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Cookie feeds fascination with future

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The really good ones are saved: tucked into a wallet or taped to a computer terminal to be re-read when you need a little pep talk, like a mantra or affirmation.

But fortunes - the words of wisdom that emerge when one cracks open the cookie at the end of a Chinese meal - are just another compass to guide people through their lives, say behavior psychologists.

As the Chinese New Year approaches Thursday, it's a good time to examine the fascination Americans have with their futures.

"People are constantly looking for something to say that the tide will change in their favor," said Debbie Mandel, author of "Turn On Your Inner Light," a book on spiritual guidance and stress management.

While being at the right place at the right time helps, it's the combination of hard work and chance that causes a person's life to be altered, she said. Each person, however, has different perceptions of just how big a part luck, logic and skill plays.

"Eventually, people will change (their lives) on their own," Mandel said.

For decades, the origin of the fortune cookie has been linked to California's Chinese immigrants, who created the cookie as a gimmick to introduce their cuisine to their adopted home, according to Jackie Lin, the head of marketing for the fortune cookie producer Well Luck Company, based in Jersey City, N.J.

Today, more than 40,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States serve their patrons these cookies with a fortune buried inside.

Copywriters turn to ancient books of wisdom, such as "The Analects" compiled by disciples of Confucius or "The Way of Life" by Lao Tzu, for the fortunes found inside cookies, said Derrick Wong, vice president of sales at Wonton Food Inc.

The company has about 10,000 fortunes that fall under four categories: advice, fortune telling, humor, and question and answer, Wong said. Lin's company tries to make 90 percent of its fortune messages positive.

Because most fortunes tend to be vague, people can interpret the insight to fit into their lives.

Dr. Jennifer Sager, a licensed psychologist in Gainesville, said this can be a positive act: the fortunes

provide hope, hope leads to hard work and hard work yields success.

While the superstitious - those who avoid spilling salt or walking under ladders - may take random fortunes to heart, even the most logical individual can propel his future in one way or another.

Once a person reads the message and truly believes it, Sager said, then he or she will actively pursue it until it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Fascination with the telling the future has lead companies to incorporate fortunes into other products.

Lucky Brand Jeans now put fortunes in the pockets of its jeans and the popular Web site Facebook.com has a fortune-cookie application that allows the user to change his fortune daily.

Author Mandel suggests looking at fortunes as instructions as opposed to a prophecy, no matter where you get it from.

"The fortune is a catalyst to point you in the right direction," she said. "The placebo effect is as good as an affirmation."

Whether the mini messages become reality or not, Chop Stix Cafe manager Cam Le said customers can't get enough of them.

People like to know about the future," he said. "It makes them happy."

He has heard many stories of people using the lottery numbers on the back of their fortunes and then winning the lottery. But he doesn't attribute this to luck.

Rather, people must take a hint from their fortune cookie and then buy a lottery ticket, thus creating their own destiny.

As for the fortune itself, it can be good or bad. But that's the way the cookie crumbles.

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