Preparing for Chinese New Year

Cleaning the House
Before New Year, houses are cleaned to sweep out any bad luck. This is known as ‘sweeping the dust’. It makes way for welcoming good luck and the New Year. The Chinese do not clean in the first two days of the New Year, so as not to sweep away the good luck.

New Year Shopping
At New Year, people buy new clothes for the festival. They also buy decorations, food, presents and they also get their hair cut.

Activities for New Year’s Eve

Putting Up New Year’s Decorations
On New Year’s Eve, decorations are put up around the home. Lanterns and red and gold decorations are hung up in houses.

Decorations
A god image is pasted onto doors as a prayer for longevity, health, and peace. The door gods have an angry facial expression and will be carrying a weapon, as they represent righteousness and power and ready to fight with evil spirits.

Spring couplets are paired phrases which express people’s wishes for peace, fortune and good luck in the coming year. They usually consist of seven Chinese characters, are fixed on either side of the door frame and are written on red paper with black ink.

New Year paintings are used to decorate the walls of houses. These are bright and colourful, in order to create a happy and thriving environment during the Spring Festival. Different images are used to represent different aspirations, for example, fortune is represented by a bat (as they have the same pronunciation in Chinese), a fan is a symbol for kindness, a musical stone stands for celebration and a spear represents luck.

Paper Cut Outs are sometimes pasted onto windows which are facing north and south, although this is a more common tradition in northern China.

Family Dinner
New Year’s Eve dinner is a very important event, in which the family members are reunited together.

Dumplings are served mainly in Northern China, which look like Chinese silver ingots. These are filled with meat and vegetables, which are wrapped in thin dough and can be cooked by
boiling, steaming, frying or baking. Apparently, the more dumplings you eat at this time, the more money you will make in the New Year!

**Niangao or rice cake** is eaten in southern China and is made by frying, steaming, stir-frying or boiling sticky rice with sugar, chestnuts, Chinese dates, and lotus leaves. ‘Niangao’ is pronounced the same as the word meaning ‘higher level of life’ and this is why it is eaten at New Year.

**Fish** is very important at the New Year’s Eve dinner and when it is placed on the table, the head must be facing either important guests or elders, as a mark of respect. In some regions in China, only the middle part of the fish will be eaten, with the head and tail being saved for the beginning of the New Year.

**Spring rolls** or spring cakes are traditionally eaten during the Spring Festival. They are made using thin flour wrappers and are filled with either vegetables, meat or something sweet. They are then deep fried, which turns them golden-yellow in colour.

**Longevity noodles** are longer than normal noodles and are served uncut either fried or boiled. These noodles signify a wish for longevity and therefore the eater should not cut them, as it represents cutting short their life.

Specific **fruits** are eaten during Chinese New Year. Tangerines and oranges are displayed and eaten, with oranges symbolising ‘success’, and tangerines signifying ‘luck’. Pomeloes are also eaten, with the popular saying, ‘the more you eat, the more wealth it will bring’.

**Tang Yuan or sweet rice balls** are small balls made from rice flour mixed with water, and can be filled with bean paste, brown sugar and a variety of fruits and nuts. Tang yuan are cooked and served in boiling water. These are typically served on the last day of the Chinese New Year, the Lantern Festival, and the name ‘tang yuan’ sounds like the word for ‘reunion’.

**Red envelopes (lucky money)** are given to children by either their parents or grandparents. The envelopes or packets contain money, and are red because this colour represents happiness, good luck and energy. These are usually given to children after the reunion dinner, but it is considered rude to open the packets in front of the person who gives it to you.
Chinese New Year's Day

Fireworks

As the clock strikes 12, fireworks and firecrackers are set off all over China. In some major cities, lighting firecrackers has been banned, due to the danger they pose and the noise which they cause. However, fireworks and rockets are still allowed in most parts of the country. In the smaller cities, towns and rural areas, firecrackers are still released and are not considered a danger.

Greeting Each Other

On New Year’s Day, people wear new clothes, and say "Gongxi", which means ‘greetings’ or ‘congratulations’ and wish each other good luck and happiness in the year to come.

Offering Sacrifices to Ancestors

It is a very popular tradition, which has occurred for thousands of years, for families to offer sacrifices to their ancestors. Often it will occur in a house, in which the members of a family will arrange themselves from oldest to youngest in front of a shrine, and will kneel and bow. It shows how a family is missing their ancestors during this time of celebration. It is also believed that the ancestors take care of their living descendants and have the power to make them prosperous, so it is important to show them respect and gratefulness and to pray for their blessings.

Lion and Dragon Dances

A Lion Dance consists of 2 dancers, who run through the streets, visiting different places, dancing to the rhythm of drums, cymbals and gongs. One of dancers is the head and the other is the body. On the head of the lion is a mirror to frighten off evil spirits with their own reflection.

Dragons are considered helpful, kind creatures in Chinese culture, symbolising wisdom, longevity and luck. They have characteristics of other animals, for example, the footpads of a tiger, the horns of a stag and the scales of a fish, and are also able to fly, swim and walk. These dragons look and act very differently to how dragons are perceived by Western culture. Leading the dance is a man, carrying a ‘pearl of wisdom’ on a pole, with the dragon following him to the beat of the drum. The dragon is made up of a line of dancers, holding a pole in each hand. As the dancers move forward, they will also raise and lower the pole. The dragon can reach 100m long!

New Year: Day 2

On this day, a married daughter will visit the house of her parents.
New Year: Days 3–7
From the third day to the seventh day, people go out to visit relatives and friends. It is also customary, on the third day, to go and visit the tombs of their relatives.

New Year: Day 8
Most people return to work on the eighth day, marking the end of the New Year holiday.

Lantern Festival: Day 15
The Lantern Festival marks the end of the Spring Festival and will also be the first full moon of the New Year. It is also the Chinese equivalent of Valentine’s Day.

Watching Lanterns
The origin of the Lantern Festival is believed to have started in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), in which Emperor Hanmingdi, a devout Buddhist, heard that some monks were lighting lanterns in the temples, as a mark of respect to Buddha on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. He then ordered all people to light lanterns on that evening. This tradition has continued and during the festival, people come together to watch the red lanterns, of all shapes and sizes, floating in the sky or lake. There will also be fireworks and people will traditionally eat yuanxiao.

Playing Lantern Riddles
Guess the lantern riddle is an integral part of the festival which originated in the Southern Song Dynasty (960 - 1279). People would write riddles on paper notes and paste them onto a lantern. If a reader thought that they had correctly answered the riddle, they take the paper out and go to the owner of the lantern, to see if they were right. This tradition is still carried out today, with prizes being awarded to people who answer the questions correctly.