



# CHINESE NEW YEAR

JANUARY/FEBRUARY—LUNAR YEAR

**G**UNG HAY FAT CHOY! This is the Chinese greeting for the New Year; it means, “Wishing you luck and prosperity.” The New Year is one of the most important and festive Chinese holidays. In the United States, where more than 2.5 million people of Chinese descent live, Chinese New Year’s celebrations provide an important connection to Chinese culture and heritage. Chinese immigrants brought the traditions with them when they came to America to work in gold mining camps and on the railroads in the mid-1800s.

The Chinese New Year falls in late January or early February according to the Chinese lunar calendar, and traditionally lasts fifteen days ending with the full moon.

For the New Year, people decorate their homes with colorful pictures of flowers and fruits, and hang red paper squares or scrolls on which gold Chinese characters represent luck, happiness, prosperity, or health. Red is the color for Chinese New Year as it represents good luck. It also symbolizes fire, which is said to drive away bad luck and evil spirits, particularly the legendary monster, “nian.” People wear red for the New Year, write poems and wishes on red paper, and give red envelopes, called “laisee” packets, filled with “lucky money” to children and young adults. Red firecrackers are also an essential part

of Chinese New Year. From ancient times to the present, Chinese people have welcomed in the New Year and chased away the evil spirits by setting off firecrackers. Long ago people lit bamboo stalks, which crackled and sparked to scare away spirits that could bring bad luck to the year.

On the night before the New Year, families and friends come together for a special meal, which includes Chinese foods that represent happiness, health, and luck.

On the final night of celebration is the Feast of the Lantern, or “Yuen Sui.” The lanterns are beautifully painted with animals, flowers and birds, or legendary scenes. Traditionally, the glowing lanterns were carried in a procession and hung in the temples. The Feast of the Lantern includes a dragon dance, which is performed by a huge, long dragon made of paper, silk, bamboo, or rattan. The dragon is carried by many

people as it dances through the streets chasing a red “sun-ball,” or a white “pearl-ball,” held aloft by a parade participant. In the United States, the Feast of the Lantern is generally part of a larger parade that often occurs on the weekend closest to the New Year.

Today, Chinatowns in American cities with large Chinese populations, such as New York and San Francisco, hold elaborate and lively New Year’s celebrations that attract hundreds of thousands of participants and spectators.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Colorful banners announce an exhibition of foods for the celebration of the New Year.  
ABOVE: “May all your wishes come true” is the message on this red money envelope.



In San Francisco, Chinese New Year is one of the largest Asian cultural events outside of Asia. Huge crowds gather in the streets of Chinatown to watch the festive and noisy parade, which includes decorated floats, musicians playing drums and gongs, lion dancers with paper lion heads on sticks, marching bands, Chinese acrobats, martial arts groups, and many firecrackers. At the end of the parade is a special Golden Dragon that was made by dragon masters in Foshan, China. The Golden Dragon is **resplendent** in gold and silver, **fur**, silk, paper, and rainbow-colored **pompoms**. It stretches over 200 feet long and requires 100 people to carry it. The dragon sways back and forth, twists and turns, jumps and dances **amid** the sparks and noise of over 500,000 firecrackers!

An important **aspect** of Chinese New Year is the animal connected with that year. For example, the New Year may be called, “The Year of the Horse” or “The Year of the Dog.” The Chinese lunar calendar, created in 2600 BC, has a 12-year

cycle, and each year is associated with one of 12 animals on the Chinese calendar. The animals are the rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. It is said that when Buddha asked all the animals to meet him on the New Year, these twelve animals came, and he named a year for each one. People born in that year are said to **embody** the **characteristics**, both good and bad, of its animal. The animal for the year is honored and **featured** on posters and many other items during New Year’s celebrations.

### Glossary

**prosperity:** *n.* wealth; abundance

**festive:** *adj.* lively; fun

**descent:** *n.* family origin or line

**heritage:** *n.* one’s family, cultural, or national background

**lunar:** *adj.* of or related to the moon

**scroll(s):** *n.* long rolled paper containing writing or pictures

ABOVE: A Chinese New Year’s celebration is not complete without a dragon weaving down the street.

**legendary:** *adj.* myths or stories told long ago  
**firecracker(s):** *n.* a small explosive set off to make noise and a flash of light  
**ancient:** *adj.* from the past, before written records  
**crackle(d):** *v.* to make a popping noise, often because of fire or flame  
**spark(ed):** *v.* to produce a flash of light due to heat, fire, or electricity  
**scare away:** *v.* to chase or frighten away; causing someone or an animal to run away because of fear or surprise  
**lantern:** *n.* container from which light is emitted by a candle inside  
**glowing:** *adj.* bright, shining from an inner light  
**procession:** *n.* long moving line of people, in a parade or ceremony  
**dragon:** *n.* a mythical animal depicted as a long snake-like creature with four claws  
**aloft:** *adv.* above one's head; high  
**parade:** *n.* a public procession or display of people, animals and/or formation moving in a single line  
**elaborate:** *adj.* very detailed and beautiful  
**spectator(s):** *n.* person who watches an event or performance  
**float(s):** *n.* a platform carrying an exhibit usually pulled by a motorized vehicle (sometimes by animals or people) in a parade  
**gong(s):** *n.* metal disc which produces a deep musical tone  
**resplendent:** *adj.* spectacular and richly decorated  
**fur:** *n.* hair of an animal  
**pompom(s):** *n.* colored ball made of yarn or cloth  
**amid:** *adv.* among; together with  
**aspect:** *n.* part; characteristic  
**embody:** *v.* to represent or contain fully  
**characteristic(s):** *n.* quality; trait; aspect  
**feature(d):** *v.* to show prominently; to present