Chinese New Year

This is the most important time of the year for the Chinese. Everyone stays with his or her family and a great deal of preparation and many activities are involved.

Traditions and activities

16th day of the 12th lunar month

May Nga, 尾禡. This is the final celebration of Nga for the year. In traditional businesses, the owner makes offerings to the Gods. A big lunch with all staff is held. For further details see chapter 16, Business Matters.

Lead-up to Chinese New Year’s Eve

Barn neen for, 辦年貨, buy food, decorations, and presents for New Year visits, an outing for all the female members of the family. The most common gift is sweet snacks.

Warn sun, 還神, visit temples to pay respects and give thanks to the Gods and Goddesses from whom one sought protection.
at the beginning of the year. Older members of the family represent the clan.

*Jeen tow fart*, 剪頭髮, hair cut. Get a new look for the New Year. *Serng guung*, 雙工, double wages, hairdressers double prices in the two weeks prior to Chinese New Year.

*Mye sun sarm sun bye*, 買新衫新鞋, buy clothes and shoes. Shops and hair salons operate until very late on New Year’s Eve. It is bargain time, with many shops (not hairdressers) offering discounts up to 50% or 60% for that new look.

### 23rd or 24th day of the 12th lunar month

*Neen ya say jair jo*, 年廿四謝灶, twenty-fourth day thank the Kitchen God. *Jo Gwun*, 灶君, God of Stove, Kitchen God, was a man who became a god after he was killed in a stove. In Heaven, he harassed the goddesses and was punished by a demotion to Kitchen God. Not much of a punishment, it suits his character because he can see women in the kitchen all day long.

Traditionally, different classes of people thank *Jo Gwun* on different days:

*Goon sarm mun say darn ga ng fart fuung look*, 官三民四賊家五發瘋六, government officials 23rd, commoners 24th, *Darn Ga* (the Tanka tribe in Hong Kong who live on boats in Cheung Chau, Aberdeen, Sai Kung, etc.) 25th, lunatics 26th.

It sounds like a good idea to say thanks on the 26th to me, just to be on the safe side…
Two cubes of brown sugar, candies and sweet dumplings, are offered to sweeten Jo Gwun’s tongue, so he cannot say bad things about the family when presenting his annual report on the 25th to the Emperor of the Heavenly Court. Peanuts are put out to keep his mouth busy so he has no time to gossip while at Court.

28th day of the 12th lunar month

*Neen ya bart sye lart tart*, 年廿八洗辣撻, twenty-eighth day wash the dirt away.

*Dye so choy*, 大掃除, thorough house cleaning, spring cleaning.

Decorate the house with New Year scrolls, *fye chun*, 揮春, and flowers, *neen fa*, 年花, (not white flowers, which are associated with death). Printed scrolls are sold in stationery shops and the flower market does a thriving business.

*Look yow yeep chuung lerng*, 碌柚葉沖涼, take a pomelo leaf bath. To bring good luck and wash away bad luck.

Some common New Year scrolls:

*Guung hay fart choy*, 恭喜發財, good wishes and good fortune

*Fook*, 福, good luck, happiness

*Chut yup ping on*, 出入平安, travel safely

*Sun tye geen hong*, 身體健康, good health

*Hok yip jern bo*, 學業進步, make progress in your studies

*Marn see yew yee*, 萬事如意, or *marn see sing yee*, 萬事勝意, everything as you would wish or better than you could imagine
Sarng yee hing luung, 生意興隆, good business
Sum serng see sing, 心想事成, may all your wishes come true
Luung ma jing sun, 龍馬精神, may you have the health and energy of dragons and horses
Fook sing go jeeu, 福星高照, may a lucky star shine on you
Bo bo go sing, 步步高陞, progress step by step
Neen neen yow yew, 年年有餘, enjoy surplus every year. This scroll may be replaced by a picture of a fish which conveys the same meaning.
Fa hoy foo guye, 花開富貴, flower blossoming brings wealth
Jeeu choy jern bo, 招財進寶, wealth coming in
Foo guye gut cherng, 富貴吉祥, wealth and good luck. A picture of a mandarin orange conveys the same meaning. This applies to the following two scrolls as well.
Dye gut dye lay, 大吉大利, good luck, good luck
Hoy guung dye gut, 開工大吉, start to work good luck. This particularly refers to the opening of the working year after the holiday and calls on the gods for luck in all endeavours throughout the coming year
Teen jung soy yewt yun jung sow, 天增歲月人增壽, heaven ages, people age; a wish for longevity
Chern moon keen kwun fook moon moon, 春滿乾坤福滿門, as spring is in the air may good luck come to your door
Decorations are red and gold; red, symbolic of luck, is believed to exorcise evil and gold is symbolic of wealth. Pictures of children playing, pictures of the Money God, choy sun, 財神, and auspicious emblems (such as fish, yew, 魚; bats, fuk sew, 福
鼠; peaches, *sow to*, 壽桃; peach blossom, *to fa*; 桃花; peony, *mow darn*, 牡丹; and an abstract design of a knot, *yew yee*, 如意, are displayed.

Fresh cut flowers and plants in bud (when the flowers bloom it symbolises the bringing in of wealth), *fa boy foo gwye*, 花開富貴, in lucky colours of red, pink, yellow or orange fill the house. Particularly lucky plants include:

- *Gut*, 桔 or *gut jye*, 桔仔, mandarin orange
- *Dye gut*, 大桔, tangerine
- *Gum gwut*, 甘橘, kumquat
- *Ng doy tuung tong*, 五代同堂, fox face, a yellow fruit with four rounded protrusions (symbolising five generations)
- *To fa*, 桃花, peach blossom
- *Soy seen fa*, 水仙花, narcissus
- *Cherk yerk*, 芍藥, dahlia (which looks like a peony)
- *Mow darn*, 牡丹, peony, a traditional symbol of wealth
- *Geem larn*, 劍蘭, gladiolus (not white)
- *Gook fa*, 菊花, chrysanthemum (not white)
- *Larn fa*, 蘭花, orchid
- *Ngun low*, 銀柳, silvery bud, pussy willow

Many people go overseas at this time of the year, often their only chance of a long holiday. Schools and many service businesses close; offices with business related to industry are quiet as most factories shut over the long holiday.

**30th day of the 12th lunar month, New Year’s Eve**

*Neen sarm sup marn*, 年三十晚, Chinese New Year’s eve
Tewn neen farn, 團年飯, family reunion dinner. After a big feast and ancestor worship, visit a New Year’s Eve Fair, harng neen seeu see cherng, 行年宵市場, more commonly known as visiting the flower market, harng fa see, 行花市.

The biggest New Year’s Eve Fair is in Causeway Bay at Victoria Park, Wye Yewn, 維園. It opens four days before Chinese New Year and remains open until about 5am on first day of New Year. Half of the stalls sell flowers, the other half sell gadgets and New Year decorations. There are also a few stalls selling food and drink.

Other New Year’s Eve Fairs are held in Shatin Central Park, Kowloon Park, and many public soccer grounds.

The most popular flower market on Kowloon side is Fa Hoy, 花墟, near Prince Edward MTR Station, this market operates throughout the year. Shops stay open 24 hours a day only over the two days immediately before New Year.

Serng tow jew herng, 上頭炷香, visit temples. The first person to perform the rites attracts particularly good luck throughout the coming year. Some people wear protective clothing, helmets and goggles, as they fight to be first and to protect themselves from the lit candles and incense held by other worshippers. Television cameras record the violence, it regularly features on the news as people fight to get their incense into the pot first.

The most popular is Wong Tai Sin Temple, Wong Dye Seen Meeu, 黃大仙廟. It closes during the afternoon of New Year’s Eve and re-opens at 11pm, the first hour jee see, 子時, in Chinese timekeeping.
Soy marn sow lo, chor ng kye see, 歲晚收爐, 初五啓市, New Year’s Eve turn off the stove, on the fifth day restart business. Restaurants and shops close for a few days, the owner puts a red notice on the door, telling customers when they will start business again. Generally, chain restaurants and supermarkets remain open during the holiday period. You had better book well in advance to get a seat in those restaurants which do remain open. Most business owners study the almanac Tuung Sing, 通勝, to choose a lucky time and day to re-open the business. Gods are worshipped and offerings laid to ask the divine powers for good luck.

New Year Activities, day by day
1st day, Dye neen chor yut, 大年初一

Bye neen, 拜年, praise the year; shake your fist enclosed in your other hand (it doesn’t matter which hand is on the outside) as a greeting while saying something auspicious to family members and all you meet during Chinese New Year.

Auspicious sayings:

Guung hay fart choy, 恭喜發財, good wishes, good fortune, congratulations on being rich.

Sun tye geen hong, 身體健康. Good health.

Sum serng see sing, 心想事成. May all your wishes come true.

Ching chern serng jew, 青春常駐. Forever young and beautiful.

Sarng yee hing luung, 生意興隆. Good business.

Hok yip jern bo, 學業進步. Make progress in your studies.
Pye lye see, 派利是, give red packets: married couples give pairs of red packets to all children they encounter and unmarried family members. Those who are widowed or divorced, or never married, give only one red packet, as do Shanghainese and Northern Chinese.

Hoy guung lye see, 開工利是, start work red packet: Give red packets to watchman and cleaners in your building, and the waiters and waitresses in restaurants you regularly visit, as a thank you for their kindnesses throughout the year.
After a lunch at home (wet markets and many restaurants are closed), go out to pay New Year Visits, *bye neen*. Lunch is often congee, *juuk*, 粥, which sounds like *juuk*, 足, enough, satisfied, and New Year’s cakes which are vegetable cakes set with agar agar or gelatine. Those restaurants that open only serve a New Year menu, have no special offers, and charge an extra 20-30% for service.

Dress in new, brightly coloured clothes, particularly red. Avoid white and grey, fashion is not important.

Cinemas remain open and gambling of any kind is good luck: *fart sun neen choy*, 發新年財. Play mahjong, *da ma jerk*, 打麻雀, play dice, *yew ba bye*, 魚蝦蟹, etc. Children are invited to gamble with the lucky red packet money.

*Ho soy booi*, 賀歲盃, celebrate New Year cup. An international soccer tournament is held at Hong Kong Stadium over the first few days of New Year.

*Seeu pow jerng*, 燒炮仗, lighting firecrackers. Firecrackers for private use are illegal in Hong Kong, but you will see them cracking away in temples and ancestral halls in villages all the same. It is a respected custom.

*Fa chair chern yow*, 花車巡遊, car parade, usually in Tsim Sha Tsui in the evening. Local and overseas businesses are invited by the Hong Kong Tourism Board to participate. Trucks are decorated, many hosting local or overseas dancers and acrobats, to form a colourful parade.
2nd day, *Dye neen chor yee*, 大年初二

*Hoy neen*, 開年, open year. Huge banquets are held at home, families pay respects to their ancestors and worship the Gods. The banquet must include vegetarian dishes, tofu coloured red, fish, chicken and roast pork. (See Auspicious Food, Chapter 23.)

*Poon choy*, 盆菜, basin food. Hakka-style feast food is served in a communal bowl. The dishes are layered on top of each other and each diner takes what he wants with his personal chopsticks. No serving implements are provided.

*Bye sun*, 拜神, praise the gods, *jok fook*, 作福, seek good luck, and *bye Tye Soy*, 拜太歲, worship the god *Tye Soy*. Visit temples to lay offerings, make wishes and ask for good luck. Every year, people of some zodiac years offend the god *Tye Soy*, 太歲. The bad luck this offence reaps is called *farn tye soy*, 犯太歲, or if the luck is seriously bad, *chuung tye soy*, 冲太歲. To avoid it, worship *Tye Soy* who is found in most temples.

Have your fortune told in a temple. (See Fortune Tellers, chapter 20.) The most popular spots are:

*Sye Guung Bart Herng Chair Guung Meeu*, 西貢八鄉車公廟, Che Kung Temple in Sai Kung. (Che Kung’s birthday is on the 2nd day of Chinese New Year.)

*Dye Wye Chair Guung Meeu*, 大圍車公廟, Che Kung Temple in Tai Wai. Hong Kong Government officials attend rites at this temple to seek the fortune for the territory.

Dye Bo lum chewn hoy yewn sew, 大埔林村許願樹, Wishing Tree in Lam Tsuen near Tai Po. The tree is now fenced off and boards erected upon which wishes are hung. The wishes used to be hung directly on the tree along with an orange; this, however, weighed the branches down until they were in danger of breaking.

Bo Leen Jee, 寶蓮寺, Po Lin Monastery on Lantau Island.

Marn Fut Jee, 萬佛寺, Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Sha Tin.

Mo see, 舞獅, lion dances, and mo luung, 舞龍, dragon dances, are held throughout Hong Kong. The performers are Kung Fu school apprentices. The dances are performed on the street. The lion or dragon symbolises protection. At the beginning of the dance, the eyes are dotted and then the beast wakens and hunts for food. Speed picks up and a red packet tied to a sprig of Chinese lettuce is placed in an awkward position and it is part of the object of the dance to see how dexterously the lion is able to extract it. The pun is on the sound of cboy (vegetables) with cboy (wealth). The dragon need not be fed. Once he is wakened he dances playfully guided by a ball symbolising a pearl. Satisfied, the beast leaves to find entertainment elsewhere.

Yeen fa wuee yeen, 煙花匯演, fireworks, held at 8pm on Victoria Harbour. The waterfront at TST, Wan Chai and Causeway Bay is crowded. Hotels charge extra for rooms with a sea view and the Star Ferry suspends service during the performance. Boat trips can be arranged to view the fireworks from the harbour.
Chinese New Year

3rd day

Chor sarm chek bow, 初三赤口, third day red mouth. Stay at home. It is said that people will quarrel when they meet.

The Hong Kong Jockey Club organises horse racing, pow ma, 跑馬, including a Treble, sarm tee, 三T. Mark Six lottery, look hup choy, 六合彩, is offered with an extra jackpot, sun chern gum dor bo, 新春金多寶, New Year snowball.

4th day

Jing yewt chor say, boy guung dye gut, 正月初四, 開工大吉, first month fourth day, start work good luck. Most businesses re-open. The boss gives red packets (containing cash as a personal gift) to employees, pye boy guung lye see, 派開工利是. This form of lye see is not received by civil servants as it falls outside the law.

New Year feasts are held from this day on over the first month. Among friends and relatives these are called tewn bye, 團拜; for companies and colleagues, chern ming, 春茗.

7th day

Chor chut yun yut, 初七人日, mankind’s birthday. No formal celebration. According to Ancient Chinese legend, the great Goddess, Noy Wor, 女娲, created a different thing on each of the first ten days:

1st day chicken, 2nd dog, 3rd sheep and goat, 4th pig, 5th cow and ox, 6th horse, 7th mankind, 8th cereal grain, 9th sky, and 10th land.
15th day

Jing yewt sup ng, yewn seej jeet, 正月十五, 元宵節, first month fifteenth day, grand evening festival. Lantern Festival, also known as Chinese Valentine’s Day. In ancient China, this was the only day of the year on which females were permitted to go out in public and so the only opportunity to see females from other families (and perhaps your future wife). There is no custom of celebration amongst lovers in Hong Kong.

Huang Hum Go Sarn Do Guung Yewn Fa Dung Wooi, 紅磡高山道公園花燈會, a lantern carnival held at Ko Shan Road Park in Hung Hom. The lanterns are decorated with riddles. This had its origins in seeking a smart man to be your son-in-law.

New Year taboos, gum gay, 禁忌

After thorough house cleaning, bad luck is believed to be banished and good luck remains. The following activities are not advised during the first days of Chinese New Year as they could carry away the good luck:

Sweep or dust, so day, 掃地.
Break things, da larn yair, 打爛嘢.
Wash hair, sye tow, 洗頭. The head is the most important part of the body, these days a shower or bath may be taken but avoid wetting the head.
Use knives or scissors (for fear of injury), yuung lay hay, 用利器.
Use forbidden or taboo words, gong mm gut lay gair sewt wa, 講唔吉利嘅說話 (e.g. death, say, 死; illness, beng, 病; lose, sew, 輸).
Fight or argue, *da gow*, 打交; *aye gow*, 嚷交.

Buy anything associated with misfortune e.g. shoes, *bye*, 鞋 – sounds like sighing; books, *sew*, 書 – sounds like lose, *sew*, 輸, if you are carrying a book do not go near a mahjong table or you risk being chased away; clocks, *juung*, 鐘 – sounds like the end, *juung*, 終, a euphemism for death, etc.

Wear colours associated with funerals: white, black, or dark blue, or colours associated with monks and nuns: brown and grey. Colours symbolising good luck should be worn: especially red; also gold, pink, yellow, orange or purple.

**New Year food**

*Chewn hop*, 全盒, everything box. A box of mixed sweets is kept on hand for visitors, each item symbolises a New Year wish:

A pair of mandarin oranges, with leaves, for decoration, *dye gut*, 大桔 (*dye gut dye lay*, 大吉大利, good luck, huge profit);

Lots of chocolates, *jew gwoo lik*, 朱古力, and candies, *tong*, 糖, (*teem teem mut mut*, 甜甜蜜蜜, sweet and happy life);

Melon seeds, *gwa jee*, 瓜子 (*yow ngarn*, 抓銀, grab some silver/money). The grabbing refers to the action of taking up a handful of seeds which open to reveal a silvery kernel;

Crystallised lotus seeds, *tong leen jee*, 糖蓮子 (*neen sarng guye jee*, 年生貴子, have a baby every year);

Crystallised lotus root, *tong leen ngow*, 糖蓮藕 (*gye ngow teen sing*, 佳偶天成, find a true love);
Crystallised water chestnuts, *tong ma tye*, 糖馬蹄 (*luung ma jing sun*, 龍馬精神 healthy as a dragon and horse)

Crystallised coconut, *tong yair jee*, 糖椰子 (*yair yair jee sewn*, 爺爺子孫, grandfather and grandchildren, a wish for a big family and longevity); and

Crystallised shredded coconut, *tong yair see*, 糖椰絲 (*teem see see*, 甜絲絲, sweet and happy).

Go, 糕, cakes and puddings. Go, cake, sounds the same as go, 高, tall or high, which symbolises getting ahead, promotion, growing taller, etc., (*bo bo go sing*, 步步高陞, progress step by step):

*Neen go*, 年糕, steamed brown sugar and rice flour cake (flavoured with coconut milk)

*Lor bark go*, 蘿蔔糕, steamed turnip cake (with preserved meat or mushrooms)

*Woo tow go*, 芋頭糕, steamed taro cake (with five spices)

*Ma tye go*, 馬蹄糕, steamed water chestnut cake.

**Lucky New Year dumplings, deep fried snacks**

*Yow gok*, 油角, dumpling filled with red bean paste, looks like money, gold nuggets

*Gok jye*, 角仔 or *choy gok*, 脆角, filled with peanuts, sesame, or sugared coconut, looks like money, gold nuggets

*Jeen doy*, 煎堆, looks like a full money purse (*jeen doy look look, gum ngun moon ook*, 煎堆碌碌，金銀滿屋, the round dumpling rolls, gold and silver fill your halls)
*Seeu bow jo*, 笑口棗, crisp, bite-sized, doughnut with sesame coating which splits open when deep fried to look like a mouth opened wide with laughter (*seeu bow serng hoy*, 笑口常開, laughing all the time)

*Ja woo see*, 炸芋絲, deep fried shredded taro balls. Seasonal.