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## Year of the Dragon

To mark Chinese New Year, China Daily presents a special edition related to the ancient zodiac. This edition also introduces the cultural significance and traditions of Spring Festival, when families gather and express wishes for a prosperous year ahead.

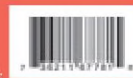
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LI MIN / CHINA DAILY



# The eternal attraction of a Chinese dragon



No creature, real or mythical, has exercised such a hold on the imagination over centuries, yet its origins are shrouded in mystery, **Zhao Xu** reports.

**The dragon ... by traversing the space between the terrestrial and the celestial, also helped to bridge the worlds of the human and the divine, the mortal and the eternal.**

**T**he sage Confucius once sought the counsel of another wise man, Laozi (Lao Tzu), the founder of Taoism, 20 years his senior. "Beyond appearances and behavior that are less than sharp, there often lies a noble soul," Laozi told Confucius, who was probably in his 20s or 30s when this encounter happened, in the first half of the sixth century BC.

"Rid yourself of arrogance and desire, and rein in your vanity and self-delusion, none of which will serve you well. That's all I have to say."

Laozi is reputed to have composed *Tao Te Ching* (*Dao De Jing*, the foundational work of Taoism) in just one session, and this one meeting with Confucius was apparently all that was needed to awe this equally brilliant mind.

"I know that birds can fly, fish can swim, and beasts can run," Confucius would later tell his disciples. "To capture them you need arrows, angling lines and nets. But I had no idea of a dragon, riding on winds and clouds, and soaring to heaven — until I met Laozi."

In short, a dragon could be neither defined nor confined.

Four centuries after that meeting, Confucianism was enshrined by a powerful Chinese emperor as the guiding ideology for his society. Yet Taoism continued to exert its influence culturally and artistically. In due time both incorporated the image of a dragon in their visual expressions.

Confucius died in 479 BC, and his humble residence in what is today the city of Qufu, Shandong province, was turned into a memorial the following year. In the ensuing centuries, the small compound was continuously expanded and added to, until it became the ultimate shrine for the wise man — the temple of all Confucius temples in China. One of its most remarkable architectural features was 10 carved stone columns in front of the temple's main hall, underneath its eaves.

The columns are wrapped in the scaled, sinuous bodies of majestic dragons, half-hidden in clouds. Manes billowing and eyes glistening with intensity, they are there to watch over the sacred place and to ensure the social order as envisioned by the master philosopher.

The columns were erected around 1500, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), with major renovations done during the ensuing Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). In court portraits both the Ming and Qing rulers routinely wear voluminous dragon robes whose resplendent patterns, woven or embroidered into shimmering silk, constitute for many the most iconic images of a Chinese dragon.

Equally well-known, at least to aficionados of ancient Chinese art, is a mid-13th-century ink painting titled *Nine Dragons*, held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Within a space of 9 meters — the entire work stretches about 15 meters, including many postscripts — the artist Chen Rong captured the elusive nature of his mythical protagonists by letting them in and out of a seemingly endless continuum of clouds, mist and whirlpools. The hand scroll, painted during the rule of Zhao Yun, a devout Taoist and fifth emperor of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), is believed to have referred directly to the dynamic force of nature that Taoism has long celebrated.

Elsewhere, the dragon, painted in gold, lends itself to a 15th-century red lacquer box containing Buddhist sutras before making

another appearance alongside a tiger in two hanging scrolls flanking a wooden statue of Guanyin, a Buddhist icon known as the goddess of mercy.

All evidence points to Chinese dragons moving freely between the worlds of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. With their powerful claws gripping the imagination of generations of Chinese, they propelled their way across the country's cultural and artistic history, becoming an enduring phenomenon with a profound impact on the nation's consciousness.

The answer to the obvious question of where the Chinese dragon came from is as elusive as the creature itself.

Based on the dragon's scaled, serpentine body, many researchers have suggested a connection with either snake or crocodile or both. While the former seems to have the capacity to arouse awe and fear, and has served throughout human history as a totem for many ancient cultures, the latter is believed to have once existed in relatively large numbers in the Yellow River Basin, one of the cradles of Chinese civilization.

Other experts have gone a few steps further. Some, after having studied the oracle bone script carved by ancient Chinese somewhere between the 17th and 11th centuries BC, posit that the image of a dragon may have been born out of that of a sea-horse. Others point to the colossal column of a tornado reaching down from a turbulent sky, saying that is what *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*), an ancient Chinese divination text, meant in its description of a dragon that "battled in the wilderness, its blood the color of a reddish dark (heaven) and yellow (earth)".

Others propose, if tentatively, that a dragon took its jagged form from lightning, and its sound — the Chinese word for dragon is pronounced *loong* — from the thunderous roar that follows.

All those natural phenomena are linked, directly or indirectly, to one element: water.

On one hand, depictions abound in ancient Chinese literature of tempestuous dragons that would announce their arrival by a loud rumble, before dumping their fury in a torrential downpour that would render the world blurry. On the other hand, a large part of the dragon worship that was to evolve later was centered on its power over the weather, either showering rain on cracked earth or making it stop once the land was flooded. Across the country, numerous dragon king temples were built, all by those praying for a good harvest, many still in existence today.

It is just as interesting to know that Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BC), a prominent thinker and influential politician during the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24), once wrote about invoking dragons during drought, by making clay figurines and having young boys pace and dance among them. Dong, who acted as a trusted counselor to the powerful Western Han Emperor Wudi, was responsible for putting Confucianism on the pedestal, once and for all, by making it the official ideology for all the Chinese imperial states that followed.

Sending out envoys on a westward journey that was to give rise to the ancient Silk Road, Emperor Wudi also redrew the map for China, partly by driving back invading forces from the northern steppes, military campaigns deemed to have taken his armies, at one point, to Lake Baikal in southern Siberia. Some scholars believe that was the place referred to as "the North Sea" by ancient Chinese texts, which talked about "the Four Seas" being guarded by mighty dragons. (The other three correspond with what is today called the South China Sea, East China Sea and Qinghai Lake in Qinghai province, western China.)



**From top:** Bronze percussion music instrument featuring dragon patterns, from the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC); a jade dragon, from the fourth to second centuries BC, excavated in Xuzhou city, Jiangsu province. **Left:** The dragon column at the Confucius Temple in Qufu, Shandong province. **Below:** A gilt bronze dragon from the Tang Dynasty (618-907). PHOTOS BY HUANG YI AND PROVIDED BY NANJING MUSEUM TO CHINA DAILY



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# Symbol: A unifying force for art

From page 2

Mythology, after all, may not be as removed from history as most people tend to think.

When it comes to habits and traits, the Chinese dragon, dwelling either in the clouds or at the bottom of lakes, seems to have little in common with its Western counterpart, which occupies lairs or caves. While fire-breathing Western dragons are often portrayed in classic literature as a destructive force, the water-spraying Chinese dragons are mostly venerated for being a savior and enabler capable of bringing an abundant yield of crops or simply good fortune.

Thus comes their well-earned place in the Chinese zodiac, which assigns an animal and its reputed attributes to each year in a repeating 12-year cycle. The dragon is there with the tiger, the ox, the horse, and eight others, the only one absent from real life.

Yet the dragon seems to have worked that absence to its own advantage, engaging the creative imagination of Chinese artists and artisans from time immemorial.

Take for example the world-renowned bronze wares made throughout the Shang and Zhou dynasties between the 17th century and third century BC. It was on the surfaces of these wares that dragon images effectively went into a visual explosion, their bodies undulating and intertwining with remarkable grace and precision.

The complexity of the patterns points to the sophisticated thinking behind the painstaking effort the making of such extravagant wares must have entailed. These were sacrificial bronzes used during rituals by the same people who had engraved the word dragon on oracle bones for augury purposes.

The Shang people, in their endeavor to communicate with heaven and earth and those who preceded them, seemed to have once again turned to the dragon that, by traversing the space between the terrestrial and the celestial, also helped to bridge the worlds of the human and the divine, the mortal and the eternal.

Inseparable from that sense of divinity was a permanency that people had always longed for themselves. For members of the ruling elite who lived during the Western Han Dynasty, one way to achieve it was to be laid to rest with a casket laden with jade, a material that, as with the dragon, Chinese culture has

treated with reverence.

From the burial ground of a vassal king in today's Xuzhou city, Jiangsu province, archaeologists unearthed what is believed to be some of the most majestic jade dragons yielded by any Han Dynasty tomb, or for that matter any ancient Chinese tomb.

Horned and bearded, with flowing mane on the back and upwardly curled tufts of hair sprouting from the ankles, these S-shaped dragons are an amalgam of fantastical details, all contained within the graceful curves which in turn were realized with powerful simplicity. Their task was to carry the soul of the deceased to heaven while keeping the body intact, until the two were reunited.

Nobleness, the very quality the ancient Chinese associated with jade, was exactly what they expected from the dragon. Since the concept of "rule by virtue" was deeply embedded in Confucianism, it seems only natural that the dragon, a symbol of moral strength, would gradually evolve into an emblem of royal power.

No one knows exactly when the idea that a Chinese emperor was a "real dragon" — a man mandated by Heaven to rule — started to take hold. However, Zhao Feng, a former director of the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, says dragon robes as we know them today have probably existed since the time of the powerful Tang empire (618-907), whose territories extended all the way westward to present-day Afghanistan.

"No contemporaneous images have been found of a dragon-robed Tang emperor," Zhao says. "However, we do have a mural from the Mogao Caves showing a Uygur ruler who lived in the late 10th century, in the decades after Tang's demise, wearing a dress decorated with the iconic dragon roundel pattern."

Sitting on the ancient Silk Road in what is now the city of Dunhuang, Gansu province, the world-renowned caves Zhao refers to stood witness to the frequent cultural exchanges along the route.

The oldest archaeological artifact of the dragon robe, Zhao says, belonged to a ruler of the Liao Dynasty (916-1125) of North China, founded by a clan of the ethnic minority Khitan people. The Khitan rulers, while pushing their borders against their neighbor, the ethnic majority Han people-dominated Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), were more than eager to take a few pages from their



From top: A dragon-patterned tile from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220); a bronze mirror with dragon design from the eighth to ninth centuries; a dragon-themed porcelain plate from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644); 18th-century dragon roundel from a ceremonial gown. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

rival's cultural books.

This was before the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) codified, for the first time, the use of dragon robes as the official court dress. The same people also put carved jade dragons on the top of their headdresses.

"Such was the symbolic significance of the dragon that it cut through various cultural divides to be embraced by all who considered themselves legitimate rulers on the Chinese land," Zhao says.

In the meantime, the creature never stopped reinventing itself. The gilt bronze dragons of the Tang Dynasty are infused with a fierce dynamism reflective of the verve and vigor of Tang society. Their counterparts in the ensuing Song Dynasty (960-1279), during which a literati culture flourished, are equally imposing, but in a more dignified, stately way.

Further on in history, the Mongol people of the Yuan Dynasty channeled their love of the colors blue and white into porcelain making, creating fine china with patterns depicting blue dragons surging through rolling clouds or frothy waves. While the theme stayed popular for the next 600 years, a palette of vibrant hues was added during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The dragon, which may come in red or green, bursts through a multicolored background to assert its presence.

A dragon is always attuned to its day, culturally and aesthetically.

Perhaps the ultimate place for one to be overpowered, at least visually, by Chinese dragons is in the Forbidden City in Beijing, built in the early 15th century to serve as the royal palaces until the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. Its largest hall, in which enthronement took place, is adorned with more than 12,600 dragons. These include carved ones on the marble stone platform leading to the hall's entrance, painted ones wrapped around the giant wooden pillars sustaining the weight of the hall's immense roof, as well as molded and enameled ones standing on both ends of the roof's central ridge.

When a Ming or Qing emperor sat on his "dragon chair", a gilded wooden seat with 13 glistening dragons curling around every part of it, he would be doing so in front of a magnificent wooden screen seething with dragons, directly underneath an equally resplendent caisson ceiling from which the dragons cast down their deep gaze.

During heavy rain, water would gush from the mouths of the stone dragon heads protruding from the stone balustrades outside the hall. They still function today.

Tai He Dian, or the Hall of Supreme Harmony, was the name bestowed upon this place by the first Qing emperor who entered it. Given his background as a member of the ethnic minority Manchu from Northeast China, the man, only 7 at the time, and his court seemed to be fully aware of the thing that had held China together.

All that said, it would be wrong to associate a Chinese dragon solely with royalty. In fact, it is its celebration by folk culture that has guaranteed its place in the hearts of hundreds of millions. Newlyweds routinely decorate their windows and doors with paper-cuttings of a dragon and a phoenix. Dragon dances are performed in anticipation of fortune and fortuity during each Chinese Lunar New Year, on village squares, in shopping malls and along streets. On the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, dragon boats are raced across the country's lakes and rivers in memory of one man: Qu Yuan (340-278 BC), a brilliant poet who was patriotic to the hilt, and who drowned himself in the land of his exile.

So what is a Chinese dragon after all? Throughout history, many have attempted to answer that question. Cao Cao, a warlord and poet who lived between the second and third centuries, compared a dragon to a man who adapts and acts on his chance — a hero, to use his term.

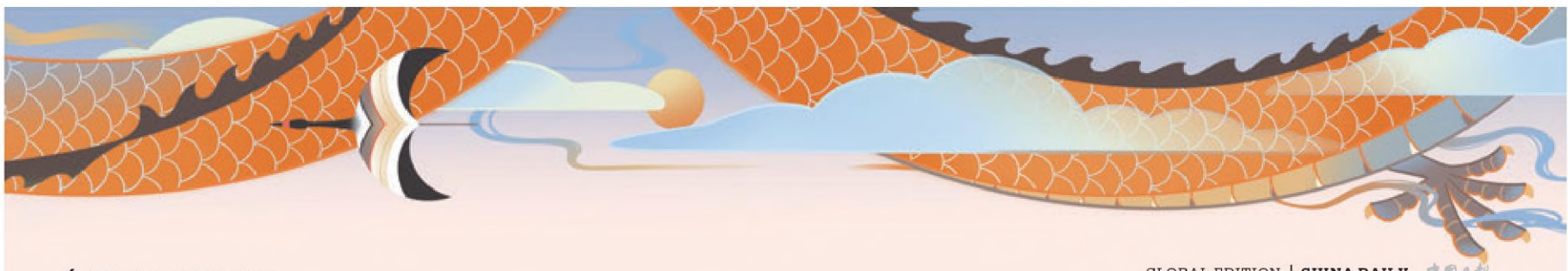
"A dragon can be both big and small; it can also go both high and low," he said. "When it is big, it announces its presence; when it is small, it conceals its existence. When it soars, it roams the cosmos; when it falls, it hides in colossal waves."

In a sense, he was echoing Confucius, who nearly seven centuries earlier had talked with a disciple about the transformative nature of a dragon: "A piece of cloud, snake, fish, bird, worm — a dragon can morph into anything it intends without becoming anything other than itself ... a manifestation of power and dignity, of honor and integrity, of strength and perseverance."

"Yet this profound changeability has often prevented it from being fully described, depicted or understood."

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# Tracking down the dragon throughout history



Archaeological digs uncover origins of mythical animal, Zhao Xu reports.

The Chinese call themselves “the descendants of the dragon” for a reason. Emperor Yandi, a legendary tribal leader in pre-dynastic China, was said to have been born out of his mother’s telepathic interaction with a mighty dragon.

Although opinions may differ, most researchers have identified the man with Shennong, or “the Divine Farmer”, long venerated as someone who not only invented a wide array of farming tools but was also a pioneer in using herbal medicine.

Legend also has it that Emperor Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor), who once allied with Yandi to triumph over their common enemy, another equally powerful tribal leader known as Chiyou, enlisted the help of a dragon during the deadly battle. Upon his death, a dragon extended its whiskers down from heaven so that Huangdi was able to grab it and be lifted into eternity.

Given that the Chinese consider themselves to be *yan huang zi sun*, meaning the posterity of Yandi and Huangdi, it’s only natural that they have placed the dragon at the very center of their ancestral worship.

Those who dismiss all this as pure mythology may need to think twice, says Guo Dashun, a renowned archaeologist who believes that the idea for a dragon began to germinate in the frozen expanses of northeastern China. There, in Fuxin city, Liaoning province, archaeologists discovered in 1982 what appeared to be a dragon made up entirely of granite pieces. The creature, nearly 20 meters long and 2 meters wide, whose different body parts are clearly discernible, occupies the center of the entire excavated ground, with its head close to more than 10 burial pits, and tail connected to the site of a big dwelling.

The neolithic ground sculpture, dating to 6,000 BC, is the oldest image discovered that bears an uncanny resemblance to the dragon that was to evolve in ensuing millennia.

Another major archaeological discovery shedding light on the origin of a Chinese dragon was made in 1987, in Puyang city, Henan province. In this case clamshells were used in place of stone. And the dragon, dating to around 4500 BC, was found in a burial pit lying on the right-hand side of a man whose left-hand side was taken up by a tiger, also pieced together by shells. While most scholars tend to view the dragon and the tiger, whose combination were to be repeated numerous times throughout Chinese history, as tribal totems, an astrological connection has also been suggested.

The earliest Chinese astronomers used Qing Loong, or the Azure Dragon, to represent the planet Jupiter, and positions of the moon against certain stars in the eastern sky.

However, when it comes to visual impact, both pale in comparison with a large turquoise dragon-form artifact discovered in Luoyang city, Henan province, the site of what most Chinese archaeologists believe was China’s earliest known dynasty, Xia (c. 21st century-16th century BC).

Dating toward the end of the Xia Dynasty, the “dragon”, 65 centimeters long, is patched together by nearly 2,000 pieces of turquoise, its round jade



Above from top: C-shaped dragon from northeastern China, dating to 3500 BC; “pig dragon” from northeastern China, dating to 3500 BC; a pottery plate with dragon design from Xiangfen county, Shanxi province, dating to 2600 BC; jade dragon from the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC). Top right: A turquoise dragon-shaped artifact from Erlitou Culture, dating to around 1600 BC. Right: A dragon pieced together by clamshells, found in Puyang city of Henan province, and dating to around 4500 BC. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

eyes and a prominent nose shaped out of carved jade and turquoise. Discovered within a burial pit filled with bronzes, jade, ceramics and lacquerware, it seemed to have enjoyed a very special relationship with the tomb’s occupant.

It was found lying on top of the skeleton, rather than next to it, with its trapezoid-shaped head resting on the dead man’s shoulder. Archaeologists suggest that at the time of burial, the man may have held the dragon in his right arm, with his right hand holding a bronze bell, which, upon excavation, was lying on the middle section of the creature. The bell contains a jade tongue of a striker.

“Imagine this man, most probably a sorcerer, dancing with the dragon during the performance of his rituals,” Guo says. And he must have been accompanied by the chimes produced by jade colliding with bronze, a resonant blend of two distinct qualities.

By that time jade ware had been made continually in China for more than 5,000 years. And it may not be mere coincidence that northeastern China, home to the aforementioned granite stone dragon, has also yielded some of the oldest jade dragons found in the country.

These jade dragons, dating to 3500 BC, fall largely into two categories, Guo says.

One, commonly referred to as the pig dragon, is noted for the creature’s wrinkled snout, pricked ear and rounded body, all pointing to a possible connection with a boar, or, as some other scholars have suggested, a bear, which at the time was probably worshiped by people living in the region.

The other, known as the C-shaped dragon, was characterized by an elongated snout, an extremely streamlined body and flowing mane, which collectively imbued it with a dynamism and gracefulness, and made it appear to be ahead of its time.

“The mane could as well be deer horns,” says Guo, who worked for nearly 40 years on the sites that yielded the two types of dragons.

What he has in mind are some pottery pieces unearthed in the area in which the C-shaped dragons are believed to have emanated. These pieces, about half a millennium older than the dragons, are decorated with mythical animals featuring a serpentine body and a deer head or pig head.

A totem complex is what many researchers believe a Chinese dragon is. In a 12th-century piece of writing, a dragon is described as having “the antlers of a deer, the head of a camel, the eyes of a rabbit, the neck of a snake, the belly of a mollusk, the scales of a fish, the talons of an eagle, the paws of a tiger and the ears of an ox”.

Wen Yiduo (1899-1946), a celebrated Chinese scholar and poet of his time, posited that the image of a Chinese dragon formed gradually during tribal wars: One particularly powerful snake-worshiping tribe, during their subjugation of other tribes, combined the features of their enemies’ totem animals with their own one, to create something truly invincible.

This mighty tribe, which played a leading role in shaping the arch emblem of China, could have been led by Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor.

Su Bingqi (1909-97), one of the foundational figures of modern Chinese archaeology, proposed that the Yellow Emperor lived around 3000 BC, a time marked by “incessant wars given rise to by a combination of factors, including the accumulation of social wealth and the stratification of the society itself”, to use the man’s words.

In 1980, four painted pottery plates with dragon design, dated to around 2600 BC, were found in four burial chambers in a huge archaeological site of 40,000 square meters. The site is in Xiangfen county, Shanxi province, in the Yellow River Basin area where the Yellow Emperor is believed to have been active.

“Out of the 1,309 crypts excavated on the site, only four contained the plates,” Guo says. “Judging by their scale and holdings, all are high-level ones belonging to members of the social elite. It is clear that the dragon, which most probably commanded a spiritual significance in this context, had become



a symbol of power and privilege, and most likely of civilization and early statehood.”

If one thing unites the myriad forms of early jade dragons — more were made during the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC) — it is their circuitous shape.

“If you look really closely, they resemble an embryo, or a newborn — be it a pig, a bear or a deer — which always tend to curl up, until it’s time to stretch,” says Teng Shu-ping, a leading scholar from Taiwan specialized in ancient Chinese jade.

These jade dragons, created by people whose society and art were still in their infancy, are “a reflection of a deep-felt amazement with the transformative force of life, and an intangible, cosmic energy that breathes vitality into the whole universe”, she says. “This life force, an eternal pulse behind all creation and renewal, gives the Chinese dragon its heartbeat.”

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# Time for special festivities

Many opt to celebrate holiday at home, some return to hometowns, while for others, it's a great occasion to travel

By WANG ZHUOQIONG and ZHU WENQIAN

**M**ona Hao, a 29-year-old woman who works at an internet tech firm in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, plans to spend Spring Festival in traditional garb to express her respect for Chinese culture.

Since her childhood, Hao has worn Tang suits during the Spring Festival. Over time, wearing *hanfu*, the traditional attire of the Han ethnic group, has become so routine that she, on occasion, also wears it for work.

A big collector of traditional Chinese apparel, Hao owns over 100 sets of *hanfu*, mainly purchasing them online.

The price for a single piece that she bought could be 300 yuan (\$42) to 500 yuan, or even higher.

"For this year's Spring Festival, I plan to buy two to three sets of *hanfu* costumes in red and with the sign of the dragon to celebrate the Year of the Dragon," Hao said.

She also wants to buy some winter clothing in red, fur jackets and fluffy scarves to match.

As the Spring Festival is one of the biggest gifting seasons of the Chinese lunar year, Hao has also bought modified traditional Chinese clothing for her mother and other female relatives.

Over the years, influenced by Hao, the family has also become more interested in these outfits and has sought her recommendations.

More youngsters in China are making plans for the Spring Festival holiday, looking for new ways to spend their money.

About 83 percent of those aged between 18 and 35 think they, or their spouses, are the primary planners for the festival this year, while the rest say it is their parents, according to the 2024 insights on social media trends during the festival, compiled jointly by market research institute Kantar and Xiaohongshu, a lifestyle-focused social media platform.

The report, based on interviews with 400 young users across first and third-tier cities, highlights that 48 percent of respondents have opted to celebrate the holiday at home, 33 percent plan to return to their hometowns, while 18 percent intend to travel, with 1 percent saying they have no specific plans yet.

The report has found that the top fixed spending during the Spring Festival will be on apparel and accessories (48 percent), snacks, alcohol and beverages (36 percent), fresh agricultural products (36 percent), out-of-home dining (36 percent), and personal hygiene (36 percent).

To celebrate the Lantern Festival, or the 15th day of the Lunar New Year, Hao has plans to buy some lanterns and take them to lantern shows.

"The Lantern Festival is a popular time to wear *hanfu* — in a white silk jacket and a blue satin skirt," she said.

Spring Festival is also a time for big meals and happy gatherings, when snacks and beverages are in high demand.

Jessica Liu, a 30-year-old office worker in Beijing, usually buys various kinds of snacks with beautiful packaging for family members during the Spring Festival.

This year, she plans to buy some cookies, dried plums and marshmallows for herself and other young relatives, as well as nuts and melon seeds for the elderly.

"I will buy many snacks, fill the plates with food and put them on the table. This will create a joyful atmosphere during Chinese New Year," Liu said.

Eyeing the increasingly sophisticated demands from young consumers, Chinese snack makers are taking more effort in designing and marketing their products.

Snack maker Weilong Delicious Global Holdings launched gift boxes in advance late last year to prepare for Spring Festival.

The gift box is designed in the shape of a dragon and can be stretched, making it more fun when consumers try to open the boxes, the company said.

The company, which makes popular spicy snacks made of wheat flour and konjac, has also created a series of short videos to promote the gift box by combining the latest marketing trends and buzzwords, thus attracting the interest of young consumers in its

gift boxes as well as other products.

Weilong said marketing for the Spring Festival needs to keep up with market changes, and brands need to directly tug at the emotions of young people, while sticking to the traditions and heritage of Chinese culture.

For many young people, the essence

of Lunar New Year is returning home after a year of living away from parents and loved ones.

Liu Qin, 31, a brand director at a firm in Shanghai, is expected to spend the holiday with her parents in hometown Enshi, in Hubei province, following the customs of her Tujia ethnic

group. "We will go to the local market and get some food ingredients," said Liu.

The Tujia celebrate by staying at home, preparing a grand dinner on the last day of the lunar year, and enjoying the first day of the Year of the Dragon with play and rest.

"I will start working overseas after the Spring Festival as our business has expanded to international markets. It is important for me to spend the holiday with my parents now," said Liu.

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## Retailers get into celebratory mood

By WANG ZHUOQIONG and ZHU WENQIAN

As consumers prepare for the Spring Festival shopping spree, known as *ban nian huo* in Chinese, consumer brands are actively engaging in competition by infusing traditional and cultural elements into their design and marketing strategies.

"This year, younger consumers have experienced a significant shift in their choice of consumption products in favor of products with innovations and quality updates during the festival season," said Zhu Danpeng, a food and beverage analyst in Guangzhou, Guangdong province. "Products lacking in differentiation and creativity may struggle to engage consumers."

Leading global houseware retailer Ikea introduced a dragon year-themed collection of 30 pieces of multiple categories including dining, decor and textiles. The collection, jointly crafted by international and Chinese designers, draws inspiration from cultural elements of the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

It also incorporates ideas from dancing dragons and pomegranates, wishing good fortune in the new year. One of the highlights is a cushion from a Chinese designer, blending functionality and style with dragon elements.

"Parents can transform into dragon dancers at home by holding the cushion with one arm, creating a playful experience with their children," said Lian Zhelin, a designer at Ikea China.

The Chinese Lunar New Year is a major occasion for eating, drinking and gift giving for family and friends. Coca-Cola China has partnered with post-1990s paper cutting artist Chen Fenwan on Chinese New Year packaging designs, wedding modern expressions with Chinese traditions.

Chen said the creative inspiration was drawn from the traditional segmented structure of dragon-shaped kites. This element served as the basis for designing a circular pattern symbolizing "reunion and completeness", he said.

The designer connected this meaningful circular pattern with the iconic

shape of Coca-Cola bottles. Through the use of paper-cutting techniques, such as hollowing and three-dimensional sculpting, a vibrant and auspicious dragon is meticulously crafted, creating a visually stunning effect that blends festive traditions with a modern touch.

Toys are one of the favorite gifting choices for many shoppers. The Danish Lego Group has lined up "Five Fortunes for Chinese New Year" of its products, which includes five Chinese New Year-themed sets.

These meaningful, symbolic cultural models are inspired by the auspicious dragon, money tree, lanterns, traditional Chinese restaurants and jackets, all symbolizing auspiciousness, wealth, happiness, family reunions and good fortune, said the company.

These models reproduce Chinese cultural traditions in rich detail, allowing children to learn more about Chinese New Year customs and evoking fond memories of traditional festivals for adults, Lego added.



**Top:** Customers wait in checkout lines at an Ikea store in Zhengzhou, Henan province, on Jan 24, 2023. JIAO XIAOXIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY  
**Above:** Children have fun at a Lego store in Beijing on Feb 12, 2023. QIN CANSONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

# Harbin a hot destination

Snow, ice, culture and food make northeastern city a magnet for tourists

By CHENG SI

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The fairytale-like scenery of Harbin, with its exquisite ice sculptures and snow-covered Western-style architecture, has been attracting tourists all

winter, but the boom is expected to peak during the eight-day Spring Festival holiday beginning on Saturday.

"All 24 of my rooms have been booked out for the Spring Festival holiday since around Jan 10," said Li Liwei, who runs a homestay in Xuegu, on Harbin's southeastern outskirts.

"Most of the customers are people from southern cities and provinces, including Shanghai, Sichuan and Guangdong, who wish to experience the festive atmosphere in the world of ice and snow."

He said his family helps him run the homestay, and they want to make travel-

ers from southern climes "feel at home".

The increasing popularity of winter tourism has led travel portals to predict a busy holiday season in Harbin, the capital of Northeast China's Heilongjiang province.

Mafengwo, a travel service and social networking platform, said Harbin is its

users' most popular domestic destination for the Spring Festival holiday.

The Trip.com Group travel portal said bookings for Harbin are up substantially this year, with most made by people from warmer southern cities such as Guangzhou, in Guangdong, and Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province, who are eager to see snow.

"Travelers from southern provinces are curious about everything in Harbin, including the food, snow and the culture," said Liu Mingyuan, a local tour guide for Tuniu, another travel portal. "And young travelers born after the 1990s and 2000s have a higher preference for niche and novel travel destinations."

"For example, many young travelers like visiting a former pharmaceutical company in Harbin where the building and decorations are as resplendent as the Louvre Museum in Paris."

"Harbin has many specialties and delicious food such as Russian-style cuisine, sweet and sour pork, and the iconic Modern-brand ice lolly, which has a history of over 100 years. Barbecue is also famous here and the sausages. We also have specialties like frozen pears and frozen persimmons."

He said Harbin's cultural heritage contributes to a good atmosphere for Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations.

"We post couplets and paper-cut window decorations featuring the Chinese character *fu*," he said, referring to the Mandarin word for good luck. "We also make dumplings and put coins and candies in some of them to send good wishes. According to traditional customs, people who eat a dumpling with a coin in it will get plenty of treasure and money in the new year, and those who eat dumplings containing candies will have easier and smoother lives."

In addition to the natural snow views, the city is organizing over 200 cultural and entertainment events including music concerts, acrobatic skating and talk shows till the end of February, the provincial culture and tourism bureau said.

Harbin saw record visitor numbers and tourism-related revenue during the three-day New Year's Day holiday in January, with over 3.04 million visitors and nearly 6 billion yuan (\$835 million) in revenue.

"It will be a romantic memory for us to welcome the Year of the Dragon in the world of snow and ice," said Zhong Minyi, 35, from Fuzhou, the capital of the southeastern province of Fujian. "My daughter, who is 5, loves snow and she has been longing for the holiday."

Zhong plans to spend the Spring Festival holiday in Harbin and at Changbai Mountain, a destination with skiing resorts, hot springs and lake views in neighboring Jilin province.

Tour guide Liu said he felt proud and happy to see his hometown go viral online and embrace an increasing number of travelers this winter.

"I've been to many places, both at home and abroad, but I love my hometown of Harbin the most," he said. "The people here are kind and generous, and I hope all the guests here for the Spring Festival holiday can have a good experience."



## Northerners head south for warmth

By CHENG SI

While people from southern provinces are attracted to the snowy winter scenery in North China, people from the north are swarming to southern destinations for the Spring Festival holiday to enjoy the warmth and sunny beaches.

Figures from online travel agency Trip.com Group show that, compared with last year, twice as many Spring Festival holiday bookings have been made on its platform for Sanya, a tropical city on the southern coast of South China's Hainan province.

Bookings for Kunming, the capital of the southwestern province of Yunnan that is known for its year-round springlike weather, are up sixfold.

In a bid to attract more tourists over the holiday, Kunming will be staging a range of cultural and tourism-related activities, including flower shows and music shows, the city's cultural and tourism bureau said, adding that discount coupons for attractions and hotels will also be given to tourists and locals.

"I grew up in Siping, in the northeastern province of Jilin, and left my hometown for college in Shanghai in 2011 and then for work in Shenzhen in 2015," said Yang Ping, a 31-year-old financial analyst. "I prefer warmer weather, and my wife and I have decided to spend Spring Festival in Shenzhen this year."

He said they married two years ago and his wife, from Shanghai, had yet to adapt to the cold climate in Siping.

"We plan to spend three days in Shenzhen and then go to Macao for a three-day stay," Yang said.

Online searches and bookings for warmer destinations have risen sharply in recent weeks.

Tujia, a homestay booking platform, said the majority of customers making Spring Festival holiday bookings on its platform were from Beijing and the northeastern cities of Shenyang, Changchun and Harbin.

Travel portal LY.com said searches for Sanya were up 302 percent since January, and those for the Zhoushan Islands in the eastern province of Zhejiang were up 242 percent.

Mo Xiaoyan, a homestay operator in Pinggang village in Guangzhou, the capital of South China's Guangdong province, has been offering a warm welcome to people from northern cities since 2016.

Her homestay receives many people who choose to stay in Guangzhou for the Spring Festival holiday every year, rather than return to their hometowns in northern provinces, which have beautiful snow views but freezing temperatures.

"They usually come here for family trips as we have distinctive folk activities during the Spring Festival holiday, for example, the lion dance," Mo said. "The villagers organize a lion dance on the first day of the Chinese Lunar New Year, and the boisterous event will start in the morning and last till the afternoon."

"We will have many other activities, such as a bonfire party and making leaf rubbings (handicrafts made by imprinting leaves on paper) during the holiday. Guests can also experience fruit and vegetable picking and taste organic chicken and fish in the village."

Figures from online travel agency Trip.com Group show that, compared with last year, twice as many Spring Festival holiday bookings have been made on its platform for Sanya, a tropical city on the southern coast of South China's Hainan province.



**Top:** Visitors enjoy the beauty of Harbin Ice and Snow World in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, on Jan 20.

**Above:** The penguins of Harbin Polar Park interact with tourists in Harbin on Jan 21.

PHOTOS BY ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

# SPRING FESTIVAL DAY BY DAY

START READING HERE (clockwise)

Day of the lunar calendar




**Feb 2**  
23rd 12th lunar month

**Little New Year**  
On this day, people start to prepare for Lunar New Year celebrations. Little New Year is also called the Festival of the Kitchen God. People believe that the Kitchen God will return from Earth to heaven on this day to report the virtues and transgressions of each household to the Jade Emperor. As a result, rituals are conducted to venerate him, praying for divine blessings of safety and health for family members.



**Feb 3**  
24th 12th lunar month

**Cleaning the house**  
The tradition of deep cleaning homes before Spring Festival is a longstanding custom. Every household washes utensils, bedding and curtains to welcome Spring Festival in a tidy and hygienic state.



**Feb 5**  
26th 12th lunar month

**Preparing meat**  
On this day, the primary focus is on preparing meat for the celebrations. Most people were poor in the old agricultural society. The festival was often their only chance to enjoy meat, hence the term *nian rou*, which translates to "New Year's meat".



**Feb 6**  
27th 12th lunar month

**Rushing to the big market**  
The 27th is often the busiest day before Spring Festival, as people rush to buy all the goods for the celebrations and especially the banquet dishes. Chicken features prominently in the New Year's Eve dinner. The term *da ji da li* is akin to the English phrase "winner, winner, chicken dinner" and represents good omens.



**Feb 7**  
28th 12th lunar month

**Window decorations**  
On this day, people make cakes and steamed buns to enjoy during the festival. They also decorate their houses with paper-cuts, New Year paintings, Spring Festival couplets and images of deities.




**Feb 24**  
15th day of first lunar month

**Lantern Festival**  
Streets and public places are decorated with lanterns adorned with intricate designs. Performances like dragon and lion dances take place on the streets, and people write and guess "lantern riddles". *Tangyuan* — sweet glutinous rice balls filled with sesame or meat — symbolize reunion and completeness, and are essential to family gatherings on this day.

## THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON

DRAGON YEARS → 1928 1940 1952 1964 1976 1988 2000 2012 2024 2036

ELEMENT → Earth Metal Water Wood Fire Earth Metal Water Wood Fire



**5TH IN THE RACE, WHY?**  
Legend indicates that the Jade Emperor held a race to decide which animals should be in the zodiac. The dragon, who was the favorite to win the first place, found a village suffering from drought and decided to stop to help them. Thus, it lost the top prize with honor.

**FEATURES AND MEANING OF THE DRAGON**  
In a 12th-century piece of writing, a dragon is described as having outstanding features of other animals.

The traditional description gives it


- The eyes of a rabbit
- The forehead of a camel
- The ears of an ox
- The antlers of a deer
- The neck of a snake
- The talons of an eagle
- The belly of a sea-monster
- The scales of a fish
- The paws of a tiger

**TRUE DRAGON ON EARTH**  
In ancient China, dragons were common motifs on royal emblems, attire and palace decorations. And they also occupy positions in literature and folklore, linking the emperor's rule with celestial appointment.

**FAMOUS DRAGONS**  
Dragons are born to be respected and admired.

- Bruce Lee** November 27, 1940 Metal Dragon
- John Lennon** October 9, 1940 Metal Dragon
- Adele** May 5, 1988 Earth Dragon
- Martin Luther King Jr.** January 15, 1929 Earth Dragon
- Rihanna** February 20, 1988 Earth Dragon

Sources: chinanewyear.net, Travel China Guide site and China Educational Tours site. GRAPHIC BY JORGE CORTES, ZHANG CHENGLIANG, YANG LIU AND LI XIAOTIAN / CHINA DAILY. TEXT BY FU HAOJU



**Feb 8**  
29th 12th lunar month

**Ancestor worship**  
Ancestor worship has a long history in China. Treating the deceased with the same respect as the living is not only a sign of filial piety but also a virtue in accordance with respecting and honoring the elderly. In most regions, people conduct worship rituals on the morning of the 29th day.



**Feb 9**  
The lunar calendar's last day

**New Year's Eve**  
Families gather for a sumptuous meal that often includes dishes like fish (symbolizing abundance) and dumplings (resembling gold ingots, consequently representing wealth). After dinner, children receive red envelopes containing "lucky money" that symbolizes good fortune and wards off evil spirits. Families stay up late to welcome the New Year.



**Feb 16**  
7th day of first lunar month

**Birthday of humankind**  
According to legend, the goddess Niyuwa created humans on the seventh day after she made such animals as chickens, dogs, pigs, cattle and horses. As such, it's considered humankind's birthday. Ancient people would also climb mountains and write poems to commemorate the day. It's also advised that parents don't scold their children on this date.



**Feb 15**  
6th day of first lunar month

**Parting with poverty**  
This day is the time to bid farewell to the God of Poverty. Another deep cleaning of the house and throwing out of garbage, useless items and worn-out clothes, coaxes fortune. Legend holds that the God of Poverty may enter relatively dirty houses on this day, causing long-term financial problems. Businesspeople traditionally set off firecrackers to officially commence operations for the New Year.



**Feb 14**  
5th day of first lunar month

**The God of Wealth**  
On the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, the God of Wealth is welcomed into the home. The day is commonly known as "Break Five" or "Chase Away the Five Poverties", which refers to deprivations of wisdom, learning, culture, fate and relationships. People in northern China often eat dumplings.



**Feb 13**  
4th day of first lunar month

**The Kitchen God returns**  
According to folk beliefs, on this day the Kitchen God conducts a census of households. So, every family must stay home and prepare an abundance of fruit, burn incense and candles, and set off firecrackers to welcome him respectfully. The custom has been passed down for generations because it carries people's hopes for blessings and protection.



**Feb 12**  
3rd day of first lunar month

**A tight sleep**  
The third day is a day for sleeping in and resting after so much preparation and celebration. Traditionally, people believed the third day is when rats marry off their daughters. Therefore, it is customary to go to bed early in the evening and avoid disturbing the rodents' wedding ceremonies and preventing any bad omens.



**Feb 11**  
2nd day of first lunar month

**Visiting in-laws**  
Traditionally, married women visit their parents on this day, often bringing along their husbands and children. The gifts they give should be in pairs. The parents don't accept all the presents, so the couple later brings a portion to their husband's family. The daughter who returns to her parents' home should bring gifts and red envelopes with cash to distribute among the family's children.



**Feb 10**  
Lunar New Year's Day

**Spring Festival**  
It's customary to avoid sweeping the floor or taking out the trash on this day. A large wastewater bucket is prepared ahead of time and shouldn't be emptied outside that day. People often stay at or near their homes and greet elders.



# 龙腾盛世中国年 万家和美庆团圆

—— 五粮液恭祝全球华人新春快乐 ——

WULIANGYE WISHES EVERYONE  
ACROSS THE WORLD A HAPPY CHINESE NEW YEAR



大国浓香 和美五粮  
AROMA OF THE NATION  
HARMONY OF WULIANGYE

# When Truffle Buddha Jumps Over the Wall

Restaurants are busy designing the perfect menu with which their patrons can welcome the dragon on New Year's Eve. **Li Yingxue** reports.



**L**i Cheung, 52, the head chef at Xin Ming Yuen restaurant in Beijing, cannot forget how his family used to mark Chinese New Year's Eve. For his mother, this used to be the busiest day of the year, and largely spent in the kitchen. Preparations started much earlier; she would start planning for the lavish spread on the 26th day of the 12th month of the lunar calendar.

"My mother would embark on a shopping spree, procuring a plethora of ingredients such as sea cucumber, fish, pig's trotters and an assortment of candies and snacks," Li recalls fondly. "For desserts we arranged rice cakes, melon seeds, pistachios and more."

Growing up in Kowloon, Hong Kong, Li often accompanied his mother to buy things in the run-up to the Chinese New Year. "We would buy dried abalone, fish maw, and preserved meats at Wing Lok Street. For candies, we went to the bustling Garden Street in Mong Kok," Li says. His mother specialized in making *poon choi*, as also rice and radish cakes.

"Initially, *poon choi* used to be made by putting together leftovers from the Chinese New Year's Eve dinner in a big pot. We'd continue enjoying it the next day," Li recalls.

As he grew up and their living conditions improved, *poon choi* turned into a stew with various ingredients, a special dish prepared specifically for the Chinese New Year's Eve dinner. It kept getting better over time.

"My favorite was the thousand-layer cake. It's very complicated to make, so we always ordered it from outside. We had to order in advance, such as the demand. In Hong Kong, the Indonesian Chinese would make the best ones," Li said.

Li also remembers how pastries were meant only for guests coming to wish them a "Happy New Year", but how he couldn't resist biting into one when his mother wasn't looking.

After dinner, Li would receive red envelopes from his grandparents and then join local kids in playing games and exchanging greetings in the neighborhood.

In China, New Year's Eve dinners showcase regional diversity through distinct culinary traditions. While common fish and chicken delicacies grace tables in both the northern and southern regions, the northern custom of relishing dumplings sets it apart.

Despite regional differences, the unifying theme is that each dish symbolizes auspicious beginnings and good fortune. The shared essence of New Year's Eve celebrations is the coming together of families to

**Despite regional differences, the unifying theme is that each dish symbolizes auspicious beginnings and good fortune. The shared essence of New Year's Eve celebrations is the coming together of families to mark the most traditional festival.**

**Clockwise:** Stewed pork and abalone with brown sauce; A combination of roasted duck and chicken; Stir-fried Chinese kale with black garlic. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

mark the most traditional festival.

Li, who has been a chef for 34 years, moved from Hong Kong to Beijing four years ago. He spends every New Year's Eve preparing special dishes for guests at his restaurant. Some patrons Li has served in Hong Kong are now regulars at his Beijing restaurant. Those who are unable to return to Hong Kong for the Spring Festival holiday also choose to celebrate the Chinese New Year feast at Li's place, enjoying the authentic flavors from their hometown.

For this year's New Year's Eve dinner, Li is preparing dishes with auspicious names such as the "Prosperity and Wealth" dish, made from abalone and goose feet. There are also radish and taro cakes. "The radish cake my mom makes has a unique taste with plenty of radish, preserved meats and less flour. It may not always have a perfect shape, but the flavor is exceptional. At restaurants, chefs usually focus on getting the presentation right," Li said.

At his restaurant, Li strives to replicate his mother's recipe, to give guests a taste of home. "Even my wife follows my mother's recipe for making radish cake at home."

Nostalgia seems to be in the air this year. Television drama *Blossoms Shanghai*, directed by Hong Kong-based Wong Kar-wai, is set in 1990s Shanghai and its phenomenal success is drawing people to Huanghe Road and the Fairmont Peace Hotel on the Bund for a taste of nostalgia.

Zhao Renliang, a chef from Shanghai with 60 years of experience, started his career at the Peace Hotel. In recent years, he has spent Spring Festival working at the restaurant serves Jiangsu and Zhejiang cuisines in Legendale Hotel, Beijing.

Noticing a growing interest in Shanghai's cuisine because of the TV drama, Zhao is planning a special Chinese New Year fare, keeping flavors from Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang provinces in mind.

One dish that stands out is the *yifanfeng-shun* (plain sailing). Zhao chose to use large shrimps for this traditional Shanghai dish made of rice cakes and hairy crab, in order to do away with the messy crab shells.

"Eating rice cakes is a must during Spring Festival, as it symbolizes joy," Zhao said.

A common feature of the New Year's Eve dinner in Shanghai is a hot pot with diverse ingredients such as egg dumplings shaped like gold ingots in both color and form. Zhao has included a similar hot pot — with rich ingredients like sea cucumber, abalone, pork tendons, shiitake mushrooms, and handmade fish balls — in this year's New Year Eve dinner menu.

## Family reunion dinner

The New Year's Eve dinner is the most important meal of the year, says writer and culture scholar Cui Daiyuan. "It's a reunion of family members with whom you share blood or marital ties. There are no leaders, colleagues, or classmates," Cui said.

Across China, fish is a common delicacy to relish on this occasion. "The fish must be whole, symbolizing a smooth and complete year. It's often soy-braised or cooked as a sweet and sour dish, both of which give it a vibrant red color, which holds auspicious meanings. Traditionally, carp is chosen as it is the epitome of good luck." However, many families also opt for mandarin fish or sea bass. In some regions it is common to find a wooden fish, carved and painted red, on the dinner table.

Cui mentions a special local dish called *doujiang* in Beijing, which is jelly-like and made by simmering diced carrots, dried tofu, celery, soaked yellow soybeans and strips of pigskin. It's meant to accompany drinking.

While dumplings are common in northern regions, the main staple for New Year's Eve dinner in Beijing is usually steamed bun. After dinner, families usually make dumplings using vegetable fillings. These dumplings, named "Wugeng dumplings" denoting the period from 3 am to 5 am, are to be enjoyed in the early hours of the second day. After eating them, it's a tradition to go out and visit relatives and exchange new year greetings. People in Beijing typically gift a box containing various snacks, Cui said.



**Clockwise:** Shrimp, chicken and fish dishes grace tables in both the northern and southern regions in China. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

In Northeast China, dumplings, usually filled with meat, are a must-have during the New Year's Eve dinner. Ren Pangbo, the general manager of the Fengtian restaurant in Shenyang, Liaoning province, shares that people in the region traditionally prepare pig trotters, chicken, and pork knuckles for this special dinner.

Meatballs are also essential on some dining tables in the Northeastern region. Ren explains that households typically make two types of meatballs. The "Four Happiness Meatballs" are the size of an apple and similar to the lion's head meatball in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. However, unlike the clear broth used in those regions, the Four Happiness Meatballs are deep-fried, then stewed in a thick soup. Made in sets of four, they symbolize the four great joys of life — happiness, wealth, longevity, and good fortune.

The other type is smaller, about the size of a coin. Families make them with either meat or vegetables such as sweet potato or shredded radish.

Ren also mentions a less common type of

meatball made by wrapping minced meat in tofu skin, cutting it into sections, dipping in a flour-based batter and deep-frying. Locals call these "*qianzi*," symbolizing the wish for many descendants and abundant blessings.

In Northeastern China, there's a unique custom of celebrating the birthdays of those turning 60 or 80 that year on the sixth or eighth day of the first month of the lunar calendar, regardless of their actual date of birth, Ren says.

The approaching Spring Festival has kept Ren busy this year, as he traveled to Fengtian restaurant branches across the country. He noticed a growing appreciation for Northeastern cuisine both in northern and southern regions while also noting the varying customs people follow in different cities.

"In Shenyang, the New Year's Eve dinner is typically enjoyed in the afternoon, with restaurants being busiest from 2 to 5 pm," said Ren. "In Shenzhen, a migrant city, most people leave for their hometowns during the Spring Festival holiday. So, the restaurant's Shenzhen branch turns busy around the sixth day of the lunar year, when people return from their hometowns."

With tourism in Northeast China booming this winter, Fengtian restaurants, which specialize in local cuisine, have become a must-visit for tourists in Shenyang. Ren hopes to use the restaurant's Northeastern delicacies to help more people understand and experience Northeastern culture.

Traditionally, families gather at home for New Year's Eve dinners, but in recent years, going out or ordering takeout meals is also becoming popular.

Li Ran, the chef of JW Kitchen in JW Marriott Hotel Beijing Central, has three years of experience preparing takeout dinners on the occasion. He carefully selects dishes that can remain fresh for long after they have been delivered.

Li started preparing the takeout menu for this year's festival four months in advance. He has created innovative and labor-intensive dishes like 'Truffle Buddha Jumps Over the Wall'. Notably, he replaced the usual cake for bird's nest pudding to cater to people's evolving taste.

Another highlight is fish that is fried till the head and tail curl. The fish sauce is packaged separately, allowing customers to pour it over the fish before enjoying the meal.

"This attention to detail ensures that customers can savor professionally crafted delicacies while celebrating the New Year with their loved ones at home," Li says.

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# Spring blooms across globe

From dazzling parades to cultural events, countries gear up to celebrate Chinese New Year. **Minlu Zhang** in New York, **Zheng Wanyin** in London, **Yang Wanli** in Bangkok and **Xu Weiwei** in Hong Kong report.

**C**elebrations of the Lunar New Year are in full swing worldwide as China's traditional Spring Festival holiday draws growing, enthusiastic attention across the globe.

From North America to Europe and Asia, the Lunar New Year welcomes the Year of the Dragon with vibrant festivities worldwide.

Chinese New Year 2024 falls on Saturday, Feb 10. The date changes every year but is always somewhere between Jan 21 and Feb 20.

2024 is the Year of the Dragon, based on the Chinese zodiac. The dragon is perceived by the Chinese people to represent dignity, prestige, and auspiciousness.

China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism has unveiled a mascot, dubbed "Jixiang Long", literally lucky dragon, featuring a gesture of welcome and a smiley face, auspicious cloud ears, and a gold ingot-shaped nose.

"The divine animal is an inseparable part of the Chinese civilization and is an important spiritual symbol of the Chinese people, embodying our hope for and pursuit of peace, joy, and good luck," said Lin Cunzhen, professor and associate dean of the School of Design at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and the lead designer of the mascot.

The United Nations has listed the Lunar New Year as a UN floating holiday in its calendar of conferences and meetings for 2024.

The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution in December 2023, requesting the UN agencies at its New York headquarters and other duty stations to avoid holding meetings during the Lunar New Year.

Many countries list the Spring Festival as a national holiday, and about one-fifth of humanity celebrates it in various ways, Dai Bing, China's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, said after the resolution's adoption.

"Everyone was spreading the news, and it was really a very happy day, just like the New Year," Nan Kang, a UN staff member, told China Daily.

"From the point of view of an international staff member, especially one of Chinese nationality, I would feel that our culture is represented on the world stage. The culture is represented and valued," said Kang, who is also the president of the Chinese Book Club at the UN.

All public schools in New York State will be closed for one day for the Lunar New Year. A state law signed into effect in 2023 declared the Lunar New Year a public school holiday starting this year.

It is the only US state that has

done so, said Chinese Consul General in New York Huang Ping. "But it is a good start," he said.

On the US East Coast, arts institutions, including the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, will present a series of Lunar New Year concerts.

The New York Philharmonic presented the first Lunar New Year concert in eastern US in 2012. Since then, it has been working with Chinese artists for 12 consecutive years to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

For the fifth consecutive year, Lincoln Center in New York City will host The Sound of Spring, a Lunar New Year concert, on Feb 11. This year, it will feature musicians from China, with traditional Chinese musical instruments, including the *erhu* and *suona*. The concert attracts nearly 1,000 attendees each year.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York will host family day programs for local people to experience Chinese cultural heritage.

The National Basketball Association, or NBA, teams such as the Brooklyn Nets organize themed events for the Lunar New Year.

This year marks the 12th consecutive year of the Nets celebrating the Lunar New Year, which is the NBA's biggest and most established Chinese-themed night across the league, said Catherine Carson, executive vice-president of global partnerships at BSE Global, the parent company of Barclays Center, the Nets and others.

"The night speaks to the community, the community that we serve in Brooklyn. We have such a diverse community, including our Chinese community," Carson told China Daily.

"While we are enjoying ourselves, we're actually doing something to contribute to the mutual understanding between our two peoples and to the friendship and the relationship between our two countries," Huang said at a reception for the launch of the consulate's Lunar New Year program on Jan 16.

## Festive mood

California embraces diverse celebrations, offering more than 40 ways to engage in both in-person and virtual events.

San Francisco has the largest Chinatown in the US, and New Year celebrations have been taking place there since the 1860s.

The Chinese New Year Parade is one of the few remaining illuminated night parades in North America and the biggest parade celebrating the New Year outside of Asia.

In London, the London Eye wheel glittered in red and gold, two colors that symbolize joy and prosperity in

**The divine animal (dragon) is an inseparable part of the Chinese civilization and is an important spiritual symbol of the Chinese people, embodying our hope for and pursuit of peace, joy, and good luck.**



**From top:** A lion dance balloon sculpture is seen in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Jan 18. ZHANG WENZONG / XINHUA; The United Nations Postal Administration officially brings out special stamps on Jan 19 to celebrate the Year of the Dragon. WANG FAN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE; The traditional lion dance at the Dulles Expo Center, Virginia, on Jan 20. VIA GETTY IMAGES

Chinese culture, to count down to Chinese New Year on Feb 8.

Prior to the transformation of the London Eye, the Chinese New Year mood has built across the United Kingdom.

On Feb 1, an exhibition of *zimingzhong*, or striking clocks that were collected by Chinese emperors during the 1700s, kicked off at London's Science Museum, showcasing more than three centuries of exchanges between China and the UK.

In the display, more than 20 resplendent clocks were brought from the Palace Museum in Beijing and shown in the UK for the first time.

The timepieces reveal the early trade history of the two countries, because many were made by British craftsmen, designed for the Chinese market, and taken to China's south coast to be traded for silk, tea, and porcelain. The exchange of goods led to the exchange of skills, represented by exhibits that were constructed using both Chinese and European technologies.

"We are excited to welcome everyone to join us in celebrating the opening of the exhibition and the Year of the Dragon," said Jane Desborough, keeper of science collections at the Science Museum and curator of the exhibition.

Tens of thousands of people are expected to join in a carnival on Feb 11 organized by the London Chinatown Chinese Association, or LCCA, that will include a lively parade, stage performances, and food stalls surrounding Trafalgar Square.

Up north in Scotland, Edinburgh has been witnessing a festive atmosphere since Feb 3, with a wave of activities, including shows of *hanfu* (a traditional Chinese style of clothing), Chinese calligraphy workshops, red envelope giveaway games and more.

Since its inception in 2019, the Edinburgh Chinese New Year Festival has become the largest celebration of its kind in Scotland, according to Rob Lang, chair of Edinburgh Tourism Action Group's China Ready Initiative.

"Chinese New Year is a fantastic opportunity to encourage our people of Edinburgh to learn more about Chinese culture and history, and it is something that is at the core of the entire city," Lang said.

In Birmingham, England, Chinese pianist Xiao Di hosted her 12th annual Didi & Friends Chinese New Year Concert on Feb 8, where musicians from different genres played a mix of traditional Chinese and Western pieces.

Daniele Rosina, a conductor for the concert and director of orchestral studies at the University of Birmingham, said being involved was an "honor" and that he appreciated the

strong emphasis on gathering for the Spring Festival.

Thailand and other Asian countries are also lighting up for Spring Festival celebrations.

Provinces and cities across Thailand organize big celebrations for the Chinese New Year and a series of cultural feasts of performances along with illuminations that fan out to welcome the Year of Dragon.

## Concerts, art expos

To celebrate the Lunar New Year on Saturday, the Thai government works together with the Chinese embassy and organizes various activities with public participation, including concerts, art exhibitions and performances.

A light show kicked off in Yaowarat, or Chinatown, in Bangkok, at the beginning of this month.

The Chinese New Year is celebrated in Thailand mostly by the Thai-Chinese communities. Traditional activities for celebration include lion and dragon dances and fireworks, which attract participants ranging from the Royal family to the general public.

This year's celebration also marks 49 years of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China and the fruitful cultural and tourism collaboration between the two partners and close neighbors.

The celebration promises a cultural feast of mesmerizing performances from both Thailand and China. Top attractions include a dance troupe from China's Fujian province.

In Singapore, New Year celebrations include River Hongbao at Gardens by the Bay, Chinatown's Chinese New Year Festival, and Gardens by the Bay's Flower Dome. The Chingay Parade features vibrant costumes and street art installations with elegant blossom themes.

Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, is expected to display 32 fireworks on Lunar New Year's Eve.

In island countries such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Fiji, the celebrations include special treats, decorations and activities for both locals and Chinese visitors.

In the Maldives, local agencies are hosting special events to mark the occasion this year. Baglioni Resort Maldives, for instance, is sending good wishes and decorating its facilities and resorts, with red lanterns and other traditional artwork symbolizing good luck and prosperity. Anantara villas are to host a Chinese-style lion dance, live music and other performances apart from a dinner gala in seaside ambience on Feb 10.

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# China's ethnic groups make jolly melodies for New Year

Local cultural traditions merge with Spring Festival to enrich celebrations across the country, **Zhao Ruinan** reports.

## DRAGON DANCE

c. 16th century to 11th century BC

As the earliest record, the Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions mentioned people collectively dancing as dragons to pray for rain.

206 BC to AD 24

Western Han Dynasty scholar Dong Zhongshu wrote in his book, *Chunqiu Fanlu*, that there was a complete dragon dance protocol in his time. Green dragons danced to pray for precipitation in the spring. Red or yellow dragons danced in summer, white ones in autumn and black ones in winter.



2006

The dragon dance was listed as a national-level intangible cultural heritage in 2006.

Dates for the Tibetan New Year can vary in the Xizang autonomous region, depending on altitude and harvest time. But this year the festival — known as Losar — coincides with Spring Festival on Feb 10. As it draws near, Tsetan Wangmo, a resident of Lhasa, Xizang, eagerly awaits.

For Tibetans, Losar is a time of joyous gatherings and lively parties, symbolizing new beginnings and providing an opportunity to rekindle friendships and express love.

“Losar is one of the most important holidays for Tibetans,” Tsetan Wangmo said. “It represents a fresh start, new plans and hope for the coming year. It brings people together. It allows us to reinvigorate our relationships.”

Preparations for the Tibetan New Year have already commenced in her household. House cleaning plays a significant role. Along with many other Tibetans, she will consult a monk or astrologer to pick an auspicious day for the annual cleaning ritual, followed by the symbolic act of discarding rubbish in a specific direction based on the consultation's outcome.

Preparations also include traditional activities — frying pastries, air-drying meat, purchasing new clothes or stocking up on various snacks, fruits and nuts. Tsetan Wangmo said her family has already prepared air-dried yak meat and plans to do more shopping in the next few days.

On the first day of Losar, families typically celebrate within their own homes. From the second day onward, they invite relatives and friends to gatherings, which last for at least 15 days and include plenty of barley wine and beer.

The Tibetan New Year, one of the most important traditional festivals for the Tibetan people, is not just about the harvest, reunions or blessings. It also serves as a vehicle for preserving ethnic culture and showcasing ethnic characteristics and spirit, said Zhong Jinwen, a professor at Minzu University of China's School of Chinese Ethnic Minority Languages and Literature in Beijing.

In China, ethnic groups typically have their own traditional calendars. The timing of the Tibetan New Year is determined by one of those unique calculations.

“Paying respect to elders, preparing delicacies, offering sacrifices and performing dances and songs are all important rituals for the New Year's celebrations of various ethnic groups,” Zhong said.

In Yunnan province, the Va people kick off their celebration on the 30th day of the 12th lunar month, their most joyous day of the year. Leading up to the event, every Va household begins making rice wine from locally grown rice at least a month ahead of time.

The year's final day is a busy one: Residents prepare food, soak glutinous rice, slaughter pigs and kill chickens. The elders interpret chicken omens by observing the part of the bird's thigh that is connected to its body. This tells them whether the household will have good fortune and abundance in the coming year.

The jubilant festivities go on and on. The village's elders ignite bonfires while reciting blessings and prayers for the community, hoping for a year of favorable weather and a happy and healthy life for all. People of all ages in the village play drums and gongs to accompany songs and dances. The revelry often extends late into the night.

Yang Fuquan, a researcher at the Yunnan

Academy of Social Sciences, said Spring Festival is not just for the Han people.

“Many ethnic minorities also celebrate it, each with their unique customs,” he said. “Virtually all of the 56 ethnic groups in China now celebrate Spring Festival, but many have also integrated their own cultural elements, further enriching the cultural connotations of the festival.”

Zhong, the professor, said that at some level Spring Festival serves as “a stage for the display of various ethnic cultures.”

“For example, people from different ethnic groups wear traditional costumes, conduct their ethnic ceremonies and perform dances and songs in different styles,” he said. “It is a form of social unity in the context of ethnic diversity.”

This unity is reflected in the Dong ethnic culture as the ethnic group celebrates two New Year's festivals — their own and that of the Han people.

Before the lunar calendar was introduced to the Dong, New Year's celebrations were already taking place. Traditionally, they consider the completion of agricultural activity after the autumn harvest to mark the beginning of a new year — around the end of the 10th month or the beginning of the 11th month of the lunar calendar.

“From the second day of Lunar New Year until the 15th day of the first lunar month, we have a village celebration every evening,” said Meng Yongfan, Party secretary of Guangnan village in Longsheng county in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

Meng described how Dong villagers sing folk songs and play the *pipa*. Every evening, the village's auditorium hosts a “fantastic” show, whose participants are chosen from among the villagers by casting lots. The selected group is responsible for the evening's performance until the 15th day of the first lunar month. Every evening features a lively Dong cultural feast.

“Do not underestimate the troupes in each village. These groups, consisting of just five or six members, or maybe a dozen, encapsulate the essence of minority culture,” said Huang Zhong-jing, a folk customs expert in the county.

“Folk culture significantly influences our daily lives, from the food we eat to the clothes we wear, the places we inhabit and the way we move,” Huang said. “Cultural troupes showcase our lives through their performances. For instance, the dragon lantern dance, which originated more than 1,700 years ago, is performed during Spring Festival to honor the dragon for saving lives, to pray for rain and to seek blessings.”

Over time, the event evolved into a form of entertainment, sports and dance.

“Now, during festive occasions, the cultural troupe will perform dragon lantern dances in many situations,” Huang said.

Professor Zhong said the celebration of Spring Festival across various ethnic groups affirms social unity and shows respect for ethnic differences. Also, in addition to serving as carriers of the cultural traditions of ethnic minorities, the rich and colorful festival customs have become a significant draw for tourists in recent years.

Students from major universities across the country visit Guangnan village regularly for pleasure and study, listening to Dong folk songs and admiring the traditional architecture. Many characteristic festival activities have become attractions.

In Tuanbao town in Lichuan, Hubei province, more than 200 tourists gathered at the Fenshui

**The Tibetan New Year ... is not just about the harvest, reunions or blessings. It also serves as a vehicle for preserving ethnic culture and showcasing ethnic characteristics and spirit.**



From Top: Women present a unique hair-swinging dance in Ximeng Va autonomous county in Yunnan province. A member of the Va ethnic group performs a wooden drum dance in Cangyuan Va autonomous county in Yunnan.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY  
A Tu ethnic girl makes *ciba* in Xiaping county, Hubei province, recently. XIANG BINGZHOU / FOR CHINA DAILY

Resort to experience the unique customs of the Tujia ethnic group as the people greet the new year and say goodbye to the old.

For the Tujia people, *ciba*, a glutinous rice cake, is an essential element of Spring Festival. The process of making it is hard work, as the glutinous rice must be soaked in water for at least three days and washed three times until clear. Then, it's steamed for at least an hour before being put into a stone tank for men to pound, taking turns with wooden hammers.

“It was my first time making *ciba*,” said Xiong Xiumei, a resident. “We all took turns pounding the rice. It was a lot of fun.”

Along with making *ciba*, traditional New Year's customs for the Tujia and Miao ethnic groups include slaughtering pigs and enjoying a special soup called *paotang*. These customs have evolved into a rich set of folk activities and have become a significant attraction for tourists in the town.

After a busy morning, with pig's blood and meat cooking, the official *paotang* soup ceremony begins.

The feast involves serving seven large bowls and eight large plates filled with various dishes made from fresh parts of the pig. The traditional activity marks the successful conclusion of the year's harvest and serves as a prayer for favorable weather in the coming year.

Traditional sports activities — spinning tops, jumping rope and kicking shuttlecocks — were also organized at night during *shousui*, a custom in which people stay up all night to ward off evil and disease and welcome a new year.

A tourist commented: “Attending this event not only allowed us to experience the culture of ethnic minorities, listen to the unique mountain folk songs of Lichuan and play with spinning tops but also gave me a deeper understanding of the culture and customs of the Tujia and Miao minorities. The experience was completely different from a typical sight-seeing tour.”

Minzu University's Zhong believes that promoting the ethnic groups' customs will help preserve and develop cultural heritage and attract tourists from other regions.

“It is important to support and preserve traditional ethnic festivals and their unique celebrations, such as the Dai water-splashing festival in Yunnan, which was popular last year,” Zhong said.

Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, received more than 2 million tourists in April, a 300 percent increase over the previous year. They brought in revenues of around 2.19 billion yuan (\$295 million).

Dai people, clad in traditional costumes, danced and sang while splashing water on each other as a prayer for good fortune and to express good wishes.

“This will promote mutual understanding and exchanges among various ethnic groups,” Zhong said. “For example, many tourists from non-ethnic minority areas will have a better understanding of local minority cultures. At the same time, exchanges between tourists and locals will diversify local culture. This is a two-way interaction and integration.”

Palden Nyima in Lhasa, Li Yingqing in Kunming, Shi Ruipeng in Nanming and Liu Kun in Wuhan contributed to this story.

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## Happy Chinese New Year to our readers

Chinese calligraphy for the character "dragon" written by Xu Liming, president of the Chinese Standard Cursive Script Society. We hope this artwork and our special edition bring you more joy during the holiday season as well as a more in-depth understanding of Chinese culture and life.