



Red Firecrackers

The Legend of the First Chinese New Year

By Nai-Ni Chen

A spectacular production of dazzling props, colorful costumes, mesmerizing music, fantastic acrobatics and lively dance by top notch performers telling the story of the origin of the Chinese Lunar New Year Celebration, where a group of villagers, working together, defeat an a terrifying monster of the ages. The story highlights the intrinsic value of coming together, courage and ingenuity.

The Chinese use the lunar calendar for celebratory events which includes the New Year. This falls somewhere between late January and early February. The cycle of twelve animal signs originates from Chinese tradition as a way of naming the years. The animals follow one another in an established order and rooster, dog and pig are the last three animal signs.

Learn how you can celebrate the Chinese New Year with your friends and families!

Every year, Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company brings an amazing production to concert stages around the United States to celebrate the Chinese Lunar New Year with thousands of audience members. However, Choreographer/Artistic Director Nai-Ni Chen laments that very few people know how to properly celebrate the Chinese New Year. She decided to tell the story of Nian, the First Chinese New Year in her native language of dance. She also encourages the audience to ask questions, learn how to celebrate the Chinese Lunar New Year. There are so many fun activities, delicious foods, elaborate fashion, and festive music and dance to participate in. It can fill up a whole month.

Synopsis

In the ancient times, before there was a Chinese New Year Celebration, in a faraway village in China, people lives joyously together in harmony with nature. But, every 365 days, a monster called Nian comes to terrorize the people. The Villagers trained themselves in martial arts to defend themselves, but even the greatest warrior among them is not able to defeat the Nian Monster. The villagers, with nowhere to turn, prayed to the gods in heaven for help.

Finally, the villager’s prayers to the gods are answered and the monster is repelled from the village.

In order for everyone to remember what they needed to do every 365 days, they used the name of the Monster, Nian, to be the same for the word “Year”. To celebrate another year absent of the Monster, people say “Guo Nian”, meaning the danger of another Nian visit has passed. On the New Year’s Day, people greet each other saying “Gung Xi, Gung Xi” (“Greetings”), they wear red color clothing, giving red envelopes to children, covering everything with red color, playing loud firecracker to ward off the Nian. Red is the color the monster is most scared of and signifies good luck in the Chinese culture.

Dances in the Program

Peach Flower Dance

This dance was inspired by the ancient Chinese paintings of villages in China. You can find some of them in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Dance for the Good Earth

Based on the movement of the farmers planting seeds, working together in the fields and helping each other in the hope for a good harvest in the autumn.



Red Bamboo Dance

Based on the Coin Stick dance originated with the Hans, in Hubei province and is traditionally done by street performers. People drill holes in the sticks, which are made of bamboo and fill the holes with coins. Dancers hit the sticks against their bodies and the ground to produce interesting rhythms as they move and they often incorporate acrobatic skills. Today, this dance is usually performed in groups of men and women during festival celebrations such as the Chinese New Year.

Warrior Dance

This dance is taken from the Chinese Peking Opera, which has over three hundred years of history and is considered the most well preserved Chinese performing art in China. The dancer in this dance portrays a warrior who is preparing to go into the battlefield. His strength is shown through his acrobatic movements and dramatic poses. Peking Opera is one of the most important form of performances during the Chinese New Year.

Festival

Part of a commission for a dance from the Lincoln Center Institute for Arts In Education. Nai-Ni Chen created this dance with memory of her witness of a celebration in the city where she grew up. In this event, people dressed up as gods and goddess in a parade outside of the temple to pray for prosperity. The blue flags symbolize the water wave to pray for enough rain falls to ensure a good harvest in the agricultural society. Colorful ribbons symbolize the gathering of rain cluds that brings prosperity to the village.

ABOUT THE COMPANY



The **Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company** introduces audiences to the beauty of Chinese traditional dances and provides a fresh vision of the contemporary world. The multiracial troupe consists of ten dancers who are originally from China, Taiwan, Korea, the Czech Republic and America. Each dancer is a specialist in classical Chinese dance, Chinese folk and ethnic dance, or American modern dance.

However, as a company, they are trained to perform repertory ranging from Chinese dance to Ms. Chen's modern choreography. The group has appeared at major performance venues in 35 states through the U.S., as well as at schools, festivals and community-based sites. In 2001, the Company also began touring abroad and has performed in Central America, Korea, China, Germany, Poland, Russia, Lithuania and Mexico. Today, it is one of the country's most widely toured professional Asian-American companies.

In addition to its nearly 40-week season of touring and performing, the Company has developed Arts in Education residency programs for many school districts to bring culture and arts into educational settings. For the past three years, the company has conducted the after school dance program at Shuang Wen School in New York City and Poetry Live project with Litchfield Performing Arts, Inc. in Connecticut which reached more than one thousand children a year.

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has been awarded grants by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the Department of State, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Fund for US Artists at International Festivals & Exhibitions, the Hyde and Watson Foundation, the Connelly Foundation, the E.J. Grassmann Trust, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, the Lillian Pitkin Schenck Fund, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Verizon, Sony and others.

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has received numerous citations of excellence from the NJ State Council on the Arts.

As participants in the First China International Dance Festival at Kunming, in the Yunan Province of China, the company received the Golden Lotus Award presented by the China Dance Association. Since 1997, the troupe has been a resident company at the Harlem School of the Arts.

CHINESE NEW YEAR

Chinese New Year or **Spring Festival** is the most important of the traditional Chinese holidays. It is often called the Lunar New Year, especially by people in mainland China and Taiwan. The festival traditionally begins on the first day of the first month (Chinese: 正月; pinyin: zhēng yuè) in the Chinese calendar and ends on the 15th day; this day is called Lantern Festival. Chinese New Year's Eve is known as *Chúxī*. It literally means "Year-pass Eve".

The New Year is the longest and most celebrated festivity in the Lunar Calendar. The origin of Chinese New Year is itself centuries old and gains significance because of several myths and traditions. Ancient Chinese New Year is a reflection on how the people behaved and what they believed in the most.



Celebrated in areas with large populations of ethnic Chinese, the Lunar New Year is considered a major holiday for the Chinese and has had influence on the new year celebrations of its geographic neighbors, as well as cultures with whom the Chinese have had extensive interaction. These include Koreans, Mongolians, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Vietnamese and formerly the Japanese before 1873. Outside of Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and within China, regional customs and traditions concerning the celebration of the Chinese New Year vary widely. People will pour out their money to buy presents, decorations, materials, food and clothing. It is also the tradition that every family thoroughly cleans the house to sweep away any ill-fortune in hopes to make way for good incoming luck. Windows and doors will be decorated with red color paper-cuts and couplets with popular themes of "happiness," "wealth" and "longevity." On the Eve of Chinese New Year, supper is a feast with families. Food will range from meat, including pork, duck, chicken and fish dishes, to sweet delicacies. The family will end the night with firecrackers. Early the next morning, children will greet their parents by wishing them a healthy and happy new year and receive money in red paper envelopes. The Chinese New Year tradition is the time to reconcile and forgive/forget all grudges and sincerely wish peace and happiness for everyone.

The Chinese New Year is now popularly known as the Spring Festival because it occurs at the beginning of spring on the Chinese calendar. The following myth tells one version of the genesis of the celebration. Nian, which is the modern Chinese word for "year," was the name of a monster that attacked people the night before the New Year. Nian was a massive beast with a huge mouth that could swallow many people with just one gulp. Everyone was afraid. They stayed in their homes for fear that Nian would eat them. One day, an aged man offered to tame Nian. The wise elder strode up to Nian and said, "I hear that you are very capable. If so, can you

swallow other beasts of prey on earth instead of people who are by no means your worthy opponents?” Nian rose to the challenge and swallowed many of the other people-hating beasts of prey on earth. After that, the old man disappeared, riding the beast Nian. The man was not a man at all but an immortal god. Nian was gone and the other beasts of prey that were not eaten were scared into the forests. People began to enjoy a peaceful life. Before the old man left, he told the people to put up red paper decorations on their windows and doors at each year’s end to scare away Nian in case the monster returned. Red is the color the beast feared the most. Today the customs of putting up red paper and exploding firecrackers to scare away Nian are still practiced.

The legendary Kitchen God also plays a role in a family’s celebration of the New Year. Everyone is concerned about the Kitchen God’s opinion of the family. On the twenty-fourth day of the Twelfth Moon (twelfth month), one week before the New Year, a picture of Tsao Wang, the Kitchen God, is hung in the kitchen of all Chinese households. The Kitchen God has two very important jobs. The first is to guard the family’s hearth. The second task, the one that could worry some members of the family, is to keep a check on the family’s morals. Legend says that the Kitchen God ascends to heaven at the end of each year to report to the Jade Emperor about the household he has just left. To protect its interests, the family members smear honey about the god’s picture before they allow the Kitchen God to leave. This ensures that he will only say sweet things about the family. Sometimes, a little wine is also poured on the god’s lips to loosen his tongue. Gold or silver paper is also placed on the picture of the Kitchen God to represent gold or silver that might be needed on his long journey to heaven. When all preparations are complete, the picture of the Kitchen God is set afire. The smoke carries the spirit of the Kitchen God up to heaven where he reports to the Jade Emperor. On the first day of the New Year, a new picture of the Kitchen God is hung, incense is burned and food offerings are presented to honor him.

There are other traditions of Chinese New Year. Even though the climax of the Chinese New Year lasts only two or three days including New Year’s Eve, the New Year season extends from the middle of the twelfth month of the old year to the middle of the first month of the new year. This period is considered a good time for businesses in the Chinese community as people will go to great lengths to purchase presents, decorations, food and clothing. Many Chinese plan vacations around the New Year so that they can travel home for a family reunion. In China and its related countries, the workers in public transportation, especially the railroad, nervously prepare for an onslaught of travelers. Days before the New Year, families work hard to give their homes a thorough cleaning, to sweep away any ill fortune that may have collected and to make room for the hoped-for, upcoming good luck. Doors and window moldings are often given a new coat of red paint and are decorated with paper cutouts that represent happiness, wealth, longevity and a satisfactory marriage with children. Paintings with the same themes are hung in the house. The New Year’s Eve supper is a feast with all family members dining together. One of the most popular courses is *jiao zi*, dumplings boiled in water. At midnight, the whole sky is lit up by fireworks and the sounds of firecrackers ring in everyone’s ears. Very early the next morning, children greet their parents and receive their presents. Often this is money wrapped in red paper packages. Then, the families converge in the neighborhood sharing greetings from door to door. The New Year is also a time for reconciliation: old grudges are very easily cast away and the air is permeated with warmth and friendliness.

DANCE IN CHINA TODAY

Chinese traditional dance can be categorized into three broad classes: classical or traditional dance originating in the Emperor's court; folk dances largely found in the rural areas; and ethnic minority dance drawn from the 55 minority cultures represented within China. In the 20th century, dance in China has included ballet, brought by the Russians in the early part of the century and, more recently, modern, jazz and popular dance forms from the West.

Classical court dances can still be glimpsed today as preserved through the stylized movements of the Beijing Opera. All young dancers in China are introduced to this highly codified movement tradition as an essential part of their training.



Dancing with the Yak

Photo: Carol Rosegg

Folk dances, still very popular today in China, are often performed in connection with celebrations of the calendar year such as the New Year's festival and the Autumn Moon or harvest festival. Folk dances are usually colorful and lively and follow fairly simple choreographic patterns that make it easy for many people to participate. There are regional styles and characteristics for many of the dances as well as innumerable folk dance ensembles that perform these dances on stage as entertainment.

Ethnic minority dance, as it is referred to in China, is endemic to the culture it represents and is often an integral part of that culture's belief system. These dances may include some specific movement or rhythmic characteristic that has been highlighted throughout the generations as unique to that culture. The dance of a particular culture, for example, might use specific hand gestures, eye movements, or expressive use of the shoulders.

Classical ballet is a style of dance with a defined vocabulary of steps that was codified in France in the 17th century. The body is generally held erect with the feet pointed and the legs rotated open. Ballet was introduced to mainland China by their Russian neighbors in the 1920's during a period of heightened cultural exchange. It became a very popular art form and is often taught alongside Chinese classical and folk dance in dance academies.

Modern dance, a style based on the natural movements of the body, was developed in the United States in the early 20th century. It has only recently begun to make an impact within the dance schools of Mainland China but has been well received in Taiwan since the 1960s.

The Chinese Movement training system emphasizes the mastery of ten areas or elements of movement-five outer or technical aspects of discipline and five inner elements having to do with mastering mental and spiritual focus. The five outer elements include a) articulation of hand and wrist movements, b) eye and head movements, c) torso and waist, d) leg and footstep and e) the coordination of all of these together. The five inner elements, which relate to the inner self,

include (*jin*) concentration, (*shen*) spirit, (*chi*) flow of energy, (*li*) strength and (*gung*) discipline. It is said that the dancer must be skilled in the five outer elements to become an accomplished performer but then must gain mastery of the five inner elements to become a true artist. The spirit and artistry of the dance will only transcend the physical when these elements are combined through the body of the dancer.

Some Characteristics of Chinese Dance Forms

- Emphasis on hand movements
- Specific eye movements that follow the hand gesture
- Codified steps for both male and female characters
- Predominance of circular patterns in space
- Extensive use of props
- Symbolic use of sets and costumes



Some Differences from European Dance Forms

The most obvious difference between Chinese and Western dance styles is the emphasis on shape. Typically, in both court dance and folk dance forms, the movement are often spirals and circles because the Chinese often use circles to symbolize harmony. Western dance forms such as ballet and modern dance tend toward linear and elongated movements. Furthermore, the complex hand and finger gestures as well as hand-eye coordination found in Chinese dance is mostly absent from the traditional Western forms. In all of Nai-Ni Chen's work, three important elements of Chinese art are present: Jin (Concentration), Chi (Flow of Energy) and Shen (Spirit). These aesthetic values are distilled from the major philosophies (Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism), which constitute the cultural values of the Chinese civilization.

“I use positive and negative space to create contrasting dynamics on stage. What I want to express is the dynamic balance between Yin and Yang, the soft and strong quality, the heavy and the light from the two extremes.”

~Nai-Ni Chen~

Questions to Consider

- How does a Chinese Dancer learn to work with props?
- What do marital arts have to do with Chinese Dance?
- What is a “flow of energy”?
- What is the difference when you concentrate on your movements and when you do not?
- How do you move in a spiral or a circular shape?
- What are Taoism and Confucianism?

ACTIVITIES

Before the Performance

- Brainstorm with classmates about what you know about China, its history, culture and customs. Make a list of some things you want to find out.
- Look at some Chinese calligraphy and make it into a movement for your body. Trace it in the air with your elbow, your shoulder, your hand, finger, etc.
- 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?

In the “Lion Dance,” the lion costume is worn by two dancers moving in cooperation and harmony with one another. Ask students as partners to explore ways in which they could move together across the floor in cooperation, while always connected in some way, e.g., holding hands, touching heads, connecting arms. The speed can be varied according to the age and agility of the participants.



Classical Chinese court dance movements emphasize circular movement.

Explore the notion of circularity by asking the students to find ways to make circles with their fingers, then with their heads, feet, legs and so forth.

- What does a circular pathway on the floor look like?
- How many circles can students make at one time with their bodies? Ask students to work in pairs. As one performs a circular dance, the other draws the spatial design on paper. Then they reverse roles.
- What does a dance on paper look like? Are there other ways to “read” the paper dance if it were handed to someone else? At the performance, students can take note of the circular movements and the many ways that Ms. Chen has chosen to work with them.

The Chinese calendar is based on a 12-year cycle with each year named for a different animal. If 2010 is the Year of the Tiger, have students determine under which sign or animal they were born. Have each student list his or her animal’s characteristics on the calendar. It is said that a person shares characteristics with the animal associated with the year in which one was born. Ask each student to review the animal’s characteristics and write a short essay that uses various aspects of his or her personality to either support or disprove this theory.

During the Performance

- Watch the dancer's concentration on stage.
- Close your eyes for a few seconds and listen to the sounds of the dancers and music.
- Observe how the dancers use their eyes.
- Look for circular shapes that the dancers are making with their arms, head, feet and props.

After the Performance (Students)

- Using the map of China, locate the places where the dances on the program come from.
- Go to museums in your area and look for the Chinese Collection.
- Design a collage using fabric, art and/or written words that express your response to Nai-Ni's dances.
- Interview a classmate about their reactions to the performance and report what you find out to the class. What did they notice or remember that you had not?
- Create a dance using circular patterns with different body parts and pathways in space. Write down your dance on paper and ask someone else to "re- create" your dance on their body by using your dance design.
- Choose an object that you use everyday and can hold in your hands. Explore different ways you could hold and move with this object. Make a short dance that shows off your new skill.

After the Performance (Teachers)

1. Ask the students to describe what they saw or remember about the performance—a visual image, a sound, colors, specific movements—and document these words on a chart. Create a word list that can be connected to other concepts and vocabulary words in the curriculum. Have each student draw an image from the performance and share these pictures with the whole class. Ask if anyone can show the class one of the movements they recall and if they would volunteer to teach it to the class.

2. The following questions might act as springboard for classroom activities: How did the choreographer use movement to tell a story? How could you? What story would you tell? What objects were used in the dances? Could you make a dance using an object and how would that object help in telling your story?

3. Ask students to partner with someone else and "interview" each other to find out how they celebrate the New Year or another holiday in their household. What are the traditions that are connected to these family activities and celebrations? What symbolic objects, animals or foods are used or included in these celebrations? What are their origins? How could students do research to find out more? Ask each child to report to the rest of the class about what their partner told them.

4. In small groups, have students invent a celebration—give it a purpose and a name, time in the calendar year and create dances and music for it. Have each group perform their celebration for the rest of the class.

5. Plan a celebration parade for Chinese New Year that could travel from classroom to classroom with costumes and headdresses. Each child could design a paper lantern to be held during the parade while fireworks could be represented with a movement chorus of dancers in red and gold costumes. Each room visited could be prepared with red door banners and symbolic paper cabbages for the lion in order to bring good luck to each classroom. Explore with the whole class the possibilities of movement while holding lanterns or other props during the parade. Using a steady drumbeat, decide which movements best express the mood and meaning of the celebration. Can they be repeated in a pattern while moving from place to place? Should the parade stop while movements in place are performed during the parade?

6. Many preparations are made for the Chinese New Year and all the senses are taken into consideration. Celebrate this holiday in the classroom by highlighting the five senses. The class could consider what highlighting the five senses might mean and how they could contribute by, e.g., bringing in flowers to smell, wearing bright clothes to see, passing around herbs and spices to smell, sharing something sweet and sour to taste. Movement and sound play a large part in the New Year's celebration. Examine the classroom for sound-making surfaces or objects not necessarily intended for sound making. How is the sound of a pencil beaten on a desktop similar to a pencil on a metal surface? Some students could be the "orchestra" while other students are the dancers. Everyone should have a chance to do both and discuss what the experience was like.

7. Many holidays involve giving gifts. Ask students to list what holidays include the exchange of gifts and describe what these gifts symbolize within the context of the holiday. The students could create the ceremonial exchange of money during Chinese New Year by wrapping a penny in red paper construction paper. These packets could be given out as guests enter the classroom throughout the 15 days of the Chinese New Year.



Fan Dance

Photo: Carol Rosegg

ELEMENTS OF DANCE (Vocabulary)

All dance shares three fundamental characteristics:

space - the place through which the dancer moves.

time - a measurable period during which movement or dance occurs; the passage of time is indicated in dance in many ways ranging from complex rhythmic patterns to long, unbroken stillnesses.

energy - the amount of intensity or force a dancer uses to execute a movement. Energy adds texture, weight and color to a dance.

Nai-Ni Chen's choreography incorporates or is influenced by several dance styles: classical court dances, modern dance, folk dances, ethnic minority dance and ballet. See "Chinese Dance Today," for information on these dance forms.

Many people are involved in the realization of a dance performance:

choreographer - a person who creates and often teaches, the movements of the dance and who decides upon the production elements, such as music, lighting, costumes, casting and overall design.

composer - a person who writes music. The music may be written specifically for the dance piece or pre-exist and be selected by the choreographer.

costume designer - a person who creates the clothing worn by dancers on stage during a performance.

dance concert - a program of several dances, often choreographed by the same person, with each dance having its own choreography, costumes, lighting design and music.

dancer - a person selected by the choreographer or artistic director of the company to perform the dance movements. Generally dancers have extensive training in one or more techniques before they perform in a professional company.

lighting designer - a person who creates the illumination for a dance or theater piece. He or she watches the dances and speaks with the choreographer before creating the theatrical effects on stage.



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FACTS ABOUT CHINA

Official Name: People's Republic of China.

Capital: Beijing.

Official Language: Mandarin. Based on the Northern Chinese dialect spoken in Beijing, Mandarin is taught throughout all China, there are at least 35 other dialects.

Area: 3,680,000 square miles, the third largest country in the world.

Geography: China is a mountainous country. More than 68% of the country is above sea level. There are two major rivers in China: the Yangtze River is 3988 miles long, the Yellow River is 3011 miles long. Thirty million people live near the mouth of the Yangtze River. The fertile soil supplying a tenth of China's rice crop and the industrial might of Shanghai make it China's most prosperous region.

An Asian Empire: At its territorial height, about 670 B.C., the Tang dynasty directly administered a vast area and received tribute from nearly a dozen kingdoms and territories. Tang rule extended far beyond China's modern western boundary.

Population: 1,133,682,500 (1.1 Billion). Han Chinese, the predominant ethnic group, accounts for ninety-two percent of the population. The remainder is comprised of 55 recognized minorities. Nearly all of China's people inhabit the fertile, humid lowlands of the east; 450 million live along the coast. Dry western highlands make up more than half of China's territory, yet are home to only six percent of the population.

Republic of China (Taiwan): Four-fifth of the island's 20 million people descend from Chinese settlers of the 1600's. Two million fled the mainland for Taiwan after Mao took power in 1949 during the Communist Revolution.

Hong Kong: Returned to China rule in 1997. Hong Kong has 5.8 million people who inhabit only a tenth of the colony's 1070 square mile. They have per capita income of \$11,500 as compare with \$300 on the mainland.

The People's Republic of China



History of China

5000 B.C. Farmers along the Yangtze River are among the first to grow rice.

3000 B.C. Yangtze River settlement produces silk and carved jade.

2000 B.C. Shang Dynasty. Priest-kings preside over ancestor cults in villages on Northern China plain.

551 B.C. Confucius born.

220 B.C. Qin Dynasty. China unified by Qin Shi, the first emperor. Great Wall built.

126 B.C. Han Dynasty. Chinese explorers foray into Central Asia. Silk ribbons used for dancing.

2 A.D. Population in China: 58 million.

220 A.D. Buddhism spreads in China.

400 A.D. Sui Dynasty. Began work on the Grand Canal.

600 A.D. Tang Dynasty. Blossoming trade with the West through the route across Central Asia called the Silk Road.

690 A.D. Empress Wu, she was the only woman emperor in Chinese history.

1086 A.D. Song Dynasty. New census taken. Population: 108 million.

1200 A.D. Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty. Genghis Khan and later his grandson Kublai Khan ruled China. Marco Polo visited China in 1271. A unified Chinese theatrical form begins to take shape.

1400 A.D. Ming Dynasty. Culture and art flourish in China.

1600 A.D. Qin (Manchu) Dynasty. The last dynasty in China. Population: 200 million in 1762 and 395 million in 1830. Peking Opera emerges from the combination of four regional styles of acting.

1911 A.D. Dr. Sun Yi-Hsien (A Western trained M.D.) leads the Wuchung uprising, overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China.

1921 A.D. Chinese Communist Party formed in Shanghai.

1949 A.D. Chiang Kai-Shek, President of the Republic of China, flees to Taiwan leaving China in Communist hands. Era of the People's Republic of China begins.

1989 A.D. Numerous attempts at economic reform fail in the forty years of Communist rule. Protest for democracy at Tienanmen Square gains global attention as the army fires on demonstrators.

1997 A.D. Hong Kong returns to China after 99 years of British rule. Economic reform has created new hopes in China. Trade gap between America and China grows bigger than Japan.