

By ELYSSA THOME

Feb. 14, 2010 marked the first day of a new year — a new lunar year. Chinese tradition follows a different calendar than Western culture, which makes now — not Jan. 1 — the time for a fresh start. Unlike the Western celebration which typically lasts one night (and however long it takes to recover), Lunar New Year requires 15 days of celebration. Year 4708, the Year of the Tiger, will have been properly welcomed by the end of the weekend.

Tomorrow marks the final day of celebration of Lunar New Year. Across the globe, communities will gather together to celebrate what is known as the Lantern Festival. In San Francisco, the well known Chinese New Year's Parade will roll through Chinatown with elaborate costumes, floats, fireworks and the Golden Dragon. Closer to home, the Chinese American Cooperation Council will be ringing in the new year with a community event at 5 p.m. in Amador Valley High School's gym.

The carnival is part of CACC's seventh Tri-Valley Chinese Culture Day. The casual event is free to everyone and will offer an opportunity for everyone in the community to learn about and celebrate Chinese culture. Last Saturday, the Amador Theater was sold out for the other portion, the Chinese New Year Evening Gala. Together, the CACC hopes the events will be an opportunity to celebrate Chinese tradition while sharing that tradition with the rest of the community.

"The CACC mission is to be a bridge between China and the U.S. so the New Year's event is an opportunity for us to show our culture," said Amy Liu, the principal of the CACC's Chinese school. "It's an opportunity for us to showcase what we have but also to invite others to be a part of it."

In addition to extending the invitation to the community at large, state and local officials were invited to take part in the event. Officials from Pleasanton, Livermore, Dublin and Danville attended the Evening Gala, and many that did not sent letters of support, including Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein.

Mayor Jennifer Hosterman, who did not attend, said in a letter to the CACC, "The Chinese Culture Day serves as the largest Chinese community event in the Tri-Valley and provides a forum for diversity and sharing in the region. This is a wonderful opportunity for local residents to experience a cultural exchange."

Happy New Year (again)

While the CACC shares culture year round, Chinese New Year is the most important celebration in Chinese tradition. The first day of Lunar New Year festivities is a day for families to gather and celebrate together, and the last day is for community celebration. The event tomorrow will have performances, booths and food to share with the whole community.

The Evening Gala presented a more formal display of Chinese culture, with performances by professionals from the Bay Area and China, as well as adult and child performers from CACC's school. While most of the performers from the Chinese school will put on their show Feb. 27, three young groups of dancers made the gala even more special. These young members of the local Chinese community are helping to share traditions many of them are just learning for themselves.

A few of the young dancers in the gala shared what they enjoy about Chinese New Year after a rehearsal the night before the show.

"I like everything about Chinese New Year. Especially the fireworks," said Celine Wang, a young student of the CACC Chinese school in dance and language.

"I like it because you can scare away the bad luck," said Sandy He, a fellow student and good friend of Wang.

The girls explained that the red colors and loud fireworks help scare off the monster that represents bad luck. The monster used to eat people, but a brave man learned how to get rid of him. Other reports say the monster was captured by an ancient Taoist monk, so the celebration now protects against the bad luck the monster represents, and not the monster itself.

The roughly 4,000-year-old tradition has many symbols and myths associated with each aspect of the festivities. Still, many think the celebration is



Clockwise from top: Students of the Chinese American Cooperation Council School perform the "Happy Chinese New Year" dance at the evening gala last weekend. Xiaopei Chinese Dance performs a group dance, "Dances of Yunnan."

PHOTOS BY WEIMIN LI

important for what it means for today. Lily Zhang, an active volunteer with CACC and one of the masters of ceremonies at the gala, is one of those people.

"It's important because it is like any traditional holiday with time for families to get together, celebrating family and the New Year," she said. "It is about putting hardships behind you and starting a new year with confidence and luck."

A growing force

The People's Republic of China has been in the headlines almost daily as the nation positions itself as a global power. With so much attention in the headlines, the members of CACC believe it is important to understand how close the geographically distant country is.

A growing number of Pleasantonians celebrate Chinese New Year as the local Chinese population grows. According to the Alameda County Census, the Chinese population in Pleasanton has grown steadily

from 1.8 percent in 1990, to 4.5 percent in 2000 and to over 6 percent in 2007.

If the size of the CACC is any indication of growth in interest in Chinese culture, that number has skyrocketed. A group which began with just nine families in 2003 now has close to 1,500 people enrolled in 85 language and enrichment classes offered on Sundays.

At the event last Saturday, Master of Ceremonies James Li (a famous television host in China) joked that the group, since it is the "Cooperation Council," should invite U.S. President Barack Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao to next year's event. While the comment was met with the expected laughs, the idea he expressed is actually right in line with the aim of the group. While the CACC may not be able to get the two nations to sit down and talk, they did invite local politicians to be part of the celebration.

U.S. Congressman Jerry McNerney expressed to the crowd at the Evening Gala that the type of cultural exchange being presented is the best way to get

people working together at all levels. McNerney also thanked the CACC for sharing their culture here in Pleasanton.

"I live right here in Pleasanton and I am always honored that so much cultural activity happens right here in the Amador Theater," McNerney said. "Thank you especially to this community for sharing such grace and honor."

Tiger strong

This year marks the year of the Tiger, which is associated with strength and vigor. CACC's president, Dennis Zhang said he hopes the efforts of CACC and collaboration within the Tri-Valley will help make this a much-needed year of strength and vigor for the community.

"This community has grown stronger, Tiger strong," he said. "Let's celebrate the Year of the Tiger and look forward to a brighter future."

For more information about CACC and the programs it offers, visit its website at www.caccusa.org. ■



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