



Introducing and Exploring Lunar New Year

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Introduction

Lunar New Year (sometimes called Spring Festival) is a holiday celebrated throughout the world that signifies the start of a new lunar calendar, planting season, and the arrival of spring. Previously known as Chinese New Year, the shift in name reflects a more inclusive representation of the many groups of people that celebrate this holiday. The celebration lasts a little over two weeks and starts the end of January or beginning of February, congruent with the amount of time between the first new moon and first full moon of the lunar calendar. Thousands of years ago, an animal within the Chinese zodiac was assigned to each month of the lunar year which rotates each time the celebration occurs. For example, 2025 was the Year of the Snake and 2026 will be the Year of the Horse. While Lunar New Year traditions may vary regionally, giving friends and family red envelopes containing money, playing celebratory music on gongs and drums, and shooting off fireworks are common practices that bring good luck.

Lesson 1 – Movement, Storytelling, and Song

- Warm-up – beat keeping or stretching/movement with song 恭喜恭喜 [Gong Xi Gong Xi](#)
- Set the scene – outline focus for the day (morning meeting) and facilitate discussion on what students noticed about 恭喜恭喜 Gong Xi Gong Xi
 - Make connection that music can be used for specific celebrations: What holidays does your family celebrate? What music do you sing, play, or listen to as part of the celebrations?
 - Introduce Lunar New Year by sharing some facts, photos, videos
 - I love to find a reputable infographic and share facts with my students this way; they also love to look up the animal for their birth year and learn about the characteristics of each animal
- Move – using the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac as impetus for movement, invite students to explore how each might travel using known movement concepts
 - Animals – rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig

→ While students move, play a recording of 划呀划 Yī Yā Yāo (Rowing Song from <http://www.chinesefolksongs.com/>; learned from Moriah Holmes) or perform the melody on recorder

Yī Yā Yāo

Rowing Song

Transcribed by K. Friesen Wiens

Traditional Beijing Rhyme
Music by Prof. Xu Hong Shuai

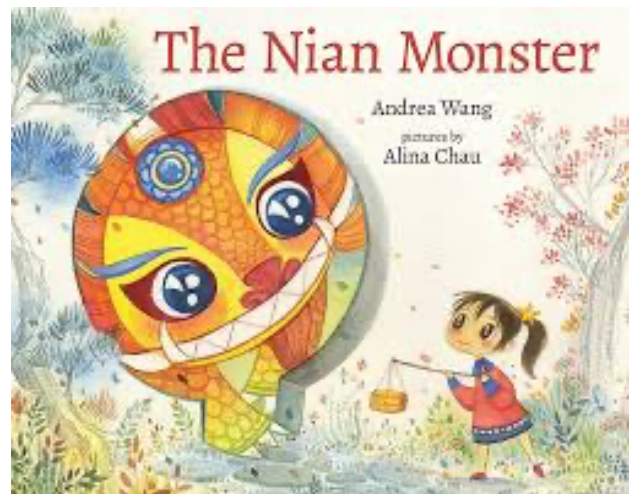
♩ = 120

Yī yā yāo, yī yā yāo, yī yā yī yā yī yā yāo! Yī yā yāo,

6

yī yā yāo, jiǔ bā qī liù wǔ sì sān èr yī yā yāo!

→ Tell a story – read Andrea Wang’s book, *The Nian Monster* which shares the myth of Nian and the beginning of the Lunar New Year celebration but with a twist (or use a read-a-loud, linked below)



→ I like to pause throughout to have students predict what will happen next in the story and make connections to some of the special Lunar New Year dishes that are mentioned

→ After reading, invite students to share a summary or what they learned about Lunar New Year

→ Melody game – present the following melodic cells from 划呀划 Yī Yā Yāo on the board and have students decode (sol-mi-do; sol-mi-sol-mi; sol-sol-sol-sol)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| s | m | d |
|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| s | m | s | m |
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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| s | s | s | s |
|---|---|---|---|

→ Play a game where the teacher points to a melody card and students sing and do body solfege; repeat with student leaders

→ End with teacher scaffolding the melody of Yī Yā Yāo, students sing and do solfege

Lesson 2 – Introducing 伊呀哟 Yī Yā Yāo in Mandarin and Dragon Boating

- Warm-up – beat keeping or stretching/movement with song 恭喜恭喜 [Gong Xi Gong Xi](#)
- Set the scene – outline focus for the day (morning meeting), review what was learned last time, and share the background of 恭喜恭喜 Gong Xi Gong Xi (official Lunar New Year song)
 - Share with students that dragons show up throughout the Lunar New Year celebration (Nian, dragon boating, dragon dancing)
- Explore – rowing body percussion paired with speaking in Mandarin
 - Review the melody from last class using body solfege
 - Introduce body percussion ostinato: snap – clap – pat
 - Modify → snap – clap – swipe off sides of legs
 - Modify → snap – clap – swipe off legs right, snap – clap – swipe off legs left
 - Students play pattern while teacher sings the melody without words
 - Repeat with students singing melody, doing body percussion
 - Repeat with teacher singing the words while students play body percussion
 - Invite students to guess the language and then show the side-by-side translation of the song (pinyin¹ on the left, Mandarin on the right)

Yī yā yāo, yī yā yāo

yī yā yī yā yī yā yāo!

Yī yā yāo, yī yā yāo,

jiǔ bā qī liù wǔ sì sān èr yī yā yāo!

伊呀哟

伊呀哟， 伊呀哟，

伊呀伊呀伊呀哟！伊呀哟，

伊呀哟，

九八八七六五四三二二伊呀哟！

- Discuss the translation: Yī yā yāo = slogan for hard work, sometimes used to get people to work together, like in dragon boating; jiǔ bā qī liù wǔ sì sān èr = 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
 - I discuss with students that Mandarin is a tonal language, meaning that there are many different ways of pronouncing the same word, thus changing the meaning; we also discuss how the Mandarin characters relate to their meaning (character for 3=3 lines)
- Show pictures and videos of dragon boat races (linked below)
- Using the pronunciation resource from <http://www.chinesefolksongs.com/>, echo numbers 1-9 in Mandarin and Yī yā yāo
- If time, try putting speech together slowly with or without the body percussion

¹Pinyin is a system of writing Mandarin sounds using the Roman alphabet that also acts as a pronunciation guide.

→ Art connection – students create a Chinese paper cut horse craft (all templates created by children’s book author, Grace Lin; archive to all of these amazing resources and more crafts for Lunar New Year found on her website, linked below)

- This is a multi-step process which sometimes takes 3 classes; students sometimes need help cutting
- On the first day, I have students work in partners to fold their paper in half, trace the animal image along the line of symmetry, and start cutting it out
- While students work, practice speaking or singing Yī yā yāo; this is a team effort and is so worth it!



Lesson 3 – Singing, Playing, and Creating with 咿呀哟 Yī Yā Yāo, Part I

- Warm-up – listen to recording of Yī yā yāo several times, students offer ideas on ways to keep the beat that could look like rowing; eventually switch to rowing body percussion part
- Set the scene – outline focus for the day (morning meeting), review Mandarin pronunciation with the recording
- Explore – rowing body percussion paired with singing Mandarin
 - Echo sing Yī yā yāo part several times, then have students be in charge of that part while teacher sings the number section, taking turns several times with body percussion
 - Echo sing jiǔ bā qī liù wǔ sì sān èr part several times; switch jobs, perform
 - Students to select their favorite part, perform with body percussion; repeat with second favorite part
 - Review that Yī yā yāo might be used for working together while dragon boating
 - Discuss with students what might happen if not all rowers are rowing together, how that might affect a race, etc.
 - Show another dragon boating video and have students identify what is helping to set the pace for the rowers (a drum!)
- Play a game – compete in many heats of a dragon boat race
 - Organize students into two lines side by side; place a drum at the front of the boat with a mallet (I use my bass bar ones) and a long dowel at the back (for the tiller, optional)
 - Captain plays the steady beat on the drum to show the rowers how fast to row, sing; rowers sing and play the rowing body percussion; the tiller acts out steering the boat
 - Repeat until all students have had a turn at each job – great for practicing the song 1000 times and every child will want to have a turn!
- Art connection – continue working on paper cut craft

Lesson 4 – Singing, Playing, and Creating with 㗎呀㗎 Yī Yā Yāo, Part II

- Warm-up – play a few rounds of the dragon boating game from last time with singing
- Set the scene – outline focus for the day (morning meeting)
- Review – practice Mandarin pronunciation with the recording
- Play a game – finish student turns on dragon boating game, if not done
- Art connection – finish working on paper cut craft, if needed

**I have a slide deck available with all of my Lunar New Year lesson segments that I update yearly, please let me know if you would like access ☺

Possible Extensions

From year to year, my Lunar New Year lessons vary. I have included the following activities in the past and students often comment that this set of lessons is their favorite of the year. I typically teach this in 2nd grade, but it could really fit anywhere with modifications.

- Dragon dancing – competitions or entertainment events happen during Lunar New Year and throughout the year; sharing videos is a great entry point for students
 - Movement and dance – invite students to explore some of the named moves within the dragon dance: whirlpool, threading the money, cloud cave, and more
 - Music – play video examples of dragon dancing and have students listen for what they notice about the music and movement; invite students to create music using cymbals and drums that illustrates the dragon’s movements in a dragon dancing video
 - Put it together – split students into two groups: dancers and musicians, then choose one student from the dancer group to be the “pearl of wisdom”; dancers use a red tablecloth prop as the dragon and follow the movements of the pearl of wisdom (I use a red ball borrowed from my PE teacher); musicians create music to accompany the dragon dance, changing their pattern when the dragon’s movements shifts (idea from Moriah Holmes, cited below)
- Lion dancing – also a part of Lunar New Year and other celebrations; watching videos of competitions for lion dancing that feature stunning acrobatics and martial arts have been a huge hit with my students
- Ribbon dancing – we will be exploring ribbon dancing this year thanks to Melanie Kang’s amazing resource, *Lions, Lanterns, and Ribbons* and her presentation at AOSA last year
- Sing and play Gong Xi Gong Xi – xylophone arrangement + teaching process in Kang’s book

Teaching Considerations

Although teaching music from any tradition should not be limited to focus on only cultural celebrations or holidays, it is a great entry point for students along the path. If possible, consulting

with or inviting in a culture bearer into your classroom is a great way for students to learn first about Lunar New Year. All materials cited in the references and additional resources sections below contain a wealth of free videos, lesson plans, virtual tours, and more to further support introducing Lunar New Year and/or additional opportunities to engage with music from Asia.

Lesson References

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CGTN Europe. (2024, July 27). *Dragon boat racing at the Olympics.*

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Coral Springs Chinese Cultural Association. (2016, February 20). *2016 CSCCA cny dragon dance.*

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Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2025, July 3). *Lunar new year.* Encyclopedia Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lunar-New-Year>

Lee, Meiyu. (Unknown). *Dragon dance.* NLB³⁰.

<https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=848b0702-f59e-4ab6-8dc7-3f7f218131b7>

One World Nations Online. (Unknown). *Dragons and the dragon dance.*

https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/dragon_dance.htm

Meredith, A. (2024, October 29). *The history and modern practice of the dragon boat festival.*

Chinese Language Institute. <https://studycli.org/chinese-holidays/dragon-boat-festival/>

National Geographic. (2018, July 7). *Dragon boat races celebrate China's ancient past | national geographic.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIPEXNPYPwQ>

Reading with PingNut. (2022, January 30). *The nian monster: Lunar Chinese new year story (read aloud) reading with pingnut.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOMQL3oIW6k>

Smithsonian Folklife. (2020, April 14). *Chinese dragon dance.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi95ZTEHoL8>

Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art. (Unknown). *Dragon dance.*

<https://asia-archive.si.edu/learn/for-educators/teaching-china-with-the-smithsonian/videos/dragon-dance/>

Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art. (Unknown). *Lunar new year.*

<https://asia.si.edu/whats-on/events/celebrations/lunar-new-year-celebration/>

Yung, I. & MacPhee, M. (2025, January 13). *Lunar new year.* National Geographic Society.

<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/lunar-new-year/>

Xue Xi Language Channel. (2019, February 4). *The original gong xi gong xi song.*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZYfG8kkqXQ&list=RD-ZYfG8kkqXQ&start_radio=1

Additional Resources for Extending Learning

Children's literature

- *The Nian Monster* by Andrea Wang
- *Dragon Dance: A Chinese New Year Lift the Flap Book* by Joan Holub
- *How to Catch a Dragon* by Adam Wallace
- *Round as a Mooncake: A Book of Shapes* by Roseanne Thong
- *Thanking the Moon: Celebrating the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival* by Grace Lin
- *A Big Mooncake for Little Star* by Grace Lin

Manipulatives

- Chinese zodiac animal rhythm cards, <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Chinese-Zodiac-Rhythm-Cards-FREEBIE-Syllabic-Rhythm-New-Year-Culture-1046236>

Resource books, articles, and websites

- Carnegie Hall's Musical Explorers resource, lesson plans and teaching videos for Gong Xi with Qian Yi, <https://www.carnegiehall.org/Education/Programs/Musical-Explorers/Digital/Program-Six/Qian-Yi/Lesson-2>
- Children's book author, Grace Lin's website, <https://gracelin.com/> and amazing newsletter of resources for Lunar New Year and beyond, sign up here: <https://lp.constantcontactpages.com/su/kEmJMT3/newsletter>
- Moriah Holmes, a Chinese music educator, shares great resources for Lunar New Year and more on Instagram (@holmessweetmusichome)
- Kim Friesen Wiens' work, the Chinese Folk Songs Project funded by the Confucius Institute of Edmonton, features a collection of Chinese folk songs, <http://www.chinesefolksongs.com/>
- *The Heart Rhythms, Songs, and Dances of Korea* by Dong-Won Kim and Karissa O. Van Liew
- *Voice Collectors: Stories and Songs of Chinese Culture Bearers* by Le Zhang and Sarah H. Watts
- *Lions, Lanterns, and Ribbons: Celebrate the Lunar New Year in Movement and Song!* by Melanie Kang
- Melanie Kang's presentation notes from the 2024 AOSA Conference, available in the AOSA resource library
- Korean children's song *Pan-Tal (Half Moon)* lesson plan by Soyeon Kang, available in the AOSA resource library