

**THE LUNAR NEW YEAR (LNY) or Spring Festival** - is the most important celebration of the year for Chinese people throughout the world.

**Chinese New Year**, as it is commonly known, is unlike the celebrations of the Western New Year, as it does not correspond with either the Western calendar or conventions. Originally, ancient China had a predominantly agrarian society and the Spring Festival fell between two rice crops - marking the harvest of the first crop and the planting season of the second. Although the role of agriculture within China has shifted, this agricultural past is the basis on which many of the ancient traditional rituals and customs of the celebration originate.

The **ancient Chinese calendar** has been in existence since the Shang Dynasty (c. 1554-1045 BCE), where evidence of ancient astronomical records have been found inscribed on oracle bones. This ancient calendar is complex as it is based not only on the lunar phases of the moon, but also on the solar solstices and equinoxes. Additionally, the opposing complementary **principles of Yin and Yang** and the twelve animal 'signs' of the **Chinese zodiac cycle** also play their part.

Since 1996, the **Lunar New Year's celebration** has been designated a **week-long holiday** in China. In anticipation of this annual holiday, shops as well as day and night markets stock goods especially for the LNY celebration. These can include decorations for both the inside and outside of family homes and businesses - **lanterns** and **paper decorations** of door gods, spring couplets, Fu signs, New Year's sayings and lucky money envelopes. There are huge piles of specific **fruits** and **flowering plants** for sale, ready to be eaten or displayed during the celebration. A whole **variety of foods** are made specifically for the celebration, each having a special significance when eaten during the holiday period and particularly on Lunar New Year's Eve. Finally, an essential purchase has to be of **fireworks**, so that the household can welcome the New Year in with a bang.

Traditionally, the Lunar New Year is a time for families to gather together at their **ancestral home**, to reflect and give thanks for the past 12 months. It is also a time to honour **household and heavenly deities** and remember their own ancestors, and to wish each other good fortune in the coming year. For the younger generation it is an opportunity to renew family ties and take a break from their busy lives and city-based jobs. As Chinese people travel back home to join their own family reunion, the **world's largest seasonal migration of people** takes place in China, as approximately 3 billion journeys are made during a six-week period!

**PREPARATIONS** for the LNY celebrations begin in a similar way to the lead up to Christmas festivities in the West. It is a time to **shop for presents, new clothes, food and decorations**, although there are some inevitable cultural differences. **Street markets** pop up at this time, providing opportunities for a normally thrifty Chinese nation to spend its money generously, while also keeping the tradition of **clearing any outstanding debts** before the start of the New Lunar Year.

From the **20<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month** homes are thoroughly spring cleaned, **'sweeping away the dust'**, dirt and any inauspicious smells and bad luck that may have accumulated in the previous year - so bidding farewell to the last year and welcoming the next. This spring clean is believed to appease any visiting heavenly deities who might inspect the home. Any sharp objects are safely hidden away.

The Chinese home is then ready to be decorated with mostly **red decorations** - such as **lanterns**. These red decorations take on the role of wishing everyone a happy new year, long life, good health, wealth and offspring. The colour red is believed to bring positive energy, happiness, good luck and to ward off evil.

Traditionally, the main threshold of a house was guarded by a **Door god** carved in peach wood. More recently, any double front doors have been protected from evil by pasting the printed images of one of a **pair of door gods** on each door. These door gods are depicted as two Tang-dynasty generals with threatening scowls on their faces, who are armed with various weapons to fend off any evil spirits that may want to cross the threshold and harm the household.

Today, evil spirits are more commonly warded off by a pair of **Spring Couplets** - each displaying a positive message. These are usually written using only seven Chinese characters in black or gold ink on vertical red paper scrolls and are pasted on either side of the doorway. A shorter couplet of four characters is placed midway along the top of the door frame. Beneath this on the door itself, a diamond shaped **red paper decoration** of the **'Fu' symbol** is often pasted upside-down to welcome the **'arrival of blessings'**. Wordplay is used in this instance, as the word 'Fu' means 'bat' and also 'blessings'. **LNY prints** and 'Fu' decorations can be used throughout the home - on furniture, appliances and window panes too.

**Round fruits**, such as bowls of **Mandarin oranges** and plant pots of **Kumquats** are found in Chinese homes during the LNY celebrations, as they represent the **Yang principle** with its positive and generative force. **Flowering plants** are also used as decorations and for their symbolism - for instance, **peach blossom** for longevity, **narcissus** for good fortune and **pussy willow** for new growth.

**LUNAR NEW YEAR'S Eve** - is when the celebrating really begins, on the evening of the **first new moon** of the first month of the lunar calendar. It can begin on any day between **January 21<sup>st</sup> - February 20<sup>th</sup>** and ends a fortnight later at the next full moon - **a celebration lasting 15 days**.

On this evening all the members of a reunited Chinese family stay up late - **'to watch over the year'**. They share an 8 course **celebratory feast of symbolic food**, ideally at a round table, which is considered to bring good luck to all for the coming year. Not only does each individual dish matter for what it represents or symbolises, but the way it is prepared, served and eaten too.

This special meal can include each of the following foods for different reasons :-

- \***Dumplings** and **Spring Rolls** are like gold ingots and represent wealth.
- \***Tangyuan** (sweet rice balls) are round and symbolise family togetherness.
- \***'Good fortune fruit'** (Tangerines, Oranges, Pomelo) because of their round shape and golden colour symbolise wealth and good fortune.
- \***Niangao** (glutinous rice cake) promises a higher income or position at work.
- \***Uncut Noodles** signify happiness and a long life.
- \***A whole fish** is often the last course of the evening - it signifies 'surplus or abundance' and is a food that is not always actually eaten.

There are **many regional differences** in the foods that are served - for instance, in the north sweet round dumplings are served, representing the full moon and the perfect family unit. Whereas, dumplings eaten in the south are crescent-shaped like an old silver ingot and represent wealth. Depending on the regional customs these foods may also be served on other days during the 15 day LNY celebration.

Throughout the duration of this meal, the television may be on in the background showing **The Spring Festival Gala** - an annual variety show featuring both traditional and contemporary singers, dancers, acrobats and magicians.

After the meal, **Red lucky money envelopes** are given to youngsters in the family wishing them good health and a productive year at school or college. At the end of the evening the New Lunar Year is welcomed in with a **fireworks display** and possibly **firecrackers** if permitted - to frighten away and ward off evil spirits. In some places **a large bell tolls** or **drums are beaten**, which are also believed to drive away bad luck, welcome the New Lunar Year and bring good luck to all.

## 15 DAYS OF CELEBRATION

**Day 1 - New Year's Day** Everyone begins the Lunar New Year with a sense of renewal by wearing **new clothes** and eating a **vegetarian breakfast**. Traditionally, no meat was eaten throughout the day, as it was considered a day of cleansing, but today this practice is not always followed.

Chinese people believe that what they do on the first day of the Lunar New Year affects their luck for the rest of the year. At some point during New Year's Day it is customary to **visit the temple**, where joss sticks are lit, prayers are offered to give thanks for the past year and for good fortune in the New Lunar Year.

**Ancestors are honoured** with small gifts of food, wine, joss sticks and paper offerings at the **family shrine** - to show respect, piety and reverence to those who have departed, in the belief that they will provide protection and good fortune to their living descendants.

This day is spent with the **immediate family** - where a daughter-in-law will visit and pay respect to her husband's family and ancestors before visiting her own family. Further **meals are shared**, family members **exchange gifts** and the children are given **Lucky Money envelopes**. **Firecrackers** may be set off throughout the day - the loud cracking sound driving away any remaining bad luck and bringing good luck to the new lunar year.

The remainder of the LNY holiday continues with visits made to a wider network of **extended family and friends** - a daughter-in-law may visit her own family now.

Between **2nd-5<sup>th</sup> day** gambling is allowed during the first few days of LNY!

Also, at this time it is customary to eat meals of **long uncut noodles** which are believed to give anyone who eats them a long life.

On **7<sup>th</sup> day**, everyone is believed to 'age a year' - with everyone greeting everyone else with '**Happy Birthday!**' Often '**Congee**' a rice soup is served and eaten.

On **8<sup>th</sup> day**, the celebrations officially end and most people **return to work**.

**Day 15** – The final day of the LNY celebration is marked by a **Lantern Festival** and the vibrant public spectacle of acrobatic **Lion and Dragon dances** - accompanied by the sound of crashing cymbals and beating drums. The day itself ends with a night sky filled with a final **firework display** and the **full moon**.