

Lanterns and the Lunar New Year

Fiona Harper





Unexpectedly, tears welled in my eyes as I released my delicate rice paper sky lantern, watching it gently ascend into the starlit sky. Filled with warm air from flaming paraffin-soaked token dollars as an offering, my friend and I had carefully adorned the lantern with wishes for prosperity and good fortune in the forthcoming Year of the Dragon. Looking around at foolishly grinning strangers, clearly I wasn't the only one mesmerised. Amidst an emotion-charged crowd of festival-goers, watching the beautiful spectacle of hundreds of lanterns sent aloft simultaneously, I didn't quite anticipate this raw sensation of clustered passion. Twenty minutes after we released the first lanterns, and subsequently throughout the night, masses of flaming lanterns adorned with aspirations were released until dawn. Each time, the crowd's reaction was similarly enthusiastic with mass exhalations of joy.

The culmination of Chinese New Year festivities 15 days after the Lunar New Year ticks over, families and visitors across Taiwan welcome in the New Year in the spirit of peace, prosperity and love. It's one of the country's most significant celebrations. With major events hosted by a different city each year (2012 honours went to Lugang), festivities take place country wide with each locality marking the occasion in its own way. The small town of Pingxi is swamped with visitors who flock to one of the few locations where sky lanterns are permitted. Steeped in tradition, for hundreds of years, sky lanterns have been released in spiritual celebration. Though somewhat of a fire hazard if lanterns drift back to land before the flame is extinguished, high annual rainfall in northern Taiwan dampens the hazard of lanterns sent aloft.

For one day a year Pingxi morphs into a vibrant, pulsing street festival with laneways and streets clogged with festival-goers weaving through street vendors and locals going about their business. Despite the light rain the air is filled with aromatic steamed dumplings to die for, mixed with sweet smelling toasted pancakes. Lantern vendors do a brisk trade too. Though figures are rather vague, it's estimated that over 50,000 flaming sky lanterns are released to the heavens in one day.



Over at lantern headquarters in Lugang (sometimes spelt Lukang), in the small city that is known as a living museum thanks to its ancient temples, preserved heritage and cobbled lanes that wind curiously past elaborate doorways set into high-walled courtyards, the city is adorned with pretty lanterns. Every viable space is utilised to hang colourfully decorated pieces; from trees, shop awnings and temples, strung across roadways. Grey haired and bearded lantern craftsman Master Wu is worshipped like a god, attracting a large crowd as he decorates his gorgeous creations on the pavement outside his store. Children wave enthusiastically at performers parading through streets. Lots of laid-back fun during the day, as dusk descends and the lanterns light up, it's standing room only as crowds politely jostle to enjoy the stunning displays.

In the Year of the Dragon, the main centrepiece of festivities, an enormous fire-breathing sculpture named Soaring Dragon in Radiant Skies, is symbolic of Taiwan's prosperity, peace and the happiness of its people. Newly re-elected President Ma Ying-jeou is a popular guest of honour in the vast stadium as the switch is flicked, lighting up the spectacular lantern. Flashing laser beams create a sense of drama which momentarily silences the crowd as it absorbs the dragon's beauty lit from within. But it's hard to keep 200,000-odd exuberant festival-goers, who erupt into applause and gushes of joy celebrating the New Year as fireworks pop and explode overhead, quiet.

The writer was a guest of Taiwan Tourism Bureau.

More information: [Taiwan Lantern Festival](http://TaiwanLanternFestival.taiwan.net.tw/2012TaiwanLantern)
www.taiwan.net.tw/2012TaiwanLantern

