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Chinese New Year combines tradition and modern practice

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By Courtney Sinner January 28, 2008 (7 years ago)

Coffman Union's Great Hall was aglow Saturday night in "lucky red" for the Chinese American Student Association's annual Chinese New Year Celebration.

The festive show encompassed the most fundamental elements of a Chinese New Year: the color red, a lion dance and folk music. Those traditions, however, were juxtaposed with mainstream American fare, making the holiday's modernization clear.

CASA President Jennifer Liu said Chinese New Year has gradually become a "mashing together" of American and Chinese tradition.

"A lot of (CASA) members are second- or third-generation Chinese immigrants," Liu said. "Even my family, we celebrate Christmas, but we still call each other on the Chinese New Year."

Liu also said for students visiting from overseas, the celebration is "an opportunity to remember and make up for the missing part of the holiday."

While most student organizers and volunteers were dressed up in traditional Chinese clothing - it's customary to wear new clothes to Chinese New Year - most students that attended sported jeans, sneakers and sweatshirts.

Chinese New Year, which doesn't officially begin until Feb. 7 this year (the year of the rat), is traditionally a 15-day celebration with food, gifts and family reunions.

Liu said when the group called to book the Great Hall a year ago for the event, Jan. 26 was the closest day they could get to the actual New Year date.

CASA worked to accommodate the diverse visitors in many ways. Drinks were available

before the program began; one table with pearl milk tea and grass jelly drink, while another held orange Fanta, Coke products and water.

The opening lion dance, which was "very traditional," Liu said, was a dramatic performance by the Ha family - complete with drums, cymbals and acrobatic moves under a brightly colored lion costume.

Afterwards, emcees Jimmy Haung and Catherine Wang took the stage with a karaoke bit about a dedication to Justin Timberlake.

Haung and Wang also spoke of the myth behind the lion dance, that of welcoming the New Year while warding off bad spirits.

The dinner, catered by E-Noodles, consisted of white rice, tofu, curry chicken, lo mein and a vegetable "triple delight." At traditional family dinners, various types of dumplings, fruit and fish are typically served.

Liu said CASA chose to offer mainstream dishes because "it's really hard to get traditional food and serve this number of people with the funds that we have."

At dinnertime, the official attendee count was just shy of 500.

"It's our biggest event of the year," Liu said. "We have a lot more people than what we expected."

Emily Crosswell, a junior nursing student, came to the event with a group of fellow nursing students because they were required to attend one multicultural event this semester. She said although the juice wasn't her favorite, the food was pretty similar to other Chinese-style food she'd had.

Mei-Thin Yap drove from St. Cloud State University with five of her friends for the celebration. Overall, they said they enjoyed the program.

"At home, relatives come over to chat, so this is different," she said.

Liu said the tradition is evolving, and "there's not just one way of doing it anymore. It really varies wherever you go."

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