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Chinese New Year: Customs & Traditions

By Alina Bradford, Live Science Contributor | February 15, 2018 01:48pm ET

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Chinese New Year celebrations feature dragon and lion dances.

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The Chinese New Year, also known as the Lunar New Year — and more commonly known as the Spring Festival (Chūnjié) in China — has become one of the world's [top five most celebrated festivals](#). It isn't just celebrated in China. Other East Asian and Southeast Asian countries — such as Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Mauritius and the Philippines — celebrate, as well. It is also popular in Chinatowns around the world. In fact, Chinese New Year celebrations take place in New York, London, Vancouver, Sydney and other overseas cities. One-sixth of the world's population participates in Chinese New Year festivities, according to the [Travel China Guide](#).

The Chinese New Year is the longest public holiday in China. Employees have seven to 12 days off from work, and students have one month of winter vacation. "No matter where they live, Chinese try to return home to be with their families for Chinese New Year, just as Americans do for Christmas," said [Dr. Ming Wang](#), an ophthalmologist and advocate for cultural

diversity in Nashville, Tennessee. "This creates the world's largest annual migration, known as the Spring Festival Travel Rush."

When is Chinese New Year?

The Spring Festival is celebrated either in January or February because the Chinese use a lunar calendar, which is based on the movement of the moon. (Much of the Western world uses the [Gregorian calendar](#), which is based on the sun's movements.) "The Chinese New Year falls on the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar," Jianguo Chen, associate professor of Chinese at the University of Delaware, told Live Science. In the Gregorian calendar, the first day of the festival occurs on the new moon between Jan. 21 and Feb. 20. [The 2018 Chinese New Year holiday begins on Feb. 16.](#)

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In the Chinese zodiac, the dog is a symbol of loyalty, responsibility, courage, sincerity, strength, trustworthiness, determination, perseverance, friendship, tenderheartedness, valiancy and heroism, Chen said.

Although it occurs in the winter, it is called the Spring Festival or the "start of spring," marking the end of the coldest part of winter, when the Chinese traditionally look forward to the beginning of spring.

History

This holiday is believed to have originated during the Shang Dynasty (1600 to 1100 B.C.) as a spring carnival in which people offered sacrifices to gods and ancestors at the end of the winter, welcoming the arrival of the spring, Chen said. It became a public holiday in 1914 during China's Republican period, but celebrations were banned in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution. The festival was later reinstated.



During Chinese New Year celebrations, houses are decorated with paper lanterns. Red is considered lucky.

Credit: szefei/Shutterstock

Traditions

"Guo Nian Hao" — which means "Happy New Year" — is a common Chinese New Year greeting, Chen said. Chinese also greet each other with blessings such as 恭喜发财 ("gōngxǐ fācái" in Mandarin) or ("Kung hei fat choi" in Cantonese), meaning "Wishing you a happy and prosperous Chinese New Year!" It is a special occasion for people to express good wishes to each other and to forgive, leaving behind all grudges and animosity from the old year.

cherish and to forgive, leaving behind all grudges and animosity from the old year.

"The Spring Festival is the most important holiday in China and is celebrated as such," Chen said. "On Chinese New Year's Eve, all family members will try their very best to travel back home, no matter how far away they may be (even on the other side of the world) to enjoy the family reunion feast known as nián yè fàn."

Before the new year comes, it is customary for people to completely clean their houses to get rid of bad fortune from the old year and decorate their tidy houses, all with an atmosphere of rejoicing and celebration. Homes are often decorated with couplets — vertical banners featuring two lines of poetry — folk painting, paper cuttings that feature intricate designs (similar to cutouts of paper snowflakes), festive scrolls and lanterns. Decorations are usually bright red. "Basically, red decorations are to the Chinese New Year festival what Christmas trees are to Christmas," Wang said.



A calligrapher in Foshan, China, makes couplets — banners with wishes of good fortune and long life — for the Spring Festival.

Credit: Rick Wang/Shutterstock

The decorations are typically red because in the Chinese culture, the color can bring happiness, wealth and prosperity by warding off evil spirits and bad luck. The tradition may have come from the story of the Nian. This fierce and cruel creature eats livestock and children, but it is scared of the color red, along with fire and noise, according to [Reader's Digest](#). People celebrate with red decorations and fireworks to drive away the Nian.

Various kinds of celebratory activities, sponsored either by the government or communities, occur throughout the celebration, including Shehuo, an ancient folk art that includes lion and dragon dances, acrobats, stilt walkers, opera performances and drum performances.

"One of the most interesting holiday entertainment programs organized by CCTV (China Central Television) over the past three decades is the CCTV Chinese New Year's Gala, which is typically a 5-hour long evening holiday entertainment program, featuring a variety show of drama, dance, music and comedy," Chen said. "Broadcast worldwide, the gala attracts a yearly viewership of over 800 million viewers. The Chinese are so enamored by this New Year Gala that to host the New Year Eve's family reunion feast without watching it would be a regretful experience."

A variety of foods are served during the New Year festival, such as dumplings ("jiaozi"), rice cakes ("niangao"), spring rolls and fish. "The Chinese traditionally prepare sumptuous feasts during the holiday, featuring fish, pork, chicken and duck, in addition to various kinds of fruit, candies and nuts. Dumpling is a must, particularly in northern China," Chen said.

Gifts are also given. "Instead of wrapped gifts like Americans give at Christmas, Chinese of all ages exchange red envelopes stuffed with 'lucky money,' from older to younger, from bosses to employees, and from leaders to underlings," Wang said. "The children get to spend their lucky money however they want."

The last day of the 15-day celebration is the Lantern Festival. It includes various kinds of activities, including folk dance, eating "yuánxiāo" (rice balls with various kinds of fillings), playing games of riddles, setting off fireworks and organizing festive parades enhanced by lanterns of various styles. "This festival is sometimes known traditionally as China's Valentine's Day when singles hope to meet with a companion," Chen said.

Additional resources

- [Princeton University: The Spirits of Chinese Religion](#)
- [China Highlights](#) features articles about Chinese culture, history and destinations
- [East Asian Institute at Columbia University: The Lunar New Year: Rituals and Legends](#)

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Author Bio

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Alina Bradford is a contributing writer for Live Science. Over the past 16 years, Alina has covered everything from Ebola to androids while writing health, science and tech articles for major publications. She has multiple health, safety and lifesaving certifications from Oklahoma State University. Alina's goal in life is to try as many experiences as possible. To date, she has been a volunteer firefighter, a dispatcher, substitute teacher, artist, janitor, children's book author, pizza maker, event coordinator and much more.

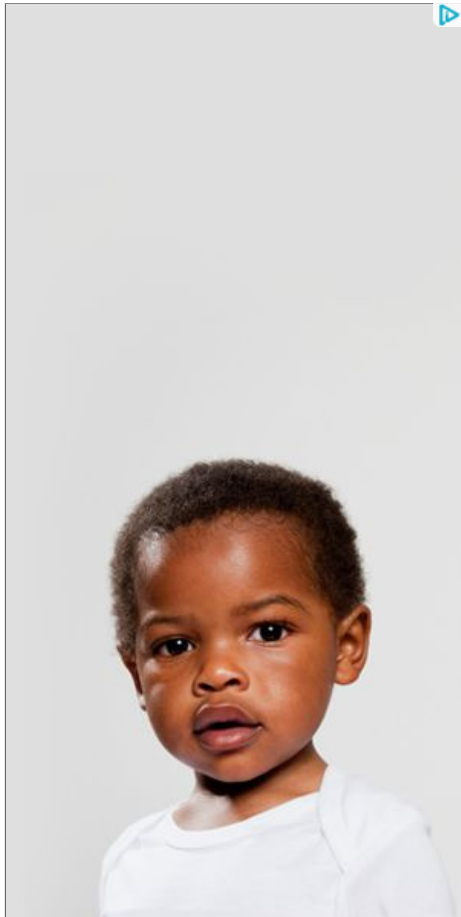
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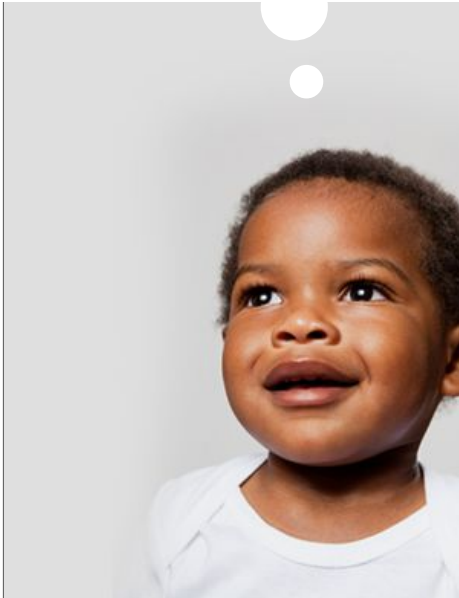
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