

Money God most popular man in town

Asian cultures have different ways to celebrate New Year

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

It's a bit like being Santa Claus, but instead of "Ho, ho, ho" you say, "Kung hei-fat choi". Playing the Money God is fun, even around people who don't recognize you as the embodiment of good luck.

"Some Canadians, they have no idea what this is," says King Chan, his hand sweeping over the red robe of the God of Prosperity costume he'll wear at a mall next Saturday, stroking a waist-length false beard as he pulls red packets of lucky money (chocolate coins, actually) from his oversized sleeves.

"People believe this story character will bring them wealth," says the Markham man recruited for a



KING CHAN: Portrays God of Prosperity at Lunar New Year events at Markville Shopping Centre.

12:30 p.m. tour of Markville Shopping Centre.

Not surprisingly, the Money God is a popular attraction around Lunar New Year in many York Region malls, as are the martial

arts-trained lion dancers who bless stores and thrill crowds.

New clothes, gifts of money to bring good fortune and the expectation of a fresh start for all are common at New Year not just in China but also in Korea and Vietnam, where the same calendar is used.

New year celebrations last longer overseas, continuing up to two weeks. That isn't possible in Canada and many new year traditions aren't continued here, some York residents say.

"I had to follow what Canadians do," says John Lee, general manager of the Korean Canadian Association of Metropolitan Toronto.

As a child in Korea, Mr. Lee observed traditions of Sol-Nal (New Year) such as eating a rice cake soup to promote long life, bowing to family elders and paying tribute to ancestors.

"They wear new clothes. They prepare food for their ancestors and have a ceremony in the morning,"

the Thornhill resident says.

Lau Thi Phi took her son back to Vietnam last year so they could visit their relatives (an important New Year tradition) and so he could see how new year, called Tet in Vietnam, is celebrated.

"Children have to wish their elders a happy new year and every time you see elders, (they) give children lucky money," says the Markham woman, owner of the restaurant Pho99.

Ancestors are welcomed back at Tet and paper objects — representations of things those ancestors enjoyed — are burnt.

In Markham, Mrs. Phi cleans her household shrine for new year and makes banh chung, square rice cakes that symbolize the Earth and, thus, life itself.

"Every family needs to make it or buy it," she says.

As in China, it's considered unlucky to sweep a floor the first day of the year.

"That sweeps all the money out," Mrs. Phi says.

Children will stay awake Tuesday to welcome the New Year, which arrives at midnight.

"It's pretty much an overnight party. It's believed that if children stay up on that night, it's good for the parents' longevity," says Suzanna Hsu, an English as a second language teacher at the Chinese Cultural Centre in Markham.

On the first day of the year, Cantonese people buy flowers and candy, says Ms Hsu, originally from South China. On the second day, married women go back to parents' homes with their families.

New year is a time of rest. For children, it's rare quality time with busy parents.

It's not a good time to move to a new home or job and everybody tries not to get angry, Ms Hsu recalls. "Old grudges have to be cast away. Reconciliations have to be made."

New year peak shopping season

BY PATRICK MANGION
Staff Writer

Michael Wong and his mother have staked out one of the prime locations at Pacific Mall in Markham.

Greeting shoppers near one of the entrances, a spread of Chinese treats has made it one of the busiest spots with Lunar New Year just a few days away.

"We're twice as busy now than the rest of the year," Mr. Wong said, as his mother looked on from behind the cash register.

Wealth and prosperity are, after all, cornerstones of the annual tradition.

With cash registers already singing at the Steeles Avenue and Kennedy Road mall, merchants expect activity to build as Wednesday's Year of the Rooster approaches.

Most of the seats were occupied at hairdresser Peter Chien's place last week.

But an appointment will secure a spot for anyone in need of a haircut, symbol of a fresh start to the new year.

In keeping with tradition, Jack Kuo, a second-generation Canadian of Taiwanese heritage, will pick up a new pair of shoes for good luck before midnight Wednesday.

As boy growing up in Hong Kong, Brian Li recalls a stack of new clothes at his bedside every New Year's Day.

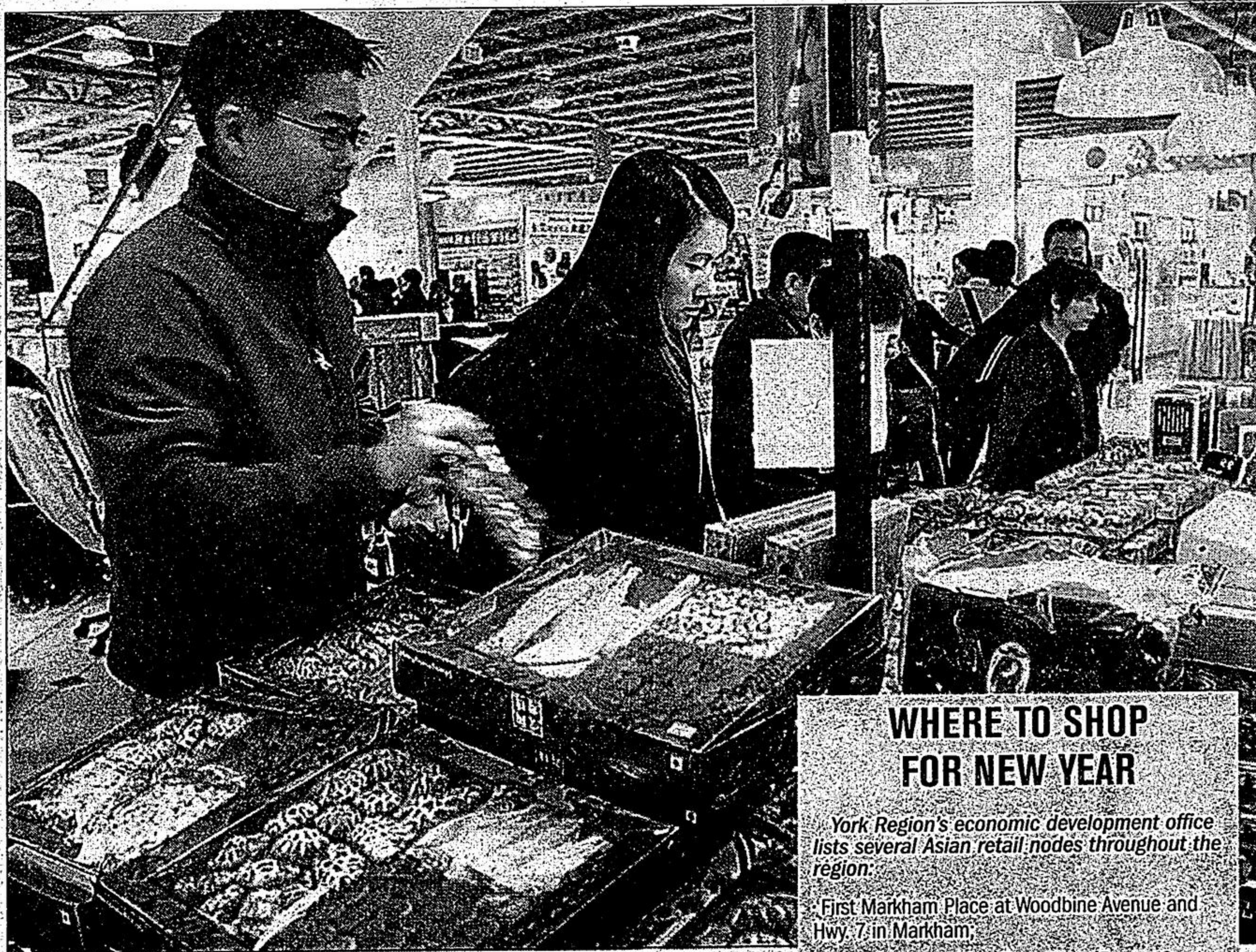
"My mom would tell me I have to wear them for good luck," said Mr. Li, Pacific Mall's Heritage Town operations manager.

While some traditions may have wavered among York Region's Asian populations, the Lunar New Year remains a boon to retailers, Mr. Li said.

For those who aren't shopping, elders giving cash to youth in little red envelopes remains as popular as ever.

Lanterns, in the traditional red and gold, line the halls throughout the mall, adding to the holiday ambiance shoppers have come to expect, said Bonnie Ng, Pacific Mall promotions manager.

"Chinese people love shopping. It's a way to get together with friends and family," she said.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

Ed Lee and Maggie Lee shop for sweets to hand out at New Year celebrations at SBS Sino-Canada Products Inc. at Pacific Mall. Asian retail centres are busy right now because prosperity is a central theme of new year celebrations.

WHERE TO SHOP FOR NEW YEAR

York Region's economic development office lists several Asian retail nodes throughout the region:

• First Markham Place at Woodbine Avenue and Hwy. 7, in Markham;

• Times Square at Hwy. 7 and West Beaver Creek Road in Richmond Hill;

• Pacific Mall at Steeles Avenue and Kennedy Road, Markham;

• Market Village in Markham; and

• Strip plazas in the Bayview Avenue/Hwy. 7 area.



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