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Way of turning strangers into friends

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Until today, I'd never seen the leering grin of the lion head, set atop two Chinese men moving in unison to the beat.

I'd never sampled Chinese goodies, placed prettily on a table groaning under the weight of food I'd never eaten before.

Chinese New Year is brand new to me. And the Malaysian custom of open house is new as well.

I came to the MCA and Gerakan open house celebrations today a stranger, but the hospitality I received at both places made me feel like an old friend.

I arrived at the MCA open house eager to see a lion dance. I'd never seen one before, and instantly regretted not bringing my camera.

Two lions, placed on top of sweating dancers in red clothing and black shoes, moved in time to the clang and clash of cymbals. When the lion turned my way, I saw both the lion, and the man inside its head, peering at me, through the lion's mouth.

If I let my imagination go, it looked as if the lion had eaten the man, and the man was desperately trying to escape.

Not long after I arrived, a father nudged his son towards the lion, hoping to get a picture of the two together. The little boy ran back to his father in tears, obviously terrified.

Not everyone saw the lion as a unique novelty, as I did. The longer I watched, the more I saw children, always about the age of four, run from the lion.

One little girl danced to the cymbals gleefully as if it was music played for her alone. But when the lion tried to dance with her, she scurried behind her mother, peering timidly from between her mother's legs.

Only eight-month-old Amadeo Celle from Italy was undaunted by the red creature. He sat in his stroller, perfectly nonchalant as the lion's head threatened to eat him alive.

The arrival of the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, at the MCA party turned the lion dance audience to an audience for the Prime Minister.

I watched as the crowds that had been enchanted by the lion surge around him - lines of people anxious to shake his hand.

One woman approached me as I headed upstairs, following the crowd. She was grinning happily.

"That's my Prime Minister," she said proudly. "I shook his hand."

At the Gerakan party, I was approached again when the PM entered the room. "Much more accessible than your President, eh?" a man asked me.

Well, in many ways, yes. My country doesn't have open house. They do have parties - but most require invitations.

And many of the events involving the President have some sort of security clearance, such as walking through a metal detector.

But at this party, it seemed that everyone was welcome, and everyone was greeted warmly.

When I arrived in Kuala Lumpur last week, I was immediately told about Hari Raya and the Chinese New Year by my colleagues and friends.

"You'll love it," they said. "People open their homes to you, and they'll feed you until you think you'll burst."

Everyone I spoke to expressed pride in this tradition, this unique

Malaysian way of celebrating festivals.

After attending a few of these open house, I can see why. These parties are the Malaysian way of turning strangers into friends.

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