

Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year is a festival celebrated in China and related countries, to mark the end of winter and the beginning of the spring season, also known as the 'Spring Festival'. The first day of the Chinese New Year begins on the new moon which falls between January 21st and February 20th, hence another name for this festival is 'Lunar New Year'. In 2023, Chinese New Year will fall on the 22nd January and celebrations will run until the 5th February, known as the 'Lantern Festival' which occurs on the 15th day of the new Chinese year. Traditionally, this is a time to honour deities and ancestors.

Festivities to mark the New Year include dragon and lion dances, fireworks, family gatherings and meals, visiting relatives and friends, giving red envelopes (generally with money) decorating with 'chunlian/couplets' (red paper decorated with black or gold characters). The chunlian are put on the windows and doors depicting good fortune, happiness, wealth and longevity, often after a fresh coat of red paint.

It is also common to thoroughly clean the house before the new year celebrations begin in order to sweep away ill fortune and make way for incoming good luck in the new year. Its important that brooms and other cleaning equipment is put away before the celebrations begin so the good luck for the new year doesn't get swept away too.

Food is also an important part of the Chinese New Year celebration, beginning with a reunion meal on New Years Eve with family. The main focus of this meal is the communal hot pot which signifies 'coming together'. This meal also includes speciality meats and seafood which are reserved for this time of year, as well as other special celebrations. However the fish is never eaten in full and the leftovers stored overnight as the phrase 'may there be surpluses every year' sounds similar in Chinese to 'let there be fish every year'.

At the reunion meal, it would be expected to serve eight dishes as there is good fortune associated with the number eight. However, if there has been a death in the family the previous year, only seven dishes should be served. Each food served signifies good things for the new year as the words sound similar or are the same as words of good fortune, these are eaten in large quantities for the best in the coming year.

Noodles – wish for a long life

Fruits (oranges, tangerines, pomelos) – round and golden colour, symbolising fullness and wealth

Dumplings and spring rolls – wealth

Tanyuan (sweet rice balls) – family togetherness

Chinese New Year is steeped in mythology, there are a number of different stories however the most common is the story of Nian, a mythical beast who would eat villagers, therefore

they would hide from Nian. One year an old man appeared and said he would stay and get revenge on Nian, setting up red papers and firecrackers. When the villagers returned the following day they saw nothing was destroyed by Nian and assumed the old man was a deity come to save them. The villagers also assumed Nian had been scared of the colour red and the loud noises, so villagers continued to use these on following new years to scare Nian and the beast never returned.

Every Chinese year is associated with an animal, the Chinese Zodiac Chart. This is believed to indicate personalities of the individuals born on that year, and predictions of luck for the year ahead. In 2023 we will enter the year of the rabbit.

Again this comes from mythology, with a number of stories but the most common is 'The Great Race' which speaks of the animals racing to cross a river to get to the Jade Emperor who would determine the order of the years. It is said Cat and Rat persuaded Ox to allow them to ride on his back, however Rat pushed Cat into the river and then ran ahead of Ox to be first. After Ox was Tiger, then Rabbit hopping from stone to stone.

In fifth place was Dragon, waylaid doing good deeds. Next Horse appeared, however Snake on its hoof caused Horse to jump back and come in seventh. Goat, Monkey and Rooster worked as a team to pull a raft to be the next three animals. Dog was next, as he played in the water and fell behind.

Finally was Pig, who got hungry and so stopped to eat, fell asleep and so was the last to arrive. It is said that Cat drowned, hence why it is not now in the zodiac, also believed to be why cats dislike water and chase rats.

Why not have a go celebrating with your unit? You could have a go at learning some Chinese, making lanterns or chunlian or have a reunion meal. There's even a Lunar New Year badge in the Girlguiding shop!