

The legend of the two poor brothers

The tradition of Yu Sheng is based on an old Chinese legend of two poor brothers.



Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a poor little country town in China, there lived two very poor brothers. One day, during the New Year celebrations – or the Spring Festival, as it is also known – the two brothers were out fishing, but all they caught was two small fish. Even so, they took their small catch to market but were unable to sell the fish. So they took the fish home to eat them themselves. But the brothers were so poor that they could not afford to buy fuel, so they cut the fish into thin strips and ate it raw.

After this New Year celebration, things began to get better for the two brothers. After having once been so poor, they began to succeed in their trade, and gradually they became very wealthy. The brothers thought that this change was all down to what had happened during that Spring Festival, when they ate their fish raw.

This is also linked with the double meaning of the term “raw fish”, which in Chinese can also mean to live or to grow. The other townspeople learned from the brothers’ success and began eating raw fish at the time of the New Year celebrations. Over time, this tradition was adopted all over China and became an important part of the Chinese New Year celebrations.

Yu means fish, but it is also pronounced the same as the word “remaining”, referring to have wealth remaining at the end of the year.