

LONTONG CAP GO MEH A CELEBRATION AT THE NIGHT OF FULL MOON

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Chinese New Year is calculated based on the lunar calendar. In the Gregorian calendar, the lunar Chinese New Year falls on different dates each year, between January 21 to February 20. In the Chinese calendar, the solstice of winter must occur in month 11, which means Chinese new year usually falls on the second new moon after the solstice of winter (and sometimes a third if there is the month of a leap year).

On the night of the first full moon after the Chinese New Year, the Chinese ancestry in Indonesia (mostly referred as 'Tionghoa') are celebrating "Cap Go Meh" Festival. The word *Cap Go Meh* Hokkian dialect, "Cap Go", which means "fifteenth" and "Meh" means night. As the name states, the celebration literally means "the fifteenth night" since Chinese New Year. Typically, Chinese people celebrate New Year for a whole 2 weeks, begins on the first day of the first month in the Chinese calendar system and ends with *Cap Go Meh* in the fifteenth day. Scientifically proven, the full moon always hangs upon the sky of Cap Go Meh. Interesting, isn't it?

Lontong Cap Go Meh celebration is a special phenomenon of the Indonesian Chinese in Java, to be exact in Central Java. Lontong Cap Go Meh is an adaptation of the Chinese cuisine and Indonesian cuisine, especially Javanese cuisine. On that day, the Indonesian Chinese people eat the special food called *lontong* (a dish made of steamed rice in banana leaf). Lontong was eating with richly-flavoured dishes which includes [opor ayam](#) (chicken in coconut milk), [sayur lodeh](#)-vegetables soup (typically made from bamboo tree shoots), hot and spicy liver, hard boiled [pindang egg](#), koya powder made of soy and dried shrimp or [beef floss](#), [chili paste](#) and [prawn cracker](#). Today, Lontong Cap Go Meh has become so popular food that it is being served anywhere and anytime, with nothing to do with the celebration of Cap Go Meh.



Figures: Lontong Cap Gomeh cuisine

Early Chinese immigrants in Indonesia settled in northern coastal cities of [Java](#), as early as [Majapahit](#) period. During that time only male Chinese settled in Java and they intermarried with local [Javanese](#) women and create a Javanese-Chinese culture. These early Chinese immigrants have become accustomed to the cooking of their Javanese wives. To celebrate [Chinese New Year](#), during [Cap go meh](#), the descendant of Chinese people in Java replaced the traditional [yuanxiao](#) (riceball) with local [lontong](#) accompanied with array of Javanese dishes such as [opor ayam](#) and [sambal goreng ati](#) (spicy beef liver). It is believed that the dish reflects the assimilation among Chinese immigrants and local Javanese community. It is believed that [lontong](#) conceived good fortune symbols; the thick rice cake is considered richer compared to thin rice [congee](#) which is often associated as food of the poor. The elongated form of [lontong](#) also symbolizes longevity, while eggs symbolize good fortune.

Generally during the Cap Go Meh night, people are watching the dragon/lion dance (Indonesians called it as [barongsai/liong](#)). The name "barongsai" is a combination of the words Barong in Javanese and Sai = Lion in a language dialect of Hokkian. Barongsai in the form of the great human body with the lion-headed.

According to this Chinese lion symbolizes happiness and joy. Dancing dragon [Cap Go Meh](#) (liong) called "Nong Long". Dragon in China is considered as a guardian, who can give you good fortune, power, fertility. In some part of Indonesia with a dense Chinese population, such as Singkawang, Medan, and Palembang, the night is even made more the merrier with the presence of fireworks and firecrackers.



Figures: Barongsai dance (left) and Liang-liong dance (right)



Figure: Chinese lantern



The *Cap Go Meh* celebration is not only celebrated in Indonesia alone, though other countries may name it differently. Some Indonesia's neighboring countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, are celebrating *Cap Go Meh* exactly the same name, the same way, but in Vietnam, the festival is called *Tết Thượng Nguyên*. In the origin land China, *Cap Go Meh* is called *Yuanxiao* or *Shangyuan* and *Yuen Siu* in Hong Kong. According to East Asian tradition, at the very beginning of a new year, when there is a bright full moon hanging in the sky, there should be thousands of colorful lanterns hung out for people to appreciate. At this time, people eat glutinous rice balls and enjoy a family reunion. As to its deep wisdom of gratefulness and family reunion, *Cap Go Meh* is considered as important as the first day of the New Year itself.