

Lunar New Year

Lunar New Year is a festival typically celebrated across Asia, which begins with the first new moon of the lunar calendar and continues until the fifteenth day of the lunar month, when the moon is full. Because the festival is based on the lunar calendar, dates of the holiday on the Gregorian calendar may vary year to year, but the beginning of the festival typically falls sometime between January 21 and February 20. In 2019, Lunar New Year, which is also known as the Spring Festival, will fall on February 5. However, holiday observances can also vary across Asia, as interpretations of the lunar calendar can vary.¹

Lunar New Year is a time to bring families together, honor deities and ancestors, and carry out rites and rituals for good luck and fortune.

Not Just “Chinese New Year”

Though sometimes referred to as “Chinese New Year,” Lunar New Year celebrations aren’t limited to just China. The holiday is celebrated across Asia and different countries may have different names for Lunar New Year, depending on the language and country of origin. For example, in Korea, the festival is known as *Seollnal*, in Vietnam it is called *Tet*, and in Tibet, *Losar*. The significance and practices for the festival can vary from place to place and observance of the holiday may occur across religious affiliations.

Observance of Lunar New Year

Lunar New Year celebrations can vary across cultures; however, the theme of connecting with parents/grandparents and family reunions remains common throughout.

In China, many people will clean the home ten days before the New Year to remove any bad luck that remains. Then, on the night before Lunar New Year and on the day of, people will celebrate with their families, exchanging traditional red envelopes (*lai see*) of small amounts of money. Celebrations for Lunar New Year in China traditionally conclude with the Lantern Festival (*Yuan Xiao Jie*), which honors ancestors and encourages reconciliation, peace, and forgiveness. According to the twelve symbols of the Chinese zodiac that is traditionally observed in correlation with the Chinese lunar calendar, the New Year beginning in 2019 is the year of the pig.

Korean Lunar New Year is observed according to a lunar calendar, similar to the Chinese Lunar New Year, and, therefore, almost always falls on the same date. Families will typically travel to celebrate the holiday together for the three days of the New Year (the day of the second new moon after the winter solstice, the day before, and the day after). Celebrations often include making and eating food together, particularly the traditional rice cake soup, *ddeokguk*. The Lunar New Year marks the time of year for Koreans when each person celebrates symbolically becoming a year older by eating *ddeokguk* together. While the traditions

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lunar-New-Year>

outlined here refer specifically to South Korean observances, since 1989 North Koreans have also observed Lunar New Year.²

Tet, the Vietnamese celebration of the Lunar New Year, is an abbreviated name for the longer *Tet Nguyen Dan* or “Feast of the First Morning of the First Day” and is the most important holiday observed in Vietnam. Similar to other cultural observances of the Lunar New Year, people in Vietnam celebrate by making a lot of traditional food with their families and gifting children with red envelopes of small amounts of money. While there are both regional and religious differences in observing *Tet* throughout the country, there are similarities in observance by many Vietnamese. For example, on the first of the three days of *Tet*, the first person to visit a family’s home is believed to significantly impact the family’s fortune for the coming year. Therefore, a person who has a good temper, is successful, and is viewed as moral is invited as a family’s first visitor to bring luck for the first day of the New Year and the subsequent year. This ritual of being the first person to enter a house is called *xong dat*, *xong nha*, or *dap dat*.³

The traditional Tibetan observance of *Losar* begins one month in advance of the first day of the first month of the Tibetan lunar calendar when the new moon is seen. Preparations include cleaning the home, making new clothes, and offering different foods on the family altar. Additionally, the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism (parasol, two golden fish, conch shell, lotus blossom, banner of victory, vase, Dharma Wheel, and the Eternal Knot) are often drawn or hung on house walls.⁴ After three days of religious offerings and time spent with family, Tibetans traditionally celebrate *Losar* for fifteen days until the festivities at the Butter Lamp Festival (*Chunga Choepa*) on the first full moon. On this day, Tibetans bring lamps that traditionally burned yak butter (though now vegetable oil or Vanaspati ghee is common) to Tibetan Buddhist temples to commemorate Buddha’s victory and wisdom.⁵

How Will Lunar New Year Affect the Global Workplace?

Though Lunar New Year is less commonly celebrated in the West, the global significance of the holiday should not be underestimated. The holiday is celebrated across East Asia and can have implications for global trade and business more generally. Many Asian-Americans continue to celebrate Lunar New Year with their families, with many modifying the cultural practices by creating their own versions of the celebration. Lunar New Year is not a public holiday in the U.S, but companies should be mindful that their employees may decide to use their vacation time to visit family during this period.

It is common for offices within Asia to close for the Lunar New Year. Some workplaces can even close for up to three weeks. Your company should be mindful of the celebration and plan ahead if your business operations will be directly impacted by business closures in Asia. While Lunar New Year preparations may last between one month to a few days before the holiday, preparations and celebrations can significantly extend employees’ time away from the office. Managers can expect employees to request time off or to ask to work remotely as they both travel to reunited with family and prepare for celebrations.

Managers should expect employees’ traditions and customs to vary, as there are any number of traditions associated with celebrating Lunar New Year. It should be noted that Lunar New Year can be celebrated in both religious and secular manners. As with any holiday, the reverence associated with celebrating Lunar New Year is determined by the individual.

² <https://amysmartgirls.com/smart-girls-understand-korean-lunar-new-year-207f236d8e43>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%E1%BA%BFt>

⁴ <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-eight-auspicious-symbols-of-buddhism-449989>

⁵ <https://www.chinahighlights.com/festivals/tibetan-butter-lamp-festival.htm> ;
<http://tibetpedia.com/lifestyle/religious-life/losar-tibetan-new-year/>

Acknowledging Lunar New Year

If you would like to recognize Lunar New Year with your colleagues and friends, consider using the following phrases in addition to, or in place of, saying “Happy New Year.”

“Gong hei fat choy” (Cantonese)

“Gong xi fa cai” (Mandarin)

“Chúc Mừng Năm Mới (chook-moong-numb-moi) (Vietnamese)

“Sae hae bok manhi bah doo seh yo” (Korean)

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