

LILY CAI CHINESE DANCE COMPANY

Art Form: Dance
Style: Traditional
Culture: Chinese

MEET THE ARTIST:

Lily Cai, a Chinese-American, preserves her traditional Chinese culture by performing ancient classical court and ethnic folk dance. Born in Shanghai, she began to study dance at the Children's Palace when she was five. As she matured, her talent became evident and she was selected to study with special teachers. Her traditional dance training was abruptly stopped during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Mao Tse-tung, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party appointed his wife, Chiang-Ch'ing, to head cultural expression in the performing arts. She allowed only five ideologically pure revolutionary stories to be danced. Lily Cai was a principal dancer in these productions at the Shanghai Opera House. In 1970 she immigrated to the United States and settled in San Francisco. Founder and Artistic Director of the *Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company* and cofounder of *Chinese Cultural Productions*, Lily's strengths as a choreographer derive from her ability to combine and integrate Chinese traditional, folk and classical dance with Western ballet aesthetics and American modern dance. She has toured extensively in the United States and Europe and is the recipient of many prestigious awards and grants.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Ancient Chinese dance comes to life in this thrilling and beautiful performance featuring Lily Cai. Utilizing traditional costumes of the Tang and Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasties, Lily appears with colorful ribbons, fans of red, green and gold, big head masks, traditional wooden platform shoes and swords. She begins with "Characters Variation," portraying an old man, a lady carrying a baby, someone catching a butterfly, a drunken man and a village girl with a big head mask. Students learn how to say "hello" in Chinese and perform the classical "S" shaped dance movement, the basis of Court Dances. A colorful ribbon dance from the Tang Dynasty is performed, followed by a contrasting dance from the Qing Dynasty. The program concludes with the audience saying good-bye in Chinese. Composer Gang Situ coordinates music written especially for the performance.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

China stood as a leading civilization in the arts and sciences for centuries. However, in the first half of the 20th century, China was beset by major famine, civil unrest, military defeats, and foreign occupation. In 1966, the Communists, under Mao Tse-tung, established a dictatorship that imposed strict controls over everyday life. It was called the Cultural Revolution. As mentioned earlier, Mao's wife Chiang-Ch'ing was appointed head of the Cultural and Performing Arts and controlled the style, themes and expression of art so that it was geared toward a revolutionary and military intent. Lily Cai remembers that everyone on the street was fighting and students dropped out of school to promote the writings of Mao Tse-tung. At this time, all the people learned a Revolutionary Dance. It required no technique, but used movements designed to make everyone feel powerful and determined to make change.

Chinese civilization, which is over 5,000 years old, has both classical and ethnic folk dance. There are many dialects spoken in China and the cultural differences are expressed in their music, art and folk dances. Chinese classical dance reflects the philosophy and aesthetics of each dynasty of individual Emperors. A dynasty is a succession of kings or emperors from the same ruling family. In classical Chinese dance, the movements, gestures and floor patterns are based on the concept of the circle and S curve. Ms. Cai has selected two contrasting classical dances which show a

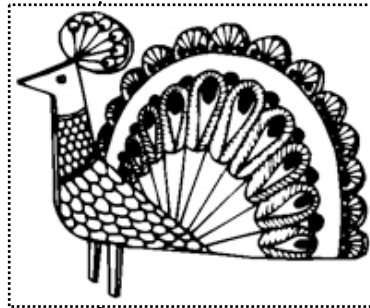
wide variety of movements based on these principles. The Flying Goddess or Ribbon Dance represents the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.), which is called the golden age for culture. The ribbons represent a goddess. The aesthetics of this dynasty were based on the concept that beauty was full and round; the costumes were transparent to reveal the outline of the body. In contrast, bodies were completely covered in the Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty (1644-1912), movements more reserved, and fans were used to highlight elegance, beauty and conservative femininity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Can you remember how to say “Hello” and “Good-bye” in Chinese? Do you know these greetings in any other languages?
- What words would you use to describe the Ribbon Dance? What images came to mind?
- What words would you use to describe the Fan Dance? What feelings did you have while watching this dance?
- What were the differences between the two dances? (costumes, movements, props, music, etc.) How would you describe the values or aesthetics of each dynasty based on the dances you saw?
- How many different ways did you see circles used in the dances. Can you show some of the circular gestures?
- What did you find interesting about the Sword Dance? What descriptive words would you use to describe it?

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- At spring festivals throughout the villages of China, people construct large props that are made to looklike animals. These props are used in dances accompanied by gongs, cymbals and drums. Select a specific animal and design an animal prop for a dance. Take cardboard or other stiff materials, combined with decorations and soft materials (e.g., ribbons, fabric, plastic, etc.) and build your prop.
- Animal mime dances are popular in parts of China. Lily did a Peacock Dance in her performance. In small groups, create a short dance that is based on the following: Dragon, lion, unicorn, monkey, peacock or horse. Ask each group to combine the designs of their bodies to create each of these animals as it is named; then ask them to use individual movement to show the way each animal might dance.



FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIES:

Today there are 55 minorities in China, each of which has its own unique culture. Dances of these cultures have been passed from one generation to the next for thousands of years. Sometimes researchers study ancient rock paintings to help in reconstructing dances which have become extinct. The written language of China is primarily composed of pictures. Originally these were called “pictograms,” which symbolized concrete ideas such as the sun, moon, animals and plants. These evolved into Chinese written characters. More than 1,000 years ago the Naxis group created pictographic characters to record their dances, fairy tales, poems and natural discoveries. Imagine that you are an artist in ancient times. Create 5-10 symbols to tell one of the following stories: How the sun rises and sets; How the forests came to be; How the animals came; How the Peacock came to be; How the mountains were formed. Tell the story from left to right, using only your original symbols to tell the story. These cave paintings are an ancient form of a storyboard. Use your symbolic drawings to tell your story or find a way to dance or dramatize it using gestures.

- Legend:
- Artistic perception
 - Creative expression
 - Historical & cultural context
 - Aesthetic valuing
 - Connections, Relations, Applications

Classical Chinese dance uses the concept of circles. Create five different circular positions (shapes) or gestures with your body. Sequence your ideas and then share them with a partner. Each person can perform their sequence of five circles or can teach the sequence to the other, combining them to make ten circular shapes or gestures.

- In small groups, select one of the dances that Lily Cai performed. Create a word web in which each person in the group contributes ideas to describe the dance. Ask one member of the group to be the scribe. Select a few words and write sentences, using those words, to describe the dance. Sequence the sentences so they work easily to describe the dance.
- Find China on a map or globe. Research some of the major inventions given to us by the Chinese. These include gun powder, kites, porcelain, paper, noodles, printing, mariner’s compass, umbrellas, wheelbarrows, game of chess, matches, and silk fabric. Check on “Chinese Inventions:” www.askasia.org/frclasrm/lessplan/1000019.htm

BIBLIOGRAPHY/WEBLINKS:

- Lewis, John. *The Chinese Word for Horse*. Bergström and Boyle Books Limited, 22 Maddox St., London W1R 9PG: 1976.
- Lily Cai’s Web Site: www.mcn.org/2/laks/lily_cai/
- Many books on Chinese culture, such as *Life in Ancient China*.
- Email Jeff: Jamner@jjamner@Kea.org
- KCA.org/education/teachersguides.asp LilyCai