

Lantern Parade

Origin legends

There are many different beliefs about the origin of the Lantern Festival, however, it is likely to have had something to do with celebrating and cultivating positive relationships between people, families, nature and the higher beings that were believed to be responsible for bringing or returning the light each year.

One legend tells us that it was a time to worship [Taiyi](#), the God of Heaven in ancient times. The belief was that the God of Heaven controlled the destiny of the human world. He had sixteen [dragons](#) at his beck and call and he decided when to inflict drought, storms, famine or pestilence upon human beings. Beginning with [Qinshihuang](#), the first emperor of China, after whom China is named, all the emperors ordered splendid ceremonies each year. The emperor would ask Taiyi to bring favorable weather and good health to him and his people.

Another legend associates the Lantern Festival with [Taoism](#). [Tianguan](#) is the Taoist god responsible for good fortune. His birthday falls on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. It is said that Tianguan likes all types of entertainment, so followers prepare various kinds of activities during which they pray for good fortune.

Another legend associates the Lantern Festival with an ancient warrior name Lan Moon, who led a rebellion against the tyrannical king in ancient China. He was killed in the storming of the city and the successful rebels commemorated the festival in his name.

Yet another common legend dealing with the origins of the Lantern Festival speaks of a beautiful crane that flew down to earth from heaven. After it landed on earth it was hunted and killed by some villagers. This angered the [Jade Emperor](#) in Heaven because the crane was his favorite one. Therefore, he planned a storm of fire to destroy the village on the fifteenth lunar day. The Jade Emperor's daughter warned the inhabitants of her father's plan to destroy their village. The village was in turmoil because nobody knew how they could escape their imminent destruction. However, a wise man from another village suggested that every family should hang red lanterns around their houses, set up bonfires on the streets, and explode firecrackers on the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth lunar days. This would give the village the appearance of being on fire to the Jade Emperor. On the fifteenth lunar day, troops sent down from heaven whose mission was to destroy the village saw that the village was already ablaze, and returned to heaven to report to the Jade Emperor. Satisfied, the Jade Emperor decided not to burn down the village. From that day on, people celebrate the anniversary on the fifteenth lunar day every year by carrying lanterns on the streets and exploding firecrackers and fireworks.

Another legend about the origins of Lantern Festival involves a maid named Yuan-Xiao. In the [Han Dynasty](#), Mr. Eastern was a favorite adviser of the emperor. One winter day, he went to the garden and heard a little girl crying and getting ready to jump into a well to commit suicide. Mr. Eastern stopped her and asked why. She said she was Yuan-Xiao, a maid in the emperor's palace and that she never had a chance to see her family since she started working there. If she could not have the chance to show her [filial piety](#) in this life, she would rather die. Mr. Eastern promised to find a way to reunite her with her family. Mr. Eastern left the palace and set up a fortune-telling stall on the street. Due to his reputation, many people asked for their fortunes to be told but every one got the same prediction - a calamitous fire on the fifteenth lunar day. The rumor spread quickly.

Everyone was worried about the future and asked Mr. Eastern for help. Mr. Eastern said that on the thirteenth lunar day, the God of Fire would send a fairy in red riding a black horse to burn down the city. When people saw the fairy they should ask for her mercy. On that day, Yuan-Xiao pretended to be the

red fairy. When people asked for her help, she said that she had a copy of a decree from the God of Fire that should be taken to the emperor. After she left, people went to the palace to show the emperor the decree which stated that the capital city would burn down on the fifteenth. The emperor asked Mr. Eastern for advice. Mr. Eastern said that the God of Fire liked to eat [tangyuan](#) (sweet dumplings). Yuan-Xiao should cook *tangyuan* on the fifteenth lunar day and the emperor should order every house to prepare *tangyuan* to worship the God of Fire at the same time. Also, every house in the city should hang red lantern and explode fire crackers. Lastly, everyone in the palace and people outside the city should carry their lanterns on the street to watch the lantern decorations and fireworks. The Jade Emperor would be deceived and everyone would avoid the disastrous fire.

The emperor happily followed the plan. Lanterns were everywhere in the capital city on the night of the fifteenth lunar day. People were walking on the street. Fire crackers kept making lots of noise. It looked like the entire city was on fire. Yuan-Xiao's parents went into the palace to watch the lantern decorations and were reunited with their daughter. The emperor decreed that people should do the same thing every year. Since Yuan-Xiao cooked the best *tangyuan*, people called the day Yuan-Xiao Festival.

Those who do not carry lanterns often enjoy watching informal lantern parades. In addition to eating 'yuanxiao (food)' ([Chinese](#): 元宵; [pinyin](#): *yuánxiāo*), another popular activity at this festival is guessing lantern riddles (which became part of the festival during the [Tang Dynasty](#)), which often contain messages of good fortune, family reunion, abundant harvest, prosperity and love.

Until the [Sui Dynasty](#) in the sixth century, Emperor [Yangdi](#) invited envoys from other countries to China to see the colorful lighted lanterns and enjoy the gala performances.

By the beginning of the [Tang Dynasty](#) in the seventh century, the lantern displays would last three days. The emperor also lifted the curfew, allowing the people to enjoy the festive lanterns day and night. It is not difficult to find Chinese poems which describe this happy scene.

In the [Song Dynasty](#), the festival was celebrated for five days and the activities began to spread to many of the big cities in China. Colorful glass and even [jade](#) were used to make lanterns, with figures from folk tales painted on the lanterns.

However, the largest Lantern Festival celebration took place in the early part of the 15th century. The festivities continued for ten days. [Emperor Chengzu](#) had the downtown area set aside as a center for displaying the lanterns. Even today, there is a place in [Beijing](#) called [Dengshikou](#). In [Chinese](#), *deng* means lantern and *shi* is market. The area became a market where lanterns were sold during the day. In the evening, the local people would go there to see the beautiful lighted lanterns on display.

Today, the displaying of lanterns is still a major event on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month throughout China. [Chengdu](#) in Southwest China's [Sichuan](#) Province, for example, holds a lantern fair each year in Culture Park. During the Lantern Festival, the park is a virtual ocean of lanterns. Many new designs attract large numbers of visitors. The most eye-catching lantern is the Dragon Pole. This is a lantern in the shape of a golden dragon, spiraling up a 27-meter-high pole, spewing fireworks from its mouth. Cities such as [Hangzhou](#) and [Shanghai](#) have adopted electric and neon lanterns, which can often be seen beside their traditional paper or wooden counterparts.