

New Year's Ends Without a Bang

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Published: February 08, 1998

Last Tuesday evening, a dozen members of the Chinatown Community Young Lions gathered in their cluttered clubhouse at Mulberry and Bayard Streets to discuss a pressing question: how to put their lions to sleep without firecrackers.

Today marks the end of the Chinese New Year celebration, culminating in costumed lion dances. The performance by 15 groups, including the Young Lions, starts at noon and will wend its way through the narrow streets of Chinatown until late afternoon.

Traditionally, when the lions have done their work to dispel evil spirits from the new year, they have been rewarded with a crackling lullaby of fireworks.

But in this second year of a fireworks ban by Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, the group has decided to indulge its lions with food instead. At the conclusion of the show, which will be in front of the Sinotique antique store at 19 Mott Street, the papier-mache and silk beasts will be feted with lettuce and oranges and red paper -- symbols of good luck for the Chinese -- all skewered, kebab style, on six-foot-long bamboo sticks.

"We're not going to let some ban ruin our time-honored tradition," said Valerie Tom, the group's founder and executive director.

Since it was founded 26 years ago, the Young Lions, whose members are overwhelmingly second- and third-generation Chinese Americans, have stood out from the other lion dance troupes, which have become increasingly multiethnic. Over the years, the group has changed from an outcast to one of the most respected lion dance groups in the city, being invited to perform for Presidents Carter, Reagan and Bush and Mayors Beame, Koch and Dinkins. (Mayor Giuliani has yet to extend an invitation.)

Founded to keep her two eldest sons, Brian and Kevin, and their teen-age friends off the streets during the height of the Chinatown gangs wars, the Young Lions have swelled into the hundreds, Mrs. Tom said. She estimated that as many as 2,000 have come through the program over the years. Today, it has about 200 active members, she said.

In the group's early years, its unorthodox philosophy and management style raised a few eyebrows among the conservative old-guard Chinatown leadership, which shunned women and American-born Chinese for positions of power.

Because the Chinatown leadership controlled the lion dance groups and the businesses for which they performed, the Young Lions were rarely invited to perform in Chinatown, Mrs. Tom said. The only exceptions were businesses whose owners' children were in the troupe.

But these days, the troupe is one of the busiest in town. It has performed two shows a day during the two-week Chinese New Year's celebration, and it has taken an active role in opposing the fireworks ban.

But although other lion dance troupes protested the ban by refusing to stop at Chinatown's Fifth Precinct, the Young Lions went into the station house at the behest of police officers to help rid it of lingering bad luck, including 17 deaths last year among family members of officers assigned to the precinct.

"We have nothing against the officers," said Jan Lee, an owner of Sinotique and an outspoken opponent of the ban.

While other lion dancers must belong to either a kung fu school or a Chinatown association, anyone can dance for the Young Lions.

To make sure today's performance goes smoothly, several members of the troupe spent last Tuesday fussing over the dozen or so bamboo sticks that will be part of the ceremony, trying to figure out the best way to hide the sticks once they have been swallowed by the lions.

The lettuce, oranges and red paper that will adorn the the sticks will first be "eaten," then torn into pieces by the lion dancers and tossed in the air for good luck, Mr. Lee said.

As for the sticks, he would not divulge how they would be disposed of. "That's a secret," he said.