

Little Saigon to mark Lunar New Year

By Amy Tassin
The Associated Press

WESTMINSTER, Calif. — The flowering tree outside Tong Le's house in Southern California sprouts but one tiny yellow blossom in early winter.

But by the time the Vietnamese community of Little Saigon readies for the Lunar New Year at the end of January, the branches of the *hoa mai* tree will brim with the yellow flowers that are ubiquitous during the annual celebration known as Tet.

"We try our best to keep our Vietnamese traditions — and sync it with work schedules, too," Le, 61, a handyman and former police officer, said through a translator.

The Year of the Horse begins January 31, but preparations and festivities start weeks earlier in Little Saigon in the heart of California's suburban Orange County, home to the largest Vietnamese enclave in the U.S.

Thousands of miles from their homeland and generations on, Le and other Vietnamese Americans mark Tet with traditions like doling out red envelopes filled with fresh-minted bills to herald good fortune. They make square-shaped pork-filled rice cakes and spruce up homes with kumquat trees and flowers like those that bloom outside Le's Garden Grove home. And they visit friends and family while enjoying parades, festivals, and special meals.

Tourists and other visitors can sample the holiday and its preparations alongside locals throughout Little Saigon, which is known for a bustling sequence of strip malls filled with Vietnamese supermarkets, travel agencies, and pho noodle soup restaurants. The area is host to a flower market through January 29 and a firecracker show January 31 at the Asian Garden Mall, along with a parade in Westminster February 1. Festivals in Garden Grove and Costa Mesa feature pageants, Vietnamese music, and carnival-style rides.

Local banks stock up on new bills and distribute slender red envelopes for giving money during the holiday. "They prefer brand new money, like you iron them," said Danny Tran, manager of the Wells Fargo branch in the heart of Little Saigon. "It's a sign of good luck, and it's a sign of new beginnings."

More than 1.8 million people of Vietnamese heritage live in the United



States, with sizable communities in California, Texas, and Washington state. More than 180,000 of them are in Orange County, where many refugees settled after fleeing the fall of Saigon in 1975. Le moved here nearly two decades ago, after he had served time in a communist re-education camp.

The Lunar New Year is an important celebration throughout Asia, and Little Saigon is among many immigrant communities in the United States — including Chinatowns in cities like New York — that host festivals and parades to mark the holiday. Here the festivities continue for three days, with shopkeepers lighting crackling red firecrackers and thousands of people turning out to watch a parade of marching bands and Vietnamese wearing traditional, silken *ao dai* tunics. Many Orange County families host friends and relatives from elsewhere.

"A lot of Vietnamese people from all the states come to Little Saigon to have a Tet celebration together," said Quyen Di Chuc Bui, who teaches Vietnamese at two Southern California universities.

On the eve of the Lunar New Year, families pray to ancestors at Buddhist temples, where monks hand out oranges to symbolize hopes for gold, or fortune, in the

SPECTACULAR CELEBRATION. Shoppers browse before the Tet holiday at the Bolsa Little Saigon store in Westminster, California. Thousands of miles from their homeland and generations on, Vietnamese Americans celebrate the Lunar New Year with traditions passed down from their ancestors. They dole out red envelopes filled with fresh-minted bills to herald good fortune and visit friends and family — despite demanding work schedules and the busy pace of life in the United States. (AP Photos/Nick Ut)

coming year. Many set up five-fruit offerings to ancestors on shrines at home. But those who recently suffered a tragedy such as a death in the family often refrain from visiting on the first day of Tet, fearing they could spread this misfortune to others, said C.N. Le, a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The traditions of the holiday, which marks the beginning of a Vietnamese calendar based on lunar cycles, are also steeped in legend, said Bui, who also teaches a university course on the Vietnamese-American experience. One tells how rice cakes came to be the hallmark food of Tet after a king set up a cooking contest to determine the heir to the throne. A poor prince won after he used rice, a basic staple of Vietnamese agriculture, to make two cakes — a round one representing the heavens and a square one for earth, Bui said.

Billy Le, Tong's 26-year-old son, who came to the U.S. when he was eight years old, said he loved celebrating Tet as a child in Vietnam and now as an adult with his family. A week before the holiday, Le said his family and many Vietnamese pray to the so-called kitchen god, asking him to fly back and report to the emperor of the heavens what is happening in each home.

"We send him away and when Tet comes around, that's when he comes back to us," said Le, a graduate student who helps coordinate an annual student-run Tet festival. "We're hoping to start the new year fresh."

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