

Jan, 28, 2008

HOLIDAYS

Community welcomes in Chinese New Year

Families sweep in year of the rat

BELLINGHAM — A masked joker danced cautiously around two lions Sunday, luring them around a room of nearly 300 onlookers — and particularly eager children.

Students of Bellingham's Eddie Lane Kung Fu Academy maneuvered ornate animal costumes, eventually spitting candies out of their gaping mouths to hordes of delighted children.

The traditional Lion Dance, which represents the drawing away of evil spirits and bringing of good luck, kicked off the 2008 Chinese New Year Celebration at the Hampton Inn's Fox Hall in Bellingham.

Chinese New Year, also known as Lunar New Year, is traditionally a two-week celebration observed in Asian countries including China, Vietnam and South Korea. The 2008 new year begins on Feb. 7.

Each year is named after one of 12 symbolic animals. 2008 is the year of the rat.

Matt Monty traveled with his wife and their two young sons from their home on Camano Island to attend the event.

"It's important for us and for (our children) to experience their Chinese heritage," he said.

Several families with adopted Chinese children attended the event, in addition to attendees with roots in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States.

"The new year is the day people look forward to the whole year," said Sam Zhaeng, vice president of the Northwest Chinese Cultural Association, which sponsored the event, speaking through a translator.

"It's kind of like Christmas for us," added Zhaeng, who owns Panda Palace restaurant in Sunset Square, and donated some of the food provided to attendees.

The event featured ribbon and fan dancing by Bellingham resident Hueih-Hueih Hurlbut, a drum dance by the Bellingham Silk Road Dancers, and a Chinese bamboo clappertale performance by Jan Walls, retired director of Simon Fraser University's David Lam Centre for International Communication.

Walls, who traveled from Vancouver, B.C., to perform the now-rare art form, also gave a partial history of clappertale, which involves rapping small handheld pieces of bamboo together, accompanied by rhythmic storytelling.

Association President Sabrina Walton said the new year represents a time of cleansing and gathering, with many families going to extra lengths to clean their homes to rid them of evil spirits.

"On new year's day, people actually hide their brooms," she said. "Once you've driven all the bad luck out of your house, you don't want to sweep out any of the good luck (brought by the New Year)."

Other traditional practices include children presenting tea to their parents in an act of repentance for any bad deeds they committed in the past year. Parents often give red envelopes of "lucky money" to their children.

Bellingham resident Frank James and wife GaZhong Yuen attended with their 3-year-old son, TaiMing YuenJames.

"In order to maintain their Mandarin (language), it's helpful to come be part of the community," James said. His son "speaks better Mandarin than he does English at 3 years old," he said.

Mount Baker Theatre will host another event celebrating the Chinese New Year on Feb. 17, including performances by the Whatcom Symphony Orchestra, the Washington Chinese Orchestra, the Chinese Peking Opera Orchestra and Chinese modern songs by guest performers from China.

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Fiona Osburn performs with the Bellingham Silk Road Dancers at the Chinese New Year Celebration at the Hampton Inn on Sunday. The Northwest Chinese Cultural Association hosted an afternoon of music, dance and food to usher in the year of the rat. See more photos online at TheBellinghamHerald.com.