



"I've never been able to choose one or the other culture, I embrace them both" . . . Charlie Chan enjoys the Western new year as much as the Chinese celebrations that begin tomorrow. Photo: Edwina Pickles

Raised in two cultures with the best of both worlds at new year

Amanda Morgan

One of composer Charlie Chan's fondest memories of Chinese New Year is set in Malaysia, when she was eight, surrounded by family.

"All the uncles pulled out of their pockets these huge wads of red envelopes and they all had a dollar in them - a Malaysian dollar - and it was so exciting for us kids, all of this booty," she laughs.

Ms Chan's upbringing in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges was a mix of East and West. Her father is Chinese Malay and her mother Scottish-Australian. She went to a Catholic school.

Now living in Sydney, Ms Chan, 37, likes to celebrate the lunar new year with friends and walk through Chinatown listening to the drums and cymbals. "It's bright and fun and vibrant," she says,

adding there is always a "seriousness" to Christmas celebrations. "The Chinese drum so loudly and wildly to keep the evil spirits out and welcome the good ones in . . . It's about spirituality more than thoughtfulness and reflection," she says. "New Year is connected to a sense of renewal and change. It's positive."

As a first-generation Chinese Australian growing up in what

was, during the 1970s, a typical blue-collar Australian area, she felt torn between her two identities.

"Part of me didn't want to belong to the Chinese because of the racism associated with being Asian, especially through the 1970s, was extraordinary.

"I've never been able to choose one or the other culture. I embrace them both."

She attributes this in part to the inclusiveness of the Chinese New Year celebrations.

"Ten years ago I used to struggle to get a crowd of friends to go out together to eat at new year, but since then the festival has been embraced. It's really become a festival of acceptance and that is so important. Right now that is really important."

The 15-day Chinese New Year

celebrations begin tomorrow and Ms Chan hopes to share them this year with neighbours who have adopted an orphaned Cambodian boy and want to keep a connection with his culture.

"He's so Australian in a way but they are trying to keep a tie with the culture for his sake and that is great," she says. "I'll also make a special call to my father, as I know it's an important time for him."