

Tales from Tasmania – celebration time!
Kung Hei Fat Choy - Happy Chinese New Year 2012
by Bob Young

Chinese New Year 2012 will be heralded in on Monday, 23 January, by the Year of the Dragon. The year should be a lucky one.

Chinese New Year is the most significant celebration on the lunar calendar wherever there are large Chinese communities. Ann and I were fortunate enough to spend many a Chinese New Year in a little village we lived in called Lo Wai, just outside Pui O on Lantau Island, Hong Kong.

We embraced the village celebrations wholeheartedly and have many fond memories of our time there. Chinese New Year is a celebration of food, flowers, traditions and superstitions.

Don't sweep away or wash away good fortune!

Spring cleaning our humble little village home was among the first tasks that needed to be done. The entire house had to be cleaned and spruced up from top to bottom before New Year's Day. We were told sweeping or dusting was not allowed on New Year's Day as good fortune could be swept away.

Similarly, hair was not to be washed on New Year's Day as it could result in washing away good luck.

All debts needed to be settled before the start of the New Year and everyone had to refrain from uttering swear words. Death and dying were never to be mentioned.

The house was traditionally decorated, a particularly fun activity, involving indoor and outdoor flowers, platters of oranges and tangerines, a candy tray with eight varieties of dried sweet fruit that were purchased individually, and paper decorations inside and outside.

Fortune-telling peach blossoms

Centerpiece was a large cut peach blossom tree, grown to flower specifically at New Year's. Great care was made in selecting the right peach blossom, either at the flower market or at the peach blossom orchard. If the flowers opened either before or after New Year's, the year would not be a good one.

Peach blossoms were also a good barometer in business as to how good a year the company had experienced – the more profitable the year, the bigger the peach tree. And the size of the tree was eagerly awaited by employees as companies traditionally paid their employees an extra month's salary at Chinese New Year if they were in profit, more (up to an extra three months) if it had been a particularly profitable time.

In addition to the peach blossom trees, a pair of potted cumquat trees were also needed to place on either side of the outside front door, and another one inside, decorated with lucky red packets.

Fleets of fabulous flowers potted & cut

There is a huge flower market at Causeway Bay on Hong Kong Island that is set up every year specifically to sell every imaginable flower for Chinese New Year. We always went to the flower market to enjoy the stalls and the atmosphere, but fortunately, as we lived on Lantau Island, we were able to make much more convenient purchases.

We had the convenience of buying from the little boats that arrived at Tai O from China – illegally if you want to be technical – selling all manner of goods at rock bottom prices to locals. For Chinese New Year they also brought in huge loads of flowers, both potted and cut. As we were regular customers at the boats during the year, they regarded us as locals and took advance orders from us as well.

On delivery day, we co-ordinated arrangements with a neighbor, who was in the tyre business in Pui O. When he went to pick up his flowers, there was some space left-over for our flowers. Included in both our orders were several caches of varying types of fireworks – illegal in Hong Kong, but on Lantau nobody cared. Least of all the authorities as we were too far away from the mainland.

As for our peach blossom, rather than leave it to the skipper of one of the fishing boats, we bought ours direct from an orchard on Lantau Island. We usually got one that opened at the right time.

Door Gods & other paper decorations

Ordering of essential paper decorations required different planning – luckily there was a stall at Mui Wo on Lantau Island that specialized in these objects for the week or so prior to New Year's. Again you could order what sayings you wanted painted on the decorations.

Every village household, including ours, had paper images of the Door Gods pasted on the outside of their front doors. The Door Gods, or guardians of the threshold, are very old deities. They protect the household from evil influences and repel demons.

In addition, two paper scrolls, inscribed with auspicious sayings, are also pasted vertically on either side of the door. A shorter horizontal scroll is pasted across the top. The top one is sometimes put on upside-down so that good fortune washes into the household instead of out.

Then there are the smaller paper scrolls for inside the house.

Incense, money, prayers & food offerings

Sticks of incense also had to be purchased, shiny new coins and new banknotes obtained from the bank, lucky red “laisee” packets bought and special Chinese New Year foods ordered.

Special food offerings are made to the deities of Heaven and Earth as well as to ancestors on New Year’s Eve.

After burning three bundles of incense, prayers are offered for a fruitful harvest in the coming year. Finally, paper images of money are burned, the smoke carrying the household’s prayers and salutations to Heaven. These rituals are a way of wishing ancestors and deities a Happy New Year.

The traditional New Year's Eve family feast follows. Our village had whole roast pigs and other meats prepared along with traditional foods, and after the offering, these were eaten by the villagers themselves. A dear old lady every year brought us a big plate of selected roast meats, duck and goose.

Far more enjoyable treats than the year we tried making a traditional Chinese vegetarian health soup ourselves. We made it wrong and it was so bad we joked even the dog wouldn’t eat it. But we put a huge bowl down in front of “Snoopy” and watched in amazement as he lapped the whole dish up, then let out an enormous belch.

We told the village ladies what we had done and how we had made the soup – and it became something of a standing joke – along with the huge platter of meats to “make sure you don’t have to eat that soup again.”

Let the old year out

Firecrackers are let off on New Year’s Eve to send out the old year and welcome in the New Year. On the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, every door and window in the house has to be opened to allow the old year to go out.

The next few days are family days and time to visit friends and relatives. On New Year’s Day it is tradition to wear new clothes, with at least one item of red, which signifies luck.

People give lucky red packets of money (a shiny new note or coin) to those who have performed a service for them during the year, to children of friends, and to friends who are not yet married. We used to go through about 100-150 packets a year!!

And everyone clasps their hands and wishes each other Kung Hei Fat Choy – Happy New Year.

Lions & dragons

At a prearranged time, the local youth association brings out the lion dancing costumes, and visits each traditional village house – ours was always included, both our house and the restaurant we owned and ran in neighboring Pui O.

Preparations for the visit included putting a donation for the youth association in a red packet, wrapping the red packet in a lettuce leaf, and hanging the package at the front door. The lion dancers would come up to the houses, perform a dance routine, throw firecrackers inside to ward off any remaining evil spirits lurking around, then perform some gymnastics to get to the lettuce leaf so they could “bite” it down.

In town there were many celebrations involving lion dancers, dragon dancers, food stalls etc. People visited temples to pray and attended special banquets.

Although there was a huge official fireworks display on Hong Kong harbor for Chinese New Year, the “home” firework activity was confined to Lantau and some remote parts of the New Territories.

Two for one

Hong Kong is a panorama of lights and decorations at Chinese New Year. Owners of skyscrapers put out a huge display of lights, then at Christmas use “Circuit A” for Christmas lights, and at Chinese New Year “Circuit B” which lights up a different sequence of lights for Chinese New Year. An ingenious two-in-one bargain.

It is the one time of the year Hong Kong stops to celebrate for any extended days. Some restaurants are open – but special “double price” menus apply.

The Lantern Festival usually marks the end of the festivities. There are processions and each home has several candle-light lanterns to carry around at night. We used to make sure we had lanterns as well – bright goldfish, fuzzy rabbits, dragons etc etc.

During our “home” fireworks celebrations one Chinese New Year night we let off all sorts of rockets and colourful firecrackers with some neighbours, and had so much fun doing it we failed to notice how much we had all singed our clothing !!

Once back inside and the extent of the “damage” was realized, there were no swear words, no negative thoughts – just lots of laughter. It was after all Chinese New Year. A really nice time of the year.

Kung Hei Fat Choy.