

Chinese lion dance



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The lion dance is a traditional dance performed in the Chinese culture. The performers mimic the moves of the lion inside a costume that looks in a way like a lion. Many people who are not very familiar with the Lion Dance often gets it confused with the Dragon Dance, since both are performed, for the most part, for the same occasions. It is simple to tell the two dances apart. The Lion Dance is performed most of the time with only two people. The Dragon Dance is performed with many people.

In the Dragon Dance multiple people are inside the dragon costume holding up poles, whereas in the Lion Dance, there is someone holding the head of the lion and another person in the back of the lion costume acting as a rear of the lion. Lions were not originally from China. They came there through what was called the Silk Road. The rulers in what is today known as Iran and Afghanistan sent the lions over to the Chinese emperors as a gift in exchange to get the right to trade with the Silk Road merchants. This form of Lion Dance dates all the way back to the Han Dynasty, which was from 205 B. C. E. to 220 C. E. in China. The peak of the Lion Dance was during the Tang Dynasty, which was from 716 to 907 C. E. It was mainly danced during religious festivals to celebrate. The dance eventually became so famous that it was exported to Japan as a formal court entertainment. The Lion Dance soon made its way to Korea and Taiwan. The Lion Dance is not exactly the same in all the countries, but the meaning and symbol of the dance are similar. There are many different stories of how the Lion Dance got its origins. One famous story is called “ The Emperor’s Dream. This story states how the emperor of the Tang Dynasty had a dream about how a strange creature came to his rescue. When he described his dream to some advisors,

they told him that the creature he described resembled that of a lion, a creature from the Western Hemisphere. The emperor then created the lion dance to honor the creature which saved his life inside of his dream. Another story of how the Lion Dance got its origins is called “ The Story of the ‘ Nian’.” Legends say that there was a fierce monster by the name of “ Nian” that liked to kidnap children.

He attacked villages every year until one year, a lion defeated the “ Nian” and chased it away. The monster promised that it will be back to seek revenge. This time the villagers did not have a lion to protect themselves. As a result, they solved the problem by creating a costume like that of a lion and two villagers wore the costume to scare “ Nian” away. This is the reason the lion dance is performed every Chinese New Year, so that “ Nian” would not come back. The legend also says that loud noises from the drum, other instruments, and firecrackers helped scare the “ Nian” away.

The color red is worn during the New Year’s celebration because it was also believed that the “ Nian”, was afraid of the color red. The word “ Nian,” thought the yearly ceremony, has become the Chinese word for year. There are two different styles of the Chinese Lion Dance, the Southern Style and the Northern Style. The older and traditional form of Chinese Lion Dance is the Southern Style. The Chinese Southern Lion Dance originated from Guangdong, a province of China. The costumes of Lion Dance vary widely, but the lion head designs shows much differences.

The traditional Fo Shan Lion, has bristles instead of fur and weighs more than the current costumes. The tails are extremely long and are perpendicular to the head for three fourths of the tail's length. The eyes also move left and

right. On the back of the costume, there are gold foiled rims and traditional characters saying the group's name. Older Liu Bei lions also have black in the tail, while the new ones do not. The Gwan Gung has a red and black tail with white trim. The Huang Joon has a full yellow tail with white trim. The Zhang Fei has a black and white tail with white trim and a white underside.

The Zhao Zi Long lion is a green lion with a green tail with black trim and also a white underside. All the traditional style Fo Shan have pop-up teeth, tongue, swivelling eyes, and a gold gilded area on the back for the school's name and also the underside of the tail is white. The designs of the tail are also squarer and contain a diamond pattern going down the back; it is also common to see and hear bells attached to the tail. Although most lion dance costumes comes with a set of matching pants, some practitioners use black Kung-Fu pants to look more traditional. The Wong people perform the lion dance using this type of lion.

The newer styles of lions for Fo Shan replace all the bristles with fur and the tails are shorter than the traditional ones. Their eyes are fixed in place, and the tongue and teeth do not pop up. The tail is curvier in design. The tail does not have a diamond pattern, and lacks bells. In addition, the dancers wear flashier pants which lack the ease of movement allowed when wearing Kung-Fu pants. The Chinese Northern Style of Chinese Lion Dance is performed usually with two lions. The lions of the North have shaggy orange and yellow hair. The way to tell these lions apart by gender is to see the bow on the head.

The females don a green bow while the male lions wear a red bow. Acrobatics are very common with the Northern Style, with stunts like lifts or

balancing on a giant ball. Northern lions sometimes appear as a family, with two large "adult" lions and a pair of small "young lions". Different colors on the costumes of the lions represent the different elements of life. The yellow represents earth, black represents water, green represents wood, red represents fire, and white represents metal. The nose of the lions is usually a green color. Green symbolizes good luck, prosperity, and the "influence of heaven. Attached to the forehead of the lion is a mirror. The mirror is said to scare away evil spirits by reflecting their own image against them, and also the ability to travel between heaven and earth. The costumes of the lions used for Chinese Lion Dance can only be custom made in specialty craft shops in rural parts of China and have to be imported at considerable expense for foreign countries outside Asia. For groups in Western countries, such as the United States, is made possible through funds raised through subscriptions and pledges made by members of local cultural and business societies.

Special hand-made costumes with different add-ons can run up to 2000 dollars on some websites. Some countries, like Malaysia for example, has a really big Chinese population. As a result, local expertise may be available in making the lion costumes and musical instruments without having to get them imported from China. The head of the lion contains a symbol of many different animals itself. The horn is shaped like a bird for the phoenix, symbol for life and regeneration, also associated with representing the female element.

The ears and the tail are shaped like a mystical creature, the Chinese unicorn, representing wisdom and good luck. The spine represents the

snake, charm and wealth. The back hump of the head represents the tortoise which is the symbol for living a long life. The forehead and the beard are from the dragon, strength, leadership and the male element. The music associated to the Lion Dance is with instruments used live, right next to the performers. The music of drums, cymbals, and gongs are heard and the dance is synchronized with the beat of the song.

There are also firecrackers, which is used to add on to the sounds as well. During Chinese New Year, different groups from different Chinese martial art schools visit the house and businesses of the Chinese community to perform what is called “cai ching.” The word “cai ching” translates to “plucking the greens.” What this is, is when a lion goes on a quest or journey to pluck the green, normally vegetables, like lettuce which in Chinese called “cai” and fruits like oranges tied to a “Red Envelope” containing money; either hang highly or just put on a table in front of the premises.

The lion will dance to approach the “cai” and red envelope in a manner of that of a curious cat. It will then get the vegetable and red envelope. After, the cat will “eat the vegetable” (rip it up and throw it back out), and keep the red envelope containing money for their group. The lion dance is said to bring good luck and fortune to the businesses. Not only is the dance only done during Chinese New Year, but also in other religious festivals, business openings, birthday celebrations, and wedding celebrations.

In the old days, the lettuce was hung 15 to 20 feet above ground and only a well-trained martial artist could reach the money while dancing with a heavy lion head. These events became challenging so a very large sum of money was rewarded, and the audience expected a good show. Sometimes, if lions

from multiple martial arts schools approached the lettuce at the same time, the lions are supposed to “fight” to decide a winner. The lions had to fight with lion moves instead of chaotic street fighting styles. The audience would judge the quality of the martial art schools according to how the lions fought.

Since the schools' reputation was at stake, the fights were usually fierce but civilized. The winner lion would then use creative methods and martial art skills to reach the high-hanging reward. Some lions may dance on bamboo stilts and some may step on human pyramids formed by students of the school to reach the “cai ching.” The performers and the schools would gain praise and respect on top of the large money reward when they did well. During the 1950's to 1960's, areas with many Chinese communities, such as Chinatown, had people who resembled that of a gangster who joined these Chinese Lion Dance groups.

There were lots of fights between these Lion Dance groups and kung fu schools. This worried many parents, which caused the parents to avoid letting their children join these schools. During festivals and performances, when Lion Dance groups met up, there would be fights between the groups. Some lifts and acrobatic tricks are designed for the lion to “fight” and knock over other rival lions. Performers even hid daggers in their shoes and clothes, which could be used to injure other lion dancers' legs.

Some even attached a metal horn on their lion's forehead, which could be used to slash other lion heads. The violence got so extreme that at one point that the Hong Kong government had to put a stop to lion dance completely. Now Lion Dance groups must attain a permit from the government in order to perform the Lion Dance. Although there is still a certain degree of

competitiveness, the groups are a lot less violent and aggressive than they were in the 1950's to 1960's. In modern day, the Chinese Lion Dance is seen as a sport and is more of something to do during free time.