



The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

Teaching About Lunar New Year

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Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, falls on the first day of the first month of the new lunisolar calendar each year. The Lantern Festival that falls on the fifteenth day brings an end to the New Year season, though for China and other Asian countries, Spring Festival is a week-long holiday. Across Asian cultures that use the lunisolar calendar, it may be referred to simply as Lunar New Year. In Korean culture, for example, the holiday is called Seollal or simply Korean New Year and falls on the same date as Chinese New Year, and likewise with the Vietnamese Tet holiday, or Vietnamese New Year. (Since 1873, Japan has followed the same Gregorian calendar followed by the United States, and Japanese New Year, or Oshogatsu, falls on January 1 each year.)

The lunisolar calendar is based on astronomical observations of the sun's longitude and the moon's phases. Though shrouded in history, some scholars believe that the Chinese emperor Huangdi introduced the calendar somewhere between 2500 to 3000 BCE. Other Asian cultures have used the lunisolar calendar nearly as long as in China. The calendar is used to determine festivals, so the dates of these festivals vary each year.

Lunar New Year Dates		
Year	Date	Chinese Zodiac Animal Sign
2019	February 5	Pig
2020	January 25	Rat
2021	February 12	Ox

At home, many Chinese Americans celebrate by burning incense, doing special prayers, and making offerings to ancestors and traditional gods. The celebrations of Chinese New Year are diverse, reflecting various ethnic customs and the combined influences of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religions. Like western Christmas, contemporary Chinese New Year's celebrations include decorations, family gatherings, and big meals. Chinese New Year has become a colorful fusion of cultural traditions.



A stone tablet of the zodiac in Qingchanghou shan, People's Republic of China. (Flickr Commons/Blake Lennon, used under a [CC BY-NC 2.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).)

The symbols of the Chinese calendar are believed to stretch back to the Buddha himself. According to one tradition, Buddha summoned all the animals to visit him just before his death, but only 12 appeared. In appreciation, Buddha named a year after each of them. In time, people born in a particular year were described by the characteristics ascribed to the animal representing that year. For reference, please see the website of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco below.

As schools teach about this important holiday, a great activity for students is to research the East Asian heritage in their own community and find out what types of Chinese or Lunar New Year celebrations are taking place among the Asian Americans and others locally.

The study of Lunar New Year fits best with California History-Social Studies standards in grades four and below, but as an important holiday celebrated by a large portion of the Asian community in California and the rest of the world, older students will gain insight and understanding through further study of this traditional Asian holiday. The resources below are offered as a starting point for such a study.

WEB RESOURCES

Here's How Families in Three Asian Countries Welcome the Lunar New Year

<https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/heres-how-families-three-asian-countries-welcome-lunar-new-year>

This brief article from the Asia Society and series of colorful images describe the food and customs of celebration of Lunar New Year in China, Korea, and Vietnam.

Seollal, Korean Lunar New Year

<https://asiasociety.org/korea/seollal-korean-lunar-new-year>

The Asia Society presents this good introduction to the rituals, foods, and games associated with celebration of Seollal.

The Chinese Zodiac Story

<http://www.topmarks.co.uk/chinesenewyear/zodiacstory.aspx>

This online book is a retelling of one of the legends associated with the origins of the Chinese zodiac animals.

WEB LESSONS AND ACTIVITIES

Chinese New Year

<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/awr09.socst.world.glob.chinesenyr/chinese-new-year/>

This lesson on PBS Learning Media is based on a Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly interview conducted by Bob Abernathy that portrays an American Buddhist family's observance of Chinese New Year. (Middle School-High School)

Tet, the Vietnamese New Year

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/byrnes-celebrations/wardtet.html>

Comparing Tet with other holidays provides a window into comparative cultures that will enrich many classrooms. However, students should not make altar remembrances of their own relatives, as suggested in the lesson, but may view and discuss photos of those altars created by people celebrating Lunar New Year. (Elementary Grades)

Tet: Let's Get Ready to Celebrate

<https://asiasociety.org/education/tet-lets-get-ready-celebrate>

The Asia Society's Center for Global Education presents a simple discussion activity on the Tet holiday, or Vietnamese New Year, helping students understand the significance of the moon as a symbol and Vietnamese cultural values of honesty and good manners. (Elementary Grades)

Lions, Dragons, and Nian: Animals of the Chinese New Year

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/lions-dragons-and-nian-animals-chinese-new-year>

This EDSITEMent site of the National Endowment for the Humanities features three lessons about Chinese New Year or Spring Festival. (Primary Grades)

Lunar New Year Activities and Teaching Resources

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/unit/chinese-new-year-everything-you-need>

This Scholastic Instructor site offers a series of lessons, activities, and crafts to learn about traditional Lunar New Year celebrations and Chinese culture. (Elementary-High School)

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

- Bae, Hyun-joo. *New Clothes for New Year's Day*. Kane/Miller, 2007. Grades Pre K–2
- Bao Lord, Betty. *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson*. HarperCollins, 1986. Grades 5–9
- Chinn, Karen. *Sam and the Lucky Money*. Lee & Low, 1997. Grades K–4
- Demi. *Happy, Happy Chinese New Year*. Crown Books for Young Readers, 2003. Grades K–4
- Gower, Catherine, and He Zhihong. *Long-Long's New Year: A Story About the Chinese Spring Festival*. Tuttle Publishing, 2005. Grades K–4
- Holub, Joan. *Dragon Dance – A Chinese New Year Lift the Flap Book*. Puffin, 2003. Grades K–3
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- Keene, Carolyn. *Chinese New Year Mystery* (Nancy Drew Notebooks, No 39). Aladdin, 2000. Grades 2–5
- Meadows, Amy. *Emma's American Chinese New Year*. Outskirts Press, 2012. Grades 3–7
- Otto, Caroline. *Holidays Around the World: Celebrate Chinese New Year with Fireworks, Dragons, and Lanterns*. National Geographic Children's Books, 2009. Grades 1–4
- Roy, Ron. *A to Z Mysteries: New Year Dragon Dilemma*. Random House, 2011. Grades 3–6
- Shen, Clarissa. *Paper Horse*. Better Chinese LLC, 2008. Grades 5–9
- Thong, Roseanne. *The Wishing Tree*. Shen's Books, 2006. Grades 3–8
- Tompert, Ann. *Grandfather Tang's Story*. Dragonfly Books, 1997. Grades K–4
- Vaughan, Marcia K. *Dancing Dragon*. Mondo, 1996. Grades K–4
- Waters, Kate, and Madeline Slovenz-Low. *Lion Dancer: Ernie Wan's Chinese New Year*. Scholastic, 1991. Grades K–4
- Yu, Li Qiong. *New Year's Reunion: A Chinese Story*. Candlewick, 2011. Elem–MS
- Zucher, Johnny. *Lanterns and Firecrackers: Chinese New Year Story*. Barron's, 2003. Grades K–2

The material above is available at the California Three Rs Project (CA3Rs) website at <http://ca3rsproject.org>. For further information contact the CA3Rs:

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