

## Young Lions celebrate the Chinese New Year

BY JOWELLE HANAHAKA

Under a huge banner emblazoned with their name and a nestful of red balloons that stretched across Mott St., the Chinatown Community Young Lions celebrated their silver anniversary at the end of the Lunar New Year festivities on Sunday.

In a spectacular finale, nine Lions (docked out in red, yellow, black, turquoise, green or pink costumes), leaped, pranced or swooped, bared fangs and fiercely glowing electric eyes of their huge carved heads at thousands of exuberant spectators, all to the rolling thunder of lion drums, gongs and cymbals.

"We are celebrating our roots. We grew up [here] and represent this community," said Henry Mo, a coordinator.

More than 100 teenagers and young adults of Chinatown's leading youth group took part in the six-hour parade. Club members hugged, kissed and greeted old friends, pausing to shake hands with members of other clubs "to show respect."

Eather Chung, a Pace University student, (one of several dozen young women wearing the club's red sweatshirt) said: taught me about my history and culture."

A team of young men pushed and pulked their red wooden can carrying the drums and gong (there were 15 alternating drummers, the youngest a three-year-old) and followed two Lions through the broad avenues and narrow sidestreets, surrounded by a half dozen youngsters banging cymbals.

They stopped at shops with names like Ping's Corned Beef, San Sun Florist and the

Silver Palace (where Lions staged a floor show for diners), as well as banks, theaters and several malls.

Older members carried red poles to protect the Lions and two greeters wearing pink and black papier mache masks danced in a comic pantomime, accompanying the Lions on their journey.

Smiling merchants hung food (mostly lettuce, although one fish store put out a live carp in a tank) in wire baskets on their awnings, pulling out cameras and video equipment as the Lions jumped up to get the contents and take small red envelopes full of money; traditionally the Lions bring good luck for the coming year.

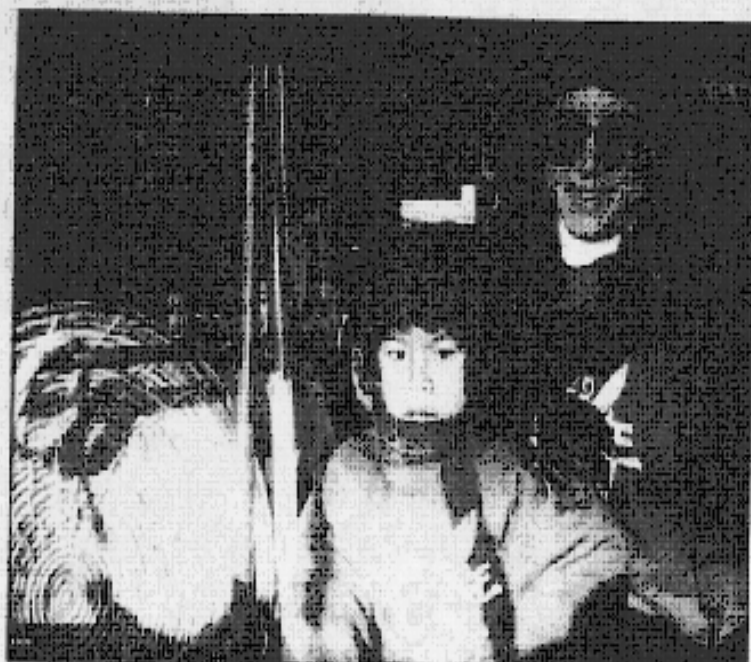
Each Lion covers two dancers, one at the head (it weighs 25 pounds) and a second who manipulates the body and tail.

A young mother from Jersey City, Caroline Lu, holding up her toddler to watch, said she wanted him to join the club.

"The teenage generation has gotten worse because nobody's there to teach them about their roots," she said. [But this group] stays together and doesn't let them leave their roots."

The Young Lions do not collect dues or rely on government funding. This New Year's march is the main fund raising event of the club.

"The lion is the symbol of strength," said Valerie Tom, the group's main adult organizer, "chasing away evil spirits, bringing good luck . . . the noise of firecrackers and the smoke from them brings the message to heaven."



Villager photo by Corby Lee

Kyle Lew, aged 3, plays for Chinatown Community Young Lions, while his mother, Kathy, looks on during Lunar New Year festivities in Chinatown.

But to the disappointment of the community, there were no firecrackers or fireworks in this year's parade, which included a number of other groups, representing local kung fu and merchant associations. Each club takes a different route.

The lone renegade was a white-haired grandmother on a side street, who beamed and clapped after throwing several firecrackers at the lions' gaping mouths.

The Chinatown Community Young Lions was started in 1972 by parents, business people and community leaders, because . . . "in those days, you had to have the same family name to belong to a club," recalled Mrs. Tom.

"They were not open to American-born

kids, and they were formed around merchant associations. There was no sense of belonging and very little aid to Chinese-American born."

A third generation Chinese American and the mother of seven, (including two adopted girls who are half Chinese and half Korean) Valerie Tom and her husband Richard have opened the door of their house to "more than 1,000 kids over the past 25 years."

"Our house was [the clubhouse]: kids would come over and do homework, and then hang out and play games."

There are currently 150 members of Young Lions, Inc.

"We have a clubhouse [now] in the old Manpower building. We pay the rent."