

Lunar New Year

A Teacher's Resource Guide



Photo credit: Gettyimages.com/Andre_Vogelaere



Traditional dancers perform the lion dance during the opening ceremony of a temple fair.

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Lesson Plan: Lunar New Year

Subject: World History

Grade Level: Elementary (K to 3rd Grades)

Content Standards: See Appendix C below

Learning Objectives:

- Students will learn about the basic facets of Lunar New Year in several Asian countries.
- Students will learn about the story of the Chinese Zodiac and identify its connection to Lunar New Year.
- Using what they have learned, students will be able to compare their own holiday celebrations with those in other countries.

Quick Facts

- Chinese celebrations marking the start of the Lunar New Year last a fortnight, during which revelers paint the town red for 15 days of feasts, firecrackers, and festivals.
- The origin of the Lunar New Year dates back to the 14th century B.C. during the Shang Dynasty.
- The origins of the Lunar New Year festival are thousands of years old and are steeped in legends. One legend is that of Nian, a hideous beast believed to feast on human flesh on New Year's Day. Because Nian feared the color red, loud noises, and fire, red paper decorations were pasted to doors, lanterns were burned all night, and firecrackers were lit to frighten the beast away.
- Each Lunar New Year is aligned with one of the animals of the Chinese Zodiac. The order of the cycle – dictated by the results of a mythological race set by the Jade Emperor – is: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig.
- Lunar New Year celebrations emphasize the importance of family. People give offerings to ancestors and gods, often in the form of food and money.
- Dishes with fish are a must for the New Year. Eating fish is meant to ensure that abundance will carry into the New Year. Other dishes, like jiaozi/餃子 (dumplings), are served in Northern China.
- Lunar New Year is celebrated in various Asian countries including Vietnam (Tết Nguyên Đán), Korea (Seollal), or Taiwan (Lunar New Year). They follow similar traditions of visiting family members, offering respect to their ancestors, cooking and eating traditional meals together.

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Background Information

Lunar New Year, Chinese Chunjie, Vietnamese Tết, Korean Seollal, Tibetan Losar, and also called Spring Festival, is typically celebrated in East and Southeast Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, and South Korea. This holiday begins with the first new moon of the lunar calendar and ends on the first full moon of the lunar calendar, 15 days later. Unlike the fixed new year of the Gregorian calendar on 1 January, the Lunar New Year is celebrated on a variable date somewhere between late January and early February, determined by the appearance of the new moon (hence why it is referred to as “Lunar” New Year).

In China, where the holiday is also called the Spring Festival, the holiday can be traced as far back as the **Shang Dynasty** (1600–1046 BC). It’s hard to know how people celebrated during the Shang Dynasty, but it is widely accepted that sacrificial gifts to gods and ancestors were involved. Similar practices continued through the **Zhou Dynasty** (1046–256 BC) when the term ‘Nian’ first appeared in historic records. Nian (年, Nián) is a lion-like beast, but the name also means “new year,” and many of the ways in which the Lunar New Year is now celebrated can be traced back to stories about it.

In the **Han Dynasty** (202 BC-AD 220), yearly celebrations became fixed to the beginning of the new lunar cycle. Ever since, the holiday has been celebrated according to a 12-moon cycle. Each Lunar New Year is aligned with one of the 12 animals of the Chinese Zodiac. The order of the cycle – dictated by the results of a mythological race set by the Jade Emperor – is: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. People born in each of these years are understood to share traits associated with their zodiac animal. For example, 2019 marks the end of the 12-year lunar cycle with celebrations for the Year of the Pig.

The Lunar New Year celebration emphasizes the importance of family. People give offerings to ancestors and gods, often in the form of food and money. In some homes, the lips on images of the Kitchen God (灶君, Zào jūn) are rubbed with honey before the new year. This is done so he only has sweet things to report to the Jade Emperor (玉皇, Yù huáng) – the principal deity – about the family’s behavior. Homes and cities are also given a nice scrub and adorned with red lanterns and auspicious floral arrangements and decorations, all of which are meant to scare off Nian and usher in prosperity and good fortune for the new year. Children and unmarried adults will enjoy more immediate fortune in the form of red packets filled with money. These red packets (紅包, hóngbāo) are given by parents, elders, and employers to ensure safety and comfort in the new year.

The significance of the Lunar New Year is family gatherings and eating traditional food. Dishes with fish are a must for the new year table because the name for fish (魚, yú) is a homophone for the word for abundance or surplus (余, yú). Eating fish is meant to ensure that abundance will carry into the new year. Other dishes, like dumplings (饺子, jiǎozi), are served in Northern China because of their appearance. Depending on the means of preparation, dumplings can be made to look like silver ingots or gold bars, and eating them is meant to usher in wealth for the new year. Similarly, dried scallops are eaten because they look like Chinese coins.

Lunar year is also celebrated in other parts of Asia such as Vietnam and South Korea. In Vietnam, it is called **Tết Nguyên Đán** or **Tết** and is the important festival. The name Tết Nguyên Đán is Sino-Vietnamese for Feast of the First Morning. Vietnamese prepare for Tết by cooking special holiday foods and cleaning their house. There are a lot of customs practiced during Tet such as visiting a person's house on the first day of the New Year (xông nhà), ancestral worship, wishing New Year's greetings, giving lucky money to children and elderly people and opening a shop. Tết is also an occasion for pilgrimage and family reunions. During Tết, individuals and families visit their relatives and temples, forgetting the troubles of the past year and hoping for a better upcoming year. They consider Tết to be the first day of spring and the festival is often called Hội Xuân (spring festival). In South Korea, the Lunar New Year is called Seollal. Seollal is one of the most celebrated national holidays in Korea. It is a time for individuals to return to their hometowns to pay respect to their ancestors, as well as catch up with family members. During Seollal, Koreans usually perform ancestral rites, play folk games, eat traditional foods, listen to stories and talk well into the night.

References

1. Fulton, M. (2019). A Brief History of Lunar New Year.
<https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/chinese-new-year-meaning-history-and-traditions/>
2. Bryant, K. (2020). The History Behind Chinese New Year.
<https://www.rd.com/article/history-chinese-new-year/>
3. Seollal in Korea: A glimpse of local customs.
https://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/ATR/SI_EN_3_6.jsp?cid=941952
4. All about traditions of Tết, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year.
<http://www.lafairy-sails.com/en/blog/all-about-traditions-of-tet-the-vietnamese-lunar-new-year.htm>

Teacher Guidance

It is important to build background knowledge on Lunar New Year. To help your students build that background knowledge, watch the following videos with them, and do the introductory activity.

Introduction to Lunar New Year:

Lunar New Year: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uz7V9xoZw_Y (0:00-2:34) The remainder of this video will be used in the “What is Lunar New Year?” activity.

Intro Activity [10 minutes]

Every year, the Lunar New Year is represented by one animal of the Chinese Zodiac. [This is referenced at 1:34 in the Lunar New Year video]. For the intro activity, students will learn about the origin myth behind the Chinese Zodiac and the order the animals come in.

- **The Great Race:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrKQmI4vSwA>

Activity: With your students, identify which animal came first, second, third, etc. Then, ask the students what year 2021 will represent. To start, 2019 was the year of the pig.

Teachers can expand on this activity by working with their students to find out what zodiac animal represents their birth year. For reference: <https://chinesenewyear.net/zodiac/>

Learning Activity

Topic	Student Activity	Teacher Guidance
What is Lunar New Year? <30 minutes>	Students will go over the “ Comparing New Years ” <i>handout</i> (pg. 8) with their teacher to discuss what they think the images represent and what country/countries celebrate/s them. They will write their guesses for each country in the “Before” section.	Using the “ Comparing New Years ” <i>handout</i> , discuss the images with your students. All of the images represent Lunar New Year’s traditions celebrated in either China, Vietnam or South Korea. Tell the students that to understand which

	<p>*Multiple countries can have the same or similar tradition for celebrating Lunar New Year.</p> <p>Once students have finished their guesses, they will watch the following videos to learn about how Lunar New Year is celebrated in China, Vietnam and South Korea.</p> <p>China, Vietnam and South Korea: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uz7V9xoZw_Y (2:34-End)</p> <p>South Korea (for more details): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOnW8JQD1bM (0:17-3:57)</p> <p>In the “After” section, students will once again match the traditions to their respective countries. Once they are finished, the teacher will debrief the correct answers with the students.</p>	<p>country follows which traditions, the class will watch 2 videos. Before and after the videos, students are asked to write down which tradition corresponds to which country.</p> <p><i>Before watching the videos, teachers can choose to ask students why they made their respective guesses.</i></p> <p>Once students begin to write their answers on the worksheet, remind them that in some cases, more than one country has the same tradition.</p> <p>After watching the videos, debrief by going over the correct answers with the students.</p>
<p>Debrief/ Reflect</p>	<p>Exit Ticket Have students discuss what they do/will do for New Year’s Day / Lunar New Year with their own families. What about today’s lesson did they find surprising or interesting?</p>	

Appendix A: Handouts

Comparing New Years - How do these countries celebrate?

Write the letter of the tradition you think each country celebrates under their flag.



China



Vietnam



South Korea

Before

After



A. Give money in red envelopes



B. Eat rice cake soup



C. Light red firecrackers



D. Do the Lion Dance



E. Clean the house



F. Buy flowering trees



G. Give money in silk pouches



H. Eat tangerines



I. Give food to ancestors

Comparing New Years - How do these countries celebrate? **[Answer Sheet]**
Write the letter of the tradition you think each country celebrates under their flag.



China



Vietnam



South Korea

Before

After



A. Give money in red envelopes
China and Vietnam



B. Eat rice cake soup
South Korea



C. Light red firecrackers
China and Vietnam



D. Do the Lion Dance
China and Vietnam



E. Clean the house
China and Vietnam



F. Buy flowering trees
Vietnam



G. Give money in silk pouches
South Korea



H. Eat tangerines
China



I. Give food to ancestors
South Korea and Vietnam

Appendix B: Resources for Teachers

Books

- Lanterns and Firecrackers: A Chinese New Year Story (Festival Time!) by Jonny Zucker and Jan Barger Cohen
- Lucky New Year! by Mary Man-Kong (with flaps and pop-ups)
- My First Chinese New Year by Karen Katz | [Video Reading](#)
- Bringing in the New Year by Grace Lin
- Happy, Happy Chinese New Year! / Kung-Hsi Fa-Ts'ai! by Demi
- A New Year's Reunion by Yu Li-Qiong and Zhu Cheng-Liang

Websites & Videos

- [Here's How Families in Three Asian Countries Welcome the Lunar New Year](#), **Asia Society**
- [All you want to know about Chinese New Year](#), **CNN**
- [Teaching About Lunar New Year](#), **The California Three Rs Project**
- [How Asians Celebrate Lunar New Year Worldwide](#), **Huffington Post**
- [The Lunar New Year: Rituals and Legends](#), **Asia for Educators**
- [Vietnamese New Year Customs](#), **X-Team**
- [Lunar New Year's Celebration: Korea vs. China vs. Vietnam](#), **The Chen Dynasty**
- [Fortune Tales | The Story of Lunar New Year](#), **PandaExpressTV**

Appendix C: Content Standards

History & Social Studies*

Kindergarten

K.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical thinking, geographical analysis, economic decision making, and responsible citizenship by

- e) comparing and contrasting people, places, or events
- i) practicing good citizenship skills while collaborating, compromising, and participating in classroom activities
- j) developing fluency in content vocabulary and comprehension of oral, written, and visual sources

K.2 The student will recognize that history describes events and people from other times and places by

- a) identifying examples of historical events, stories, and legends that describe the development of the local community

Grade 3

3.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical thinking, geographical analysis, economic decision making, and responsible citizenship by

- a) identifying artifacts and primary and secondary sources to understand events in world cultures
- b) using geographic information to support an understanding of world cultures
- c) interpreting charts, graphs, and pictures to determine characteristics of people, places, or events in world cultures
- d) summarizing points and evidence to answer a question
- e) comparing and contrasting ideas and perspectives to better understand people or events in world cultures

**These standards are based on the History and Social Science standards of learning set by the Virginia Board of Education.*