



Carlo Carlo

New beginnings, family and food at core during new year

Reunions and giving thanks an important part as year of the rat begins

by Martin van den Hemel

Staff Reporter

2008 figures to be first-rate lucky for residents preparing to celebrate the Chinese New Year beginning next week.

This will be the year of the rat, the first of the 12 animals that comprise the Chinese zodiac calendar, and that has special significance, according to Henry Beh, executive director of the Richmond Chinese Community Society.

"It's really the beginning of the cycle, so a lot of people look at it as a very important date," Beh said, noting that the New Year and the start of the cycle give a double dose of beginnings where people can start fresh. "A lot of merchants and business people (are thinking) this is a beginning and hopefully will bring even better luck."

As well, the number eight symbolizes luck, happiness and good fortune, which gives 2008 great promise, he said.

With the start of the new cycle, people will likely be spending a bit more this year, purchasing new decorations for their stores, homes and themselves.

At Aberdeen Centre, where there will be plenty

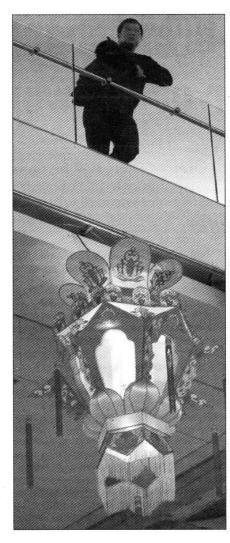
of celebrations in the next two weeks, a giant lantern is being brought in to give a fresh look to the decorations. Paper lanterns are traditionally red, and symbolize happiness, Beh said.

"People born in the year of the rat are always noted for their attraction to the opposite sex. But business people and the Chinese culture hope the year of the rat will bring us even more prosperity than last year."

Here are some other ways used to usher in the Chinese new year:

- sweep the dust and dirt of the old year from your floors to make way for the new year (Beh cautions, however, that it may be unwise to do this on the new year, as they might inadvertently sweep away the good luck instead)
- decorate your house in brilliant shades of red and gold which are the traditional Chinese colours for wealth and good fortune
- fill your rooms with brightly coloured flowers and blooming plants, which symbolize rebirth and new growth and help ensure prosperity in the new year
- order a traditional new year's day dinner from a Chinese restaurant (Beh said any sort of gathering for the new year's dinner works fine, but on new year's eve, families like to have a sit-down hot pot dinner)
- to draw luck, cook dishes that include oysters which represent good fortune and success, as well as fish, which represent surplus, and lettuce, which represents wealth, riches and prosperity

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Mark Patrick photo

Decorations are going up at Aberdeen.

Is it the year of the mouse or rat?

The Chinese new year is just a week away, but is it the year of the mouse or the year of the rat?

It's all the same, as the Chinese symbol for 2008 on the Chinese zodiac translates into both rat and mouse, explains Henry Beh, executive director of Richmond Community Society.

"I think in Chinese, it's only one word in writing. But in English, you have either the mouse, the little one, or the rat, which is the big one. But I noticed these days the year of the rat is more acceptable because it's most commonly used," he said.

"I do use mouse, and I notice other people say rat, so sometimes we change it too, either way."





Start the new year with a bang

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• ring in the new year with noise makers, such as firecrackers, which drive away evil spirits

There are some very old traditions that not many people practise anymore, Beh said.

This includes the sacrifice to the kitchen god, to ensure that he gives a good report on the family's behaviour when he returns to heaven.

But family gatherings and the sharing of food are at the core of the celebrations.

In northern China, dumplings are served as families gather to celebrate the evening, while in southern China, the hot pot is favoured.

Continuing the eating theme, an octagon or circular-shaped tray of togetherness is served, containing symbolic foods such as lotus seeds and lychee nuts.

Parents also hand out red-and-gold coloured money packets—known as leisee—to children that are filled with 'lucky money.'

2007 was the year of the pig and 2009 will be the year of the ox.

The Chinese new years starts with the new moon on the first day of the new year and ends 15 days later, with the lantern festival. Because the Chinese calendar is based on both lunar and solar movements, the new year falls on a different date each year.

This year, the Chinese New Year is on Feb. 7.



Mark Patrick photo

Joey Kwan, promotion and public relations manager, at Aberdeen Centre poses with some of her mall's Chinese New Year's decorations.