

A Joyous Chinese New Year¹

As Chinese New Year draws near, every family is busy preparing for its arrival. People will have their hair cut, buy new clothes, do shopping, and cook special food and snacks for this festive occasion. Everywhere is bustling with life.

Dad has to work overtime and cannot do New Year shopping with Mum. It is tiring for Mum to make purchases by herself. On the twenty-eighth day of the twelfth lunar month, Mum and I start year-end household cleaning to tidy up every corner of our place.

The Chinese New Year's Eve is a busy day. Merrily, I first fill up the confectionery box with sweet candies, melon seeds and traditional Chinese snacks. After lunch, I cut the red paper bought from stationery shop into strips for making spring couplets in the evening. When finished, these couplets will be posted around the door.

In the kitchen, I find that Mum has all the ingredients ready for our reunion dinner: chicken, fish, vegetables, mushrooms and many others. "Let's have a hearty reunion dinner when your dad gets home," Mum says. I wash my hands and help Mum prepare the meal. Mum even teaches me how to make sticky rice balls to be served in sweet soup.

At reunion dinner, I notice some hair-like strands in one of the dishes and cry to Mum, "How strange! We eat hair?" Mum smilingly explains: "That is black moss seaweed. It looks like hair but is not. People think it is auspicious to eat black moss seaweed because in Chinese, 'black moss seaweed' and 'wealth' have similar sounds." Mum also tells me that fish is a must-have dish for any reunion dinner because the Chinese words for "fish" and "surplus" are pronounced the same. Having an ample surplus symbolises the abundance of wealth.

After reunion dinner, my parents take me to a park where Chinese New Year Fair is held. At the fair, there is a lot to see and experience, with a number of stalls selling flowers and different kinds of New Year products, like luck-bringing decorations, amusing toys and balloons. Spring couplets with cartoon characters are probably the most popular. Before we go home, Dad buy two mufflers for Mum and Grandma, and Mum gets some seasonal flowers, while I choose a windmill toy for myself. The three of us go home happily.

Before bedtime, Dad tells me stories about the Chinese New Year. The story I like most is the legend about the New Year Monster. Dad is a great storyteller and I immensely enjoy listening to his stories.

When I am about to fall asleep, Dad quietly slips underneath my pillow a red packet

¹ This is an English version of a picture book written in Chinese.

with money. The “lucky money” inside represents Dad’s wishes for my health and happiness. That night, I have a sweet dream.

On the first day of the first lunar month, I put on new red clothes and go out with Dad and Mum in the morning. On our way to pay New Year visits, we meet our neighbour Siu-man and his parents. I wish Siu-man’s parents health and wealth. In return, they wish me good progress in my studies and give me two red packets. Siu-man also receives two red packets from my parents.

As soon as we reach Grandma’s place, I wish her health and happiness. Dad presents to Grandma the muffler he has bought for her and Mum lovingly puts it around Grandma’s shoulders. Grandma lets me play with her little dog and before we leave, she fills my backpack with some candies and toys without my knowing. Grandma is so dear to me!

On our way home, there is a lion dance performance on the street. The colourful lions dance to the strong rhythm of drums and cymbals and bow gracefully to the onlookers. Exhilarated, people in the crowd clap their hands together. The sounds of drums and cymbals mingled with those of cheering and clapping of the festivities.

On the evening of the second day of the first lunar month, Dad and Mum take me to Victoria Harbour to watch the New Year fireworks display. Mum tells me when she was living in the village, every household set off firecrackers excitedly to welcome the new year.

Since lighting up firecrackers is now forbidden in Hong Kong, to get into the spirit of the festivities, we come to the waterfront to watch the fireworks display organised with special permission. As the beautiful fireworks light up the sky, I make a silent wish.

Traditionally, the third day of the first lunar month is not a good time to pay visits because it is believed that people may quarrel easily. We therefore go to Tai Po in the New Territories to see the countryside, particularly the Wishing Trees in Lam Tsuen Valley. People write their wishes on red paper strips which they then throw to the tree or tie to the nearby wooden racks.

After paying New Year visits for two consecutive days, on the sixth day of the first lunar month, we stay home to have a break and some family time. Dad shares with me his recollection of childhood events during Chinese New Year. One unforgettable anecdote is that when helping Grandma make crunchy peanut crescents, he once fiddled with the dough and stealthily shaped it into some miniature figures of monsters. Grandma was both amused and bemused when she saw them. After telling me this, Dad suggests helping Mum fry slices of Chinese New Year pudding. I stride hand in hand with Dad into the kitchen and soon our home resounds with laughter.

On the morning of the seventh day of the first lunar month, I eagerly open the red packet Dad has given me. Afterwards, I open my diary and put down my new year wishes.