

The Story of Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year has been celebrated for more than 4,000 years. In ancient China, the New Year celebration was probably held at various times, at the whim of the emperor. Today, the celebration starts on the first day of the Chinese calendar. Because the Chinese calendar is tied to the cycles of the moon, the Chinese New Year is also called the Lunar New Year. The celebration typically falls sometime between late January and mid-February.

Chinese New Year is a holiday rich in symbolism, both religious and cultural. To prepare for the New Year, Chinese people clean their homes from top to bottom, pay off their debts, resolve disagreements, and buy new clothes and shoes. This period of preparation is known as the "Little New Year" and is meant to chase away the evil influences of the year that is coming to an end. And it's no good putting it off. The Chinese believe that those who wait until New Year's Day to clean, also sweep away the good fortune about to come!

On the night before the New Year begins, Chinese families gather to feast on "lucky" foods such as mandarin cakes (symbolizing fulfilled wishes), shrimp (symbolizing wealth), and puffed rice cakes (symbolizing a sweet New Year). They visit cemeteries to honor their ancestors and set up altars with pictures of deceased relatives. On this night, Chinese children try to stay up as late as they can; it is believed that the longer they can stay awake, the longer their parents' lives will be.



On the first day of the New Year, people dress in their best clothes and visit friends and relatives. No work is done on New Year's Day because it is believed that working on this special day will lead to hard work all year long. On this day, children are given red envelopes full of money, called *li-shih*. People decorate their homes with red banners featuring messages of luck and happiness. Lion Dancers perform in front of businesses—for a

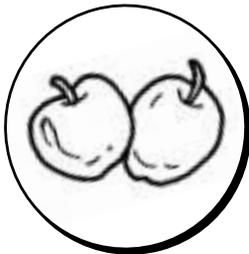
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donation—to bestow good luck on those inside. The New Year celebration continues until the moon is full. Then, festivities come to a close with the great Festival of Lanterns. The streets are filled with the noise and excitement of a giant parade led by a huge dragon. People carrying lanterns join the parade, and fireworks are set off to scare away evil spirits. Today the Chinese New Year is celebrated not just in China, but in many cities worldwide. People in Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam also celebrate variations of the Lunar New Year.

The date for Chinese New Year varies from year to year. Here's a peek at the dates for the next few years: February 12, 2002; February 1, 2003; January 22, 2004; February 9, 2005; January 29, 2006; February 18, 2007.

Gung Hay Fat Choy! Bai-nien! May you prosper! Happy New Year!

Some Symbols of Chinese New Year



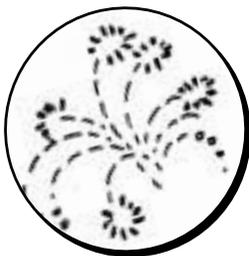
Many people decorate their homes with flower buds just ready to open. It's believed that if the buds open on New Year's day, they will bring good luck.

Fruits and other foods have great symbolism during the New Year. Peaches signify immortality. Oranges and melons stand for the moon, a lucky omen. But if you're given an orange on the first day of the new year, wait until the second day of the year to eat it—or it will bring bad luck.



Chinese households display red banners with special sayings during the New Year celebration. These sayings, called *fai chun*, are written in Chinese characters. They are meant to wish good luck and prosperity to friends and passersby.

The dragon, which is a traditional part of the New Year's parade, symbolizes strength and luck.



The Chinese animal zodiac is an important part of the New Year remembrance. Each year is named after an animal which has certain characteristics. It is said that people born during that year will have those same traits. There are 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig.

The fireworks that light up the streets during the Chinese New Year symbolize the banishing of bad luck.