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## Year of the Ox begins

*(by Daniel O'Keefe - January 14, 2009)*

Locals gathered in Rutherford last week at the newly opened Gain Contact Center on Ames Avenue for an early celebration of the coming Chinese New Year.



One person dressed up in clothing that evoked imperial dress during the Tang Dynasty. The beads hanging down from his hat were to prevent people from making direct eye contact with the emperor.



In Chinese culture the date of the New Year is based on a lunar calendar so, like Easter Sunday, its date changes from year to year. This year the official date is on Jan. 26. The Chinese astrological calendar cycles through 12 animals every 12 years with this year marking the end of the Year of the Rat and the beginning of the Year of the Ox.

"It's a very hard-working year," said Elizabeth Wang, a representative of New York-based New Tang Dynasty Television (NTDTV) which sponsored the event. Wang was born and raised in mainland China before

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Attendees at the event sampled traditional Chinese fare, such as dim sum (left) and dumplings (upper right). People traditionally eat long noodles to symbolize longevity.



Presenters brought traditional Buddha and dragon statues.

moving to America in 1996. The ox, she said, is characterized by endurance and dependability.

Attendees got a chance to sample traditional Chinese cooking, though not exactly all the same dishes that would be served at New Years. One of the items, dumplings, is a staple of new year celebrations, according to Ping Yi Lee, who grew up in Taiwan before moving to the United States. Many families will put a coin in one of the dumplings and whoever gets it is supposed to have good luck. She also said fish is a common food to

eat during the festival since in Mandarin Chinese the same sound means both "fish" and "abundance."

Though the New Year falls on a particular day, the accompanying festival lasts two weeks with a lantern festival on the last and 15th day. Lee said almost everyone gets the first week of the festival off from work. For five days only restaurants are open for business.

Craig Zabransky, a travel writer from New York City who was at the event, has first hand experience with the holiday. He recounted a trip he made to Beijing five years ago.

"It's a lot more like Thanksgiving and Christmas combined," said Zabransky. For someone expecting a large, Times Square-like celebration with fireworks and a ball drop, he said, it was shocking how different it was.

"It was hectic and cold and then all of a sudden [Beijing's] empty." At New Year millions of people will leave the cities to take trains back to their hometowns and villages. "They'll travel a day in advance, for 15 hours or more packed like sardines. It makes a delayed flight leaving Newark or LaGuardia look like nothing."

Lee said she remembers fondly the family reunions and fireworks displays when growing up in Taiwan. When asked about the difference between New Years in her country and in China, she said one of the biggest differences was the programs they would show on television.

"We have much better shows," she said. "In China there's state-controlled television so

there's only one program. In Taiwan they compete so there's more than a hundred."

Matt Sullivan, a Rutherford resident who lived and worked in Hong Kong for several years and who made the trip over the border into China several times, was also at the event. He and his wife lived in Hong Kong in the late 90s before moving back to the United States to raise their children.

Also at the event was a man from NTDTV dressed in period clothing meant to recreate the garb of the emperor during the Tang Dynasty about 1,500 years ago. Lee pointed out to the crowd how the beads hanging from his hat were meant to block direct eye contact with the emperor. His robe was made from 12 pieces of clothing symbolizing the 12 months and even the direction of the fold in front would indicate he was of Han descent, China's majority ethnic group.

The Gain Contact Center, which opened in October, hosts multicultural events and classes for children and adults as well as cultural awareness training for companies. The center teaches language immersion classes for a variety of ages in Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian and Mandarin Chinese.

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**South Bergenite**  
33 Lincoln Ave.  
Rutherford, NJ 07070  
201-933-1166



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