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Chinese New Year is the biggest holiday celebrated among Chinese people. It is often referred to as the spring festival because it signals the beginning of spring. It is a time when families and friends get together to say goodbye to the old and welcome¹ the new.

The exact origin of this holiday is too old to be traced, but many explanations still exist. One idea is that the holiday originated when a beast named Nian came out the night before the New Year and started to prey on the people in the villages. Of course, the people were very frightened² by this monster and so a brave old man went up to the beast and said to him that instead of eating the people of the villages, he should eat the other beasts that frightened these people. Nian followed the old man's request and all of the beasts were chased into the forest. The old man rode away on Nian's back; as it turns out, the man was an immortal³ god. The people of the village were very grateful to the old man for giving them a peaceful life. Before the old man left for good, he told the people to put up bright red paper decorations on their windows and doors at the beginning of each New Year because the colour red scared the beast. They also set off firecrackers to scare away the horrible⁴ beast.

Very few people know when this holiday is celebrated without looking at a traditional Chinese calendar because it never falls on the same day. The ancient Chinese used a lunar calendar. Chinese years are grouped in sets of 12 with each year being represented by an animal (zodiac sign). Legend⁵ has it that in ancient times, Buddha asked all the animals to meet him on Chinese New Year. Twelve came, and Buddha named a year after each one. He announced that the people born in each animal's year would have some of that animal's personality⁶. For example, those born in horse years are cheerful, skilful with money, perceptive, witty, talented⁷ and good with their hands.

During the Chinese New Year's celebration, people take part in many traditional activities. The Chinese believe that as they enter a new year, they should put behind them all things of the past. They clean their houses, pay off debts, purchase⁸ new clothes, paint their doors and window panes, and even get new haircuts. These activities symbolise new life and new beginnings.

Homes are decorated with flowers and paper decorations stating wishes of prosperity⁹, good luck, happiness, and good fortune for the coming year. Decorations of the incoming zodiac animal are also displayed. Red and gold are very popular colours to decorate with. Red represents power happiness, vitality (and scares away beasts). Gold represents wealth and good fortune.

One very important tradition of the Chinese New Year is exchanging¹⁰ gifts. A traditional gift that is given is small red envelopes filled with "lucky money". These envelopes are given to children by their family and friends. The red colour is used to bring good fortune, and the money inside is used by the children to buy holiday treats. These envelopes symbolise the giving of good fortune.

Chinese New year

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