

Name: _____

The Lantern Festival

The Lantern Festival marks the end of the two-week Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) holiday. It is also the night of the first full moon of the lunar year. During the festival, lanterns are hung everywhere—in the streets, in temples, in homes, and in public spaces. People also carry lanterns in a night parade to honor the full moon. Some of the lanterns are painted with birds, animals, flowers, zodiac signs, or scenes from legends.



According to one legend, the festival dates back more than 2,000 years, to the time of the Han Dynasty, when Buddhist monks would light lanterns in their temples on the 15th day of the first lunar month to show respect to the Buddha (founder of the Buddhist religion). The light from the lanterns is said to make it easier for the gods to find their way to earth to bless the people.

A different explanation for the festival is given in another legend—

The Legend of the Lanterns:

Along time ago, the earth and sky were full of wild beasts. Many of these were quite fierce, and the people of China lived in constant fear of being attacked by one of them. Hunters would try to find and kill the savage beasts before they harmed anyone.

One day, a sacred bird from heaven accidentally fell down to earth. A hunter, seeing the strange bird and thinking that it might be dangerous, shot and killed it. The Heavenly Emperor was very angry over this, and ordered his soldiers to set fire to the earth and destroy it.

The Heavenly Emperor's daughter felt sorry for the people on earth, so she secretly warned them of the coming disaster. The people were terrified but could think of nothing to do. Finally, an old monk came up with an idea. He told everyone to light as many torches, lanterns and fireworks as they could. That way, when the Emperor looked down from heaven, he would think that the earth was already on fire and wouldn't bother sending his soldiers to destroy it.

Things turned out just as the old monk had hoped they would. When the Emperor heard the crackling fire and saw the red flames, he decided that the people had been punished enough. The people had managed to save their lives and their property, and every year on the 15th day of the first lunar month, they light lanterns and fireworks to celebrate their success.

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1. When is the Lantern Festival?

What do people do to celebrate?

2. What does the Legend of the Lanterns attempt to explain?

3. According to the Buddhist legend, how old is the Lantern Festival?

Why did the Buddhist monks light lanterns?

4. Which legend, the Buddhist legend or the Legend of the Lanterns, is more likely to be true? Explain.

5. How is the Legend of the Lanterns similar to the Legend of Nian?

How are the two legends (Nian and Lanterns) different?