

Of Tigers, Hearts and Little Red Lai Sees

With the Tigers in a dominant position for the next 12 months, and with rose petals beginning to litter the pavements, Brian Salter* looks with green eyes at the way this special holiday has just been celebrated in Hong Kong.

I love Hong Kong. It makes such a pleasant change from the Middle East especially at Valentine's Day. Ah... now that's something that got the locals upset this year. I know. I read all about it in the local Dubai press. I mean, who would have thought it? Valentine's and CNY on the same day. What on earth to do? Ah well. Those canny Chinese worked it out. Hearts and tigers go well together, so why not make it a double celebration.

As I say, it makes such a pleasant change from the Middle East where there is no such thing as Valentine's Day and as for New Year well that hardly counts does it. (Not to mention the fact that, according to their hijra calendar, they are some 500 years behind the rest us!)

Valentine's Day is actually banned in places like Saudi Arabia. For weeks beforehand, the muttahwah the religious police go around the shops insisting that anything red is removed from the shop windows; and as for flower shops well woe betide any who even think of stocking roses, let alone any red flowers whatsoever.

Valentine's is regarded as the height of lewdness and immoral behaviour. In a country in which boys and girls are separated at puberty and are forever after never allowed to meet unless they are family, any thoughts of Valentine's would encourage a so-called state of khulwa in other words it would be the beginning of the end, the break up of civilisation as they know it, and the start of the long road to perdition.

Of course not every country in the Middle East is like this. Right now I am living in Dubai the third largest of the United Arab Emirates, where the law changes depending on which area you are in at any

precise moment. In Sharjah, for instance they are nearly as fundamentalis

t as the Saudis, whereas just down the coast in Dubai a bastion of western depravity, they get away with Hearts Day a sop to the not so westernised within the community. Go a little further down the coast to Abu Dhabi and once again hearts are banned, but chocolates seem still to be OK.

By comparison, the Omanis and Egyptians are free to express their emotions, despite them both being Moslem countries. If you buy a heart-shaped box of chocolates in the UAE, the chances are that it has been made in Oman, or even Turkey, though the greeting will still be along the lines of Happy Hearts Day!

One of the unexpected benefits of CNY and Valentine's coinciding over here in HK is that unmarried couples can make a killing by going to visit both sets of future in-laws, uncles, aunts, third cousins twice removed... or whoever, where they can be guaranteed to walk away with fistfuls of red packets which you can see them opening later in the day in their favourite McDonalds, Cafés de Coral, KFCs, or wherever and counting their ill gotten gains. It's truly a sight for sore eyes.

Of course, one doesn't need red packets in the Middle East in a culture where daddy pays for everything. But for us westerners looking into the Arab culture from the outside, it sure seems like a brilliant idea.... just so long as one is single and fancy free.

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