

CHINESE/LUNAR NEW YEAR

Factsheet

Tan's Topics



**VOICE
ESEA**

This factsheet aims to educate and spread awareness of the biggest festival celebrated by billions of people in the ESEA (East and Southeast Asian) region and the world - Chinese, or Lunar, New Year. Here, this will talk through the basic facts, the history behind the name, as well as fun tidbits about how it is celebrated, from the delicious food eaten to the intriguing superstitions followed. We hope you find it useful and interesting.



The basics

The earliest known use of the English phrase “Chinese New Year” was in 1704 in G. F. Gemelli Careri's *Voyage round the World*. It was popularised further in the 1800s. And while it is based on the ancient Chinese calendar, over time its traditions migrated across the East and Southeast Asian region and it is celebrated by people around the world, not just those who are ethnically or nationally Chinese.



Despite its name, the Lunar New Year is actually based on a lunisolar calendar*, meaning it combines monthly lunar cycles with the solar year. But its date and many other important calendar dates are determined by the moon's phases. The first day is a new moon, the last a full moon



2 billion people around the world celebrate this festival



Countries and regions including China, Taiwan, North and South Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia, Tibet, Singapore and Malaysia, as well as diaspora worldwide mark it. ESEA countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Timor-Leste do not officially, religiously or largely culturally-speaking celebrate it



The 15-day long festivities end with the Lantern Festival, representing letting go of the past year and welcoming a bright future with the start of spring

*This Lunar New Year is not to be confused with the Islamic New Year (*Hijri*), which is based solely on a lunar calendar

Chinese vs. Lunar

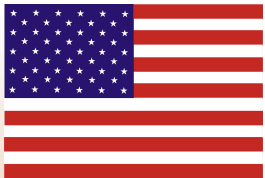
Lunar New Year has been adopted by a growing number of people as an inclusive term. However, this has also caused tensions, with blame passed onto alleged “anti-China propaganda” and to those trying to “erase Chinese identity and culture”. For others, it is simply a way to acknowledge those who are non-Chinese that also celebrate it, even if many of the traditions were passed on by or are similar to the Chinese.



Geopolitical



Particularly in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and in countries with high populations of people who originate from there, the desire to move away from identifying as “Chinese” - even if they are ethnically - has increased over the years



In the 1970s and 80s, the term Lunar New Year became more popular in the US as the increase of those from Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Vietnam soared, bringing their traditions of this festival

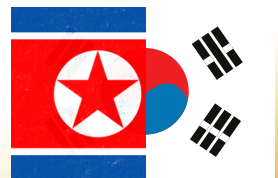
Cultural



Mainland China: Spring Festival



Vietnam: Tết or Tết Nguyên Đán



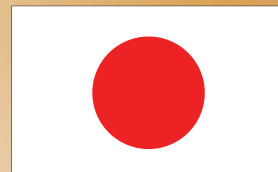
North and South Korea: Seollal



Tibet: Losar



Mongolia: Tsagaan Sar



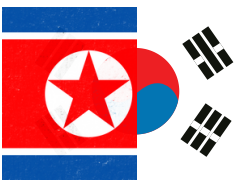
Okinawa, Japan: Sōgwachi

Different traditions

Many traditions remain or are similar throughout different cultures and countries that celebrate Chinese/Lunar New Year, though some have their own unique customs. Below is an example of one or two things out of several observed in a few countries or territories.



"Xông Đất" or "first footing" in Vietnamese culture is based on the belief that the first visitor will influence the family's prosperity and happiness throughout the year



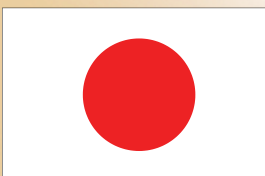
In Korean culture, younger generations perform a deep, formal bow (*sebae*) accompanied by offering *deokdam* (words of wisdom) to elders



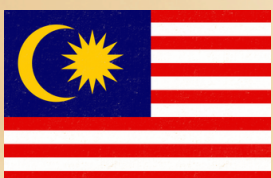
Losar is deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism and plateau culture. Examples of the former include the sacred Cham dance to symbolise the triumph of good over evil and wisdom over ignorance, while the former includes a plowing ceremony - praying for a good harvest and honoring livestock



Instead of bowing, in Mongolia, family members greet each other by placing their arms under the elbows of the elder person (*zolgokh*) and present a blue silk scarf (*khadag*) to show support and respect



Japan stopped officially celebrating Lunar New Year in 1873 during the Meiji Restoration but in the Okinawa islands, it is still marked. Unique celebrations include playing *sanshin* music, *kachāshī* dancing and honoring the god Miruku for happiness



The Malaysian Chinese open their homes to friends and neighbours of different ethnicities (Malay, Indian, etc.) as well as family to foster unity and share food. One food custom - *yee sang* (prosperity toss) - involves tossing a raw fish salad with chopsticks. The higher the toss, the greater the prosperity

Food

Food is extremely important in ESEA cultures. A host of different foods are eaten during this time. Many are either because their shape or size symbolises or looks like something or because the pronunciation of their name is a homonym.



Noodles signify longevity because of their length



Nian gao is a sticky glutinous rice cake whose name sounds like "higher year/to grow every year"



Spring rolls look like bars of gold



Dumplings look like gold ingots



The roundness of oranges and rice balls symbolise unity and togetherness



The word for chicken sounds like "lucky"



The word for fish sounds like "abundance/surplus"

The Zodiac

The 12 Chinese Zodiac animals (Ox, Rat, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat/Sheep/Ram, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig) were, according to legend, chosen after they took part in “the Great Race” held by the Jade Emperor (scan the QR code for the full story). But in other cultures, sometimes the animals are different.



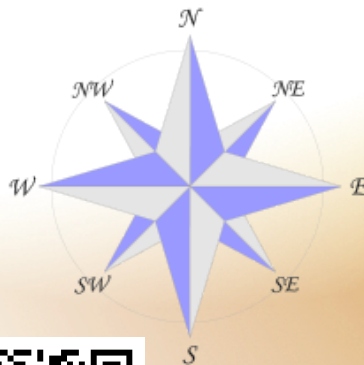
The character 羊 can mean goat or sheep, hence being interchangeable. However, historically it is more likely a goat

In Vietnam, the Ox is a Buffalo, and the Rabbit a Cat. This may be because of historical linguistic differences



When Japan celebrated Lunar New Year, they used the Boar instead of the Pig due to different cultural perceptions of the animals

The Naga - a divine, mythical half-human, half-serpent being - replaces the Dragon in the Thai zodiac



The Burmese zodiac only has eight zodiac signs based on the eight directions and each day of the week



Superstitions

Superstitions are prevalent across East and Southeast Asia, with customs passed down over the millennia. This is no exception during the New Year period, such as setting off fireworks and firecrackers to ward off evil spirits or praying to gods for good health, luck and fortune. While today it is often thought to be the older generation who still at least adhere to or even believe these superstitions and taboos, a lot of the younger generation might still observe those that are common during this time, usually out of tradition or habit.

Do



Wear red or gold or decorate your house in these colours as they symbolise good fortune and wealth. This is often especially common important if it's your zodiac year. Conversely, wearing white or black symbolises death, funerals and the afterlife



Clean your house before the New Year, not on or during the period. Cleaning sweeps away bad luck ready for the New Year, and doing so on it sweeps away any good luck that comes in



Eat kucky foods

Don't



Wash or cut your hair or nails on or during the New Year. Doing so washes or cuts away at your fortune because a character in the word "hair" is the same as a character in the word "to prosper"



Do things in 4s - four is unlucky number in many ESEA languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean because it sounds like "death". 8 on the other hand, is a lucky number



Argue, carry over feuds or owe people money - having a bad relationship or being in debt is considered unlucky

Reflections

Hopefully this factsheet was helpful and insightful in learning more about some key aspects of Chinese/Lunar New Year and ESEA cultures. But of course, it is only a snapshot of the vast amount of information there is to know. To end, below are a few things to think about as an individual or organisation, particularly from a self-learning perspective.



Greetings

In a world where tensions can be high, getting the language right when talking about the new year is important to some. Who are you saying “恭喜发财” (gōng xǐ fā cái) to? Or asking “do you celebrate Chinese New Year”? Follow their lead, respect their wishes and opinions, and learn from them. If you’re an organisation, who is your internal and external audience and why do you use one or the other? Consider the responses you would get either way.



Goods and money

Many retail companies market special products during the New Year period. But who designs and makes them? Are ESEA people's talents used but not just during this time? What awareness of Lunar New Year or ESEA cultures and issues are being raised? Do any profits go back to the community?



Parades

If you’re going to watch New Year parades and events that take place across the country, think about what you’re watching. Do you understand what the dragon dance is about? What do the lions dancing outside of shops and restaurants mean? If you’re going with children, are they being taught this too?



Immerse yourself

Whether it's watching documentaries and films, reading books, listening to podcasts, researching online, travelling, or speaking and connecting with people of ESEA heritage, there are many ways to further your cultural understanding