

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



## **The Chinese Dragon**

In China, people think of dragons as helpful, friendly creatures. They are linked to good luck, long life and wisdom. They are nothing like our fierce, fire-breathing Western dragons that hoard treasure, carry off princesses, and eat people. Instead, they are associated with water, storm clouds and life-giving rain.

The dragon is a popular symbol in Chinese culture. The Chinese dragon is a mythical combination of many different animals, having the horns of a deer, the head of a camel, the neck of a snake, the scales of a fish and the paws of a tiger. It has special powers so they can fly in the air, swim in the sea and walk on land. The Chinese people consider themselves the "descendants of dragons".

During New Year celebrations, dragon parades are held to scare away evil spirits. During the parade, young men dress up in colorful dragon costumes and dance down the street. The dragon costumes are made of silk, paper, and bamboo. Some of the dragons might be as long as a football field. Long dragons are thought to be luckier than shorter ones.

The dragon is held up on poles by the young men, who raise and lower it as they dance through the streets. Firecrackers are thrown at the feet of the dragons to keep them awake for the celebration; dragons are believed to sleep during the rest of the year. It is also hoped that the noise of the fireworks will scare away evil spirits and wake up the Cloud Dragon who brings spring rain for the crops.

The dragon parade often includes a traditional lion dance which is thought to bring good luck. The lion needs only two dancers. One acts as the head and the other the body. They dance to a drum, cymbals and a gong. On the head of the lion is mirror so that the evil spirits will be frightened away by their own terrible reflections.

People "feed" *red packets* to the lion by handing them through his mouth. This is supposed to bring good luck and good fortune. At the end of the dance, the lion is feed a cabbage filled with red packets. The lion "eats" the money and spits out the greens, scattering the fresh leaves around to "spread" good luck and symbolizing a "fresh start" for the New Year.

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1. How is the way dragons are thought of in Chinese culture different from the way dragons are thought of in western culture?



1. Do you know any stories about dragons? Which ones? What type of creatures are the dragons in the stories?

2. What is the traditional reason for holding dragon parades during New Year celebrations?

3. Why are firecrackers thrown during the parade?

4. Why does the lion in the lion dance have a mirror on its head?

5. What do people feed the lion during the parade? After the parade? Why?