

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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CULTURE

Local families ring in Chinese New Year

Holiday invokes luck, prosperity

MARY LANE GALLAGHER
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Sabrina Walton won't get to go home to Malaysia this year to celebrate Chinese New Year with her family, but she's keeping cultural traditions alive in her Bellingham home just the same.

"When you live overseas and cannot be home with family, you create a little circle of family amongst your friends," said Walton, who will serve a traditional Chinese New Year dinner at her home this weekend for other Chinese American families.

The lunar new year marks the most important holiday of the year in many Asian countries. Here, the holiday marks an important way for families to pass down cultural traditions, particularly in families with American-born children or spouses who aren't Chinese.

It's also a special holiday for families who have adopted children from China, who often celebrate Chinese New Year to introduce their kids to the cultural traditions of their birthplace.

Lillian and Isabelle Bushue, 9 and 7, will be performing with other students from the Mei Hua Chinese School at new year's events, said their mother, Jeanine. The family decorates their Bellingham home with red sashes over doorways in a symbolic invitation to good luck and prosperity. The girls get new clothes, too, in the tradition of the holiday.

"They come from a really wonderful, fabulous, rich culture," Jeanine Bushue said. "We're not of that culture, so we try to do what we can to help them value their birth culture and be somewhat familiar with it."

TRADITIONAL GIFT

For children, one of the favorite Chinese New Year traditions is receiving

FESTIVAL FEB. 10

The Bellingham Chinese Culture and Music Festival will be at Mount Baker Theatre at 7 p.m. Feb. 10. Performers will include the Seattle Peking Opera Troupe; the Vancouver, B.C., Silk and Bamboo Ensemble; and musicians from Western Washington University and the Mount Baker Youth Symphony. Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children under 12.

red envelopes containing money. The tradition extends to unmarried adults, said Debbie Ruther, who sneaks red envelopes under the pillows of her three 20-something sons on Chinese New Year's Eve.

Ruther's family tradition is one dollar per year, per envelope.

"It's getting pretty expensive," she said, laughing.

Ruther was born and raised in Taiwan, but her husband is not Chinese, making her family a member of what she called the "half-and-half club." When her sons were growing up, Ruther made sure they knew the traditions their mother learned as a child.

"Young people kind of slowly drift away if their families don't keep the traditions," she said.

Very traditional families may also clean their homes to prepare for the new year. But they don't do any cleaning on New Year's Day, said Helen Li, one of the founders of the Northwest Chinese Cultural Association.

Sweeping the floor or pouring out water on the first day of the year might send away the year's good fortunes, she said. And breaking anything that day also could bring bad luck, she said.

FOOD PLAYS A PART

Many Chinese New Year's traditions are linked to food. It's important to have too much food for New Year's dinner, Ruther said, not only to symbolize prosperity for the coming year, but to help feed the family when all the stores are closed during the holiday week, when everyone is visiting family and friends.

A well-prepared New Year's meal has a lucky number of 10 dishes, including one dish with 10 different vegetables chosen because their names sound like words that will bring good luck for the year. Ginger, for example, is for "life," black moss for "prosperity" and celery for "hardworking."

It's a lot of work in the kitchen, said Walton, just like Christmas and Thanksgiving.

"When you preserve that tradition, it's all worthwhile," said Walton, whose home is already decorated with red sashes, lanterns and clusters of firecrackers draped over doorways.

"I decorate my house every year because it makes me happy," she said.

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