

# FESTIVITIES

## in a Foreign Land

As a fresh new year begins, we welcome 2025 with festive cheer. Remembering our colleagues abroad who are not able to celebrate in person with us and their families, *SMA News* features doctors and medical students sharing their stories of how they celebrated festivities while working or studying in a foreign land. Be it at Christmas, Chinese New Year (CNY), Hari Raya or any other joyous occasion, our distant friends and families remain near and dear to our hearts.

Text and photos by Helen Cai

Helen is currently a Year 4 medical student at the University of Cambridge.



Legend has it that at the end of each lunar year, the beast Nian emerges to haunt villages, creeping through the darkness and preying on their sense of peace. The villagers discovered that loud noises and the colour red could drive Nian away, and they were united in this battle. And so, a tradition was born: firecrackers, lanterns and boisterous reunion dinners to usher in the new year and banish the monster.

It is January yet again, and Nian waits quietly in the shadows. It strays further from the streets of Singapore, where red lanterns illuminate and CNY songs reverberate. It inches closer to the cold, rainy homes in the UK – unfamiliar with and unprepared for its arrival. As an international medical student in the UK, CNY always falls during term time. This marks the third year I have spent CNY away from family and friends in Singapore, with at least three more to come. As I watch the sun set at 4 pm, the longing for home looms large, an ache that creeps in with the season.

CNY used to be a given in Singapore. The entire country was a part of the celebrations – the streets alive with red banners and festive songs, the excitement

spilling into every corner. But here, celebrating CNY is no longer a communal certainty. It takes effort to gather the villagers and prepare the weapons needed to fend off Nian. Discretionary leave from school must be applied for, hotpot ingredients have to be specially scouted from Asian marts, and time has to be carved out of busy schedules to recreate even a fraction of what I once took for granted.

In university, some of us decide to take matters into our own hands. We gather our Singaporean friends for “reunion” dinners – fellow villagers in our shared fight against the encroaching loneliness of the season. *Chunwan*, a CNY Gala television show, plays in the background, its bustling energy filling the room with the festive noise we crave. We sing along to familiar songs, share CNY goodies, and wear red to ward off Nian’s lingering shadows.

It is one minute before midnight – the moment Nian is said to strike. Lighters flicker to life, and we scramble into the night, ready to face the beast. The sky erupts in a burst of colours. Red, pink, orange. Fireworks shimmer brightly before fading, leaving behind a faint

glow. We stand in silence, watching the spectacle, a sense of triumphant celebration washing over us. In that moment, the lonely emptiness is replaced by the presence of those around me.

Nian has been chased away.

CNY here is not the same as it was back home, but it does not need to be. We have found our own ways to light up the night, to reclaim the joy and togetherness of the season. And with every burst of laughter, every firework that lights up the sky, the beast retreats further into the shadows.



Self-assembled yusheng



Our reimagined reunion dinner



Text and photos by Dr Sarina Sairazi

Dr Sairazi is a full-time GP working at Shifa Clinic (Tampines).



I had the privilege of spending a year in New Zealand, also known as Aotearoa, in 2020. I worked and lived in a small town named Masterton, north of Wellington. Arriving to live in a new country is equal parts exciting and terrifying, but my long-suffering husband and children took it all in stride. It helped immensely that Kiwis (slang for New Zealanders) are some of the friendliest, nicest people we have met.

We quickly learnt that Kiwis celebrate festivities slightly differently – with a more relaxed approach to traditional holidays. Furthermore, the diversity of cultures meant that there was always something to celebrate somewhere.

For example, it is common in New Zealand to set off fireworks to celebrate Guy Fawkes Night, so this law-abiding Singaporean was thrilled at the prospect of doing something “illegal”. Together with a few friends, I rented a seaside bach (vacation home) over a weekend to have our first experience setting off fireworks. It did not disappoint.

My children celebrated their first Halloween here in New Zealand, which

was as fun for the adults as the children. I brought my costumed children to my workplace Halloween party, which featured activities for various age groups, “horror rooms”, themed food, and movie screenings. The town park, normally sedate and manicured, was decorated with impressive Halloween decor, with pop-up stands and unlimited free Halloween-themed train rides. Even the train masters wore terrifying costumes and makeup. Like most of the sensible adults, I went on the train at least twice.

There were also local quirky celebrations. On a road trip with friends, we stopped by the annual Caboodle festival in Whanganui, which celebrates all things vintage. Revellers arrived in vintage cars, dressed in beautiful clothing of yesteryears (with a smattering of steampunk), celebrating traditional dance, music, food and – the most exciting part for me – vintage flea markets.

Not all celebrations are equal though. Celebrating our first Eid (Hari Raya) away

from home was emotionally difficult. What should have been a boisterous day-long reunion with extended family was replaced by a Zoom meeting with our families back home. We cooked festive foods like rice cakes, *sayur lodeh*, *rendang*, and *sambal goreng* because they tasted like home. It was then that I learnt that barbies (barbecues) are a common way of celebrating festivities with friends, and our new Muslim friends taught us to celebrate Eid the Kiwi way. It was comforting to know that Kiwis love to bond over food, just like back home. I think fondly of the barbies I had with my friends since, celebrating everything from national holidays and birthdays to new friendships. I even got to host my first Christmas gathering with friends.

Discovering new cultures helped my family deepen our understanding of our identity, beliefs and values. I highly recommend similar sojourns in other cultures to everyone.



Enjoying the Caboodle festival with some very well-dressed revellers



Me with my three children when we first arrived in New Zealand



**Text and photo by Dr Claire Lim**

Dr Lim is a fourth-year general surgery resident with Singapore Health Services under the clinician-scientist track. She has a strong interest in translational science research and has embarked on a PhD in oncology at the Early Cancer Institute, University of Cambridge, UK, and is currently in her third year of study.



I am thankful for the opportunity to study at the University of Cambridge, where I have spent the last two years embarking on a PhD. The challenges of being away from home were greatly eased by the close-knit community I found in Cambridge, UK, through my laboratory group and church. There is a strong bond among international students and workers who reside overseas as we partake in one another's lives. We are able to relate to the emotions and experiences of living away from home, and are in a unique position to support one another through our different phases of life. In particular, the festive periods are valuable opportunities to gather and spend time with one another.

To celebrate the 2024 Chinese New Year, my friends and I each cooked a dish that reminded us of home, and we had a cosy gathering over a pot luck dinner. We had great fun and lots of laughter as we enjoyed the home-cooked meal and shared about the family traditions we had. We also had baking sessions of local favourites, including pineapple tarts, which brought people together and provided opportunities to share the Singaporean culture with others. It was the first time for some of us baking these treats and it will certainly not be the last. In the lead up to Christmas in 2024, my laboratory group had our annual Christmas dinner and Secret Santa gift exchange game. It was a relaxing time to unwind and get to know one another better outside of work. In addition, my friends and I were involved in carol services, where we had readings from the Bible alongside a choir and carol singing. These services allow us to reflect on the year and be thankful

for the good news of Christmas. It was also a heartwarming time to meet both new guests and old friends over mulled juice and minced pies. Over time, this community became a home away from home as we provided mutual support and care for one another.

The holiday periods also bring to mind celebrations back home in Singapore among family and friends. I chat with my family regularly, and it is always heartening to hear of their gatherings and time spent among loved ones. I enjoy looking through the photos taken at these gatherings and am able to feel the warmth and closeness of our family bonds. Overall, these experiences have helped me appreciate the genuine friendships forged and the cherished memories shared living overseas, while still keeping in touch with and remembering loved ones back home. I would like to wish everyone a Happy New Year and CNY. May the year ahead be filled with joy and gladness!



Home-cooked dishes to celebrate Chinese New Year



Text and photo by Dr Arthur Tan

Dr Tan is a surgical resident in New Taipei City, Taiwan.



Being a half-blooded Singaporean-Taiwanese, I have spent about two-thirds of my life in Taiwan, and currently live and work in Taipei. I sometimes fall into a dilemma as to where I call home and where my patriotism resides.

Some might think that Singapore, being a predominantly Chinese society, would have similar CNY festivities as Chinese-speaking areas like Taiwan or Hong Kong. Reunion dinners in Taiwan are still undoubtedly of utmost importance; doctors and nurses on call that night have hotpot dinners in the hospital that can last for hours, despite the constant need to leave and attend to patients every so often. When working during the CNY period, everyone wishes for auspicious and

hopefully uneventful shifts. One local practice is to buy a Taiwanese coconut-flavoured tidbit called “Guai Guai” which literally translates to being “obedient”, and put them on top of whichever relevant equipment we were operating on (eg, the ECG machine or anaesthesia machine) in hopes of bringing good luck for the machines to function smoothly without any hiccups, or even better, to not have to use the machines at all.

However, traditional CNY practices can actually be quite different here in Taipei. On the first day of CNY, Taiwanese usually stay at home with their close ones instead of going onto the streets to *zou chun* (welcome the new year). Therefore, an interesting sight to behold is that big cities like Taipei actually have rather empty streets during the festive season as many people have returned to their hometown. On the other hand, suburb areas like Hualien or Tainan get more crowded as families gather for meals, catching up and recapping the events of the past year.

Wearing red-coloured clothing during CNY is actually not a particularly preferred choice here; perhaps because it has been done for centuries and nowadays Taiwanese may be somewhat desensitised to the tradition. Nevertheless, the redness of the

*ang bao* surely still excites everyone – just that I am the one giving them out now.

From young, one of my favourite Taiwanese CNY activities has actually been playing with firecrackers and even mini fireworks. As these lie in the grey area of being legal in Taiwan (with certain timing and location restrictions) but not in Singapore, I still feel like a teenage boy whenever I play with firecrackers, the sparkles and bangs signifying good health and wealth. If I were to do the same in Singapore, I would probably be jailed.

Celebrating CNY in Taiwan definitely feels somewhat like home, despite the minor cultural differences. While these recounts barely encapsulate my emotions, I still hope that they will stir up in you the joy of or wistful longing for home. ♦



Guai Guai tidbit placed on machines for good luck

