

Chinese New Year Falls on Feb. 1

The origin of the Chinese New Year is centuries old and lost in a haze of legend and myth. All legends agree that the word “Nian,” a Chinese term meaning “year,” was the name of a cruel monster that preyed on and swallowed people the night before the beginning of the new year.

Chinese people wore red clothing and hung red decorations on their windows and doors to frighten away the monster. They also fired firecrackers to scare it away. One day, an old man came to their rescue, subdued Nian and rode the monster away. Before leaving, the old man, who was really a god, told the people to continue wearing red clothing, hanging red decorations and firing firecrackers in case the monster returned.

The Chinese New Year falls on a different day each year, according to our Gregorian calendar. It is celebrated on the second new moon after the winter solstice, which falls between Jan. 21 and Feb. 19. In 2003, the Chinese New Year falls on Feb. 1 and, according to the Chinese calendar, will begin the year 4701, the year of the sheep or goat. The Chinese arrange their calendar in 12-year repeating cycles, each year named after an animal such as the monkey, rooster and rat.

Today, the Chinese New Year is also known as the Spring Festival. It is a time when Chinese people take a break from work to be with family and friends. Preparations begin a month before the new year. Gifts, food, new clothing and decorations are purchased. Paper scrolls or squares are hung around the house. They are inscribed with blessings for the new year, such as “good fortune,” “longevity” and “springtime.”

Chinese homes are thoroughly cleaned to sweep away any traces of bad luck. Doors and windowpanes are repainted, usually red. A feast is eaten on New Year’s Eve—a time for family and friends to be together. Raw fish salad may be eaten for good luck; an edible hair-like seaweed for prosperity. Dumplings boiled in water,

jiaozi in Chinese, is one of the most popular foods. *Jiaozi* literally means “sleep together and have sons,” emphasizing the importance of children, especially sons.

Many Chinese stay up all night on New Year’s Eve. Tradition holds that staying up all night helps one’s parents live a longer life. Every light in the house is supposed to remain on the whole night to keep away Nian.

Windows are left open all night to let the old year go out. Firecrackers are shot off at midnight. Early on New Year’s Day, children receive a present from their parents, a red paper envelope with money inside. Children are never to be punished on New Year’s Day, even if they are mischievous.

On New Year’s Day, reverence is paid to one’s ancestors and then to the gods. Visits to temples are especially auspicious. Younger family members pay their respects to older adults. New clothes are worn. Chinese spend New Year’s Day visiting relatives and neighbors to cast away old grudges and begin the year with a feeling of warmth and friendliness.

One of the most spectacular sights during the Chinese New Year celebration is the dragon and lion dance. These fearsome-looking beasts are supposed to ward off evil. The movement of the dancers is always a highlight enjoyed by all.

The 15-day celebration associated with the Chinese New Year is important in Chinese culture. On the second day, married daughters are supposed to visit their parents. On the third day, Chinese go to bed early because, according to an old legend, mice in the homes marry off their daughters on that night. Going to bed early gives the mice freedom to perform their wedding ceremonies.

Tradition holds that it is unlucky to sweep the floors during the first five days of the New Year, because one might accidentally sweep one’s good luck and wealth out of the house. If sweeping is necessary, one must leave the dust and dirt in a pile in a corner of the house until after the fifth day. Bad language and talk of death are to be avoided as well. If a dish is broken, a person is supposed to quickly say, “Peace throughout the year.”

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The Festival of Lanterns, on the 15th day of the New Year, concludes the celebration.

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