

Prepare to Ring in Chinese New Year!

By Bill Poorman

Living in Singapore offers numerous ways to experience different cultures and events and one highlight is the opportunity to join in on one of the biggest holidays in the world: Chinese New Year.

Also known as Spring Festival or Lunar New Year, since its exact dates are determined by the Chinese lunar calendar, the holiday is a time for gathering with family and friends, celebrating one's good fortune and preparing for another prosperous year ahead.

In 2019, February 5-6 are the official Chinese New Year holidays. That is, you get them off work. But the entire season lasts 15 days. It starts on Chinese New Year's Eve, with a reunion dinner for families, where they share traditional dishes. At this meal and throughout the season, children, younger relatives and unmarried people are often given *hong bao*, or 'red packets', with money in them. People also exchange mandarin oranges which represent good fortune and prosperity. There are many customs associated with giving gifts during Chinese New Year, but one stands out: don't offer four of anything or multiples of four. The word for 'four' in Mandarin sounds similar to the word for death and, therefore, promises ill fortune – no one wants that at the start of a new year.

During the Chinese New Year season, you're likely to see and hear special celebrations across the island. Red and gold are the colors of the season and each new year is associated with an animal from the Chinese Zodiac. 2019 is the year of the pig, so expect many places to decorate with these themes and colors. You'll also likely hear the phrase, "Gong xi fa cai!" – pronounced, roughly, "gong see fah tsai". It's the traditional Chinese New Year greeting and it means

"Wishing you good fortune!" or "Congratulations on your prosperity (in the new year)!" You're also likely run across a loud and boisterous lion dance. Performance troupes dress in traditional Chinese lion costumes and play drums and cymbals in order to bring good fortune to businesses and residences. Much like Christmas carols, you might also hear traditional songs played on repeat in stores. A famous one is "Gong Xi, Gong Xi". What you won't hear everywhere are firecrackers, though. Traditionally these were set off with the idea being to scare away evil spirits, but firecrackers have been banned for safety and to keep the air clean.

You're encouraged to wear new red and gold clothes during Chinese New Year. You might want to consider doing a deep spring cleaning on your home, as well. You might even have the opportunity to join in a *yu sheng* ceremony. *Yu sheng* is a traditional fish salad and people stand in a circle around it, using chopsticks to toss it into the air, again, to ensure prosperity for the future.

To bring all of this together, make a trip to Chinatown, where you'll see the decorations and season in full. And to finish it all off, be sure to catch Singapore's Chingay Parade – a celebration of its multicultural character – held at the end of the Chinese New Year season.

If you're interested in more of the many traditions and customs associated with Chinese New Year, have fun learning all about them by checking out the American Association's *Living in Singapore* guidebook.

Bill Poorman is a writer who has lived in Singapore for four and a half years and still finds out about new Chinese New Year traditions and their meanings.

