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Lunar New Year: Fact Sheet

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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 Ox began on February 12, 2021, and the Year of the Tiger will begin on February 1, 2022.

This fact sheet focuses on the Lunar New Year celebrated by people of Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese descents, 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 Ox began on February 12, 2021, and the Year of the Tiger will begin on February 1, 2022.

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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[1] Jessica M. Kizer, "Lunar New Year," in Mary Yu Danico and Anthony C. Ocampo, editors, *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), pp. 650-652.

[2] "Chinese Calendar and Asian Festivals," in *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2020* (New York: Infobase, 2016), p. 351.

[3] William D. Crump, "Calendar, Chinese," in *Encyclopedia of New Year's Holidays Worldwide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), pp. 28-29.

[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.

[5] Liz Robbins, "A Persistent, but Quiet, Campaign Made Lunar New Year a School Holiday," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2015; Jill Tucker, "Lunar New Year Set to Become School Holiday," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 12, 2006.

[6] Smithsonian, National Postal Museum, "Community: Lunar New Year Stamps."

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.[7] On New Year's Eve, families gather for meals featuring foods that signify luck and prosperity. 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] During the holiday period, there may be public displays of fireworks and traditional Chinese folk performances, including the lion and dragon dances.[11]

The United States is home to an estimated 5.1 million people of Chinese descent, the single largest national group among Asian Americans, plus an additional 214,000 people of Taiwanese descent.[12] 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."[13] 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.

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.[14]

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[7] Crump, "China," pp. 56-58; Leanne White and Daniel Leung, "Wishing You Good Health, Prosperity and Happiness: Exploring the Rituals and Traditions of Chinese New Year," in Jennifer Laing and Warwick Frost, eds., *Rituals and Traditional Events in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 81.

[8] Crump, "China," p. 58.

[9] White and Leung, pp. 85-87.

[10] Crump, "China," p. 58.

[11] Crump, "China," pp. 58-59.

[12] U.S. Census Bureau, "Table B02018, American Community Survey 2018 1-Year Estimates."

[13] "San Francisco Chinese New Year Festival and Parade," in William D. Crump, *Encyclopedia of New Year's Holidays Worldwide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), pp. 215-216.

[14] "Korea," in William D. Crump, *Encyclopedia of New Year's Holidays Worldwide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), pp. 134-136.

On the last day of the old year, people prepare by cleaning and decorating their homes and settling any outstanding debts or disputes.[15] 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.[16] 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 white envelopes in return.[17] Traditional Korean New Year's foods include *tteokguk* (rice cake soup) and *mandu* (dumplings).[18] Other activities include visiting family and friends, wearing traditional Korean outfits, kite-flying, and traditional games.[19]

The United States has an estimated 1.9 million Korean Americans, with large populations in Los Angeles and New York.[20] Public festivities have included a folk drumming street festival in Los Angeles' Koreatown neighborhood.[21]

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.[22]

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.[23] 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.[24] 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 greetings and elders offer gifts of money in red envelops in return.[25] 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.[26]

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.[27]

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[15] Crump, "Korea," p. 134.

[16] Crump, "Korea," p. 134.

[17] Layne Vandenberg, "South Korea's Two New Year's Celebrations," January 15, 2015, *The Diplomat*.

[18] Vandenberg, "South Korea's Two New Year's Celebrations."

[19] Crump, "Korea," p. 135.

[20] U.S. Census Bureau, "Table B02018, American Community Survey 2018 1-Year Estimates"; Pew Research Center, "Koreans in the U.S. Fact Sheet," September 8, 2017.

[21] Kyung Jin Lee, "Korean Folk Drummers Ring in the Lunar New Year," *KQED News*, February 28, 2015.

[22] Thuy Vo Dang, "Tet," in Xiaojian Zhao and Edward J.W. Park, editors, *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014), pp. 1081-1083.

[23] Crump, "Vietnam," pp. 262-263.

[24] Crump, "Vietnam," p. 263.

[25] Crump, "Vietnam," p. 263.

[26] Crump, "Vietnam," p. 264.

[27] Crump, "Vietnam," p.264.

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.[28]

Legislation

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

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

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

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

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

S.Res. 366 (114th 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 (114th Congress), Recognizing the cultural and historical significance of Lunar New Year in 2016, introduced February 8, 2016.

S.Res. 80 (114th 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 Ben Leubsdorf

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:

Representative Grace Meng, "Lunar New Year 2021," Extension of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, vol. 167 (February 11, 2021), pp. E125-E126.

Representative Young Kim, "Celebrating Lunar New Year," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record,* vol. 167 (February 4, 2021), p. H338.

Representative Grace Meng, "Lunar New Year 2020," Extension of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, vol. 166 (January 24, 2020), p. E72.

[28] U.S. Census Bureau, "Table B02018, American Community Survey 2018 1-Year Estimates"; Hien Duc Do, "Vietnamese Americans," in Xiaojian Zhao and Edward J.W. Park, editors, *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014), pp. 1154-1163; Vo Dang, "Tet," pp. 1081-1083.

Representative J. Luis Correa, "In Celebration of Vietnamese New Year Tet 2020," Extension of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, vol. 166 (January 16, 2020), p. E45.

Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, "Recognizing the Lunar New Year," Extension of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, vol. 162 (February 8, 2016), pp. E125-E126.

Senator Harry Reid, "Celebrating the Lunar New Year," remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 161 (February 9, 2015), p. S853.

Senator Mitch McConnell, "Kentuckians Celebrating the Vietnamese Lunar New Year," remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 161 (February 3, 2015), p. S734.

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—Donald J. Trump (2017-2020)

Presidential Proclamations—Barack H. Obama (2009-2016)

Presidential Proclamations—George W. Bush (2001-2008)

Presidential Proclamations—William J. Clinton (1993-2000)

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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