

# Lunar New Year



An annual celebration that is the most significant for both Chinese and Vietnamese cultures. Although the timing of the event is the same, based on the *Yin Yang Li* calendar which is a Lunar cycle, each culture is able to reflect unique features, preparations, geographic and climatic differences. It reflects the Start of new life and appropriately takes place in Spring. Chinese people call it *Yuan Tan* and the Vietnamese people, *Nguyen-Dan*. Celebrating not only occurs in China and Vietnam but wherever Chinese and Vietnamese communities settle. The festival is vibrant, colourful and noisy steeped with many well known superstitions.

New Year is the biggest and most exciting celebration in China and Vietnam. And this occasion can take place over 15 days! There are similarities and differences in how the celebrations take place. The festival has been observed for over 5000 years and signals the end of Winter and the welcoming of Spring. The celebrations sweep away the misfortunes of the past and greet the new with lucky symbols.

The traditional celebration consists of Little New Year (7 days of preparation) New Year (5 days of celebration) and the Festival of Lanterns (3 days). The amount of time spent in celebrations depends on the areas in which the customs have been developed and the families' traditions.

Little New Year takes place the whole week before New Year. The Kitchen God (*Tsao-Chun*) (or in Vietnam, the Three Kitchen Gods) whose picture hangs in every kitchen is believed to report to the Heavens on the behaviour of the family. Offerings are made of sweets, fruits and flowers. As New Year approaches his picture is taken down and burnt in a fiery send-off to the Heavens of exploding fireworks. Enough food must be prepared for the coming celebrations, all housework completed, all metals polished and all debts paid in full. On New Year's Eve all shops close and all work ceases for the next five days.

New Year begins in the evening when incense burnt and offerings are made to the gods and ancestors. A new picture of the Kitchen God is hung in the kitchen for the New Year. He is welcomed back and with him comes peace, health and prosperity for the coming year. The feasting begins and visitors are welcomed. The first person to step through the doorway as a guest is associated with luck and prosperity. New Year is a family occasion with much feasting, new clothes and lucky money, and red envelopes (*Lai see* in China) (*Li Xi* in Vietnam) are distributed amongst the children. Red is the colour of happiness and luck. Visits are made to all family members (even those that are a long distance away). Homes are decorated with blossom trees in either pink or yellow, which are symbols of prosperity. Firecrackers and dragon dancing commences on the third day and continuous until the end of the fifth day. Dragon dancers take turns with the dragon mask. The dance is energetic and continuous with the Dragon chasing a white ball (Pearl of fire). The Dragon is accompanied by musicians and fireworks in a street procession. It is believed that all the noise will scare away the evil spirits, and the Dragon's visit to the homes will bring Good Luck for the coming year. Visits are also made to the local temple in order to receive a gift from the Celestial spirits ( a branch of greenery) that is placed and kept in the home for the whole year. This, too, is a lucky omen.

New Year celebrations are family occasions with the family groups celebrating together.