



Above: Thousands of peoples participated in the “Chinese Lunar New Year Parade” in Flushing of New York. — IC



Right: A Chinese lion dance is performed in Chinatown during Spring Festival celebrations in London. — IC

Splitting hairs: You say ‘lunar,’ I say ‘Chinese.’ Does it really matter?

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A holiday with a semantic stumper: Is it “Chinese New Year” or “Lunar New Year?” Every time Spring Festival rolls around in China, the debate is renewed, and this year is no exception.

It reached a peak on January 12 when the British Museum introduced a Korean music group in a Twitter post that said, “Join us in celebrating Korean Lunar New Year with magical performances.”

The post was subsequently deleted after it triggered angry comments from netizens who argued that it should be “Chinese New Year.”

But even that term is controversial because the Lunar New Year is not only celebrated by Chinese people, but also by people on the Korean Peninsula and various countries in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, the holiday known locally as Tet, is celebrating the Year of the Cat in 2023 rather than more widespread Year of Rabbit.

This whole debate made me wonder how much foreigners really know about Chinese New Year and how they think about it.

So I asked several of my foreign

friends. None of them said they are aware of the linguistic debate. All of them shrugged off the issue.

“I just say ‘Happy New Year!’ to all my Asian friends, no matter if they’re from China or South Korea,” said Kanna A., a Japanese friend of mine who has lived in Shanghai for five years.

Lily Zhang, a translator, told me that when she translated the term into “Lunar New Year,” her polisher from Luxembourg found it quite weird.

“She believed that ‘Chinese New Year’ is the more common term,” Zhang said. “In her social circle, it is intuitive to say ‘Chinese New Year’ rather than ‘Lunar New Year.’”

Katharine Sun, a friend who has been living in the United States for 14 years, said that about half of Americans she knows will wish her “Happy Chinese New Year,” while the other half will say “Happy Lunar New Year.” Most of them acknowledge that the day is a festival that originated in China, she added.

“The popularity of the holiday is probably the result of better cultural communications,” Sun said. “In the past, not many people here knew why Chinese people celebrated a new year much more ceremoniously than January 1, but I think they now understand

the difference between the lunar and solar calendars.”

But even that understanding is riddled with inaccuracy. Technically, the date of the Chinese New Year is not based solely on the lunar calendar.

Shi Wei, deputy secretary general of Shanghai Astronomical Society, told local media that what the Chinese commonly call *nongli*, or “Chinese calendar,” literally means “the agricultural calendar” and is actually a “luni-solar” calendar based on exact astronomical observations of the longitude of the sun and the phases of the moon.

The lunar calendar is calculated according to phases of the moon excluding the Earth’s revolution. A lunar year has 354 or 355 days, so that “Lunar New Year” might not actually fall in either late winter or early spring, but in other seasons.

Well, to be honest, it’s not the fault of foreigners that they don’t know the distinction because you know what? I didn’t know it either. And none of my family or friends knows it. We all thought that *nongli* refers only to the lunar calendar. Even some dictionaries state that.

Youdao, one of the most popular online multilingual dictionaries in

China, says that “农历(*nongli*)” refers to the “lunar calendar,” and the entry is quoted from “The New Chinese-English Dictionary,” first published in 2003.

The more you delve, the more confusing it all becomes. Where does that leave us?

Maybe we should just go with what’s most popular. If “Lunar New Year” is actually not an accurate term to define the day, we all know what it means when we refer to “Chinese New Year.”

Bickering about semantics online really doesn’t get us anywhere. Cultural communications is not an issue of winning or losing; it’s a matter of understanding and respect.

Spring Festival was celebrated around the world this year with rabbit lanterns and dragon and lion dances that attracted both Chinese and non-Chinese. We should be proud to see that an event so important in our culture has received such widespread recognition.

If one really wants an English term for holiday, look no further than “Spring Festival.”

The term is deeply rooted in our ancient culture and also goes beyond national boundaries. It marks the beginning of a year and represents new hope. It’s a beautiful term, isn’t it?