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Lunar New Year brings on a drove of lucky newborns

Year of the Pig babies are thought to have a better life, and many couples are paying close attention to the calendar

Vanessa Hua, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Ying Wang and Hiroshi Ching looked for a nanny and began decorating their daughter's bedroom weeks ago, but they were in no hurry to bring her into the world.

They wanted their first child to arrive in the lunar Year of the Pig, which began Sunday.

"They told me if I have a girl pig, she'll have a better life," said Wang, 29, who lives in Brisbane and works at KTSF, a television station that produces multilingual programming. "They have patience and understanding and can enjoy their life. Those born under this sign enjoy life and all it has to offer."

People born this lunar year, or who turn 12, 24 or any multiple of 12, are all pigs and believed to be lucky, especially those born in a "fire pig" year like this one. Pregnancies are up in South Korea and China and among followers of the lunar calendar in the United States trying to bestow more luck on their families.

Famous pigs include Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, singer Elton John, actor Ken Watanabe and Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek.

In ancient China, people were buried holding a jade pig for wealth in the afterlife, and the written character for "home" depicted a pig under a roof.

"Pigs are supposed to be very smart," said Terese Tse Bartholomew, curator of Chinese decorative arts at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. "They have an easy life, sleeping all day long."

This time around, the Year of the Pig follows a "double-spring" lunar year, when newlyweds were believed to accrue twice the blessings. The boar sign's alignment with the fire sign, one of five elements -- metal, wood, water, fire and earth -- that rotate through the Chinese lunar calendar, is what makes this year especially auspicious.

Rumors have circulated that this also is an even rarer "golden pig" year, which occurs every six

centuries, though few if any astrologers agree; some even say there's no such thing. Gold piggy banks and other memorabilia are appearing all over Asia.

According to news reports from Asia, some officials are concerned that a baby boom will cause problems down the road, such as crowding in schools and stiff competition for jobs.

Nonetheless, people are trying to find "some excuse for having babies," said Sherman Tai, a fortune-teller in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Pigs bringing good fortune may sound to some people -- including many Asian Americans -- like hogwash. But the number of babies born to Chinese women in San Francisco shot up 21 percent -- to 2,214 births -- the last time a lunar year was considered lucky, when the sign of the dragon coincided with the dawn of the millennium.

The number of Chinese babies fell by 19 percent in 2001, according to the city health department, perhaps reflecting how many of San Francisco's ethnic Chinese residents live by the lunar calendar's predictions. In the following two years, though, births among Chinese women rose again.

Patty Lui and her husband, Daniel, didn't know Asian lunar year 4705 was supposed to bring good fortune when they began trying to conceive, but they have since felt blessed and bought pig decorations to prepare for their child, which is due in May.

"We think pigs are fat, but people are saying it's such a lucky year," said Lui, a San Francisco firefighter who grew up in the city's Richmond District. "We're happy and feel lucky that people know that."

The persistence of these beliefs in the United States, for generations in some cases, reflects how traditions survive and are interpreted and adapted.

Dao B. Hoang, due to deliver in May and told that she is quite lucky to be having a child this year, relies on her parents to keep her informed of traditional beliefs.

"I hope they're still around for a while," she said. "Otherwise, we'd be lost. Eventually we'll have to step up. We're trying to keep (the traditions) and show the kids."

She and her husband raced, without success, to have their first child in the Year of the Ram rather than the monkey because primates -- though clever -- are, according to tradition, at risk of loneliness.

"I try to believe in the good stuff, and if there's something bad, you have to try and make it work out," said Hoang, 40, a Vietnam-born dentist who moved to the United States as a teenager.

Some reject the lore outright.

"I don't think all babies born this year will have a lot of money and be rich. It doesn't make sense," said Jee Yun Hwang, 26, who was born in South Korea and is expecting her first child in April. The Daly City resident moved to the Bay Area about six years ago to study Japanese and biology.

Dr. Anne Tang, head of a unit that provides culturally appropriate care for Chinese patients at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in San Francisco, said many of those she serves want a due date by Feb. 6, 2008, the end of the Year of the Pig.

"Usually, when there's a wonderful year like this, people try to hurry and get pregnant," Tang said.

They have roughly three more months -- and a bit longer if their pregnancies don't last the full 40 weeks from the date of the the last period.

But planning and reality don't always line up.

Ying Wang and two of her co-workers -- who all timed their pregnancies to give birth in the new lunar year -- instead all welcomed daughters at the tail end of the Year of the Dog that ended Saturday.

"I always wanted to have a baby born in the Year of the Pig," said Jo Wan, 37, a reporter and co-worker of Wang's at KTSF. "They're cute, naive, very sweet and happy and all they do is eat, eat, eat."

Her longtime partner had wanted to start trying again right after their daughter was born in July 2005, but Wan persuaded him to wait so they could have a Year of the Pig baby. She didn't realize the Lunar New Year started later than usual. Nor did she know she would have twins -- which would push up her original due date of Feb 25. Her twin girls were born on Feb. 5.

"No matter how much you plan, life turns out in a direction different than you expect," she said. "Everybody has their own destiny when they are born. You cannot say all pigs will have a happy life. That's not reality."

Wang and Wan's colleague, Mina Ku, who grew up in Hong Kong, assumed she would give birth in early March.

She feared having a child in the Year of the Dog. She was born in the Year of the Rooster and always argued with her grandmother, born in the Year of the Dog. It is a pattern she does not wish to repeat with her daughter, who arrived Feb 4.

Their prospects of getting along might improve if her daughter doesn't share this particular bit of lore.

"They'll be more Americanized, especially with my husband not believing it already," said Ku, whose third-generation Chinese American husband tells her she worries too much about the old beliefs. "I will mention it when they are growing up, and if they believe it, that's OK. If they don't, that's also OK. I

won't force them to believe what I believe."

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