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Miami-Dade ready to greet Chinese New Year

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CHRIS CUTRO / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

1/25/14—In the Scarlet lion Ryan Chin, 10, from Weston, jumps to the beat of the drum during practice of the Lion dance, a form of traditional dance in Chinese culture. He was practicing at John Wai Kung Fu Academy in Plantation.

Friday marks the beginning of a 15-day celebration steeped in old-world tradition and mysticism.

The 2014 Chinese New Year (also referred to as the Lunar New Year) welcomes the Year of the Horse. It's one of the most significant holidays in China and other Asian countries, including Indonesia, Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

In South Florida, it's part of our cultural tapestry too, with large festivals, lion dances and spiritual activities taking place over the next two weeks.

Festivals

“The Chinese Lunar New Year is like Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve combined,” said Dr. Jim Yu, director of the Confucius Institute at Miami Dade College (MDC).

Similar to western tradition, the Chinese New Year is a time when families come together to give thanks and celebrate, sharing customs that are meant to attract positive energy, luck, prosperity and longevity.

The Confucius Institute began activities at four MDC campuses this week, including

live musical and dance performances, calligraphy demonstrations, Tai Chi and performances from the Peking Opera.

The largest celebration in Miami-Dade County, the 26th Chinese New Year Festival, will take place from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Feb. 16, at MDC's Kendall Campus. It's co-hosted by the Confucius Institute and the Chinese Cultural Foundation in Miami.

Peter Liu, the foundation's president, said the festival was originally founded by a group of about 200 Chinese Jamaicans who settled in the Kendall area. Today, it's no longer just for the Asian populations in South Florida; last year, more than 6,000 people attended.

"At first the people who attended were 100 percent Chinese descent. Today, it's less than 50 percent," Liu said.

The University of Miami will hold its own celebration, the Third Annual Lunar New Year Festival, starting at 6 p.m. Feb. 3. Now in its third year, the event is organized by the Asian American Student Association and the Chinese Students and Scholars Association.

Expect traditional favorites, such as the lion dance, mixed with Asian hip-hop dance and pop numbers.

"We bring in our own flavor," said Jacinta Yong, president of the UM Asian American Student Association. "It's an event made for UM students and families as well."

Eight tents will reflect Asian traditions for the New Year, including upper mask face painting, Chinese jump rope and more.

A spiritual celebration

Zen Village in Coconut Grove, a cross-cultural, interfaith Buddhist temple and community wellness center, will present its Eighth Annual Chinese New Year celebration at 7 p.m. Saturday. It will feature dragon and lion dances, Tai Chi taught by a 13th generation master, drumming, fortune telling, lantern prayer, tea ceremony, and fireworks, among other activities.

"Here at Zen Village, we promote the world's cultures. The Chinese New Year is part of that," said Master Chufei Tsai, a Buddhist and Taoist master who leads the center.

Tsai says the spirit of the horse is active, very engaging and about doing things in life. The celebration will also include candle lighting and lanterns strung up with prayers and poems attached. Attendees can explore the lush property, sample traditional Chinese New Year dishes and a variety of teas.

The lion dance

Among the oldest and most popular Chinese New Year traditions, the lion dance is danced during cultural and religious celebrations to bring luck, expel evil spirits and clear the path for new beginnings.

"The lion dance is about having a fresh start. Blessing businesses, mostly restaurants was the common practice at first. But as knowledge of the culture grew we began getting more calls from corporations too," said Osei Xavier, senior instructor at John Wai Kung Fu Academy in Plantation.

This is peak season. Already the troupe has 15 performances lined up over four days, including the UM festival, Hakkasan at the Fountainsbleau Miami Beach, Dragon Gate restaurant in Pembroke Pines and Christina Lee's at Gulfstream Park.

The lion dance is performed by two people sharing a costume: one under the large, colorful head piece and the other hunched over the tail. It's physically hard, Xavier says, requiring coordination, strength and balance, which is why lion dancers are often martial artists.

At its full strength, the troupe can perform with eight to 10 lions. They will need it for the next couple of weeks.

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