Chinese New Year

(Lunar New Year, Yuan Tan)

Type of Holiday: Calendar/Seasonal
Date of Observation: Between January 21 and February 19; first day of the first Chinese lunar month
Where Celebrated: China, and by Chinese communities in the United States and throughout the world
Symbols and Customs: Debt-paying, Firecrackers, Flowers, Gate Gods, Kitchen God, Lucky Phrases or Spring Couplets, New Year Prints, Nian Monster
Colors: The color red, associated with good luck, can be seen everywhere during the Chinese New Year celebration (see FIRECRACKERS, NIAN MONSTER). LUCKY PHRASES are printed on red paper, red luck candles are displayed in homes and offices, and at one time, doorways were painted red to frighten demons away.
Related Holidays: Lantern Festival, Li Ch’un, Sol, Tet

ORIGINS

The Chinese New Year celebration is actually a two-week sequence of events, beginning with the ascent of the KITCHEN GOD to heaven near the end of the twelfth
lunar month and ending with the **LANTERN FESTIVAL** on the fifteenth day of the first month.

The Chinese lunisolar calendar is based on the oldest system of time measurement still in use. It is widely employed in Asian countries to set the dates of seasonal festivals. The Chinese New Year takes place on the new moon nearest to the point which is defined in the West as the fifteenth degree on the zodiacal sign of Aquarius. Each of twelve months in the Chinese year is twenty-nine or thirty days long and is divided into two parts, each of which is two weeks long. The Chinese calendar, like all lunisolar systems, requires periodic adjustment to keep the lunar and solar cycles integrated; therefore, an intercalary month is added when necessary.

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The names of each of the twenty-four two-week periods sometimes correspond to seasonal festivals celebrated during the period. Beginning with the New Year, which takes place in late January or early February, these periods are known by the following names: Spring Begins (New Year and **LI CH’UN**), the Rain Water, the Excited Insects, the **VERNAL EQUINOX**, the Clear and Bright (**CHING MING**), the Grain Rains, the Summer Begins, the Grain Fills, the Grain in Ear, the **SUMMER SOLSTICE** (**see DOUBLE FIFTH**), the Slight Heat, the Great Heat, the Autumn Begins, the Limit of Heat, the White Dew (**see MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL**), the **AUTUMN EQUINOX**, the Cold Dew, the Hoar Frost Descends, the Winter Begins, the Little Snow, the Heavy Snow, the **WINTER SOLSTICE**, the Little Cold, and the Great Cold.

On New Year’s Eve (Moon 12, Day 30) all the doors to the house are sealed with strips of paper and the head of the household performs three important ceremonies: the offering to the God of Heaven and Earth, the offering to the Household Gods, and the worship of the ancestral tablets, usually strips of wood with the names and dates of deceased family members in raised or gilded characters. Then the entire family, putting aside their quarrels with one another, sits down to a special reunion meal. At midnight, everyone presents New Year wishes to one another in a very formal ceremony known as **K’o T’ou** (or kowtow, meaning to touch the ground with the forehead), observing strict rules about who should bow to whom. Between 3:00 and 5:00 a.m., the head of the household breaks the seals on the front door and greets the returning Household Gods, led by Tsao Wang, the Kitchen God.

New Year’s Day itself is spent paying respects to elders, setting off **FIRECRACKERS**, burning incense, and calling on friends and relatives. No knives or sharp instruments may be used on this day, for fear of “cutting” good fortune, and brooms aren’t used because they might sweep good fortune away. The first five days of the New Year, known as the Beginning of the New Spring, are devoted to the worship of the God of Wealth. Married women visit their family homes and sweep out their houses to fend off poverty. Most people return to work after the fourth or fifth day of celebration, and by the thirteenth and fourteenth days, they’re busy getting ready for the **LANTERN FESTIVAL**.
Chinese New Year

Telling fortunes based on the zodiac, an astrological diagram of the universe, is a popular New Year’s custom in China. According to legend, the Chinese zodiac of twelve animals representing each year in succession came about in the sixth century B.C.E., when Buddha invited all the animals in creation to come to him. Only twelve responded: the tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig, rat, and ox. Buddha rewarded them by giving each one a year that would carry the animal’s name as well as its traits: hence the “Year of the Rat,” “Year of the Monkey,” etc. By referring to the “eight characters” (which symbolize the hour, day, month, and year of a person’s birth) and the twelve signs of the zodiac, fortunetellers can predict what events the coming year might hold.

New Year’s Day is also a birthday celebration for all Chinese people, since birthdays are calculated according to the year in which a person is born rather than the day. Every new baby, in other words, is considered exactly a year old on New Year’s Day. Some people, however, prefer to use the Western method of observing birthdays.

SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS

Debt-paying

Anyone who has not paid his debts before New Year’s Day loses face, which in China means that he is disgraced. Shops are open and customers line up, waiting to settle their accounts. Paying off debts is a symbolic as well as a practical act, enabling people to face the New Year with a “clean slate.”

The Chinese have three traditional dates for settling their debts: New Year’s Day, the DOUBLE FIFTH (Dragon Boat Festival), and the MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL. In between times, many people live on credit. There is a great deal of scurrying around as the Lunar New Year approaches and people try to raise cash to pay their debts. If someone can’t pay up, he may try to hide until New Year’s morning. Then he is safe until the next settlement day—unless the person he owes goes searching for him with a lantern, indicating that it is still dark and that the debt may be collected without violating the New Year.

Poor debtors often find refuge in the courtyard in front of the temple of the City of God. Comedy troupes give free performances here, and creditors who spy their debtors in the crowd are usually hesitant to demand payment in front of other people.

Firecrackers

Firecrackers play an important role in many Chinese celebrations. Along with fire (or bright light) and the color red, loud noises are guaranteed to scare off evil spirits—particularly the NIAN MONSTER, a legendary beast who appears at this time of year.
Firecrackers are first set off when the Kitchen God departs for heaven, several days before the New Year actually begins. The noise they make speeds him on his way and also keeps evil spirits out of the house until he returns. More firecrackers are set off during the Lantern Festival, which concludes the New Year celebrations.

**Flowers**

Flowers can be seen everywhere during the celebration of the Lunar New Year, particularly in southern China. They are used to decorate houses and public places, and each flower has a symbolic meaning. The white narcissus, for example, stands for good fortune and prosperity; the camellia, springtime; the peony, wealth; the peach (or plum), longevity. The quince, traditionally a symbol of fertility, is often used by the Chinese community in San Francisco.

Any plant with red flowers is considered a symbol of good luck and happiness. Blossoms that open on New Year’s Day signify an extra dose of good fortune.

**Gate Gods**

During the New Year celebration, the Chinese put up pictures of the Gate Gods, guardians of the home and protectors of mankind, on the panels of their front doors. These figures are often shown against a background of peach blossoms; according to legend, the Gate Gods were two brothers who lived under a peach tree so large that 5,000 men could not encircle it with their arms. Images of these traditional warriors have stood guard over Chinese households for thirteen centuries.

The earliest “New Year pictures” of the Gate Gods date from the late second century and show Shentu and Yulu, guardians of the underworld, who protected families by tying up threatening demons and throwing them to the tigers. They are dressed in full armor, and their faces are painted with the bright makeup of the Chinese opera.

The most popular Gate Gods today are the Tang dynasty (618-907) generals Qin Qiong (or Qin Shubao) and Yuchi Jingde (or Hu Jingde). Legend says that when the Tang emperor Tai Zong was kept awake all night by evil demons, two of his ministers offered to stand guard outside the palace gates, but they never saw a sign of ghosts or goblins. After letting them spend several nights like this, the emperor decided to have their portraits painted and hung up on either side of the gate. His sleep was never disturbed again.

**Kitchen God**

Tsao Wang, also known as the Kitchen God or Prince of the Oven, personifies the hearth or center of the home. He is one of the oldest gods worshipped in China, and he serves as a messenger between the inhabitants of the earth and the gods in heaven. Every Chinese kitchen has a shrine with a picture of Tsao Wang, usually in
a small niche behind the cooking stove, which is considered the soul of the family and represents its fate. A good stove guarantees peace in the family, while a bad one brings strife.

The Kitchen God spends the entire year with the family, observing everything that goes on. Then, on the twenty-third day (twenty-fourth in the South of China) of the last month of the lunar year, he ascends to heaven to make his annual report on what he has seen and heard. Commonly called Little New Year, this occasion is marked with a farewell dinner given by the family and with offerings of sweet cakes and preserved fruits. Sometimes his picture is dipped in wine and his lips are smeared with honey so that he will be in a good mood when he reports on the family’s behavior.

After the dinner is over, Tsao Wang’s portrait is carried out into the courtyard and set up on an improvised altar with candles and incense. Prayers are offered, and the portrait is set on fire. The burning of the image releases Tsao Wang for his “ascent” to heaven. Paper spirit money (called qianchang or yuanbao) is thrown into the fire along with straw for the Kitchen God’s horse. Peas and beans are tossed on the kitchen roof to imitate the clatter of the horse’s hooves and to bring good luck in the coming year to the family’s livestock.

The Kitchen God is usually shown sitting next to his wife. Sometimes a dog and a rooster, domestic symbols of a rural household, are shown with him. If the family is very poor and can’t afford a woodblock print of Tsao Wang, his shrine may have nothing more than a plain sheet of red paper with his name written on it.

Lucky Phrases or Spring Couplets

On the last day of the twelfth lunar month, the gate posts and door panels of Chinese homes are decorated with images of the gate gods and “lucky phrases”—brief inscriptions printed on red paper (blue if the family is in mourning) with characters embossed in gold ink. Sometimes they are written in the form of “spring couplets” or two-line verses, and sometimes they consist of only a single character. “Fu,” the character for good fortune, is often used because when it is printed upside down, it sounds the same as the word meaning “to arrive,” thus implying that good fortune has arrived.

A popular custom for more than 1,000 years, lucky phrases are designed to bring good fortune of a particular kind. For example, a merchant might put up an inscription designed to attract success in his business; a farmer’s lucky phrase might express the wish for a good harvest. In private households, lucky phrases usually concern wealth, longevity, the gift of sons, and official promotion—all traditional Chinese ideals.

The first spring couplets were composed to bring good fortune to the emperor Meng Zhang in the tenth century. It wasn’t until the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) that the custom became a popular one. During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the
composition of these brief verses was regarded as a means of measuring one’s literary talent, education, and wit. They consist of two lines, called the “head” and the “tail,” that correspond to and balance each other: for example, “By virtue united, heaven is strong;/Through compassion shared, earth is yielding.” Many contemporary New Year couplets set political terminology against traditional descriptive elements. “Red flags,” for example, might be paired with “fresh flowers.” No longer composed by scholars, today’s spring couplets are mass produced and can be purchased at stationery stores and magazine stands.

**New Year Prints**

*Nianhua* or New Year prints are posted at the same time as the *gate gods* and *spring couplets*, providing visual images of the wishes that the couplets describe. The desire for many children might be accompanied by a picture of a pomegranate, a symbol of fertility. Wishes for wealth and honor are often represented by full-blossomed peonies. The bat is another popular subject; although associated with evil in European folklore, in China it is a common symbol for good luck and happiness. Plowing and weaving prints are popular, as are peaches (symbolizing longevity) and pictures of plump, healthy children holding pots of money (progeny and wealth). Some New Year prints portray scenes from historical novels and popular operas.

The subject matter of New Year prints has changed with the times. In the People’s Republic of China, there was an increased demand for art with a socialist theme; prints often showed cooperative labor and bumper harvests. Since the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) ended, traditional New Year sentiments have been more acceptable. Some New Year prints try to combine both: for example, a picture of a communal fish pond may support the government’s involvement in aquaculture, but it also symbolizes the traditional New Year wish for wealth. The word *yu*, meaning “fish,” sounds the same in Chinese as the word meaning “affluence.”

Like *lucky phrases*, New Year prints are purchased rather than created. Nianhua workshops throughout China produce more than 100 million of these prints each year.

**Nian Monster**

According to Chinese legend, there was a frightening creature called *nian* (which is the same as the word meaning “year”) who appeared at the end of the year, attacking villagers and their livestock. Nothing could destroy the *nian*, but people eventually discovered that it had three weaknesses: It was frightened by loud noises, it disliked sunshine, and it was terrified of the color red. So they built a huge bonfire outside the village, set off firecrackers, and painted the doors of their houses red. The *nian* covered its head in fear and ran away.
**Ching Ming**

*(Pure and Bright Festival, Spring Festival)*

**Type of Holiday:** Calendar/Seasonal  
**Date of Observation:** April 5 or 6; fourth or fifth day of the third lunar month  
**Where Celebrated:** China, and by Chinese communities in the United States and throughout the world  
**Symbols and Customs:** Ancestral Graves, Cold Food, Kites, Willow  
**Related Holidays:** Li Ch’un

**ORIGINS**

*Ching Ming* means “Pure and Bright,” an apt name for a Chinese festival that takes place at the beginning of spring. Although *Li Ch’un* celebrates the first day of spring, it usually occurs in February when the weather is still cold and the