

Lunar New Year, More Than Just a Holiday

As Lunar New Year approaches, state and city officials push for a school holiday

By Kristina Skorbach
Epoch Times Staff

NEW YORK—The majority of Westerners would probably say that the Lunar New Year is the Eastern equivalent of the first day of the year. But legend has it that on this day, a battle between good and evil transpired, a tale that carries traditions and culture to this day.

According to legend, over 17 centuries ago, during the Yin-Shang Dynasty, an evil monster lived in the depths of the Yellow River. Every New Year's Eve, at midnight, the monster would come out onto the land and wreak havoc in the village by eating the people and their livestock.

But one day an old beggar showed up in the village and decided to get rid of the monster. After all the villagers fled to the mountain, he put up a red poster on the door, lit some candles, and when the monster approached his dwelling he set off firecrackers, scarring the monster abruptly.

The monster fled. When the villagers returned and found their homes untouched, they rejoiced and marked the day as a time for a new beginning.

From that day forth they celebrated the Lunar New Year by dressing in their best clothes, hanging up red posters over their doors, and setting off firecrackers. They believed that gods also use firecrackers to get rid of evil in the heavens.

It's legends like this that remain the cornerstone of cultural reference for Asian families who raise their children in America. For

Jianfen Zhou, and her husband Jianda Yuan, raising two girls in their culturally diverse neighborhood of Forest Hills has been rewarding and challenging.

"In her class, there's not many Chinese kids, so that's how she struggles," Zhou said about her 11-year-old daughter, Sherry. To keep her Chinese traditions alive, Zhou and Yuan encourage their daughter to learn how to play traditional Chinese music instruments like the Pipa, a four-stringed Chinese lute.

It's about institutionally telling the world we accept Asian-Americans as part of American culture.

Ron Kim, state assemblyman

"We let her speak Chinese at home, so she doesn't forget her heritage," Zhou said. This is just one of the ways they can pass on traditions to Sherry and soon to her 1-year-old sister Lotus.

Every New Year's Eve, when Sherry would be coming home from school, her father would take her to the store and they would browse through the books. Yuan feel fortunate that he is still able to keep

close communication with his almost-teenage daughter, something he said is lacking in modern society.

"Sherry just showed me two golden awards from her past two semesters," he said, "I recognized it, appreciate it." For him, celebrating the Lunar New Year, means calling his parents back in China, sharing a bowl of dumplings over dinner, and strengthening familial relationships.

They want to pass on traditional Chinese values to their daughters, like the five cardinal virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness.

"These are universal values," Yuan said.

Pushing for Recognition of Lunar New Year in Schools

When Pauline Chu realized that the Chinese New Year was not recognized as a public holiday and that children had to go to school, and were penalized for being absent, she set herself a goal of making the Lunar New Year a citywide celebration.

Chu, who was born in China, came to New York in 1980. She had degrees in teaching and in 1986 was elected to be a community school board member to represent 23 elementary schools and 6 junior high schools in Bay-side and Flushing. That year she also founded the Chinese American Parents Association where she still holds the title of president.

"Back in 1986 I raised a question, why do the Jewish get a holiday?" Chu said. She wanted



Jianda Yuan and his wife Jianfen Zhou with their 1-year-old daughter Lotus Yuan and 11-year-old daughter Sherry Yuan in their Forest Hills apartment, Queens, Jan. 29.

public schools, especially those in Flushing and Chinatown with large populations of Asian students to observe the Lunar New Year as a legal holiday.

According to statistics from the New York City Department of Education (DOE), approximately 14 percent of students in the city's public school system are Asian-American.

Chu told the Chinese parents in the community to keep their children at home for the Lunar New Year, regardless if their teachers will mark them as absent.

"I remember at one junior high in 1989 half the class had no students," she said.

"I'm just trying to promote our culture," she said. She got a lot of encouragement from local leaders, and she started writing letters to lawmakers.

Chu still holds the letter that she wrote to Dr. Joseph A. Fer-

andez, who was the schools chancellor in 1991, asking for the Lunar New Year to become a legal school holiday.

Officials Move to Make Lunar New Year a School Holiday

In 2012, New York City Council members introduced a bill that would mandate all public schools to observe Asian Lunar New Year as a legal holiday.

Last Friday, many of the supporters and council members, including Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, stepped out at the Queens Library in Flushing to push for the bill.

Council member Peter Koo, a Hong Kong native, said in a statement that the occasion is as important as other cultural and religious holidays.

"For too long, parents have had to decide whether to allow their children to take part in Lunar New Year festivities.

They should not have to make that choice anymore," he said.

Schools like P.S. 130, located in lower Manhattan's Chinatown, for example, had an average absence rate of 80 percent on Lunar New Year.

Another school in Chinatown, P.S. 124, had an absentee rate of 50 percent.

State politicians have tried to pass a similar bill at the state level for years. This year, Assemblyman Ron Kim and Sen. Daniel Squadron co-sponsored a bill that would mandate New York City schools with high probability of absences on Lunar New Year to consider a school closure.

Kim said that making the Lunar New Year a legal holiday holds much more value than not having to go to school.

"It's about institutionally telling the world we accept Asian-Americans as part of American culture," Kim said.

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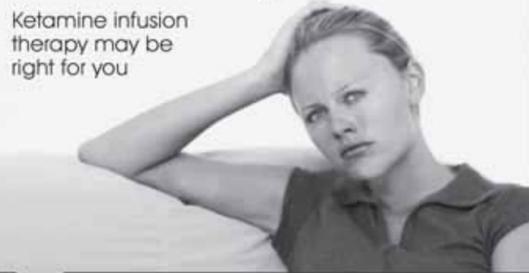
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Locals and tourists take part in events at Super Bowl Boulevard on Broadway, Manhattan, Jan. 30.

New Yorkers and Tourists Descend on 'Super Bowl Boulevard'

Super Bowl continued from A1

Every block from 34th to 47th streets on Broadway hosts a different attraction from concerts and autograph sessions every night 8 p.m.-10 p.m. between 39th and 40th streets to the 60-foot high Toboggan Run with lines that fill up soon after opening.

According to many event staffers, the boulevard was packed soon after the opening at noon the first day and stayed crowded during the sunny hours. Thursday was no different.

Cross streets from 42nd to 47th streets remain open to traffic, where cars pass by, slowly, between crowds of pedestrians.

On the sidewalks, traffic moves just as slowly. Two such New Yorkers were stranded on the sidewalk just a few feet from their office building, where pedestrian traffic

had come to a standstill for minutes because of the crowd of fans. "This is unbelievable," one commented. "We're right outside the building."

Players signing autographs or giving interviews with ESPN came and went throughout the day, and Felicia Duquette from Virginia said she had exclaimed loudly "You're one of them!" on such an encounter.

"I'm not going to the game, we're just here for the junk," Duquette said laughing. She said she'll be watching from her relative's house in New Jersey but is here for the week of events.

Many of the fans attending the NFL Super Bowl XLVIII game Sunday in New Jersey plan to make the most of the trip by making the most of New York.

"We're excited about New York City and we're excited about Super

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Gilbert Rodriguez, a Denver Broncos fan from Colorado

Bowl," said Gilbert Rodriguez, who flew in from outside Colorado Springs with his wife Elena. Gilbert has been a fan of the Denver Broncos since he was 5 years old, for 39 years and counting, and the couple has had season tickets for 18 years.

The Rodriguezes spent about \$16,000 on the trip entirely. Gilbert said he'd paid over face

value for his tickets and wasn't too happy about that, but they were determined the trip would be worth it.

"We know they're going to win," Elena said of the Broncos.

Keenan Sanders has been a fan of the Seattle Seahawks her whole life, and couldn't be happier to support her team by attending her first Super Bowl game—and making her first trip to New York.

"We really need to win one," Sanders said.

Neither the Super Bowl nor the city was new for Kelly King, who said he was excited not just for the game but "to see everything we can in New York that we can."

King, who said he's been a Seahawks fan since the 1970s, flew into the city last night and the first thing he did was to see "The Lion King" on Broadway.