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CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Lunar New Year

Happy New Year! While many countries in the world celebrate New Year's Day on January 1, there are some countries in Asia that celebrate "Lunar New Year" about a month later. The start of the lunar new year is based on the traditional lunisolar calendar from China. This month, I will introduce some Lunar New Year celebrations that will be celebrated on January 29 this year.

Chinese New Year

Perhaps the most well-known Lunar New Year around the world is Chinese New Year. Chinese New Year is one of the most important holidays in Chinese culture. This year, Chinese New Year starts on January 29, and festivities last until the Lantern Festival 15 days later.

Red is the color of Chinese New Year celebrations, because it symbolizes good fortune, joy, and the warding off of evil spirits. Red decorations, such as lanterns, banners, and paper cuttings, adorn homes and streets, creating a festive atmosphere.

On Chinese New Year's Eve, families gather to enjoy a delicious feast, with each dish having its own symbolic meaning. For example, fish signifies abundance, dumplings represent wealth, and noodles symbolize longevity.

Children and unmarried young adults receive red envelopes called *hongbao* in Mandarin or *laisee* in Cantonese. These envelopes are filled with money. The bills should be crisp and new, and should not be odd in number. Even numbers are considered lucky, except for four, which is a homophone of "death."

Lion and dragon dances are iconic performances during Chinese New Year. Accompanied by drums and cymbals, dancers in colorful costumes bring these mythical creatures to life. The dances are believed to ward off evil spirits and bring good fortune.



The loud bangs of firecrackers and the dazzling displays of fireworks are also believed to scare away evil spirits, and no Chinese New Year celebration would be complete without them.

Many countries around the world with large Chinese populations celebrate the Chinese New Year. It is a public holiday in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and even in New York and California in the United States. Sydney, London, San Francisco, and New York City boast the largest Chinese New Year celebrations outside of Asia.

When I was in kindergarten, my class celebrated Chinese New Year by making a display of paper plum blossoms, which symbolize good luck. We also learned the Cantonese New Year greeting, "*Gong hei fat choi!*"

Seollal

Seollal, also called Korean New Year, is a 3-day holiday celebrated in both North and South Korea. During Seollal, Koreans visit their families and pay respect to their ancestors through a special rite called *charye*. Traditional foods are placed on a table as an offering to the ancestors, and the rite begins with deep bows from all family members. Many people dress up in traditional *hanbok* for the occasion. After the rite, the family has a big feast.



A traditional Korean New Year's dish is *tteokguk*, which is a soup of thinly sliced rice cakes in beef broth,

garnished with thinly sliced eggs, green onions, and meat. The white rice cakes symbolize purity and cleanliness. They also symbolize adding another year to your life. In the Korean language, asking someone, "How many bowls of *tteokguk* have you eaten?" is another way to ask, "How old are you?"

Respecting one's elders is extremely important in Korean culture, so on Seollal, young people face the elder members of their family, bow deeply, and say a formal greeting: "*Saehae bok mani badeuseyo*." It means, "Please receive a lot of good fortune for the New Year." The elders then give the young people silk bags full of money. Like the red envelopes of Chinese New Year, the bills have to be crisp.



A special game called *yutnori* is enjoyed by people of all ages. It is a board game that involves throwing sticks instead of dice. The first person to move their pieces around the board wins the game. Many families bet money on the game, and the winner takes all.

Tết

Finally, Tết is the Vietnamese New Year. It usually is celebrated at the same time as Chinese New Year, but due to the one-hour time difference between Vietnam and China, the new moon can occur on a different day. Therefore, it very rarely falls one month after the Chinese New Year.

On Tết, families gather together to feast. People prepare special dishes called *bánh chưng* and *bánh tét*. These dishes are made from glutinous rice, mung beans, and pork, and wrapped in *lá dong* leaves and boiled for several hours. *Bánh chưng* are square-shaped to represent the earth and are more popular in the north, while *bánh tét* are cylindrical-shaped to represent the moon and are more popular in the south.



There are similarities with Chinese New Year, like red envelopes containing money for children, firecrackers, and lion dances. Like in China, plum blossoms are a popular decoration for Tết in northern Vietnam, but Yellow *mai* flowers are the flowers of choice in central and southern Vietnam. And Like Koreans on Seollal, Vietnamese people pay respects to their ancestors by cleaning their family graves.



It is believed that the first visitor to a home on the first day of Tết determines the family's fortune for the entire year, so families invite guests who are successful and of good moral standing in order to bring good luck. This custom reminds me of the Scottish custom of ["first-footing"](#) that I wrote about two years ago.

Do any of these Lunar New Year customs remind you of New Year's customs in Japan? ★

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