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The Many New Years

Among all of the celebrations in the world, there is one notable holiday that is recognized by all, if not many, people. That universal celebration is New Year's Day. In many Asian cultures, most people celebrate the New Year, commonly referred to as Lunar New Year, in February instead of January, since they use the lunisolar calendar as opposed to the Gregorian calendar. In Chinese culture, people tend to call the date Chinese New Year. In Japanese culture, people began celebrating New Year's Eve instead of Lunar New Year after adopting the Gregorian calendar in 1873. Although Japan celebrates New Year's Day like many Western countries, Chinese and Japanese celebrations of this holiday are similar in terms of the meanings behind their cuisine, customs, and superstitions.

Many of the cuisines share the same meaning in both cultures. According to Molly H. Isham in *Asian Pacific American Heritage: A Companion to Literature and Arts*, "Fish is essential on New Year's Eve" since the Chinese pronunciation of fish, *Yú*, "has the same sound as the word 'abundance' or 'surplus.'" In another source, Michelle Lynn Dinh writes in SoraNews24, "grilled fish is eaten as a prayer for a successful career" and certain fishes hold other meanings such as "happiness" or "success of rapid promotion." *Nian gao*, or New Year's rice cake, is known in Chinese New Year to bring wealth since these desserts resemble gold and silver ingots. Whereas in Japanese culture, people eat *kinton*, a golden dumpling made out of

sweet potatoes and chestnuts. Just like the *nian gao*, the *kinton* also represents wealth since this cultural food looks like gold and silver ingots. In addition to the related dishes, they have identical preparations for the celebration.

During the New Years, both cultures have similar customs before and during the commemoration. An Australian travel writer based in Tokyo, Jessica Korteman states that Japanese people often "use the term '*osouji*' to describe the ritualistic cleaning of homes." Chinese culture is much the same, "everything in the house was washed, swepted, cleaned" (Isham). Another similarity is in how both cultures' temples and shrines serve as an important place to visit on the big holiday. On the third day of Chinese New Year, Chinese worshippers visit the temple to "light incense and pray to deities for blessings and good luck," stated by Chloe-Rose Crabtree, a history editor. Likewise, Japanese people go out for *hatsumode*, the first shrine visit of the year to pray and make wishes.

Furthermore, Chinese and Japanese culture share superstitions. Both believe in potential bad luck. For example, the Japanese have *shimenawa*, sacred straw ropes that are commonly tied to structures or trees to protect a sacred space from evil spirits. In their homes, they hang a special *shimenawa,* called *shimekazari,* at the entrances of homes and offices. Similarly, red paper lanterns are hung around the house to ward off evil in Chinese culture. In addition, Japanese people read fortunes written on white strips of paper during their visits to temples. If the fortune one pulls happens to be a bad fortune, one would tie the strip to a tree in order to keep the bad luck away. Likewise, Chinese people also have their own good luck charm at the start of their New Years. Elders generally pass out lucky red envelopes that contain crisp bills to friends or family members. Equally, Japanese people purchase good luck charms such as tokens or

wooden arrows, called *hamayas*. These *hamayas*, which translate to “arrow that destroys demons,” are bought every year and burned at the end of the following year in return for a new arrow.

In closing, although the way Chinese and Japanese celebrate their New Year’s Day seem different, many cultural similarities remained after Japan adopted the Gregorian calendar. They’re both ultimately very much the same in the meaning behind their cuisine, customs and superstitions.

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