Imagine standing on a crowded street, firecrackers going off all around you and music in the air, as you watch a festive parade. Now imagine seeing a long, brightly colored dragon swaying, bobbing and weaving its way toward you down the middle of that street. That scene, particularly the Dragon Dance, is part of Chinese New Year celebrations each year in Chinese communities around the world. The Dragon Dance is performed at other Chinese celebrations as well, but it is the high point of the Chinese New Year celebration, which is the most important of all Chinese celebrations. In fact, every year the Chinese New Year creates the world's largest human migration as Chinese people around the world travel to be with their families for the holiday.

The Chinese New Year celebration does not happen on December 31st and January 1st like it does in Europe and North America. The Chinese calendar is lunisolar, which means it's based on both the earth's rotations around the sun, like our own calendar, and the moon's rotations around the earth. The Chinese New Year falls at the beginning of the first lunar month of the solar year, which puts it in late January or early-to-mid February each year. The celebration lasts for fifteen days.

The dragon is an ancient and powerful symbol in Chinese culture. Chinese people often refer to themselves as "descendants of the dragon." The dragon is believed to have become an important part of the culture sometime in 2500 B.C., when the powerful emperor Huang Di used a dragon as his banner. The dragon symbol can be found prominently featured in Chinese art and artifacts from every era since then.

Today, brightly colored dragon costumes and puppets, some of them tens of feet long, are operated by a number of dancers for the famous Dragon Dance. The costumes transform several people into a long, dancing dragon, with a pair of legs belonging to each dancer. The puppets make use of long poles that allow the dancers to hold the dragon high and make its head bob and sway, while they make its body twist and undulate like a snake. Some of the dragon puppets are big enough in diameter that they partially cover the dancers' bodies. Others are smaller and seem to float above the dancers and their poles. Most dragon puppets and costume heads have a jaw that can be opened and snapped shut by the dancer carrying or wearing it. In more high-tech dragons, equipment inside the beast's head makes smoke puff out of its nose or mouth.

Accompanying the Chinese New Year celebration is the famous song, "Gong Xi" (pronounced GUNG shee). "Gong Xi," which means congratulations, is sung by Chinese children and adults around the world during the Chinese New Year celebration. The song is so popular throughout the world that several video versions of it can be found on the Internet, some complete with firecrackers (which were invented in China) and dancing dragons.

By Elaine Schmidt

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**Gong xi**  
*(Chinese New Year Song)*

Sing 3 times  
*(4 measures introduction)*

1., 3. Mei-tiao ta jie shiao shiang Mei ge ren de tsui li  
2. Up and down the streets to-day, There's a joyful sound you'll hear.

Jian mian di-i chu hua Jui shi gong xi gong xi  
Family and friends all say: Bless-ings for the New Year!

Gong xi gong xi gong xi ni ya! Gong xi gong xi gong xi ni!  
Happy, happy, happy New Year! Gong xi, gong xi, gong xi ni!