

Millions prepare for Chinese New Year

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(BBC) Millions of people are preparing to celebrate Lunar New Year, also known as Chinese New Year, the most important annual holiday in much of Asia.

The new year begins on Sunday, when the new moon is seen in the sky. In the Chinese zodiac, this year will be the year of the snake, taking over from the dragon of 2012. In China, an estimated 200 million people are travelling to be with their families in what is considered the biggest mass human migration on Earth.

The BBC's John Sudworth, in Shanghai, says the big cities have been emptied of migrant workers, who are now at home in the far-flung provinces, reunited with family, often including their own young children, for the first time since last Lunar New Year.

Saturday evening will see a spike in electricity consumption as an anticipated 700 million people tune in for state television's annual TV gala, a variety performance show in which Celine Dion will sing her theme tune from the movie Titanic.

Our correspondent says that, according to one well-known Chinese songwriter, My Heart Will Go On is one of two English songs that are well known in China. The other is Happy Birthday.

However, the gala's producers have been ordered to make the show a more low key affair, in the wake of the new leadership's recent crackdown on corruption and official extravagance.

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The authorities in Beijing are also asking people to limit the number of fireworks they set off, given the recent high levels of pollution.

The snake has a mixed reputation in China. It is associated with wisdom, beauty and intelligence but also pride and anger.

Lucky foods

On Friday, vast crowds of people passed through China's railway stations, airports and bus stations on to crowded transport, many of them making journeys of thousands of miles, sometimes lasting several days.

Migrant workers in China often only have one holiday a year in which to visit their home towns, and will be taking the money they have saved back to their families.

"For Chinese, the most important thing is to be with family. Family always comes first," Jin Yuan, a 34-year-old worker in Beijing told Reuters.

"No matter how busy I am, I must go home. That is why so many people in Beijing are travelling home for the Lunar New Year."

Vietnamese media said tens of thousands of people were also on the move there. Markets and shops have been selling red and gold decorations - colours considered lucky - for the past few weeks, bearing messages wishing good fortune and prosperity.

Traditional foods associated with long life or good luck are a key part of Lunar New Year festivities.

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"I'm slicing the rice cake so that people can make rice noodle soup during the holidays," said Oh Jung-sook, a 72-year-old rice cake seller in the South Korean capital, Seoul.

"People say that eating rice noodle soup can keep them healthy, age one more year and have no unfortunate events for the family throughout the year."