



The Lunar New Year Story in Houston

In 1930, there were fewer than 30 Chinese in Houston. By then, Houston's Chinatown had moved from its original location at 600 Texas Avenue to the southeastern outskirts of town on Chartres Street at Rusk Avenue.

The On Leong Chinese Merchants' building in Houston's *then-new* Chinatown became the venue for the City's first community Lion Dance celebrations for Lunar New Year. Endless strings of Lucky Red Firecrackers were suspended atop the green tiled roof. The three-story building housed the community's elaborate Ancestors Altar, civic meeting & banquet space, as well as the 'old bachelors' living quarters. By 1950, there were just an estimated 1,000 Chinese Houstonians.

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, Houston's Chinatown New Year celebration was a grand spectacle. Lion dancers precariously balanced on each other's shoulders to reach the Jade Green Lettuce Heads that hid the Lucky Red Envelopes of money, amid the incessant roar of millions of firecrackers. *This* was the collective community memory of New Year for the entirety of Houston's Chinese for 60 years.

Until the 1990's, when Houston's East Asian immigration exploded, some 250 – 300 small Asian businesses and community organizations celebrated with Lion Dancers and Firecrackers each New Year. "*Lunar New Year without firecrackers is NOT a real New Year celebration!*" was the sentiment echoed by many, including Vican Tan of Viet Hoa Center, venue host of Lunar New Year Houston since 2008.

In 1994, the City clamped down on Lion Dance fireworks and the hundreds of authentic New Year celebrations dwindled to a single small event in Houston. The prohibitive expense of meeting the City's safety and permitting policies heralded the demise of this most consequential cultural keystone of Houston's Asian community. The loss of these essential ritual celebrations in the community resulted in the dwindling of arts groups dedicated to practicing and perfecting the Lion & Dragon Dance art forms in Houston.

Since those days, this historically significant, organic art form was kept alive in Houston by a single Asian entrepreneur. Mr. Henry Chiu, of Tan Tan Restaurant, a Cantonese-ethnic Vietnamese national refugee, resettled his family here after fleeing war-torn Vietnam. He truly believed that the great good fortune of his family and business in Houston was based in his cultural fidelity to the *authentic* Lunar New Year celebration.

Each year, in their tiny parking lot, Tan Tan Restaurant hosts all the City's Lion Dance groups celebrating the New Year with millions of Lucky Red Firecrackers. For years, this was the only chance for Houstonians to experience a '*real Lunar New Year*' event. Even though this event was not marketed citywide and the size of the audiences was limited by the small venue, Mr. Chiu single-handedly saved an ancient art form for our International City. It is his unwavering dedication that serves as our inspiration.

The cultural import of this ancient ritual ceremony is not well understood by the American public, yet it holds deep meaning for many Asian cultures. The City is home to many Asian cultures that assign

great significance to this celebration of the Lunar New Year, including Houstonians from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Sydney, and Singapore, with each region possessing their own Lion Dance styles.

The Lion Dance dates back to **510 A.D.**, while the Dragon Dance's origin dates to **200 A.D.** The Lion, traditionally regarded as a 'guardian' creature, figures prominently in Buddhist tradition. The Dragon is considered as a 'sign of their cultural identity' by the Chinese,. It is regarded as a 'sacred' creature, symbolizing power, courage, righteousness and dignity,

IN 2008, LUNAR NEW YEAR HOUSTON was launched. The authentic Lion Dances presented at LUNAR NEW YEAR HOUSTON are of the 'Southern style' and are performed to exorcise Evil Spirits and to summon Luck & Fortune. The Dragon Dance signifies the end of the year and welcoming New Beginnings, driving away Evil and blessing all with Health & Prosperity.

The dances are performed atop hundreds of thousands of Lucky Red Firecrackers, accompanied by giant drums, cymbals and gongs, to make an immense noise to chase away Bad Fortune of the Old Year. As many as 100 Lions and Dragons perform at LUNAR NEW YEAR HOUSTON with nearly a million red firecrackers! It is sponsored, in part, by The Brown Foundation and the Strake Foundation.

This unique cultural arts event is the first professionally produced Lion & Dragon New Year ceremonies for the City of Houston. LUNAR NEW YEAR HOUSTON is a FREE outdoor event for family audience. The International Management District estimates Lunar New Year Houston's annual audience for its 2-day event at 50,000.

For 2012, we add the mythical Qilin, known as the Chinese Unicorn, to our Lion and Dragon Dances. Houston's only Qilin will be ceremonially "awakened" at Teo Chew Temple Blessing on October 15, 2011.

All of the world's International Cities boast of elaborate traditional Lunar New Year celebrations. True dedication to the authentic celebration of Houston's Lunar New Year will bring Good Fortune to Our City.

The Sage advises: "Feed the Lions and bring Good Fortune in the New Year!"

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www.LunarNewYearHouston.com