you would like your snake to be.



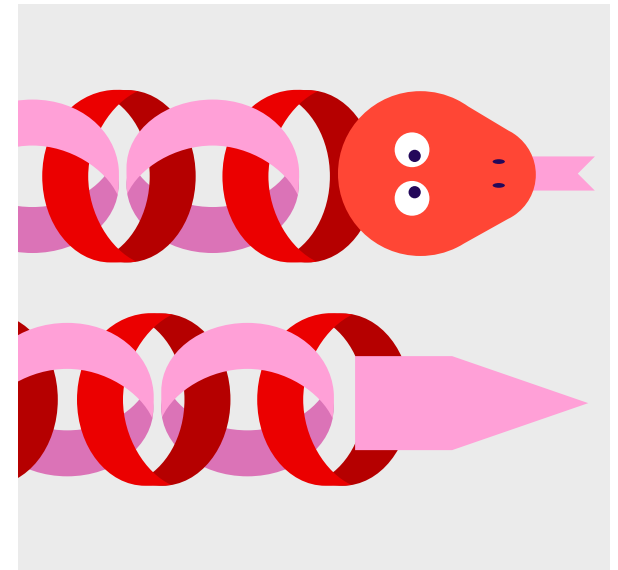
Make a paperchain snake



Draw and cut out another 2 strips with a head on one and tail on the other on your spare paper or card.



Draw or stick on the eyes, tongue and nostrils, then loop on the head and glue into place at the front of your paperchain. Do the same with the tail, threading it through the end loop.



Partner school activities

If you are working with a partner school, you could:

Exchange your favourite snake facts and take pictures of your snake displays to swap with each other. You could also find out and share information about any snakes that are native to each country.

Traditional Chinese Festivals



Information to share with your pupils

Traditional Chinese festivals are celebrated according to the Lunar Calendar, so their dates vary from year to year in the modern 'western' calendar.

Spring Festival 春节 (Chūn Jié) also known as **Chinese New Year** is the most important festival of the Chinese year. It is celebrated from the first day of the first lunar month, and traditionally lasts 15 days; but in modern China the public holiday is only four days, usually with two more days over the weekend. The last day of the Spring Festival, the Lantern Festival, is observed with big displays and parades of huge lanterns in all manner of shapes and sizes. During the New Year public holiday, millions of people travel long distances to return to their family homes to celebrate the festival with their parents and other relatives.

Qingming Festival 清明节 (Qīng Míng Jié) also known as the **Tomb Sweeping Day** is celebrated 104 days after the winter solstice, usually on 4th or 5th April. It is a festival dedicated to respecting and caring for ancestors, a tradition that goes back many thousands of years in China. Families will go to their ancestral graves to sweep and clean the site, decorate it with flowers, and make offerings of food and wine. The family may make the best of the day by having a picnic feast as well. These rites are practised more fully in the countryside, where there are still burials, than in the cities, where cremation is the norm.

Traditional Chinese Festivals

Dragon Boat Festival 端午节 (Duān Wǔ Jié) This festival which was mentioned in the story of the White Snake Lady is also known as the Double Fifth Festival because it takes place on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, usually sometime in June. The festival celebrates the patriotism of a minister called Qu Yuan in the 3rd century BC. Qu Yuan advised the ruler of the State of Chu to resist the powerful State of Qin as it tried to expand its territory. At first the ruler agreed, but later changed his mind, and exiled Qu Yuan. As Qu Yuan watched the power of the State of Qin grow, he despaired and drowned himself in the Miluo River, saying he would rather die than see China fall into the hands of Qin. A little more than fifty years later, the King of Qin finished his conquest of all of China, and declared himself Qin Shi Huangdi (秦始皇帝), the First Emperor of China.

To commemorate Qu Yuan's patriotism, boat races in long canoes decorated with dragon designs take place on rivers and lakes all across China, and in other Chinese communities. The traditional food of the Dragon Boat festival is zongzi (粽子), leaf-wrapped sticky rice dumplings. A simple recipe for these can be found in this pack.

Mid-Autumn Festival 中秋节 (Zhōng Qiū Jié) is also known as the Moon Festival and is held on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, when there is a full moon. It was originally a festival celebrating the autumn harvest, and dates back more than 3000 years to the Shang Dynasty.

The main legend associated with the Mid-Autumn Festival is the story of the great archer Hou Yi and his wife Chang E, who became the goddess of the Moon. Hou Yi saved mankind by shooting down nine of ten suns that had appeared and were burning up the Earth. The gods rewarded him with the Elixir of Immortality. He gave it to Chang E to look after, but one day, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, someone came to their house and tried to steal it. Rather than let the thief take the Elixir, Chang E swallowed it herself and flew away up to the Moon to be safe. Once there she could not come back, so she and Hou Yi were parted forever. Every day, on the day Chang E left him, Hou Yi made sacrifices to her of his wife's favourite fruits and cakes, and soon other people joined in to honour the two of them. Legend says that you can still see Chang E on the moon, making pills out of the Elixir, accompanied by her pet rabbit.

People hold parties to view the full moon at Mid-Autumn Festival, most famously on the West Lake at Hangzhou. The traditional food of the festival is moon cakes: round pastries with elaborate decorations on top, stuffed with a variety of sweet and savoury stuffings. People also release sky lanterns to float up to the Moon.



Chinese Language Activities

节庆和庆典 (jiéqìng hé qìngdiǎn) Festivals and Celebrations

Having learnt about some of the many Chinese festivals try saying the names of the different festivals.

春节 chūnjié – Spring Festival

新年 xīnnián – New Year

清明节 qīng míng jié – Qingming Festival/Tomb-sweeping Day

端午节 duān wǔ jié – Dragon Boat festival

中秋节 zhōng qiū jié – Mid-Autumn Festival/Moon Festival

圣诞节 shèng dàn jié – Christmas

复活节 fù huó jié – Easter

生日 shēng rì – Birthday

祝你。。。快乐 zhù nǐ.....kuài lè – (wishing you a) Happy.....

e.g. 祝你新年快乐 zhù nǐ xīnnián kuàilè – (wishing you a) Happy New Year

聚会 jùhuì – party

生日聚会 shēngrì jùhuì – birthday party

礼物 lǐwù – present/gift

Activity

Divide your class into small groups and give each group information about one of the festivals along with copies of the Chinese vocabulary.

Encourage your pupils to make and decorate a greetings card for their festival and write the appropriate Chinese greeting on it. Perhaps practice forming the characters separately first, before writing them on their card.

Learning Objectives: To learn Chinese vocabulary associated with festivals and celebrations. To practice writing Chinese characters.

Curriculum Links: Modern languages, Art and design.

Core and transferable skills: Communication and collaboration, creativity and imagination.

Preparation and Resources: You will need: Internet access, scissors, card and art materials

Recipe for 粽子 zòngzi Leaf-wrapped Rice Dumplings

Steamed rice dumplings 粽子 are the snack-food traditionally associated with the 端午节 (duān wǔ jié) Dragon Boat Festival that featured in the legend of the White Snake Lady. They take several different forms, wrapped in either reeds or bamboo leaves, with either a savoury pork filling or a sweet one using red bean paste.

This recipe is for the sweet version, which is more common in the north of China. Just as with making dumplings at New Year, assembling 粽子 can be a fun family activity in preparation for the festival.

Remember to check for any allergies with your class first.

The mainstay of the traditional sweet 粽子 filling is red bean paste which can be found ready-made in tins in Asian supermarkets and some western supermarkets. It can be a little bland for western tastes, so we have suggested you include some Chinese red dates or ordinary dates as well. Bamboo leaves, both fresh and dried, are readily available in Asian supermarkets.

The main challenge of making 粽子 is the wrapping process, but it is not as hard as it looks, especially if you have two pairs of hands doing it. Your first few dumplings may not be perfect, but you will soon get the hang of it. A description of the process is given in the recipe below, but you may find it easier to watch it on a video. Just enter “making zongzi videos” in your preferred search engine online.





Recipe continued...



Ingredients (for 12 dumplings)

12-24 (depending on size) fresh or dried bamboo leaves

600g glutinous rice (ordinary rice will not work)

6-8 tbs red bean paste

12 Chinese red dates or western-style dates (pitted)

Kitchen string for tying

Method

1. Rinse the rice two or three times in cold running water, then soak overnight in a large bowl of cold water.
2. If using dried bamboo leaves, soak overnight in cold water, then boil for 2-3 minutes before use.
3. If using fresh bamboo leaves, no need to soak overnight, but dip in very hot, but not boiling, water for 1-2 minutes. **Make sure you have an adult to do this bit.**
4. Unless the bamboo leaves are very wide, overlap two by about 50-60%, then twist one end round to form a cone at that end. At this point, you may want to refer to an online video to clarify the process.
5. Place a date at the bottom of the cone, followed by enough soaked rice to cover it. You can spoon the rice directly from its soaking water – this helps to keep the packing loose and excess water will drain out of the leaves. Press it down gently then add half a tablespoon of red bean paste. Cover with another layer of rice.
6. Fold the long end of the leaf/leaves over the top of the cone, then continue wrapping until you have a fairly tightly wrapped pyramid (not too tight as the rice will expand during cooking). Tie with string, using a few more turns than seems strictly necessary (again, refer to online videos for clarity).
7. Transfer the assembled dumplings into a large pot. Almost cover with cold water and weigh down with a heavy plate. Cover the pot, bring to the boil, then simmer gently for 3 hours.
8. Transfer the cooked dumplings to a plate. Unwrap and serve as soon as they are cool enough to handle or wait until completely cold. They will keep a couple of days in the fridge or can be frozen for up to 2 months.
9. If you have a sweet tooth, serve with sugar, syrup or honey for dipping.

Hold a Year of the Snake Celebration Event

To celebrate Chinese Spring Festival and the start of the Year of the Snake why not invite friends and family to school to **share your versions of the White Snake story**, impress them with your knowledge about snakes and festivals and eat some delicious **leaf – wrapped rice dumplings**.

You could also teach them how to create their own **paper snakes** and festival invitations using Chinese characters.

Partner school activities

If you are working with a partner school, you could:

Share pictures of your Year of the Snake events celebrations with each other and discuss what worked well.



Find out more

We hope your pupils enjoyed the activities in this pack. There are lots more ways you can get find out more and get involved in international work with China and other countries:

Find a partner school

International school partnerships can inspire pupils by bringing the world into the classroom through joint learning activities which bring language learning to life. They also offer teachers the chance to share experiences and learn new practices from colleagues in other countries. Our Partner Finder site gives you the tools you need to find and work with like-minded schools around the world. Partner with a school | British Council

Access resources

Check out our global learning resources, including classroom activities and lesson plans: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/school-resources/find>

Learn Chinese

Host a Chinese Language Assistant. It's easy to organise and you can share the assistant with other local schools. Information about the Primary Programme of Study at the Confucius Institute can be found at: <http://bit.ly/2cVRnkl> To find out more about implementing Chinese teaching in your school contact the UCL IOE Confucius Institute for Schools at chinesenetworks@ucl.ac.uk

Get recognition

Sign up to our prestigious British Council International School Award scheme to earn accreditation for your international work: <https://bit.ly/383onFp>

Other useful resources can be found at:

<https://wildchina.com/2024/05/the-most-interesting-snakes-in-china/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws6BR741ios>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEd94UeM0MM>

<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/childrens-laureate/poetry-prompts/poetry-prompts-library/#!?q=&sortOption=MostRecent&pageNo=1>

These links were correct at the time of publication.



And don't forget
next year is the

**Year of
the ____?**

