

Fireworks Ban May Send the Ox in Quietly

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They have been known to start fires and blow off fingers. But firecrackers have been an integral part of the Chinese New Year celebration for thousands of years, charged with chasing away evil spirits. But come Friday, the first day of the Year of the Ox, year 4695, in the Chinese lunar calendar, the evil spirits need not worry about finding a new home for the first time in the city's history. Mayor Giuliani has ordered a ban on fireworks during the Chinese New Year, and police commanders in areas with large Chinese populations like Chinatown, Flushing and Sunset Park have promised to follow orders.

"In keeping with the Mayor's policy on the quality-of-life issue, there will be zero tolerance for fireworks during the Chinese New Year," said Deputy Inspector Thomas M. Chan, commander of the Fifth Precinct in Chinatown. "We will be enforcing the rules." Inspector Chan said no one, not even the lion dancers who are traditionally accompanied by exploding firecrackers, will be exempt.

Although the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, which represents the interests of the pro-Taiwanese faction, and the Chinese United Associations of New York, which is pro-China, jointly endorsed the ban in a rare show of unity, many Chinese business owners, lion dancers and schoolchildren are in an uproar over the Mayor's decision.

"Since when do these organizations speak for Chinatown?" asked Jan Lee, an owner of Sinotique on Mott Street and a third-generation Chinese. "The Mayor is missing the point. He is pursuing the quality-of-life issues where there doesn't seem to be one."

Because of their cultural significance, firecrackers have been tacitly permitted during Chinese New Year festivities in the city for more than 100 years, despite their danger. After all, Chinese New Year without firecrackers is, well, sort of like a Super Bowl without beer.

"We are totally crushed," said Brandon Tom, 16, a nephew of Mr. Lee and a member of the Chinatown Community Young Lions, a dance troupe whose dream of celebrating their 25th anniversary with extra blasts of firecrackers has been dashed by the ban. "My friends were almost in tears over this."

The president of the United Chinese Associations of New York, Wong Kai Shing, has suggested that tape recordings of firecrackers be played during the celebration.

But many scoffed, saying recordings would not have the same impact as the real thing.

"Kind of like phone sex," said a Chinatown advocate who insisted that his name not be used.

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