

All About Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, starts at the beginning of spring. It occurs somewhere between January 30 and February 20. Each Chinese year is represented by a repeated cycle of 12 animals, the rat, ox, tiger, hare or rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. Chinese New Year is China's biggest holiday.

Its origin is ancient, but many believe the word Nian, which means "year", was the name of a beast that preyed on people on the eve of a new year.

In one legend, the beast, Nian, had the power to swallow up all the people in a village in one big bite. Village people were very scared of Nian.

One day, an old man came to the villagers' rescue, offering to subdue Nian. The old man asked Nian, "I know you can swallow people, but can you swallow other beasts of prey instead of people who are by no means your worthy opponents?"

Nian accepted the old man's challenge and swallowed the beasts that had harassed the villagers and their farm animals for years.

At the end of the legend, the old man disappeared riding off on Nian. In this legend, the old man turned out to be an immortal god.

In the end, Nian is gone and the other beasts of prey are scared into hiding in the forests. The villagers can once again enjoy their peaceful life.

The legend goes on to say before the old man left, he told the villagers to put red paper decorations on their windows and doors at each year's end in order to keep Nian away. It is believed Nian is afraid of the color red.

The tradition of observing the conquest of Nian is carried on from generation to generation. The term "Guo Nian", which means "Survive the Nian" became "Celebrate the Year" and the word "guo" in Chinese means both "pass over" and "observe".

The custom of putting up red paper and lighting firecrackers to scare away Nian continues today.

Traditions

As part of the the Chinese New Year celebration, people buy presents, decorations, special foods and new clothing. Railroad stations throughout China are filled with travelers who take their vacation days around New Year to return home for a family reunion.

Days before the New Year celebration, Chinese families are busy giving their home a thorough cleaning. It is believed the cleaning sweeps away bad luck and makes the house ready for good luck to enter. All brooms and dust pans are put away on New Year's Eve so good luck cannot be swept away.

In many homes, doors and windowpanes get a new coat of red paint. The home is decorated with paper-cuts and poems called couplets of "happiness", "wealth", "longevity" and "satisfactory marriage with children".

The New Year's Eve supper is a feast with all the members of the family getting together. One popular food is "jiaozi" which are dumplings boiled in water. After dinner, the whole family stays up all night playing cards, board games or watching TV programs dedicated to the New Year's celebration. Lights in the house are kept on during the whole night. At midnight, the sky is lit up by fireworks which symbolize the sending out of the old year and the welcoming in of the new year. People open all the windows and doors in the house in order to let the old year go out.

Very early the next morning, children greet their parents and receive their New Year present. They get lucky red envelopes, called lisee or laisee with money inside. The rest of the first day of the New Year is spent visiting relatives, friends and neighbors.

There are many ancient superstitions still practiced on New Year's Day in China. Many people do not eat meat on this day because they believe it will give them happy lives for the rest of the year. Also, some believe it is bad luck to wash your hair on this day because you would wash away the good luck of the new year. It is believed that if you cry on New Year's day, you will cry all through the year. Therefore, children are indulged by their parents, even though they might be naughty they are not punished on New Year's Day!

The second day of the new year is a day for prayer to the gods and to the ancestors of the family. It is also a day to be extra kind to dogs. An ancient belief is that the second day of the new year is the birthday of all dogs!

The fifth day of the new year celebration finds many Chinese families staying home. It is considered bad luck to visit friends and relatives on the fifth day. This day is called "Po Woo". It is a day to honor the God of Wealth.

The seventh day is a time for farmers to show off their produce. Farmers make a special drink using seven different vegetables and eat raw noodles for a long life. This day is considered the birthday of all human beings.

Chinese New Year is a time for reconciliation. Old grudges are forgiven. People are warm and friendly toward one another. Sometimes people exchange gifts. An important part of the New Year celebration is to honor and respect relatives and

ancestors who have died. New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are celebrated as a family affair, a time of reunion and thanksgiving. The thanksgiving celebration is highlighted with a ceremony given in honor of Heaven and Earth, the gods of the household and the family ancestors.

The thanksgiving ceremony to the family's ancestors, unites the living family members with those who have died. Ancestors are remembered with great respect because they were responsible for laying the foundations for the fortune and glory of the present day family.

The spiritual presence of ancestors is acknowledged by a family banquet on New Year's Eve. The spirits of the ancestors, together with the living relatives, celebrate the New Year together. A special feast called "surrounding the stove" or "weilu" symbolizes family unity and honors the past and present generations.

The Festival of the Lanterns begins fifteen days after New Year's Day. It is celebrated with lantern shows and folk dances. Children display their lanterns in a night time parade. This is when the Chinese people welcome the first full moon of the new year. A typical food is "Tang Yuan", dumplings made of sweet rice rolled into balls and stuffed with either sweet or spicy fillings. The Festival of the Lanterns mark the end of the New Year's celebration and life goes back to normal.

Chinese New Year customs vary from place to place in China because China is a big country geographically, demographically and ethnically. But the spirit underlying the diverse celebrations of the New Year is the same, a sincere wish of peace and happiness for family members and friends.