

Celebration of Lunar New Year

By

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Lunar New Year, also known as Spring Festival, is one of the most important traditional celebrations in many Asian cultures, including Chinese, Vietnamese (Tết), Korean (Seollal), and others. The holiday marks the beginning of the lunar calendar year, usually falling between late January and February, and is observed with a rich set of cultural practices: family reunions, traditional foods, lion and dragon dances, gift-giving, and lantern festivals. Over time, as Asian immigrant communities grew in the United States, Lunar New Year has become a prominent and highly visible cultural event, especially in California, where large Chinese, Vietnamese, and other Asian populations have deeply embedded these traditions into local civic life. Historically, Lunar New Year celebrations in California reflect both the legacy of early Chinese immigrants, dating back to the 19th century, and more recent waves of migration. Chinese railroad workers, gold rush-era settlers, and their families brought their traditions west; over decades, these have evolved into large public festivals, parades, and official cultural observances in many cities.

In California, Lunar New Year has grown from private family celebrations to highly public and governmental-recognized observances. The Bay Area is a center of Lunar New Year activity, with major festivals, parades, and community events. The *San Francisco Chronicle* has noted that in 2025, Bay Area communities hosted a range of traditional and contemporary Lunar New Year events, such as lion dances, street fairs, art exhibits, and pop-up cultural performances. Across the state, community organizations, city governments, and cultural institutions collaborate to celebrate Lunar New Year publicly. These celebrations often serve not only as cultural remembrance for Asian American communities but as opportunities for cross-cultural engagement, education, and civic solidarity.

At the state level, California has passed laws and issued gubernatorial proclamations to formally recognize Lunar New Year. In 2018, the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 892, which designates the date of Lunar New Year as a day “having special significance” and encourages public schools to conduct exercises recognizing Asian and Pacific Islander contributions. The bill also requires the Governor to annually issue a proclamation acknowledging Lunar New Year in California. In 2023, Assembly Bill 264 allowed community college districts to replace certain holiday closings with Lunar New Year, ensuring that community college employees may observe the holiday. In

October 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom officially proclaimed Lunar New Year as a recognized day in California, reflecting the state's acknowledgment of the holiday's cultural and civic significance. These state-level actions codify the cultural recognition of Lunar New Year and encourage civic participation and educational programs statewide.

Santa Clara County officially acknowledges Lunar New Year in its civic life. District 3 Supervisor Otto Lee, for example, publishes annual Lunar New Year messages to the community, affirming the significance of the holiday for the county's diverse Asian populations. The County's Sister-County Commission between Santa Clara County and Hsinchu County, Taiwan, organizes a traditional student painting exhibition to mark Chinese Lunar New Year. In 2019, the contest's winning artworks by students from the Association of Northern California Chinese Schools were displayed in the County Government Center breezeway. This exhibition is repeated yearly and emphasizes youth engagement and cross-cultural artistic expression as part of the county's Lunar New Year recognition.

Several annual community events in Santa Clara County celebrate Lunar New Year. The Vietnamese American Service Center in San José hosts a big Lunar New Year (Tết) event. In 2025, their celebration was held on January 18, featuring traditional games, calligraphy, bingo, cultural performances, and food. The Santa Clara Family Health Plan organizes a public Lunar New Year event at the Blanca Alvarado Community Resource Center, combining cultural celebration with community health resources. In 2025, the event included a health resource fair, health checks, and culturally tailored programming. The San José Public Library holds Lunar New Year programming for all ages, including hands-on activities, storytelling, and books about the New Year. Additionally, LNY: SJ, a youth-led festival, has included a parade through "Vietnam Town" at Grand Century Mall, live performances, lion dances, and cultural exhibitions. Retail and public venues in Santa Clara County also host Lunar New Year celebrations, such as Westfield Valley Fair in Santa Clara, which organizes a free community day with traditional performances like lion dances, ribbon dancing, and red-envelope giveaways.

In 2016, Gilroy Gardens presented "Lumination," a 26-acre nighttime light exhibit featuring over thirty giant illuminated sculptures handcrafted by Chinese artisans, including dragons, pandas, and traditional lantern structures. This festival mirrored lantern-festival traditions associated with Lunar New Year celebrations in Chinese culture.

Over the decades, Lunar New Year observance in the Bay Area has included a variety of iconic, historically significant, and culturally resonant celebrations. One of the most prominent is the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade, which dates to the 1860s. Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush organized public festivities to both celebrate

their heritage and educate the wider public. As these celebrations evolved, the parade became a powerful symbol of Chinese American civic presence: in 1953, the first modern parade was organized to share culture and dispel stereotypes, featuring elaborate floats, lion and dragon dances, music, and fashion shows. In San José and broader Santa Clara County, community-led festivals have grown in recent years into important local traditions. LNY: SJ, now held at Grand Century Mall, is one such example. Organized by the Vietnamese American Roundtable and NorCal UVSA, the youth-led festival combines Vietnamese Tết traditions, lion dances, food, and community vendors. The first iteration, held at History Park in 2024, highlights how Vietnamese refugees and their descendants rebuilt their cultural traditions in Silicon Valley. Another memorable tradition in San José is hosted by the San José Museum of Art, which organizes a “Community Day: Lunar New Year” featuring youth orchestras, cultural performances, and artmaking. Additionally, Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County have hosted intergenerational community celebrations, bringing families together for dragon dances, traditional games, and red envelope exchanges.

Santa Clara County has also formalized recognition of Lunar New Year through resolutions and ordinances. In 2021, the Santa Clara County Board of Education, led by President Claudia Rossi and County Superintendent Mary Ann Dewan, Ph.D., passed Resolution No. 2274-5, honoring Lunar New Year and calling on schools in the county to recognize its traditions. On February 2, 2022, the Board adopted another resolution recognizing Lunar New Year, adopted by President Peter Ortiz and County Superintendent Mary Ann Dewan, Ph.D., noting the long history of Lunar New Year celebrations in California dating back to 1858. On a practical level, the Santa Clara Valley Water District recognized Lunar New Year as a paid holiday for its employees, reflecting institutional inclusion beyond ceremonial acknowledgment. While no formal Gilroy city council resolution or ordinance has been publicly documented, the city’s residents participate in county-wide and regional celebrations and Gilroy Gardens cultural events.

The way Lunar New Year is observed in Santa Clara County reflects several important themes. Multigenerational and institutional engagement is prominent, with school art contests, youth-led festivals, and library programming serving as a bridge between generations and between immigrant communities and civic institutions. Community organizers preserve traditional customs while adapting them to a modern, American civic context, including public health fairs and museum-style exhibitions. Observances highlight civic inclusion and identity, emphasizing the diversity of Asian cultures, including Vietnamese Tết traditions. Public service integration, such as health resources at cultural celebrations, connects Lunar New Year to broader civic and community well-being.

While widely celebrated, Lunar New Year also faces challenges. Representation can be uneven, with smaller Asian communities sometimes underrepresented in major events. Organizers must manage public safety, traffic, and permits in high-density areas such as San José. Balancing cultural authenticity with entertainment and commercial sponsorship remains an ongoing negotiation. Funding for large public events often depends on nonprofit support, county funding, and volunteers.

Lunar New Year in California, especially in Santa Clara County, is a vibrant and significant observation deeply rooted in cultural tradition, civic identity, and community engagement. Through events hosted by nonprofits, county government, libraries, and commercial venues, Lunar New Year serves as a civic celebration that bridges generations, supports cultural preservation, and fosters county-wide unity. Although Gilroy does not currently host large independent Lunar New Year festivals, its residents participate fully in regional celebrations, including LNY: SJ and Gilroy Gardens' lantern-themed Lumination exhibit. These evolving practices reflect both the enduring importance of heritage and the dynamic character of California's Asian American communities.