

All about Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year is a holiday that celebrates the beginning of a new year according to the lunar calendar. It is considered to be one of the most important holidays for Chinese families.

The holiday is celebrated with big family gatherings, gift giving, eating of symbolic foods and displaying festive decorations--all focused on bringing good luck for the new year and celebrating the coming of Spring.

1. When Is Chinese New Year?

The start of the Chinese New Year changes every year since it is dictated by the lunar calendar. The Gregorian or solar calendar--which is based on the Earth's movement around the sun and has a fixed number of 365 days a year (366 during a leap year)--is the most widely used calendar system in the world and has been the official calendar used in China since 1912.

But in China, the lunar calendar is still used to determine traditional holidays like Chinese New Year. Since the lunar calendar is based on the phases of the moon-- which has a shorter cycle than the sun—the Chinese New Year is never on the same day each year, but typically falls somewhere between January 21st and February 20th. This year, the date is January 23, 2012.

2. How Long Do Chinese New Year Celebrations Last?

According to Daria Ng, Assistant Curator of Education at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in New York City, celebrations can actually last up to a month, especially in China.

Originally, the celebrations lasted for lengthy amounts of time because China was a very agriculture-based country so farmers took the whole month off to rest since crops couldn't be planted during the winter. Nowadays most families celebrate the New Year for about two week's time, says Ng, starting on the first day of the new year and end on the 15th.

3. Traditions and symbols associated with Chinese New Year

Here are a handful of the most popular practices.

a. Clean house and new clothes

According to *Celebrate Chinese New Year* by Elaine A. Kule, prior to the first day of the New Year it is customary for families to thoroughly clean their homes from top to bottom. Doing this is said to clear out any back luck from the previous year and to ready the house to accept good luck for the coming year.

All cleaning must be finished before New Year's Day so there is no chance of accidentally throwing out the good fortune of the new year. "Before New Year's Day you want to buy new clothes or cut your hair" in order to have a fresh start, says Ng. Wearing black is not allowed due to its association with death, however, wearing red is encouraged as the color is associated with warding off bad spirits.

b. Decorate the house

Another popular custom is to hang up signs and posters on doors and windows with the Chinese word *fu* written on them, which translates to luck and happiness. Buying flowers for the home is also commonplace since they symbolize the coming of spring and a new beginning. In Chinese neighborhoods, special lunar New Year flower markets often sprout up during the days prior to the New Year.

c. Eat with your family

On the eve of the Chinese New Year, it is customary to visit with relatives and partake in a large dinner where a number of specific foods are served.

"Typically families do eight or nine dishes because they are lucky numbers," says Grace Young, author of *The Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen*. "The Chinese word for eight is *baat* [in Cantonese], which rhymes with *faat*, the word for prosperity." The word for nine means "long-lasting."

"A lot of the foods are very symbolic," explains Ng. Some popular foods include: dumplings ("because they look like golden nuggets"), oranges ("because they are perfectly round, symbolizing completeness and wholeness"), and long noodles ("served to symbolize long life").

Sticky rice cakes and sweets are also served and are tied to a story about the Kitchen God-- a Santa Claus-like figure who reports to the Jade Emperor in heaven on whether families have been good or bad through the course of the year. According to legend, when families serve the Kitchen God sticky, delicious foods, his mouth gets stuck together and therefore he cannot report any bad things about the family to the Jade Emperor.

d. Give good luck gifts

It is a traditional practice for adults to give children little red envelopes--*hong bao* in Mandarin or *lai-see* in Cantonese--filled with money in order to symbolize wealth and prosperity for the coming year. It is also common for elders to bestow red packets to unmarried members of the family. It is a sign of respect to bow three times in order to accept the *hong bao*. Envelopes are not to be opened until the recipient has left the home of the giver.

e. Make lanterns

The New Year's festivities come to an end on the fifteenth day of the new year, which is celebrated by the Lantern Festival. According to the book *Moonbeams, Dumplings & Dragon Boats* by Nina Simonds, Leslie Swartz, and the Children's Museum, Boston, the Lantern Festival honors the first full moon of the year and represents the coming of springtime. Families will light lanterns symbolizing the brightness of spring, and hang them on walls around the house, or on poles to be carried in lantern parades.

f. Honor the animal

Every year is associated with one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac, with each animal being represented once every 12 years. These animals are often represented in decorations during the holiday. Some people believe that those born during the year of a particular animal will end up with the character traits of that animal. For example, if you were born during the year of the rat, you will grow up to be imaginative and cunning.

g. Attend a Chinese New Year parade

Chinese New Year parades are grand celebrations where people come out to happily carouse with one another.

In addition to floats, fireworks, performances, and marching bands, parades often feature people performing "dragon" or "lion dances"-- a ritual in which a group of dancers gets under an elaborately decorated dragon or lion costume with a long silky train, and visits the homes and businesses to scare away bad luck. It is common practice for the home or business owners to "feed" red envelopes to the animal to promote good luck for the coming year.