

A Community and a Smile

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'Lively' usually isn't the first word that comes to mind when describing a high school on the weekend. One would expect the hallways to be silent as students stayed home for the weekend, quiet except for maybe the odd janitor moving around. However, for one Saturday in the winter, the Chinese community--my community--fills a local high school full of life.

Lunar New Year is an annual celebration for the Chinese community to commemorate new beginnings. It's one that the Howard County Chinese School (HCCS), where I studied Chinese language for over a decade, celebrates with great pride. Every year, HCCS hosts a gala where Chinese performers showcase their talents, from singing to dancing to martial arts. It's always a sight to see, that's for sure. Yet, in my humble opinion, one of the best parts of the HCCS Lunar New Year Gala is the food fair.

The food fair is a relatively new event. It was introduced only a couple of years ago, but it has quickly become my favorite HCCS tradition. As I walk through the entrance of the cafeteria, my attention is immediately captured by the vibrancy of my community. The room is absolutely packed. The normally plain walls are draped in red, a show of life, luck, and happiness during Lunar New Year. Vendors, selling all different kinds of food, are calling out to potential customers, encouraging the bustling passersby to buy their goods. The smell of traditional Chinese cuisine is hard to ignore, the mouthwatering scents of meat, vegetables, and spices mingling together to the point where it's practically impossible to decide what I want to try first.

It always takes a moment to absorb it all, to absorb the energy of the Chinese community. I greet my friends with a smile, say hello to my teachers, and wave at familiar faces. Then I come to my senses, and make my way around to each vendor in order to eat my fill. Endless, and not to mention delicious, possibilities? Definitely not an opportunity to be missed, and the food always runs out quickly.

When I finally manage to snag one of the cafeteria's few empty seats, I can't fight the urge to smile, and I can feel a grin spread across my face. I am surrounded by friends and family, and I am given a rare opportunity to spend time with all of them at once. I am celebrating my

culture and one of the most important holidays of the year with people who are like me. I am immersed in my community, and I am happy.