

# DRAGON'S TALE

A STUDY GUIDE



By Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company

P.O. Box 1121, Fort Lee, NJ, 07024

Tel: 1-800-650-0246 / Fax: (201) 947-6380

[www.nainichen.org](http://www.nainichen.org)

# DRAGON'S TALE

## An Introduction

A Chinese dragon has the head of a camel, the horns of a stag, the eyes of an awakened



spirit, the scales of a fish, the claws of an eagle, the pads of a tiger, the ears of a bull, and the long whiskers of a cat. It can make itself as small as a silk worm or large enough to overshadow the world. The Chinese Dragon (Lung) is not a terrifying monster, but a benign creature that embodies wisdom and strength. It is associated with long life and prosperity, and represents the Chinese civilization.

Dragon's Tale is a series of dances inspired by traditional Chinese festivals and rituals. Through fantastic props, colorful costumes and ingenious choreography, these dances display the excitement of Chinese celebrations and the beauty of the Chinese American heritage.

In addition to traditional dance steps, choreographer Nai-Ni Chen incorporated Chinese martial arts, acrobatics and interactive movement demonstration making the ancient culture accessible to everyone. The variety of folk dance presented not only speaks to richness of Chinese culture but also the diversity of the races that make up the Chinese people.



Over half a million people around the United States have shared the original works



created by artistic director Nai-Ni Chen and a multi-racial group of dancers from Asia, Europe, South America and North America.

Nai-Ni Chen was one of the most renowned Chinese Classical dancers in the Republic of China. After touring in sixteen countries around the world for the Chinese culture ambassadorial missions, she came to the United States to study choreography and received an MA degree from New York University in 1985.

Ms. Chen founded her own company in 1988. Since then, she has created a wide-ranging repertory that includes dances that originated thousands of years ago and highly abstract, modern creations. The inspiration of her dances often comes from the poetic motion of the Chinese painting brush, folk rituals and ceremonies as well as phenomena of nature. Winning critical acclaim everywhere, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is now the most widely presented Chinese American Dance Company in the U.S. Nai-Ni Chen has received fellowships, awards and commissions from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Lincoln Center Institute, Jin-Sun Foundation and the Joyce Theater Foundation. Ms. Chen is a Principal Affiliate of the NJPAC Arts Education Department. The company has made a major commitment to arts education. Annually its programs reach hundreds of schools throughout the Northeastern Region. In recent years, they have been in residence at Harlem School of the Arts in New York City.

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# Chinese Dance Movement

There are many intricate hand, finger, and wrist gestures to help express the drama of Chinese dance, a form highly influenced by acting and mime as found in the Peking Opera. These gestures are different from those used in other forms of Asian dance. In Indian dance, for instance, the gestures carry meanings. In Chinese dance, the hand gestures are simply used to emphasize and dramatize; they are not the only carriers of the message. The dancer must use

his or her entire body to express the complete message or idea.

In the Chinese movement tradition, the study of both martial arts and dance has traditionally focused on the Ten Elements of Movement. Hand and wrist, Eye and Head, Torso and Waist, Leg and Footstep, plus the coordination of the Nervous system are the five outer elements. Training of the five outer elements can make a strong dancer with excellent body and agility. However, it is the five inner elements, that defines the artistry of the dance. These elements are: Concentration (Jin), Spirit (Sheng), Flow of energy (Chi), Strength (Li), and Discipline (Gung). The spirit of the dance transcends the physical and is reflected in the eyes of the dancer. The five outer elements define the physical training, while the five inner elements help the dancer go beyond technique and become an artist.

## Lion Dancing is Team Work

Because team work is an important life skill. The Lion Dance is an excellent way to introduce students to teamwork, discipline, movement coordination and courage. The dancers also need to develop flexibility, strength, endurance and balance in order to perform the lion dance well.

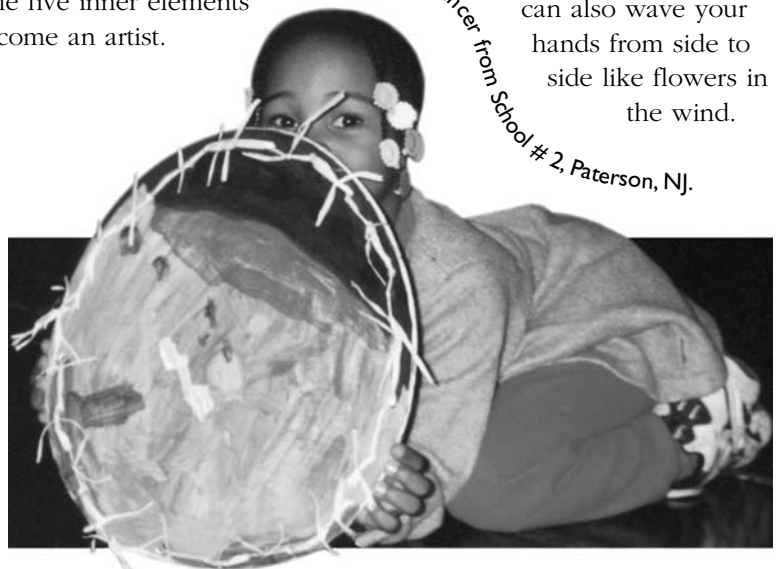
Practice "Orchid Hand"  
Young audience from Southburg, CT.



## Orchid Hand

This hand gesture is for females in Chinese theater. It's based on the Orchid, a flower which grows in China. First, place your hands in front of your chest with your fingers pointing up, then place your thumb on the middle finger to make the shape of an orchid. Then, turn your hands out and in, and out and in. You can also wave your hands from side to side like flowers in the wind.

*Little Lion Dancer from School # 2, Paterson, NJ.*





# the Program

presented by  
six dancers with  
Chinese traditional music and costume



## ❖ LION DANCE ❖

The Lion Dance has been an important festival activity in China since the late Han dynasty. Although originally there were no lions in China, they were imported from other parts of the world. This dance incorporates Chinese Martial Arts techniques, and takes two dancers working as a team to make one lion come to life. Through their skillful movements, they transform the image of a fierce animal into a humorous and dramatic character on stage.

## ❖ MONGOLIAN CHOPSTICK DANCE ❖

China is a diverse country with over 55 minority groups living there. So far, you have seen several folk dances from the majority group, the Han. Next, we will take you to the open fields in Mongolia. Mongolian people live by herding horses on the great open Erdos plain in inner Mongolia. They are passionate people who love the outdoors and greatly value friendship. The Mongolian dance movements often portray their horseback riding experience and imitation of eagles flying. What we will show you today is the Mongolian Chopstick Dance. You can imagine yourself after a big feast at the palace of the Great Kahn. Beautiful dancers enter the party and grab the chopsticks. They sing and dance with them to express their joy and happiness.

## ❖ SWORD DANCE ❖

Chinese martial art has been incorporated into Chinese Dance for centuries. The concept of Yin and Yan is fully expressed here. There are many props used in Chinese martial art. Each one of them has special meanings. The sword has been a symbol for justice, strength and courage.

## ❖ MOVEMENT DEMO ❖

Demonstrates the unique steps and exercises Chinese dancers practice in class. Audience members learn the hand gestures from the dancers in their seats.

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### ❖ FAN DANCE ❖

A joyful dance that comes from Southern China which is known for its abundant crops and scenic beauty. Each dancer holds a pair of Pink Silk Fans. The images of flower and butterfly are shown through the movements of the fans.

### ❖ RIBBON DEMO ❖

Volunteers will be chosen to be on stage to learn basic ribbon movements which are then choreographed into a simple dance.

### ❖ IN THE BAMBOO FOREST ❖

Very often, Chinese artists take inspiration from nature. This dance has modern choreography which is inspired by our relationship with nature in the bamboo forest. Chinese society was based on agriculture for over 5000 years, and people lived with nature in harmony. By working with the natural resources, people developed certain skills to survive and found willpower and vital energy as the driving forces to keep them going through difficult times and to conquer obstacles.

### ❖ DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL ❖

Many Chinese dances are created for special celebrations. This dance is inspired by the Dragon Boat Festival in China. There are many important festivals taking place at different times. For example, Chinese New Year, the biggest festival, is on the first day of Spring. The Moon festival is in the fall during the harvest time, and the Dragon Boat festival is in the summer. In this dance, the blue water flag symbolizes waves, which lead the boats to their destiny. And the beautiful ribbon dance which originated over two thousand years ago during the Han dynasty is part of the celebrations to show the prosperity of society and the joy, and happiness of the people.

### ❖ QUESTION & ANSWER ❖ (optional)



### Notes for Students:

During the performance you should watch the dancer's concentration on stage. Observe how the dancers use their eyes. Then, close your eyes for a few seconds and listen to the sounds of the dancers and the music. Especially look for circular shapes that the dancers are making with their arms, head, feet and props. See if you can tell the difference between Chinese dance and ballet.

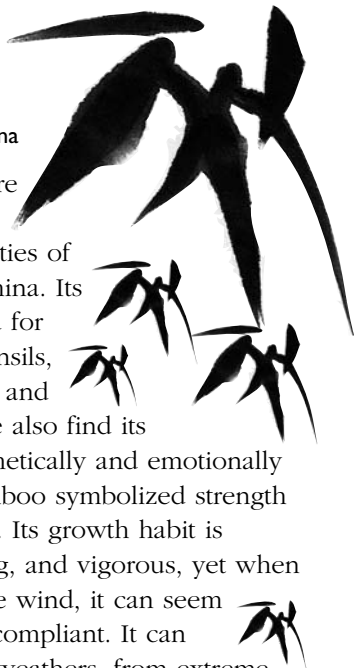
Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company



## Bamboo

the friend of china

There are more than 280 different varieties of bamboo in China. Its parts are used for buildings, utensils, papermaking, and eating. People also find its structure aesthetically and emotionally pleasing. Bamboo symbolized strength and flexibility. Its growth habit is straight, strong, and vigorous, yet when it sways in the wind, it can seem yielding and compliant. It can withstand all weathers, from extreme heat to severe cold. Bamboo has been a leading subject of Chinese painting for centuries. And it is also a good example of the way in which painting subjects are more than the representation of a vision or image. The scholar-painters read even more into the bamboo. They saw that the Chinese character used for the joints of the bamboo, jie, was the same as that used for the principles of living a good life. In addition, the hollow branches reminded them that no matter how much you know, there is always room to absorb more.



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## About My Dance

by Nai-Ni Chen

Chinese artists are usually generalists; a painter is often a poet, a calligrapher could be a dancer. This is because the discipline of our artistic traditions are all related and the concepts behind all art forms are the same. Aesthetic values distilled from the major philosophies (Confucism, Taoism and Buddhism) have become the central focus for all artistic achievements.

As a dancer and choreographer, I benefited from my studies beginning at age six of Chinese painting and calligraphy. I learned about the tremendous amount of concentration (Jin), which is required for me to hold a brush and to master the strokes on paper and produce lines with graceful and elegant quality. When I relate that to my dance, I create a spatial realm to invite the audience to share the beauty, the dynamics with the artists. The movement phrases are conducted in a manner with consistent intention to focus on the spirit of the dance. As the result of concentration, it bridges the performer and audience, and helps bring the beauty to the highest level during a live performance.

Dance is alive and deals with breathing and energy. When you use these two elements properly, it strengthens the dance movement and creates a varying thickness in the movement. This creates a sense of harmony in the movements. The same energy flow also occurs when one uses a brush pen to produce varying thickness of lines and compositions in calligraphy. This breathing guided energy flow is what the Chinese call Chi(Qi). Breathing and energy can be the way to create dynamic changes in the flow of movement phrases. Sometimes I choose to have ten dancers move with the same energy. The gathering of the "Chi" makes the moment powerful, like thousands of horses running through the field. Other times, I toss the energy from one dancer's movement to another dancer's movement. This is like water running in a small brook.



Sheng is the most important aspect of my work. I believe the spirit of a human being can be expressed through art, it can come through the colors of the ink, the lines and shapes of the brush stroke or complex body movements. In dance, the central idea and aesthetic direction need to be clear and artistic intent needs to be genuine. This is the only way the spirit of the dance can be revealed. In another words, Sheng is also the dancer and choreographer's inner spirit that comes through one's work. Since ancient times, Chinese artists have stay close to nature. To find the spirit in nature and connect myself to it has helped me to become a richer and better person. I hope it shows through my dances.

# *Jin Chi Sheng*

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# Elements of Dance Theater

the result of creative energies

## ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

the artistic leader of a dance company, who may or may not be a choreographer. He or she makes the decisions about hiring and casting the dancers and about the repertoire.

## AUDIO TECHNICIAN

a person who is responsible for sound and recorded music during a performance.

## CHOREOGRAPHER

a person who develops the concept for a dance, composes the steps, and teaches the movements to the dancers.

## COMPOSER

a person who creates the music for a dance.

## COSTUME DESIGNER

a person who creates a visual concept by designing the costumes for a dance piece.

## DANCE MASTER/MISTRESS

an experienced dancer who teaches a technique class for all of the dancers in a company, and may also rehearse the dances after the choreographer creates the dances.

## DANCER

a performer who executes and gives meaning to the movements of a dance on stage. Generally, dancers train in one or more techniques for at least five years before performing professionally.

## LIGHTING DESIGNER

a person who creates a visual concept by designing and arranging the lighting for a performance.

## MUSICIAN

a person who plays live music for a dance performance.

## REHEARSAL DIRECTOR

a person responsible for coaching and rehearsing a dance after the choreographer makes the dance.

## SET DESIGNER

a person who creates the scenery for a dance.

## STAGE MANAGER

a person who calls the cues, e.g., for changes in lighting, raising and lowering the curtains, and directs the theater technicians backstage.

## THEATER TECHNICIANS

persons who are responsible for the backstage technical activities: lighting, sets, curtains, and sound.



Artistic Director / Choreographer / Dancer Ms. Nai-Ni Chen

“I believe dance is a way to express the passion of life in all of us. An expression beyond words, it can cross cultural boundaries and be shared by all people.”

~ Nai-Ni Chen ~



# History of China

China is the oldest continuous culture in the world, with over 5000 years of recorded history. Their civilization was far in advance of Europe and Western Asia. (The Chinese calendar began around 4698 years ago and written language began long before that.) About 8,000 years ago, farmers settled in between areas of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River. For centuries, China was enclosed by mountains, deserts, and the sea. Chinese developed their own way of life, and called their country "The Middle Kingdom" because they thought it was the center of the universe.



## SHANG DYNASTY 1650-1027 B.C.

This bronze age civilization is renowned for its skillful metal work and for emergence of the first Chinese writing.



## ZHOU DYNASTY 1027-256 B.C.

According to Confucius (551-479 B.C.,) the early years of Zhou were a golden age of social harmony. The Zhou kings maintained the Shang practice of ancestor worship and society was organized on the feudal system.

## WARRING STATES PERIOD 481-221 B.C.

Confucius and other philosophers taught more peaceful ways of being, but their ideas were not adopted until later years.

## QIN DYNASTY 221-207 B.C.

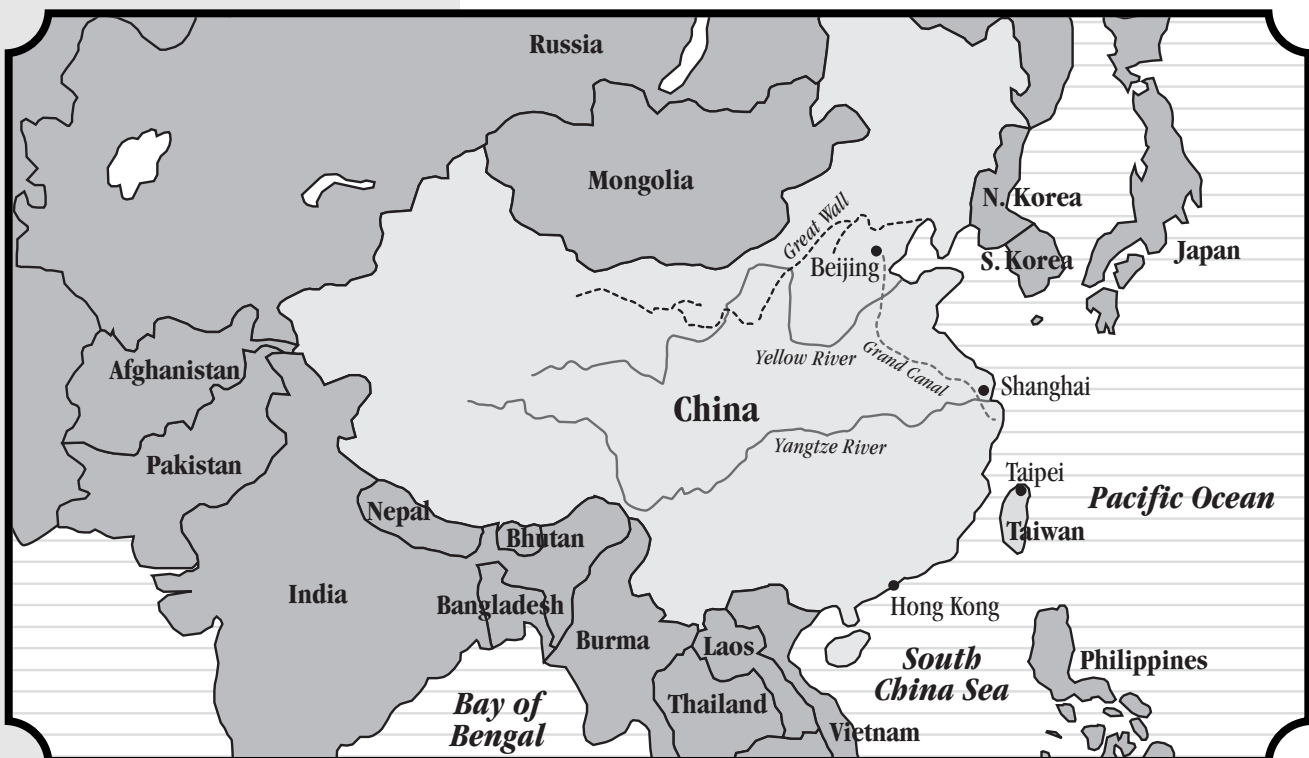
The first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, built the Great Wall to protect his empire from the northern nomad and standardized Chinese script, coins, weight, and measures. Qin Shi Huangdi united the Chinese so firmly that afterward the Chinese people regarded imperial rule as the only form of government.

## HAN DYNASTY 207 B.C.-220 A.D.

The Han emperors consolidated the imperial system by establishing a national civil service. It was to run China for the next 2,000 years. Educated officials studied the teachings of Confucius and were selected by a rigorous examination system. The iron industry has nationalized. The first Chinese merchants set out into central Asia. This trade route became known as the Silk Road. A Music Bureau was set up. Acrobats were popular entertainers.

## PERIOD OF DISUNITY 221-589 A.D.

China was divided into separate states although it was briefly unified





under the Western Jin Dynasty(256-316). Foreign peoples overran northern China, and in the south, various dynasties struggled for power. The gentle ideas of Buddhism first became popular in those years of unrest. Later, Daoism became the official religion in the North. In this period, China developed the paper-making process. The first national library was built.

### **SUI DYNASTY 589-618 A.D.**

Northern and southern China were reunified. The major part of the Grand Canal was finished-this great waterway linked the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, which improved communications and enabled grain and soldiers to be transported around the empire.

### **TANG DYNASTY 618-906 A.D.**

The Chinese empire expanded to become a great world power. This was a time of prosperity and cultural golden age in which both art and trade flourished. Poetry was added to the examination syllabus. In 868A.D. the first book with bound pages was printed by woodblock.

### **FIVE DYNASTIES 907-960 A.D.**

The fall of the Tang dynasty caused China to be divided into numerous small states. However, the Chinese continued to advance both culturally and economically.

### **SONG DYNASTY 960-1279 A.D.**

China reached its greatest heights of civilization. Advances in science and technology produced a minor industrial revolution and the world's first mechanized industry was developed. The Song emperors were great patrons of the arts and poetry. Painting and calligraphy reached new levels of perfection.

### **YUAN DYNASTY 1279-1368 A.D.**

Throughout Mongol rule, Chinese scholars were banned from the civil service and many of them retired to write literature. Because the Mongols controlled the entire length of the Silk Road, international trade thrived. Many merchants became rich by exporting Chinese luxury goods. Marco Polo, and later other Europeans, visited China. A unified Chinese theatrical form began to take shape.

### **MING DYNASTY 1368-1644 A.D.**

This dynasty exerted China's prestige by sending Admiral Zheng He on great maritime expeditions to visit foreign rulers. The Ming Dynasty become famous for its exquisite arts and crafts.

### **QING DYNASTY 1644-1911 A.D.**

Being foreign rulers, the Manchu emperors lived in fear of Chinese revolt and clung to outdated traditions. For the first time, Chinese technology fell behind the outside world. After a series of wars, it was forced to yield both concessions and territory to foreign powers.

### **POST-EMPIRE 1912 A.D.-present**

The Chinese Republic overthrew the Qing dynasty and adopted the Western Gregorian calendar. 37 years later, it was destroyed by wars with Japan and civil war with the Communists. Since 1949, the Republican government withdrew to Taiwan, while the Communist set up the present day People's Republic of China. Hong Kong returned to China after 99 years of British rule in 1997.



Silk ribbons used for dancing go back to the Han Dynasty. At that time, musicians and dancers were employed in wealthy households.

### **Teaching Strategies -A**

- Ask the students what they think of when talking about China. In what ways do they think Chinese culture is different from ours.
- Go to museums or galleries in your area and look for the Chinese collection.
- Have a brainstorm in the class. Try to name the items that are made of bamboo which surround us in our daily life.
- Go to web sites in your computer lab, collecting information about Chinese festivals. For instance, why do they race dragon boats in the summer?

### **Tip: How to Use Chopsticks**

1. Place the first chopstick in the hollow between the thumb and index finger. Rest its lower end below the first joint of the third finger.
2. Hold the second chopstick between the tips of the index and middle fingers. Steady its upper half against the base of the index finger, and use the tip of the thumb to keep it in place.
3. To pick up food, move the upper chopstick with index and middle fingers.





# Wu

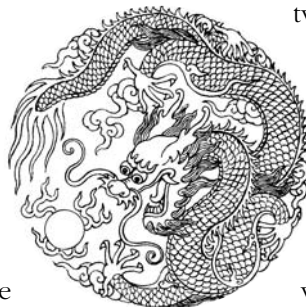
the first pictograph of the word “dance” on oracle bone inscriptions from the Shang

Dynasty could, with some imagination, be seen to resemble someone dancing with feet apart and out-flung arms, brandishing an oxtail in each hand. Bird and animal imitation dance are still very much featured today in China, for instance, the Lion Dance and Dragon Dance. The Chinese dance language also has profuse terms which describe vividly an enormous spectrum of birds and animals with gestures; ‘Tiger Hand’, ‘Wild Goose Pose’, ‘Coiling Dragon’ etc.. They are among numerous examples inspired by the primitive people’s hunting life and their intimate relationship with nature. A nature we are not all that far away from.

## Think the Chinese Way

**Philosophy** is not a set of dusty books on the shelf, nor a purely academic concern. It has been intertwined with politics, government, religion, art, and even daily life. Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism influenced the ancient Chinese. Each one might help with a different part of life.

**Chi.** In Chinese mythology, before the world began, there was chaos, shaped like a hen’s egg. Pan Gu separated this egg into Yin and Yang-whole, Yin formed Yang formed the then on, Yin female, wet, dark while Yang everything that bright. There could happiness until there between Yin and Yang.



Pan Gu separated this egg two parts of the same the heavier Earth; lighter Sky. From stood for all the things of nature, represented was male, dry and be no perfect was an equal balance “Chi” in Chinese character

means “steam” or “air” which explains why you cannot see it or touch it. It is a sort of unseen, moving energy.

**Tai-Chi Quan** is a development of Qigong exercises that promote the circulation of qi (chi) around the body and concentrate the mind. If you practice it, you will get a good idea of how Nai-Ni Chen’s movements work. In Tai-Chi nothing is jerky; all is smooth. Every movement has a start, a development, a suspension, and a relaxation. It is continuous, smooth, and yet always changing shape. Yin-Yang, the negative and positive principles of universal life, is another cornerstone of Chinese thought.

### Teaching Strategies -B

- Interview classmates about their reactions to the performance. Then report to the class what did others notice or remember?
- Find an example of Chinese painting and write a brief story to go along with it. Then, imagine you are inside the painting. How would you move about? Where would you go?
- Create a dance using circular patterns with different body parts and pathways in space. Then write it down and ask someone else to “re-create” the dance with their body.
- Choose an object that is used every day and can be held in the hands. Let students explore different ways they could hold and move with this object. Make a short dance that shows off their new skill.

### Differences

from the West Typically, Chinese dance movements are often spirals and circles because the Chinese use circles to symbolize harmony.

**Props** is short for “property.” In the theater or movies, “props” refers to moveable articles that are part of the setting or action on stage, excluding costumes and scenery. There are many different kinds of props used in Chinese dance. These props are part of the dance, moving with the dancer to create patterns of motion on the stage.



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## Bibliography and Teachers' Resources

### Books for Children:

#### **Ancient China (Eyewitness Books)**

by Arthur Cotterell (editor), Knopf Books, 1994. (Age 9-12)

#### **Ancient China (The Nature Company Discoveries)**

by Judith Simpson, Carol Michaelson (editor), Time-Life Books, 1996. (Age 9-12)

#### **Ancient Civilizations (Exploring History)**

by Philip Brook, Lorenz Books, 1999. (Age 9-12)

#### **At the Beach**

by Huy Voun Lee, Henry Holt & Co., reprint 1998. (Age 4-8)

#### **Celebrating Chinese New Year**

by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith, Holiday House, 1998. (Age 4-8)

#### **Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes**

by Robert Wyndham (editor), Paper Star, reissue 1998. (Age 4-8)

#### **The Dragon's Tale: And Other Animal Fables of the Chinese Zodiac**

by Hitz Demi, Henry Holt & Co., 1996. (Age 4-8)

#### **Step into the Chinese Empire**

by Philip Steele, Lorenz Books, 1999. (Age 9-12)

### Varied Resources for Teachers

#### **China, A New History**

by John Fairbank, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

#### **Chinese Calligraphy**

by Edoardo Fazzidi, Abbeville Press, 1986.

#### **Oriental Painting Course**

by Jia-Nan Wang, Xiaoli Cai, and Dawn Young, Watson-Guptill Publications, 1997.

#### **Understanding Asian Americans: A Curriculum Resource Guide**

by Marjorie H. and Peter Li, New York: Neal-Schumann Publishers, 1990.

#### **Asia for Kids, Master Communications**

Call: 1-800-765-5885

This company sells videotapes, books, games and teaching aides.

#### **Chinese Information and Culture Center and Taipei Gallery**

1230 and 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Call: (212) 373-1854 or go to //www.taipei.org/

CICC has a modern library and audiovisual department with an extensive collection of resources about China. Through its film series and programs in the theater and gallery, CICC is committed to making Chinese culture approachable and understandable to the American public. Many monograph and books on Chinese culture are available to educators free of charge.

#### **China Institute in America**

125 East 65 St., New York, NY 10021

Call: (212) 744-8181

Houses a library and gallery and offers courses and workshops.

#### **Asian American Arts Alliance**

74 Varick Street, Suite 302, New York, NY 10013-1914

Call: (212) 941-9208

Publishes the Asian American Arts Calendar, a national directory of Asian American performing artists and a directory of Asian American arts organizations.



### A Chinese Dancer

is required to study martial arts, acrobatics and stylized theatrical movements on a daily basis. The technique includes work with such props as handkerchiefs, ribbons, fans and ritual weapons.

### Tip: How to Make Ribbons

Materials needed:

1. Wooden dowel -15 inches long, 1/2 inch in diameter for each student
2. Silk - 3.5 yard by 45 inch wide for every 3 students (poly-silk will do)
3. 1/8 inch wide elastic band (1 foot per student) or thick rubber band
4. Nail polish (1 bottle for 2 students)

Procedure:

1. Cut the fabric into three equal widths (about fifteen inches wide). Three and half yards in length.
2. Use nail polish to seal the edge of the cut, so the threads of the fabric do not run. You can also use a sewing machine to do this.
3. Wrap the end of the fabric onto the dowel. Tie the fabric down with elastic (or rubber) band.





“The Chinese traditional dance training I had involves the entire culture, not just the dance steps. The Western modern dance I learned is not just techniques, to me it is the entire way of thinking; the freedom and the expression of it. Besides learning the two different dance cultures, I tried to learn how Western people think, and how Chinese people think.”

“In my work, I emphasize the three most important elements in Chinese Art: Jin, Chi and Sheng. These three elements are the essence of an artwork. They are timeless and can be applied to all art forms: contemporary and classic, visual art and performing art.”



~ Nai-Ni Chen ~

### About This Information Packet

It is hoped that the material in this guide will stimulate discussion, inspire activities, promote further research and generally prepare the students for the performance. It is designed to provide educators with information about China, Chinese Dance in general and the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in particular. Through exploration of this material, numerous connections might be made to existing school curriculum.



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design: dgArtist@DaisyGraphics.com