Lunar New Year: Fact Sheet

Updated January 25, 2023
Introduction

The Lunar New Year is a major holiday celebrated in many parts of Asia and in Asian communities around the world. It marks the beginning of the year using the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar. Typically, Lunar New Year is observed in late January or early February of the Gregorian calendar. The Year of the Tiger began on February 1, 2022, and the Year of the Rabbit began on January 22, 2023.

This fact sheet focuses on the Lunar New Year celebrated by people of Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese descent, including many Asian Americans.

This fact sheet assists congressional offices with work related to the Lunar New Year holiday. It contains historical information, links to legislation, sample speeches and remarks from the Congressional Record, presidential statements, and other web resources.

History

The Lunar New Year is a major holiday in Asian societies that use variants of the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar. The holiday has cultural significance for Asian American communities with ties to those countries.¹

The Lunar New Year starts on the second new moon after the winter solstice and falls between January 21 and February 19 on the Gregorian calendar used in the United States.²

The Chinese calendar uses a 60-year cycle known as the sexagenary cycle. The current cycle began in 1984 and ends in 2043. Each cycle consists of one each of the 10 heavenly stems and 12 earthly branches, which correspond to 12 zodiac animals. These zodiac animals are the rat, ox, tiger, hare (or rabbit), dragon, snake, horse, sheep (or goat), monkey, rooster (or chicken), dog, and pig (or boar).³ The heavenly stems are also associated with one of the five traditional Chinese elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. The Year of the Tiger began on February 1, 2022, and the Year of the Rabbit began on January 22, 2023.

The Lunar New Year is not a public holiday in the United States. However, some states, such as California and Washington, have passed legislation recognizing the cultural significance of Lunar New Year.⁴ Some cities with large Asian American populations, including New York and San Francisco, close schools for the day.⁵ The United States Postal Service began issuing special stamps in 1992 to commemorate the Lunar New Year.⁶

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⁴ California Senate Bill 892, An act to add Section 37222.19 to the Education Code, and to add Section 6730 to the Government Code, relating to public schools, August 24, 2018; Washington H.R. 4608, Commemorating Lunar New Year, January 30, 2019.
Lunar New Year customs vary across countries and regions. In many places in Asia, it is a public holiday and a major time period for travel. Commonalities include cleaning the house; settling debts and disputes; gathering with family and friends; eating auspicious foods; honoring elders and ancestors; exchanging gifts of money; and watching or participating in traditional dances, games, and other cultural activities.

**Chinese Traditions**

The Chinese New Year, also called the Spring Festival or *Chun Jie* in Mandarin Chinese, is a 15-day festival that marks the beginning of the Chinese traditional calendar and welcomes spring.

Prior to the New Year, people traditionally prepare by buying new clothes, cleaning and decorating their homes, and settling any outstanding debts or disputes. On New Year’s Eve, families gather for meals featuring foods that signify luck and prosperity, such as whole fish. Traditional New Year’s foods vary by region but include chicken, black algae, and dumplings. Younger family members bow to older members in a traditional ceremony conveying New Year’s wishes. Married family members may give younger family members gifts of red envelopes containing money, often in “lucky” amounts such as numbers containing the numeral 8. The days following the New Year are a time for visiting friends and family. Married women customarily visit their natal families on the day after New Year’s Day. During the holiday period, there may be public displays of fireworks and traditional Chinese folk performances, including the lion and dragon dances. The fifteenth day is the Lantern Festival, during which celebrants eat sweet rice balls called *tangyuan* and carry lanterns through their neighborhoods at night.

The United States is home to an estimated 5.2 million people of Chinese descent, the single largest national group among Asian Americans, plus an additional 310,000 people of Taiwanese descent. Celebrations are held in many U.S. cities; the San Francisco Chinese New Year Festival and Parade has been described as “the largest celebration of its kind in the world.” Groups with varying political and cultural affiliations organize celebrations and Members of Congress who have been asked to participate in specific events may want to determine the affiliations of the organizing groups.

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**Forever Stamp Highlights Year of the Rabbit,** January 12, 2023.


8 Smithsonian, National Museum of Asian Art, “Lunar New Year Celebration.”


10 White and Leung, pp. 85-87.


14 U.S. Census Bureau, “Table B02018, American Community Survey 2021 1-Year Estimates.”

Korean Traditions

The Korean New Year, Seollal (alternative spellings Sollal or Solnal), is a three-day festival. It marks the first day of the traditional Korean calendar, which is based on the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar.\(^\text{16}\) It includes the day before and the day after New Year’s Day.\(^\text{17}\)

On the last day of the old year, people prepare by cleaning and decorating their homes and settling any outstanding debts or disputes.\(^\text{18}\) On New Year’s Day, families hold a ritual memorial service, or a charye, honoring their ancestors. A ritual table or charye sang is set up with food and wine offerings.\(^\text{19}\) Also performed is the sabae ritual in which younger family members pay formal respects to their elders with bows and New Year’s greetings and elders offer gifts of money in small pouches called bok jumoni.\(^\text{20}\) Traditional Korean New Year’s foods include tteokguk (rice cake soup) and mandu (dumplings).\(^\text{21}\) Other activities include visiting family and friends, wearing traditional Korean outfits, kite-flying, and traditional games.\(^\text{22}\)

The United States has an estimated 1.9 million Korean Americans, with large populations in Los Angeles and New York.\(^\text{23}\) Public festivities have included a folk drumming street festival in Los Angeles’ Koreatown neighborhood.\(^\text{24}\)

Vietnamese Traditions

The Vietnamese New Year, Tết Nguyên Đán or Tết, is a three-day festival marking the beginning of the traditional Vietnamese calendar, which is a variant of the Chinese lunisolar calendar. The Vietnamese zodiac uses the buffalo, cat, and goat instead of the Chinese ox, hare, and sheep.\(^\text{25}\) The Vietnamese Year of the Cat began on January 22, 2023.\(^\text{26}\)

In the month before the New Year, people prepare by buying new clothes, cleaning and decorating their homes, and settling any outstanding debts or disputes.\(^\text{27}\) On New Year’s Eve, families perform traditional ceremonies to honor ancestors with bows, food and drink offerings, set off firecrackers, and burn ceremonial paper money.\(^\text{28}\) On New Year’s Day, families arrange for an auspicious person or “first-footer” to be the first nonfamily member to visit their home during the New Year. Younger family members honor their elders with bows and traditional New Year’s foods, kite-flying, and traditional games.

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\(^\text{19}\) Crump, “Korea,” p. 134.


\(^\text{21}\) Layne Vandenbeng, “South Korea’s Two New Year’s Celebrations,” The Diplomat, January 15, 2015.

\(^\text{22}\) Crump, “Korea,” p. 135.


\(^\text{26}\) Smithsonian, National Museum of Asian Art, “Lunar New Year Celebration.”


greetings and elders offer gifts of money in red envelopes in return.\textsuperscript{29} Traditional New Year’s foods vary by region but include rice cakes, stewed pig’s feet with bamboo shoots, bitter melon soup, and boiled chicken. On the day after New Year’s, customarily families visit with the wife’s family and close friends, and the day after other friends and acquaintances.\textsuperscript{30} Following the New Year, the Beating of the Spring Ox is celebrated in agrarian regions by breaking ceramic images of oxen with sticks and playing traditional games.\textsuperscript{31} The United States is home to an estimated 2.2 million Vietnamese Americans who host hundreds of Tet celebrations each year, including the largest in the “Little Saigon” community of Westminster, California.\textsuperscript{32}

**Legislation**

H.Res. 49 (118\textsuperscript{th} Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2023, introduced January 20, 2023.

H.Res. 120 (117\textsuperscript{th} Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2021, introduced February 11, 2021.

H.Res. 808 (116\textsuperscript{th} Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2020, introduced January 24, 2020.

H.Res. 98 (116\textsuperscript{th} Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2019, introduced February 4, 2019.

H.Res. 744 (115\textsuperscript{th} Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2018, introduced February 16, 2018.

H.Res. 63 (115\textsuperscript{th} Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2017, introduced January 24, 2017.

S.Res. 366 (114\textsuperscript{th} Congress), A resolution recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year, introduced February 8, 2016, and agreed to in Senate.

H.Res. 608 (114\textsuperscript{th} Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2016, introduced February 8, 2016.

S.Res. 80 (114\textsuperscript{th} Congress), A resolution recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year, introduced February 12, 2015, and agreed to in the Senate.

**CRS Report**

CRS Report R43977, *Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month Speech Resources: Fact Sheet*, by Valerie Cervantes

\textsuperscript{29} Crump, “Vietnam,” p. 263.


\textsuperscript{31} Crump, “Vietnam,” p.264.

Sample Congressional Speeches and Recognitions

Some Members of Congress make floor statements, issue press releases, or enter Extensions of Remarks into the Congressional Record to recognize holidays and observances. The following are some recent examples that may be of assistance in preparing such statements:


Presidential Proclamations and Remarks

One of the many uses of a presidential proclamation or presidential remarks is to ceremoniously honor a group or call attention to certain issues or events. Some recent remarks and proclamations commemorating the Lunar New Year from the Compilation of Presidential Documents include the following:

Presidential Proclamations—Joseph R. Biden (2021-)
Presidential Proclamations—Donald J. Trump (2017-2021)

Presidential proclamations and remarks from 1993 to the present are available through the govinfo service on the Government Publishing Office website. Earlier remarks (including selected audio and video clips) are available through The American Presidency Project, established by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Historical and Cultural Resources

Asia Society, “Celebrating the New Year in Asia”
Asia Society, “Seollal, Korean Lunar New Year”
Columbia University, “The Lunar New Year: Rituals and Legends”
Library of Congress, “Chinese New Year Celebrations: Primary Sources Reflecting a Cultural Tradition”
National Folk Museum of Korea, “The Story of the Twelve Animals of the Korean Zodiac”
Vietnamese Culture, “Vietnamese New Year.”

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