

# The Chinese New Year

## Pre-reading

Questions: When is the Chinese New Year? How is it celebrated?

Definitions: Symbolize – to represent or stand for something  
Longevity – a long life



## Reading\*

The Chinese New Year is the biggest holiday celebrated among Chinese people throughout the world. However, few people know when this holiday is celebrated without looking at a traditional Chinese calendar. The Chinese New Year never falls on the same day. The ancient Chinese used a lunar calendar. (Today we use solar calendars.) On a lunar calendar, the New Year begins the first night of the new moon after the sun enters Aquarius. On a solar calendar, this date is anywhere between January 20 and February 19.

The Chinese New Year is often referred to as the spring festival because it signals the beginning of spring. It is a time when families and friends gather to say goodbye to the old and welcome the new. It originally lasted for almost four weeks. Today it lasts for three to five days.

The exact origin of this holiday is unknown, but many explanations exist. One idea is that the holiday **originated** when a beast named Nian (which means year in Chinese) came out the night before the new year and started to prey on the people in the villages. The people were very frightened by this monster.

One brave old man talked to the beast. He suggested that instead of eating the people of the villages, Nian should eat the other beasts of the villages. The beast followed the old man's suggestion, and all of the beasts were chased into the forest.

The old man told the people to put red paper decorations on their windows and doors at the beginning of each new year because the color red scared the beast. People also used firecrackers to scare the beast. It was determined later that the old man was an immortal god. The people were very grateful to him for giving them a peaceful life.

The Chinese New Year is celebrated with many **traditional** activities that symbolize new life and new beginnings. Houses are cleaned, new clothes are purchased, and doors and window panes are painted. Homes are decorated with flowers and paper decorations with wishes of good luck, happiness, wealth, and longevity for the coming year. Red and gold are popular New Year colors. Red represents power, happiness, and vitality (and scares away beasts). Gold represents wealth and good fortune.

The exchanging of gifts is an important New Year tradition. "Lucky money" is given in small red envelopes to children by their family and friends. The red envelopes symbolize the giving of good fortune. Friends, family, and feasts are a large part of the New Year celebration. Before feasting, food is placed on an altar and offerings are made to the gods.

The Eve of the New Year is the most strictly observed part of the holiday. It starts with a late night feast with family. Ancestors are honored and offerings of food and incense are made to the gods. At the strike of midnight, the sky is filled with fireworks and people wish each other a Happy New Year.

\*Revised selection – original text authored by Natalie Walker. Reprinted with permission by Deborah Byrnes, Ph.D., Utah State University.

## Understanding

1. What colors are associated with the Chinese New Year? Why those colors? \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. What does the word **originate** mean? \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. How is the Chinese New Year similar to the modern U.S. New Year? \_\_\_\_\_  
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4. How is the Chinese New Year different from the modern U.S. New Year? \_\_\_\_\_  
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5. Why do you think fireworks became a part of the Chinese New Year? \_\_\_\_\_  
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6. What does the word **traditional** mean? \_\_\_\_\_  
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7. When is the Chinese New Year? \_\_\_\_\_  
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## Writing

Option A: Summarize the reading in your own words.

Option B: Write about how you celebrate the New Year.

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