

## Tết - the Vietnamese New Year

By

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### Abstract

Tết Nguyên Đán (Tết), the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, functions as both a ritual renewal and a central axis of social life across Vietnam and its diasporas. This journal entry examines Tết as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon: its calendrical and historical roots, the ritual repertoire of home-based ancestor veneration and public ceremonies, and the seasonal practices that mark the transition between old and new.

This journal entry explores Tết not only as a festive occasion but also as a cultural lens through which Vietnam's history, spirituality, and modern identity can be understood.

This entry traces how core themes of filial piety, communal reconciliation, and cyclical renewal are enacted through material forms like family altars, ancestral offerings, food items like *bánh chưng/bánh tét*, red envelopes, symbolic acts such as first-visitor customs, house-cleansing rites, and public festivities including parades, lotus-and-lion dances.

### Keywords

Celebration, Family, Tradition, Culture.

### Introduction

*'I can't say what made me fall in love with Vietnam – that a woman's voice can drug you; that everything is so intense. The colours, the taste, even the rain.'*

-Graham Greene

Tết or the Vietnamese New Year, is one of the most important festivals in Vietnam. Tết is an occasion for pilgrims and family reunions. The Vietnamese set aside the trouble of the past year and hope for a better and happier upcoming year. This festival can also be referred to as *Hội xuân* in vernacular.

During Tết, people from everywhere return to their hometown, visit their families and relatives, reward themselves some relaxing days after a hard-working year, and celebrate the new year with plenty of customs and festive activities.

Vietnamese people celebrate Tết annually. It is based on a lunisolar calendar (calculating both the motions of the earth around the Sun and of the moon around Earth). Tết is generally celebrated on the same day as the Chinese New Year also called Spring Festival, with the one-hour time difference between Vietnam and China.

Tết is always the 1st day of the year in the Lunar Calendar. This date changes year by year and falls between late January to late February in the Solar Calendar. In 2026, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year falls on 17th February 2026. Tết includes 4 main days: the last day of the old year and the first 3 days of the new year. However, customs related to Tết usually take place a few days before or after, so the festival often lasts 22 days.



**Image 1: Festive Décor for Tết**

## History

The Lunar Year holiday was originally brought to Vietnam by the Chinese, who had formally incorporated Vietnam into their Han Dynasty empire in 111 BCE and had ruled it for over thousand years until the collapse of the Tang Dynasty in the 10th century. That historic period of Chinese rule significantly influenced Vietnamese culture, language, and administration, as Chinese governors attempt was complete Sinicization.

Vietnamese Lunar New Year today still retains a degree of the original Chinese customs such as giving of lucky money in red envelopes and use of the lunar calendar, but has also over time, evolved its own separate and unique traditions that reflect Vietnam's distinct culture and identity, including the Vietnamese zodiac where the Vietnamese do not use the Ox, Rabbit, and Sheep of the Chinese zodiac but instead have replaced them with the Buffalo, Cat, and Goat, respectively.

## Customs and Traditions

Many customs and traditions are practiced during Tết, such as visiting a person's house on the first day of the new year. Tết is associated with good luck. According to Vietnamese tradition, if good things come to a family on the first day of the Lunar New Year, the entire following year will also be full of blessings.

The Vietnamese believe that the first visitor whom a family receives in the new year determines their fortune for the entire year, so, no one enters any house on the first day without being invited first. Usually, a person of good temper, morality, and success will be chosen by the host family and be invited into the house. However, just to be safe, the owner of the house will leave the house a few minutes before midnight and come back just as the clock strikes midnight to prevent anyone else from entering the house first and potentially bringing misfortune to the household in the new year.

Children receive red envelopes containing money from their elders. This tradition is called "mùng tuổi" (happy age) in the North region and lì xì in the South region. Usually, children wear their new clothes and give their elders the traditional Tết greetings before receiving money. Wearing red clothing during Tết is common as it is associated with good luck.



**Image 2: New Year Tree decorated with red envelopes**

### Decorations and Displays

Traditionally, each family displays an artificial New Year Tree consisting of a bamboo pole 5 - 6 mtrs. long. The top end is usually decorated with many objects, including good luck charms, origami, fish, cactus branches, and more.

At Tết, every house is usually decorated by Yellow Apricot blossoms (*hoa mai*) in the central and southern parts of Vietnam and Peach blossoms (*hoa đào*) in the northern part of Vietnam, or (*hoa ban*) in the mountain areas.

In central Vietnam, the Kumquat tree is a popular decoration for the living room. Its many fruits symbolize fertility and fruitfulness which the family hopes in the coming year.

Vietnamese people also decorate their homes with flowers such as chrysanthemums (*hoa cúc*), marigolds (*vạn thọ*) symbolizing longevity, cockscombs (*mào gà*) in southern Vietnam, and paperwhites (*thủy tiên*) and orchids (*hoa lan*) in northern Vietnam.

During Tết visitors can come across flower markets with many vibrant colours of spring flowers that they may have never seen before. The Vietnamese display flowers not only to beautify the house but also for prosperity and well-being.



**Image 3: Peach blossom tree hung with traditional lanterns**

### **Good luck practices in the Lunar New Year**

According to ancestral beliefs, things that happen on the very first days of the year reflect things that may happen throughout the year. Therefore, Vietnamese will do things that bring good luck and avoid bad things on the first days in order to obtain a peaceful, lucky, and successful year.

#### **Best Practices**

- Burn incense and give offerings to ancestors: Not only to thank ancestors for their great merit in giving birth and educating, but also to pray for their blessing.
- “Xong dat” for the house: Choosing the most suitable person for the first visit to bring luck to family members in the house.
- Choosing red. Red is the lucky colour. Wearing red clothes or eating red food such as “gac” sticky rice, watermelon attracts fortune and luck.

- Give lucky money and good wishes: Saying good things, giving and receiving lucky money, and sending best wishes bring luck to others.
- “Xuat hanh” - the first outing and lucky leaves: The time to first go out of the house is usually carefully selected. After visiting relatives, Vietnamese often go to the pagoda to pray. On the way back home, they will pick a branch with verdant leaves as a way to bring fortune home.
- Go to the pagoda or temple: Burn incense in the pagoda to get peace of mind, drive away bad luck and pray for peace, health, wealth, and luck.
- Buy salt: Salt is an indispensable spice symbolizing an in-depth relationship in every house and is believed to dismiss evils and bring good things to the family. Many pagodas offer small bags of salt for visitors as a wish for them. Salt is also sold on many streets on the first new-year days.

### **Practices to be avoided**

- No sweeping house on the first day: It may sweep away fortune out of the house.
- No cutting hair: It may bring bad luck, bad health, and reduce wealth.
- No borrowing or paying money back: To avoid poverty and debt in the new year.
- No quarrelling or swearing: To avoid bad luck and unhappiness.
- No breaking things such as bowls, mirrors, plates, cups: To avoid bad luck and separation in the family or relationship.
- No closing the front door: It may prevent luck and fortune from entering the house.



**Image 4: Exotic flower display at a flower show**

### **Tết 2026 – The Year of The Horse**

Vietnamese usually have a representative animal or a zodiac animal for each lunar year. In Vietnam, there are twelve zodiac animals in the following order: rat, ox, tiger, cat, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, pig.

2026 is the year of the Horse of the Vietnamese zodiac. In Eastern culture, the horse symbolizes strength, freedom, agility, endurance, and generosity.

Each person is also attached to a zodiac animal corresponding to that year. Therefore, those who will be born in 2026 and were born in 2014, 2002, 1990, 1978, 1966 and so on will be a horse. It is believed those born in the Horse years are optimistic, determined, and energetic. However, their over enthusiasm or stubbornness may lead to impulsive decisions or misunderstandings in personal relationships sometimes.

The Horse is supposed to best match the Tiger (similar energy), the Dog (similar loyalty), and the Goat (complementary and supportive relationship). On the other hand, it is incompatible with Rat or Rooster due to their fundamental personality differences.

Vietnamese believe that if the lunar year coincides with a person's zodiac animal, that year may bring some bad luck and is not favourable for crucial plans like getting married, buying a house, starting a business, etc.

For those who will be born in the year of the horse, 2026 promises to be a vibrant year bringing opportunities, especially in terms of career.

## Conclusion

Tết Nguyên Đán remains a resilient and deeply generative cultural cornerstone in Vietnamese life. It is simultaneously a ritual of intimate family renewal and a public performance of communal identity.

The political-economic dimensions of Tết underscore its broader significance: seasonal consumption patterns, tourism, and state ritualization reveal how festive time shapes and is shaped by structural forces. Diasporic adaptations further demonstrate the festival's flexibility, as communities abroad negotiate authenticity, memory, and belonging in plural cultural environments.

Ultimately, studying Tết as both a ritual and a social institution offers a productive lens on how societies maintain meaning in times of rapid transformation revealing the ways collective memory, material culture, and civic life are continually remade at the threshold of each new year.

## Acknowledgement

The article is based on personal observation, secondary literature, and contemporary media.

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## Images

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## About the Author

**Neeti Parti** is an educationist, a prize-winning poetess and writer, an exhibited artist, an editor. She has recently published her solo poetry book **VERDANT VERSES** & contributed to more than fifty anthologies and edited eight.

She has received the *ALS SAGAR MEMORIAL AWARD 2024 for Children's Stories*, *ALSPHERE AWARDS 2024 for Story on Women's Issues*, *LIONS CLUB DELHI VEG WOMEN PRESTIGE AWARD 2023*, *ALSWA EDUCATION ICON OF THE YEAR AWARD at the Women's Alliance Conclave 2022*, *ASIAN LITERARY SOCIETY INDIAN WOMEN ACHIEVERS AWARD 2021 for LITERATURE* among many other laurels for education, poetry and prose.

She is a keen environmentalist associated with many 'green causes' and loves nature photography.

Her Motto: **मुस्कान बांटते चलो**

