

For Some Chinese-Americans, Thanksgiving Is for Wedding Receptions

By Jeffrey E. Singer

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To many immigrants from Fujian Province in southeastern China, Thanksgiving does not mean turkey, stuffing and football. It is instead a rare day off that many use to give or attend wedding receptions.

“It’s the biggest day of the year,” one waitress at 88 Palace, a dim sum restaurant under the Manhattan Bridge, said in Mandarin. “It’s grueling, but I come mentally prepared.”

Thousands of Fujian immigrants arrive each Thanksgiving in New York from across the country, to celebrate at dozens of receptions held in banquet halls and dim sum parlors throughout the city’s Chinese-American communities in downtown Manhattan, as well as Brooklyn and Queens.

It is a day chosen out of convenience. Many Fujianese immigrants work in buffets and takeout restaurants, and so the holiday is the one when many can close their doors and share their time together.

Unlike many Western-style weddings, the actual marriage is not typically a part of these events. The legal part often takes place at a city hall or church somewhere, weeks or months before the wedding reception.

While not as popular, many guests said that wedding receptions in this community can also take place on Sundays, Mondays or Tuesdays, when restaurant workers can more readily take time off.

“During the peak seasons, there can be as many as 100 wedding receptions a week in the Fujianese communities,” said Zheng Junguo, 58, whose daughter’s reception at 88 Palace at 88 East Broadway on Thursday was attended by more than 500 guests.

Three wedding receptions were simultaneously held Thursday afternoon at 88 Palace. In one room, a magician couple performed tricks. In another, a singer dressed in a suit of gold sequins belted out pop ballads in Mandarin, and in a third room, a man in goofy glasses presided as the lights dimmed and confetti cannons exploded to announce that the bride and groom had entered the room.

The performances were accompanied by announcements that blared at almost absurd volumes, leading many guests to stuff their ears with wadded-up pieces of paper napkins.

“The napkins make it less painful,” shouted Cindy Zheng, 34, seated at a table that was caught in the crossfire of two large amplifiers from two different receptions. Ms. Zheng had driven down from New Hampshire, where she works as a restaurant hostess. She was seated with her siblings and cousins, who came from Ohio.

Three more wedding receptions were held in the restaurant that evening. As with the receptions earlier in the day, the events at 88 Palace began with the guests first checking in at tables where they deposited money into red envelopes, which they signed on the back. As they took their seats among the sea of round tables, waiters deposited take-home favors: two-liter bottles of corn oil for one affair, bottles of Remy Martin VSOP Cognac for another.

As is standard, the events included a traditional tea ceremony during which each couple honored their ancestors by bowing with three sticks of incense. Family members were then called up to the front of the banquet hall to give their own gifts to the couple, including gold jewelry and necklaces that were placed around their necks.

“Bow once, bow twice, now three times,” the master of ceremonies repeatedly intoned into the microphone in Fuzhou dialect with the flair and volume of a circus ringmaster.

Waiters with turquoise vests pushed through the crowds with carts carrying platters of king crab, lobsters and abalone.

There are couples who choose when to hold their receptions based on auspicious dates in the lunar calendar, but for many, the convenience of Thanksgiving supersedes those customs.

Andy Liang and Xu Xiamei, both 30, said that they had their hearts set on a Thanksgiving reception so that more members of their families, who are scattered around the country, could attend. “This way we can receive their blessings,” said Mr. Liang, whose reception was held Thursday at Ai Zhen Foo Chow restaurant at 68 East Broadway.

Among the guests was Zhu Rongbing, 56, an acupuncturist and practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine in Manhattan who once treated the bride and whom the families credit with introducing the couple.

“Thanksgiving is to thank everybody,” Dr. Zhu said. “Thank their parents and thank their friends — *and thank me.*”