

HOLIDAY

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At the end of every year we in the western world celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah and New Years. In the United States and Canada we also have Thanksgiving Holidays.

However in the Far East over a billion people celebrate just one major holiday during this time of year. This holiday includes elements of our western celebrations plus some uniquely Asian features.

Of course I'm talking about the Chinese New Year, also known as the Lunar New Year or by various names in other countries; for example, Tete in Vietnam. It is celebrated in China, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, North and South Korea, and Japan. It is also a major holiday in Chinatowns and Asian homes around the world. North Korea eliminated this holiday in 1953 during the Korean War but restored it in 1967.

Although, as I said, this holiday has several names depending upon location, for purposes of clarity I will mostly just refer to it as the Chinese New Year, or Lunar New Year.

Whereas Christmas (except for Eastern Orthodox) and New Years are celebrated on the same days each year on the Gregorian calendar, this is not true for the Chinese New Year and Hanukkah whose dates are determined according to Lunar calendars and fall on different (Gregorian) days each year. Therefore, the 2022 Chinese New Year will be on February 1. In 2021 it was on February 12.

Japan celebrates this holiday on January 1. The reason for this is that in 1873 the Japanese government adopted the Gregorian calendar. At that time the prevailing attitude among the Japanese elites was that Asian practices were inferior to Western ones and would hold Japan back unless they were abandoned.

The purposes of this holiday are to usher in the New Year, to honor ancestors and deities, and to be with family.

Each year is associated with one of 12 animals in the Chinese Zodiac. 2022 will be the year of the Tiger. The tiger has commonly represented the masculine principle in nature and is king of all the animals in Chinese history and culture. Tigers are the symbol of bravery.

A very important feature of this holiday is to travel to your home town to be with your relatives. This gives rise to what is often referred to as the world's largest annual travel migration.

In keeping with the eastern philosophical concept that everything in the world has a soul or spirit, houses are thoroughly cleaned before the arrival of the Lunar New Year to drive away bad fortune and to welcome the god of fortune and ancestors who will visit during the new year. The clean house brings good fortune and luck for the upcoming year.

On New Year's Eve families traditionally gather to celebrate and enjoy sumptuous feasts and greet the New Year with fireworks at midnight. There are performances and shows at the main cities. People stay up late to count down the new year with fireworks. In Asian tradition, young family members also stay up late for the new year to help their senior family members have longer lives.

In the days that follow, festive dance parades are held featuring colorful dragons and lions. Ceremonies are held to pay homage to deities and ancestors.

On New Year Day, children receive money in red envelopes as gifts from their parents and relatives. The financially independent adults also often give red envelopes to their own parents. It's common for gift-givers to write their new year wishes on the red envelopes. The gift recipients respond by saying "Thank You," and also say Chinese idioms which have good meaning for the new year, such as: "Wishing you prosperity and wealth," "Great fortune and great favor," and "Wish you good fortune and may all your wishes come true."

The Chinese New Year lasts for fifteen days culminating with the Lantern Festival when people go outside to look at the moon, send up flying lanterns, fly bright drones, have a meal and enjoy time together with family and friends. This Lantern Festival tradition celebrating the first full moon night of the new year is based on an ancient Chinese myth involving an angry god whose supernatural bird was killed by a hunter and who wanted to destroy the world by fire. Setting off fireworks and sending up flying lanterns was thought to fool the angry god into thinking the world was already on fire.

On Lantern Festival day, people eat sweet boiled balls of glutinous rice flour together with their family and friends, which has been a Chinese tradition for thousands of years. They wish everyone well and express their hope of seeing each other again next year. The weather is usually a little chilly on Lantern Festival night, so eating rice balls in the sweet broth keeps people warm. Sugar was precious in ancient times, too, and the New Year festivities end with this sweet treat.

Much of the information about preparation for and celebration of the Chinese New Year was told to me by my daughter-in-law, Nicole, who is Taiwanese.

So instead of saying “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Hanukkah” to you, I say “Shing Yin Quaile,” which is “Happy New Year” in Chinese Mandarin.