



Roads Scholar Educational Adventures in Our Own Backyard

By Kathleen Williams
CRIZMAC Art and Cultural Marketplace

Celebrate Chinese New Year at the Tucson Children's Museum

Of all the Chinese festivals celebrated throughout the year, the Lunar New Year is the most important and spectacular. China has been an agricultural country for thousands of years, and Chinese New Year celebrates the season for planting, as well as all new beginnings.

At this time of year, families like to begin with a clean slate, so houses are cleaned from top to bottom, things that are broken are repaired, and everyone gets a haircut and new clothes. According to tradition, old debts cannot be collected after New Year's Day so this is also the time to pay bills and settle debts.

On New Year's Eve, the family gathers for a large banquet. The foods served have special meanings and are symbolic of what is wished for in the year to come. For example, tangerines, oranges, and kumquats represent good luck. The Chinese word for fish, *yu*, sounds like the word meaning "surplus," so a whole fish is served to symbolize abundance.

Firecrackers and dances are also important aspects of the celebration. Firecrackers are lit in front of each house to scare away the evil spirits. Dragon dances begin on New Year's Day and are believed to bring wealth, wisdom, and power in the New Year. Lion Dances are usually performed for three to five days of the New Year and are thought to drive away evils spirits and bring good luck.

A Chinese tradition for thousands of years, the Lion Dance is performed at many important occasions, such as weddings or the opening of a business, in addition to Chinese New Year. Although the lion is not native to China, the Chinese consider it a symbol of power, wisdom, and good fortune.

The lion costume may be operated by a single dancer who springs about while moving and shaking the head. More often, the dance is performed by a pair of dancers who form the front and rear legs of the lion.

There are two primary types of the Lion Dance: the Northern Lion and the Southern Lion. Since the lion is not native to China, people did not know what the animal looked like when the dance originated many years ago so they imitated it by looking at animals with which they were familiar. As a result, the Northern Lion is short, stocky, and furry, much like an oversize Pekinese, while the Southern Lion is based on a cat. The Northern Lion is usually red, yellow or orange, and uses light playful motions. The Southern Lion is more symbolic, very colorful, and has a distinctive head with large eyes and a single horn at the center. It utilizes more restrictive, powerful motions. In either case, excellent balance and agile footwork are required. Dancers are usually skilled acrobats or martial arts experts.

The lion's head is made of papier mâché and wood, and is elaborately painted and decorated with strings, fringes, tassels, and bells. The head can weigh more than 40 pounds. Attached to the head is the body of the Lion. The Northern Lion body is actually a uniform worn by both dancers. It is usually yellow with many tassels. In the case of the Southern Lion, the body is created from a long piece of colorful fabric, under which the person representing the body and tail must crouch.

The lion is accompanied by musical instruments such as a drum, large and small cymbals, and a gong. The drummer must be very skilled to know the proper drum beat for each part of the dance, and to demonstrate when the lion is happy, sleepy, mad, scared, or curious.

There are different methods of performing the lion dance. One is called free style, in which the dancers improvise and make up the dance as they go. Another method is called the set method. In this method, the dance and dancers are telling a very specific story about the origins of the lion.

Visit the Tucson Children's Museum this Saturday from 1 – 4 p.m. to take part in the Chinese New Year festivities and to see the Lion Dance performed by students from the Tucson Chinese School.

Tune-up Your Mind

Look for these books and related materials:

Happy, Happy Chinese New Year by Demi (Crown Publishing)

Moonbeams, Dumplings and Dragon Boats: A Treasury of Chinese Holiday Tales, Activities and Recipes by Nina Simonds, Leslie Swartz, and The Children's Museum, Boston (Gulliver Books)

Chinese New Year (video), produced by Schlessinger Media (Holidays for Children series)

Details

What: Tucson Children's Museum

Where: 200 S. 6th Avenue

When: Chinese New Year Celebration 1 – 4 p.m., Saturday, January 28

Regular Museum Hours: 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Tuesday – Saturday, 12 – 5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: \$3.50 for children, \$5.50 for adults, \$4.50 for seniors. Children under 24 months are free.

Information: 792-9985 or e-mail tcm@tucsonchildrensmuseum.org

Discovery Detours

On Chinese New Year, many families prepare a tray of prosperity—a special six-sided platter that has sections filled with candied fruits, melon, and lotus seeds. These foods all symbolize wishes for the coming year, such as riches, health, and good luck. Think about what wishes you have for the New Year. What foods would you select to represent your wishes? With an adult's help, make your own tray of prosperity and serve it at a family dinner.

If you go...

The Chinese New Year celebration this Saturday at the Tucson Children's Museum features dance performances, singing, calligraphy demonstrations and crafts making. Students from the Tucson Chinese School will perform the colorful and energetic Lion Dance. After you watch the dance, consider what you saw. Do you think the Lion Dance that was performed was the Northern version or the Southern version? And was it danced free style or set method?

Answer: The Lion Dance performed at the Children's Museum was the Southern version and it was danced in the set method.

Fuel for Thought

Did you know...

The Chinese zodiac links twelve animals to a cycle of twelve years. Many people believe that a person born in a particular animal's year will have some of the personality traits of that animal. One of the most popular stories concerning how the animals came to be associated with the zodiac tells of a time long ago when the Jade Emperor invited all the animals in his kingdom to share in his New Year's celebration. He also wanted to choose twelve animals for the twelve-year cycle, so he decided to hold a race. The animals would be chosen for their intelligence as well as their physical strength. The elephant, who was known for being fair and calm, was selected to be the judge. The contest was held and the winners were: the rat, the ox, the tiger, the rabbit, the dragon, the snake, the horse, the sheep, the monkey, the rooster, the dog, and the pig. This year's New Year celebration welcomes the year of the dog.

To learn more about the Chinese Zodiac, visit <http://www.c-c-c.org/chineseculture/zodiac/zodiac.html>

Think Tank

Discussion questions for the whole family to consider:

Many of the traditions associated with the Chinese New Year celebration are believed to bring good luck. Think of some of the traditions in your own culture. Are any of them supposed to attract good luck? What are they?

For the Mouse-bound

www.tucsonchildrensmuseum.org

www.tucsonchinese.org

www.c-c-c.org

www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/social_customs/dragon_lion.htm

Wheels Are Turning

Parents and Caregivers: These activities can help your child meet Arizona's educational standards. The standards addressed here include:

3SS-F2. Identify natural and human characteristics of places and how people interact with and modify their environment.

3SS-E6. Describe the economic, political, cultural, and social processes that interact to shape patterns of human populations, interdependence, and cooperation and conflict. (Grades 6-8)