Parade-goers line SF streets to welcome the Year of the Rooster

By Emily Green, San Francisco Chronicle  Updated 9:50 pm, Saturday, February 11, 2017

Thousands of spectators lined the streets Saturday in San Francisco to welcome the Year of the Rooster during the annual Chinese New Year Parade. They were followed by a run of local politicians dressed in red in classic convertibles, including Supervisor Hillary Ronen in a low-rider that thrilled onlookers with its up-and-down moves. Then came the marching bands from high schools around the region, kids from kung fu schools showing off their martial arts skills, and a host of beautiful dragons slithering through the street.

The rain, which has doused San Francisco almost nonstop for the past week, stayed away, and onlookers enjoyed temperatures in the low 50s. The event drew people of all ages from around the world.

“This is one of the things in the Bay Area that’s still family-friendly. And who doesn’t like firecrackers and cotton candy?” said Rudy Batt, who drove from Vallejo with his wife and three daughters, ages 2, 3 and 5. “Seeing it through my kids’ eyes is awesome. They love it.”

“It’s fun for the kids and fun for us,” said Beyza Gokturk, who came with her husband, Erek, and 5-year-old daughter.
The couple, who are originally from Turkey and now live in Berkeley, said they wanted to celebrate a different culture’s new year.

“The weather is a blessing on the Chinese New Year, whatever religion you might believe in,” Erek said.

The Chinese zodiac is based on a 12-year cycle with each year related to an animal sign. This year’s sign, the rooster, is known as being “rock steady,” said the Rev. Norman Fong, executive director of the Chinatown Community Development Center and the parade’s master of ceremonies.

Less well known is that the years also correspond to different elements — fire being this year’s element.
“The fire rooster is one of perseverance,” Fong said. “It awakens the world to the light. It brings in the dawn. Especially in these tough times — we don’t know what Trump is going to do — it’s time to cock-a-doodle-do and speak out and stand up for our values.”

One large presence missing from this year’s parade was Rose Pak, the Chinatown power broker who died in September. For years, she turned the family-friendly event into something of a political sport, yelling out colorful and expletive-filled commentary as the politicians drove by the grandstand at Jackson and Kearny streets.

While her quips could be more than a little mean, many people thought that being on the receiving end of them was still better than not being mentioned at all.

This year, Fong said, “kids will not have to worry about swearing.”

Most onlookers, however, knew little of San Francisco’s rough-and-tumble political world. They were drawn by the sheer spectacle of the parade.

“It’s so pretty and colorful,” said Lily Velasquez, 17, who came with her friend from Red Bluff (Tehama County). They planned to go shopping for prom dresses after the parade.

Many people who drove in from out of the city said the traffic was no worse than normal, but parking was very difficult.

Tim Cao, who came from San Jose, said he ended up parking about 2 miles away. Still, he wasn’t complaining. Cao, who moved to the United States from Vietnam 30 years ago, brought his wife and a friend visiting from Paris. “I like the dragons and the cars,” he said.