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Lunar New Year feasts take on a special significance for Hongkongers visiting from abroad. Lavinia Chang sees how three families will usher in the Year of the Rooster

NEXT WEEK, GENERATIONS of Hong Kong families will reunite en masse. Brothers and sisters, cousins, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents will sit down together to enjoy a traditional family reunion dinner and celebrate the arrival of the Year of the Rooster.

Although Lunar New Year remains an important festival for Chinese communities all over the world, busy schedules, distance or indifference to customs and traditions have meant that many no longer celebrate the occasion as they did in the past.

For Khong Fui-leng, preparations used to begin weeks in advance. "I baked all sorts of cookies and tarts," the 73-year-old housewife says with pride. "I even made my own prawn crackers."

Her husband, Chang Chee-yong, 74, was the eldest son, so Khong assumed responsibility for hosting the reunion dinner when her mother-in-law died. Over the years, the number of guests at her table grew as brothers-in-law got married and started their own families.

Being a confident cook, she says it was a job she enjoyed. A typical spread would include traditional dishes with auspicious sounding names such as hou tse fat choi (good fortune and good luck), which consists of dried oysters and black hair fungus, and nihh nihh yau yue (a year of abundance), a fish dish normally steamed in soy sauce, with ginger and spring onions.

"It was hard work, but seeing everyone enjoying my food made me happy," Khong says. The reunion dinner was taken much more seriously than it is today.

"No matter how busy or how far away people were, they would return home for the special dinner," she says. "We wouldn't start till everyone had arrived. It was important that we enjoyed the meal together, as a family. Of course, then, people rarely travelled very far. Now, they fly around like we take the bus."

Khong continued to host the reunion dinner until her six sons all left home to study abroad. By then, many of her nieces and nephews had also gone overseas, so the remaining family members would meet at a restaurant for a banquet dinner.

"The last time we had a full reunion was about nine years ago, at my fourth son's wedding, so having four of them here with us is pretty good" Khong Fui-leng Mother

"It's convenient, but it's not the same, and we missed our children," she says.

In recent years, the Changs have flitted between Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia to be with their sons. "Since our boys can't come to us because of their work, we often go to them and do separate, mini reunions," Khong says. This year, however, she's ecstatic because four of their sons and their families will be in

band, Ron Chau, and their sons, Timothy, 15, and Matthew, 10, used to put great significance on the reunion dinner when she was young and living in Hong Kong.

"Lunar New Year was the only time dad could stay home for a whole week," she says. Her father used to travel frequently and was rarely home for more than a few days at a time. "It really fostered a sense of family belonging."

four. Each book contains about 64 pages of activities. The earlier levels are fully illustrated and the higher levels contain a mix of illustrated activities and drills or text. There's an assortment of four-colour stickers in the centre that children can use to mark their progress on the inside back cover of the books.

Not only are the books good for home schooling or extra practice, but they are also useful when travelling. My five-year-old daughter goes through them quickly. Luckily, there are plenty of subjects to choose from - everything from word puzzles to games, reading comprehension and maths problem-solving.

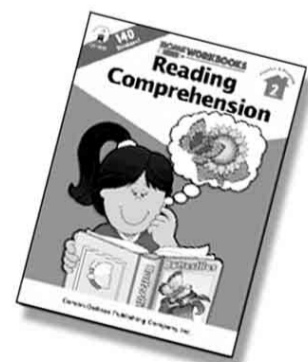
Skills categories include: puzzles and games (dot-to-dot alphabet pages and word searches); early skills (matching, categorising and fractions); phonics and reading (fill-in-the-blanks, rhyming schemes and reading); and numbers and maths (from circling and matching to drill work).

Check the publisher's website, too. There's free clipart and assorted teaching materials for sale (www.carsondellosa.com).

Verdict: Great education. *K.J. Kingan*

REVIEWS

Home Workbooks
Carson-Dellosa Publishing
Company \$29.90



Here's a nifty series of simple, black-and-white activity books that will put your kids on the fast track to reading, writing and arithmetic. The Home Workbooks series, available at ParknShop, is just the thing to help perfect basic skills. The activities and drills are presented in an age-appropriate format, and the variety of activities in each book means it will hold the interest of young attention spans.

The series runs from pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels to grade



we'd each get two more *lai see* for the New Year. We weren't allowed to open the red packets till after the 15th day."

It was a custom she looked forward to every year, but now, as a mother, she says she doesn't practise the tradition with her 14-year-old son, Jonathan, and says she'd forgotten about it until a friend reminded her recently. She and her engineer husband, David Lam, left Hong Kong to study in Canada when they were in their teens. "We were away for many years and we didn't celebrate the occasion in a big way over there," she says. "So now we only observe the most basic of New Year traditions."

Lam remembers the grand feasts her mother used to prepare for the reunion dinner. "My mother is a Taoist, so she would always have a chicken slaughtered as an offering," she says.

"Hoi nihh faahn, the first main meal on the second day, was also a big affair." The entire family would congregate at her parents' house for both meals to enjoy a time of bonding. They would also meet there on the first day to *pai nihh*, or visit and exchange gifts, *lai see* and good wishes with relatives.

Both the Lams' parents emigrated to Vancouver some years ago. Since then, the Lunar New Year has been a low-key affair for the family.

"If our parents come back for the festival, we have a proper reunion dinner, like old times," she says. "Otherwise, I don't cook anything special and we don't do much visiting. Sometimes, we may meet some friends at a restaurant, but we rarely visit each other's home to *pai nihh*. Besides, many of our friends are often away during the New Year holidays."

This year, the Lams will enjoy a big reunion with both sets of parents back in town to celebrate the New Year. "Jonathan will have to learn some Cantonese well-wishing phrases quickly because my mother won't give him the *lai see* till he can come up with at least 10 phrases," she says.

Bringing it all back home

Hong Kong to usher in the Year of the Rooster with them.

"The last time we had a full reunion was about nine years ago, at my fourth son's wedding, so having four of them here with us is pretty good," she says.

Accountant Soong-kheng Chau, 44, who lives in Melbourne with her hus-

band, Ron Chau, and their sons, Timothy, 15, and Matthew, 10, used to put great significance on the reunion dinner when she was young and living in Hong Kong.

"Lunar New Year was the only time dad could stay home for a whole week," she says. Her father used to travel frequently and was rarely home for more than a few days at a time. "It really fostered a sense of family belonging."

They also make a point of getting together with friends. "It's an excuse for us to have a party," says Chau. "Melbourne now has a big Asian population, so we can get many New Year goodies here, like egg rolls and nihh gou [New Year pudding]."

Although the Chaus would like their boys to carry on the tradition, they know it will be hard to impress on them its significance. Some years, they take them to

watch organised events such as lion and dragon dances in Chinatown, in the hope that they'll take pride in their heritage.

"They identify more with Christmas because everyone else celebrates it, and they're involved in Christmas activities at school," she says.

Helena Lam, a fortysomething teacher, fondly remembers the significance of the celebrations. "When I was little, my parents used to place *lai see* under my and my siblings' pillows on New Year's eve, to bring us good luck and good health," she says. "The next morning,

TIPS FOR HEALTH, WEALTH AND HAPPINESS

There's more to the New Year than *lai see* packets. The Lunar New Year or Spring Festival (*Chun Jie*) represents a time of renewal, manifested in the customs observed by families at this time. Here are some of the common ones:

- All debts are cleared by year-end, in the hope that the new year will bring greater financial success.
- There's a thorough spring cleaning of the house, to get rid of bad luck. Sweeping is done inward from the door, and scooped up inside

- the house, to prevent wealth being swept away.
- Homes are decorated with flowers or plants and well-wishing couplets are written on red paper, expressing hopes for wealth, career success, good health and longevity.
- Families gather

- for a reunion dinner on New Year's eve. This is a time for forgiveness and renewed bonding. Foods considered auspicious are the order of the day.
- New clothes and shoes are donned on the first day, for the same reason.

- Some wear new pyjamas.
- Many people cut or restyle their hair before the celebrations, to symbolise a fresh start.
- The visiting of friends and relatives, to exchange *lai see* and gifts, is done mainly on the first and second

- days. Many believe it's bad luck to visit on the third day.
- The festival lasts 15 days. Some people don't work during that time, believing that to do so would mean having to work hard for the rest of the year.

Lavinia Chang

Should old resolutions be forgot ...

Well, the start of the Year of the Rooster is a perfect chance to start all over again, writes Hazel Parry

If you missed making a New Year's resolution last month (or have already let the ones you made fall by the wayside), the arrival of the Year of the Rooster is an ideal opportunity to try again.

I already have one in mind - something I've been meaning to do for months and that I hope all my family will follow. From next week, I plan to resist the temptation to switch on the computer at the weekend to check e-mails.

I know from experience that the two minutes I think it will take soon becomes 30 minutes because I feel obliged to reply to each and every one - no matter how petty or trivial. And so these 30 minute intervals eat into the weekend, swallowing the free time I should be spending with my family.

Sometimes, an annoying message crops up that niggles me the whole two days and so I start Monday feeling wound-up and grumpy, as if I hadn't had a weekend at all - and feeling guilty that I didn't spend the time with my children.

So, from next weekend, my computer is off. E-mail me if you will, but don't expect a reply until Monday. And if it's urgent, then I'll put my trust in the old-fashioned

telephone - for the time being, at least, I'm still a slave to it.

I expect there are others who share my view. With this in mind, *Families* asked some Hongkongers to suggest one thing they'll be doing (or think families can do) to improve family life in the Year of the Rooster. Here are their suggestions:

Katherine Kot Lam-kat
Clinical psychologist

"Treasure your family and spend quality time with each other. It doesn't have to be long - just 15-30 minutes each day, every other day, or two times a week. The idea of quality time is to be with your kids, doing what they enjoy, playing, talking and dreaming together. Husbands and wives should also spend quality time once a week, going out for dinner or a walk without the kids to rekindle their relationship. Adults should also spend time with their parents before they get too old. You don't know when you may lose them and then you'll regret not spending enough time with them."

Joachim Chu Chee-kong
Family First Foundation president

"Switch off the television and have a good family meal at home - daily, if possible. Why? Because home meals unite family members and strengthen the parents-children bonds miraculously, particularly with teenagers."

Lauren Bramley
Family doctor and author of *The Baby's Table*

"Keep your children healthy, happy and clever with better nutrition by protecting them from synthetic foods such as 'trans fat' - known on labels as 'partially hydrogenated oils' or 'shortening'. Trans-fat is present in about 40 per cent of grocery store food and almost 100 per cent of fast food and children's menus. It alters your child's metabolism, behaviour, learning ability and mood and

puts them at risk of heart disease and diabetes over a lifetime."

Ditys Tong Chau Ming-lai
Hong Kong Family Welfare Society counsellor

"Show your family how much you care by doing something special out of the blue. Send a SMS or an e-mail to your husband or wife to say, 'I'm proud of you'. Or give your child a surprise by picking them up after school and treating them to a sundae. Such expressions of care enhance intimacy."

Cindy Miller-Stephens
Mother and author of *Hong Kong for Kids*

"Plan an adventure somewhere in Hong Kong where no-one in the family has ever been. There's something magical about discovering a new place. We often experience this feeling when we go

on holiday, but rarely in our own backyards. My family has been trying out new things in Hong Kong for the past three years and, although at times it feels like a Herculean effort, in the end we've created lasting memories and have shared hours of special family bonding time."

Nury Vittachi
Author and columnist

"My family's resolution this year is to ignore the Chinese almanac we usually follow. This year, it tells us not to take baths or showers on Lunar New Year's eve in case we wash away our luck. It tells us not to clean the house, and urges us to organise a meal with the entire family plus spirits of the ancestors 'around the stove'. Do almanac writers have any idea of the size of Hong Kong kitchens?"

Do you have a resolution you think Hong Kong families should do in the year ahead to improve family life? Please e-mail your suggestions to families@scmp.com.

Illustration: Julien Lallemand