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# Sunset Park Kids Ring In New Year

By DANA L. OLIVER

Rodents slinking in and out of the crevices of the concrete jungle are usually unwelcome visitors – but for many in Sunset Park the arrival of the Year of the Rat is a time for celebration.

Echoes of drums and Snap-N-Pops and hues of red and gold lanterns bounced along Eighth Avenue Thursday as hundreds of people gathered to greet the Chinese New Year.

"This was passed down from the older generations to the kids and then carried on," said David Ma, 28. "Every ethnic group has its own unique way of celebrating the New Year. Being Chinese, this is definitely the holiday to celebrate."

As the first sign of the zodiac on the Chinese lunar calendar, the rat represents a fresh start and prosperity. It is a conniving creature that possesses charm – and those born in the Year of the Rat are hailed as great leaders.

The first day of celebration brings out lion dance performers, who sway to the steady beat of gongs and drums as they ward off evil spirits and ascend into the heavens to eat gifts of prosperity like oranges, dollar bills and lettuce. Children run around with rat pockets — small purses filled with lucky money from their elders — shooting neon-colored silly string.

Many Chinese-owned businesses, excluding food markets, restaurants, and a few 99-cent stores, are closed down for the day. The Brooklyn Chinese American Association sponsors a huge parade filled with music, fireworks, dancing, and kung fu demonstrations.

A young Chinese girl watches the traditional lion dance.

(Photos by DANA L. OLIVER)

A lion dance performer reaches for gifts of prosperity — oranges and dollar bills.

"This is a social service," said Betty Lee, a member of the organization. "We serve the people and it's very important that we do a parade every year to represent the Asian Americans in the community."

Brooklyn's Chinatown is the third largest in New York City following Manhattan and Flushing, Queens, and the Chinese population makes up the second largest ethnic group with over 25,000 in Sunset Park, according to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau.

Within this ethnic community, native traditions and customs evoke feelings of familiarity and a cultural connection that is beyond the scope of the American society.

"Many times we don't get to participate and learn about Chinese culture," said Dr. Madhulika Khandelwal, director of Asian American Studies at Queens College. "The Lunar New Year presents an opportunity. As the holiday becomes more public, it provides a way for mainstream and ethnic communities to interact."

For Ma, the holiday is a part of the life he brought with him when he moved to the U.S. in 1992.

Keeping with ritual, he doesn't eat meat on the opening day and wears red to bring luck. However, he notices a disconnect starting with third-generation Chinese Americans.

"I don't think that they carry things on as much as their grandparents and great-grandparents," he said.

While growing up in Burma, a country south of China, Soe Soe Win longed to know more about her Chinese heritage. Having lived in Sunset Park for more than 20 years, she still hasn't learned the language.

However, she remembers how her mother tried to instill practices that stem from her Chinese grandfather. She grins when she reflects on receiving lucky money in even numbers.

"The Chinese have something against odds," she said.