

Deep Dive: Lunar New Year

What is the Lunar New Year, and who celebrates it?

Families all over the world in countries such as China, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and more celebrate the Lunar New Year. To prepare for an auspicious year, families clean the house, feast, hang lanterns, and more! Read on to learn more about this very important tradition – specifically, the Year of the Horse.

What are people celebrating?

Unlike the Western Gregorian calendar, many people use the **lunisolar calendar**, which is based on the **cycles of the moon**. The Lunar New Year is the first day of the lunisolar calendar, with a focus on welcoming the new and good by purifying the household.

When exactly is the LNY?

The festival starts on the first new moon of the year and ends with the full moon, which is a cycle that lasts **roughly 15 days**. This year, the festival begins on February the 17. During this time, many people take care not to wash or cut their hair – the Chinese character for “hair” is the same character for “prosper,” so it’s considered bad luck!

When did people in the U. S. start celebrating the LNY?

Throughout the early 1800s, Asian immigrants were forced to hold secret LNY festivities to avoid discrimination. In 1860, however, the first **public** celebration was held by the Chinese community in San Francisco, complete with **lion dancing** and parades. Today, the **San Francisco Chinese New Year Celebration** remains a very important annual event.

How do people all around the world celebrate this day?

In most Asian cultures, there is a shared focus on spending time with family, wearing traditional clothing, and respecting superstitions to **maximize prosperity**. In Korea, people don *hanbok*, eat **rice cake soup**, and play traditional games. In China, children are given **red envelopes** full of money, and people wear new clothes to symbolise a fresh start. Vietnamese families also exchange red envelopes and wear traditional **áo dài**, while Singaporeans wear red (a lucky color, as you may have noticed) and invite **lion dancers** to their homes.

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What do people eat?

In China, families eat dumplings shaped like silver ingots to symbolize wealth, whole fish for surplus, and glutinous rice cake. In Vietnam, people celebrate Tết with dishes like *bánh chưng*, a sticky rice cake wrapped in banana leaves that honors ancestors and symbolizes the earth. In Korea, families eat *tteokguk*, a rice cake soup that signifies aging one year and gaining wisdom; without eating it, tradition says you don't "officially" grow older.



What is the story of the Chinese zodiac?

Are you familiar with the origins of the Chinese zodiac (生肖)? Everyone is assigned an animal according to their **birth year**. The story comes from a classic myth, where the Jade Emperor (玉帝) wanted to create a way to measure time, and organized a race. He declared that the first twelve animals to arrive at his palace would each be given a year in the zodiac calendar. To win their place, the animals had to cross a great river and reach the palace. Some ran fast, others swam, and a few got clever.



The first animal to arrive across the river was the **Rat**, who asked the kind **Ox** to carry him across and leapt off just as both animals reached the riverbank. The powerful **Tiger**, nimble **Rabbit**, and righteous **Dragon** followed. Then came the **Horse**, who was spooked by the slithering **Snake** at the last moment and ended up in seventh place. The **Sheep**, **Monkey**, and the **Rooster** followed, having worked together to reach the bank. The **Dog**, a supposedly good swimmer, had gotten distracted while playing in the water and scrambled for eleventh place. Finally, the last animal – the **Pig** – made it across the finish line.

