



R is for Red Envelopes | ABC's of AAPIs

This lesson plan encourages students to learn more about other holidays and cultures and make connections to their own experiences, with a focus on red envelopes and Lunar New Year.

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In partnership with the Asian American Advocacy Fund (AAAF), WQED Education took AAAF's ABC's of AAPIs coloring book project and created lesson plans for educators to use in the classroom to provide a creative activity and resource for AAPI Studies.

Time Allotment: 1 class period

Learning Objectives

- Learn about the significance of red envelopes
- Learn about Lunar New Year and the customs, practices, and origins of the holiday

Prep for Teachers

- Print enough copies of the coloring sheet and poem

Supplies

- Red envelopes (never use white envelopes for Lunar New Year)
- Gold markers (do not use white or red to write names)
- R is for Red Envelope coloring sheet
- Coloring pencils

Background Information

Lunar New Year Fun Facts

- **Note that due to varying mythologies, some of these facts may differ depending on the source**
- **Lunar New Year** falls on a different date each Gregorian calendar because it follows the Lunar Calendar. A lunar calendar is a calendar based on the monthly cycles of the Moon's phases.

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- Each **Lunar calendar year** has a zodiac sign, 12 or 13 months and each month has 29 or 30 days. If there are 12 months, there will be 354 or 355 days in a year; if there are 13 months, there will be 383 or 384 days.
- **Zodiac Animals:** Every lunar year has a representative zodiac animal. The 12-year cycle follows the following order: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, Pig. This order was based on the myth of the Zodiac Race put forth by the Jade Emperor. All the animals raced and those who crossed the finish line first were the selected zodiac representatives. The Rat was first because it rode on the back of the ox and jumped off at the last moment. The Dragon was arrogant and thought they would win easily, so it took its time, but when it realized it wouldn't be first it quickly flew to place 5th. The Pig was the laziest making it last place. In Vietnam, they replace the rabbit with the cat. Some say that the cat and the rat rode on the ox together but when they crossed the river, the rat pushed the cat into the river.
- **Leap Year:** Just as the Gregorian calendar has a leap year because the earth does not travel around the sun in exactly 365 days, the Lunar calendar has a leap month that adds on a 13th month every 2 or 3 years.
- **Current Use:** Asian countries use the Gregorian calendar officially, but the traditional Lunar calendar is still commonly used today to determine the dates of traditional holidays and inform lucky/auspicious days for important activities such as weddings or moving into a new house.
- **Red Envelopes:** Children pay their respects to their elders, who in return gift them red envelopes with money, wishing them good luck in the new year. Later on, when these children grow up and have careers of their own, they return the favor and gift red envelopes to their own children/nieces/nephews as well as gifting red envelopes to their parents and grandparents and wishing them good luck, happiness, and good health. Sometimes the criteria for when an adult is supposed to give red envelopes is when they get married or when they have a steady income, this varies by family.
- Usually, red envelopes are only given between extended family members though close family friends and employers will also give red envelopes to children and employees as a new year bonus.
- The amount of money in red envelopes varies based on family and town. Some provide a customary small amount; others provide larger amounts.
- It's a tradition to put new bills inside a red envelope.
- You're supposed to avoid putting coins in the envelopes.
- Avoid giving amounts with the number 4 like 40 or 400. This is considered bad luck as the number 4 in Chinese is a homonym for "death." The number 8 is best because it

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rhymes with the Chinese word for "fortune" or "prosperous" Even numbers are also better than odd numbers.

- Always receive your red envelope with both hands. It is impolite to accept a red envelope with just one hand.
- When you receive a red envelope, you should express thanks.
- Never open your red envelope in front of the person who just gave it to you. Do it in private or when you get home.
- Red envelopes are not limited to Lunar New Year. They are also given as wedding gifts, for graduation, birth of a baby, or an elder's birthday. Funerals sometimes also have envelopes of money but they are not red, usually they are white.
- Never give a white envelope with money during Lunar New Year because it is associated with funeral money.

Nian Legend

The start of Lunar New Year is said to begin with Nian, a mythological beast, that would come down into the villages during the winter to eat livestock and humans, particularly children. Nian is described in a number of ways, as a lion with large teeth or a beast with long horns and many teeth. So every year the villagers would hide from Nian in fear. Until one day, an old man, later believed to be a god, came to the village and told them that Nian was afraid of the color red, and loud noises.

So, people put red lanterns and scrolls on their windows and doors and set off firecrackers to scare Nian away. We can see how this practice evolved into lion dance today, with the hitting of drums and clanging of gongs. When the villagers successfully scared off Nian, they celebrated every year thereafter the same way and would wear their finest clothes because they survived and would have feasts in celebration. Now they could welcome the start of spring happily, which is why sometimes the Lunar New Year is also called the Spring Festival.

Today, firecrackers and fireworks and the abundance of red in decorations and gifts are seen every Lunar New Year.



Learning Activities

A red envelope (hong bao in Mandarin, lai see in Cantonese, and ang pow in Hokkien) is a gift of money in a red envelope. They are given special occasions such as Lunar New Year, birthdays, and weddings.

The color red symbolizes good luck in Chinese cultures. Read further information for the significance of red in the support materials and read up on the legend of Nian.

1. Ask students what they know about Lunar New Year. What would they like to know more about? Write these responses so everyone can see them.
2. Ask students to look up photos from Lunar New Year using [PBS News Hour](#). Describe the photos in the article(s). What colors, decorations, and things do you see? How would the feeling or aesthetic be described?
3. Have students research about Lunar New Year and make a fact sheet. Make sure students use reputable resources. Encourage students to look at authentic content creators who are sharing their cultural practices and traditions.
4. What are some variations of celebration? Why do we think there is a variation?
5. Draw some parallels between Lunar New Year and holidays your students are familiar with (these can be holidays that are culturally relevant to each students' experience). i.e. Holiday greeting cards, food traditions, symbolism.
6. Distribute copies of the coloring sheet and put students into small groups to read and analyze the poem.
7. Red envelopes symbolize well wishes to a loved one. Ask students to decorate their own red envelope for a loved one. What kind of well-wishes are they hoping for this person?
8. How can we celebrate lunar new year authentically in our communities? If there isn't a lunar new year event in your community, why is that? What are ways we can celebrate digitally?