

Chinese New Year

What is Chinese New Year?

Chinese New Year is a celebration of the lunar New Year or the change of the Chinese calendar. It is also called Spring Festival and Lunar New Year and many of the traditions relate to the welcoming in of spring. It is celebrated by millions of people every year and has become a popular annual event, not just for Chinese people, but for people of many races and cultures. Communities all over the world have their own parades and dragon dances to mark the turn of the New Year. Many of these take place in Chinatowns – the Chinese cultural centre of many Western cities. Very large events take place in Vancouver, New York and San Francisco each year. In countries with high Chinese populations, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, national holidays occur at this time of year, often for a period of three days.



Unlike the western calendar, the Chinese calendar is a lunar one (the year's beginning and end are worked out according to the movements of the moon). This means that Chinese New Year can fall anytime between 21st January and 20th February each year. Chinese New Year is unlike the western New Year in another way. While New Year for most nations is a one evening/one day affair, Chinese New Year is a fifteen day celebration.

Preparations

Chinese people will spend the days before the New Year preparing their home and finances. It is considered a good idea to clean the home thoroughly before the New Year. This is often done on *nin ya baat* (the 28th day of the 12th month). This allows people to sweep out the bad luck of the previous year. If they were to sweep or clean at the start of the New Year, it would be seen as sweeping out the good fortune that the New Year had brought.

Other traditional things to do before the New Year include paying off any debts (this includes debts of gratitude and so thank you gifts are common at this time). Businesses should conclude any outstanding business. People might also decorate their homes, particularly the front entrance, with red banners that carry auspicious couplets for the New Year and for spring. The word for hair and the word for prosperity sound very similar and so haircuts must be done before the New Year as cutting the hair afterwards would be symbolic of cutting off prosperity.



In Tao and Buddhist homes, paper effigies of gods, particularly the Kitchen God Zao Jun, are burned so that they can make their way to the Jade Emperor to report on family matters. This is called 'sending the gods'. Families might bribe the gods into saying nice things about them by offering sweet foods to the gods at their home altars.

New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve is a major festivity with a meal, called the Reunion Dinner or *Nian Ye Fan*, where all members of the family get together. This is similar to a Thanksgiving or Christmas celebration in western culture. Traditionally, in the north, dumplings called *jiaozi* were made to be consumed at midnight while, in the south, a special new year's cake was made to give to relatives. Each of these traditions relates to the idea of giving prosperity in different forms.

New Year's Day

The first day of the New Year officially begins at midnight and is a time for welcoming the deities of heaven and earth. It is a traditional practice to light fireworks, burn sticks and firecrackers and to make as much noise as possible to chase off the evil spirits known as *nian*. This relates to the old legend that every spring a dragon (*Nian*) would appear and destroy villages and eat people. Villagers noticed that the dragon did not like the colour red or the sound of firecrackers and drums. From then on the *nian* has been kept at bay with loud noises and the colour red.

People may also invite lion dance troupes into their homes or villages. These acrobatic dances in which a pair of men play the part of an auspicious and fun loving lion character are danced under a large papier mache mask with moveable eyelids and mouth. The lion ushers in the new year at each home and business that he passes and is traditionally given green lettuce to eat as a thank you.

Married people will be expected to give out red envelopes containing money known as *lai see* or *angpow*. This is a form of blessings to suppress the challenges of the New Year and is given to junior members of the family. The money should be in even values, as odd values are reserved for funerary gifts, and should be in crisp new notes. It should also be in auspicious numbers like 8. In the United States \$8 is a common amount to find in a red envelope for children. Business managers also give bonuses through red packets to employees for good luck, good health and wealth.



The celebrations continue for most Chinese people for three days but in some communities a fifteen day celebration is still maintained. Each of the days has a function, often these days are for appeasing a particular god or drawing a particularly good quality into the home for the New Year.

Naming the Year

The Chinese Zodiac or astrological chart consists of twelve units. These are each given an animal representative. All the animals link to certain years of the lunar calendar: 2014 was the Year of the Horse, 2015 was the Year of the Goat (sheep) and 2016 is the Year of the Monkey.



In a legendary race run long ago all these animals took part in the crossing of a river. The rat won the race by tricking the ox into carrying him and people who are born in the year of the rat are believed to be cunning. The animals finished the race in the following order: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. The zodiac runs through this cycle and then repeats. 2017 therefore will be the Year of the Rooster.

