1. Introduction

The Art of Chinese Dance introduces students to the elegance and beauty of Chinese culture. Through the language of movement, our dancers reveal the richness of China’s long history and complex heritage. In the program, students will see the agility and courage of Chinese warriors, the skill and excitement of Peking Opera acrobatics, and folk dances from various ethnic groups within China. Our production reflects the cross-cultural experience of choreographer Nai-Ni Chen.

"When I first visited America, I felt a sense of freedom. I could feel the energy of this freedom on the streets and knew this energy would help me to grow in my artistic endeavor."

Nai-Ni Chen

**BIG IDEAS FROM THE PERFORMANCE**

Students will understand that:

- Chinese dance has a long tradition with many variations that directly correlates to the culture, customs, beliefs, geography, and history of its people.
- Endurance, discipline, persistence, and concentration are key qualities that dancers develop in all areas of their lives, especially performance.
- Hand gestures are unique in Chinese dance.
- Traditional Chinese artists find creative inspiration from nature.
- The use of props adds meaning, visual beauty, and excitement to the dances.
The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has been transforming the rich tradition of Chinese art through contemporary dance since its founding in 1988. The themes of Nai-Ni’s work ranges from the poetic drama of Chinese traditional legends, to the highly abstract elegant lines of Chinese calligraphy. An Asian American company that celebrates the cross-cultural experience, the Company’s productions naturally bring forth issues of identity, authenticity, and equality.

The company’s accomplishments are evident in its extensive performance history. Our work has been presented in some of the most prestigious concert halls including: Joyce Theater, Lincoln Center, Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts, Raymond F. Kravis Center, Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, and New Jersey Performing Arts Center. We have had television specials on PBS/NJN, ABC, WNYC and completed eight international tours spanning the globe. Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has received grant awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, as well as continuous generous support from the state of New Jersey since 1990. The company is currently in residence at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, and New Jersey City University.

3. The Legacy of Traditional Chinese Dance

Dance reflects the culture, people, beliefs, and aesthetics of a certain population. Traditional Chinese dance can be divided into two broad categories—court dance and folk dance. Court dances date back to the Qin Dynasty (220 B.C.) and were performed in the palace of the emperor. Court dancing reached its height of sophistication during the Tang dynasty as evidence by its depictions in the poetry, paintings and sculptures of that period. There are two kinds of court dances: those based on various martial art fighting forms, and those based on Confucian etiquette and ritual codes. Today, aspects of these ancient court dances are still found in traditional Peking Opera, and ancestral ritual ceremonies in Confucian temples.

Folk dances originate from over 50 distinct indigenous ethnic groups within China. A Chinese dancer today is expected to study the classical court dances embedded within the Peking Opera movement style as well as numerous forms of folk dance. Dancers must begin training from a very young age by studying martial arts, acrobatics and stylized theatrical movements on a daily basis. Dance technique typically incorporates work with props like handkerchiefs, ribbons, ritual weapons and fans.
4. Characteristics of Chinese Dance Forms

- Emphasis on Hand and Eye coordination
- Use of circular patterns in space with every part of the body
- Extensive use of props
- Stylized steps and gestures
- Unique emphasis on movement accents in relation to the music

“The Chinese court dances have been re-created from poetry and paintings of that period in history. Poems describe movements of the Tang dynasty dancers and you see what the costumes and some of the hand and facial gestures looked like from the paintings and sculpture of the time. But you have to use your imagination to recreate these court dances.”

Nai-Ni Chen

5. Differences from European Dance Forms

The most obvious difference between Chinese and Western dance styles is the emphasis on shape. Chinese court and folk dances typically focus on organic circular movements that represent harmony. Western dance forms like ballet and modern dance tend toward linear, elongated movements.

Complex hand gestures and emphasis on hand-eye coordination found in Chinese dance is mostly absent from 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 of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism which constitute the cultural values of Chinese civilization.
“I believe that Shen (Spirit) is the most important aspect of my work as an artist. It can be expressed through the colors of ink, the lines of the brush stroke or by complex body movements.”

Nai-Ni Chen

6. Philosophies

In China, traditional dance forms are guided by philosophies found within the overarching culture. Traditional Chinese art is heavily influenced by Taoism; the belief that humans are one with nature. Various artistic disciplines share the fundamental interest in finding inspiration from nature to create art. The concept of achieving a balance between Ying and Yang is also essential for poets, musicians, dancers, calligraphers, and painters alike. Examples of this philosophy can be found in the often contrary, but interdependent patterns in nature. The rotation of the earth from sun-rise to sun-set causes changes in shadows and light. The dark side of the mountain becomes bright, water flows in a stream, sounds of pine trees wave in the wind, and the movements of animals are all urging us to observe and feel. The various dynamics, and rhythms of the universe create an on-going energy that seeks to fulfill the circle of life. Circular patterns in dance are symbolic of this on-going energy.

Chinese painting and dance focus on the same philosophy of four elements. Chi describes the breath of internal energy, Yung the flowing of rhythm, Sheng life, and Dong motion, or the ability to evoke liveliness. Each element contributes to a dancer’s training and artistry when performing. Music also greatly contributes to the way that traditional dance is performed. The term Yue Wu, or Music Dance, was recorded in historical Chinese documents and describes the inseparable nature of the two art forms. In fact, unlike many Western Modern dance forms, music and dance are always performed together.

Questions to ask before the performance:
How do you think dance is the same and/or different around the world?
How do rituals, festivals, and celebrations relate to dance?
Do you think the geographic area affects how dance looks?
Who participates in dance in China? What about in your own culture?

During the Performance:
Watch how the dancers perform with concentration and control on stage.
Listen to the music and see if you can identify what instruments are being used.
How are the colors and styles of the costumes different from the clothes you are wearing?
Observe how the dancers use their eye focus and hand gestures to add drama and to connect with the audience.
Let’s Get Moving and Make Learning Memorable!

After the Performance:
*Using a map of China, locate the places where the dances in the program came from.
*Turn and talk to a classmate about their reactions to the performance. What did they notice or remember that you had not?
*Have a classroom discussion about what the students discovered.

Studies show that physical activities are beneficial for elementary students’ physical and cognitive development. Incorporating physical activity breaks, like dance, improves overall physical activity, and behavior in the classroom (Carlson, et al; Howie, Beets, & Pate). Incorporate some of these post-performance movement activities as a fun and active way to assess what your students learned during our performance!


Dancing with Props (Improvising)

**Before activity:** Students bring in their own scarves, or long material to dance with.

Have the students who participated in the silk ribbon demonstration help lead the class through the movements from the program. Have half of the class perform while the others observe and switch roles. Discuss the origins of silk and the importance of the material in Chinese culture.

**Blueprint Connections:** improvise in response to stimulus and/or with props

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Images for Silk Ribbons

- Waterfall, rainbow,
- ocean waves,
- whirlpool, dragon,
- snake, cloud

Encourage students to create their own movements inspired by their natural environment!

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Hand Eye Coordination (Developing Skills and Techniques)

Traditional Chinese dancers must develop their hand eye coordination for stronger concentration. Circular patterns are often used to find harmony within the movements.

To help develop these skills, have students use their finger to trace their names in space. While they do this, have them follow the movement with their eyes. Review the hand gestures that the dancers performed in the show including the Orchid Flower Hand, and Tiger Hand. How many ways can you make circular patterns using these hand gestures?

Dancers must also develop spotting techniques to help them achieve balance. Like the performance, have the students try balancing on one leg while concentrating on a specific spot that they find in the room.

**Blueprint Connections:** explore and repeat movement, balance of various parts of the body, execute simple basic elements of various dance forms

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Embroidery and Costumes (Choreographing)

Students often ask questions about our costumes during the question and answer session. Expand upon these inquires by bringing in examples of ancient Chinese embroidery. Discuss the symbolism of color and design. See what symbols the students can identify! Students can create stories and/or poems based on the embroidery they view. From these stories students can choose three action words that identify a beginning, middle, and end. The students then create a movement sentence to perform for the class. Students can also learn each others sentences! Instead of words, students can choose symbols from the embroidery to create choreography from.

**Blueprint Connections:** choose and order the movements in a sequence with a beginning middle and end, recall, repeat and practice the sequence, connect dance to other arts and disciplines

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Suggested Activities

Perform for peers in dance class
Improvising in response to stimulus
Improvising with props
Class discussions to further movement explorations

From: *Blueprint for teaching and learning in dance: Grades pre-k-12.*
pg. 10-11

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Dance Activities for Second Grade

**Using the New York City Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Dance**

**Entry Points for Teaching**

Themes relating to social studies
A traditional cultural dance, like Chinese Ribbon Dance
Visual art works

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**Blueprint for teaching and learning in dance: Grades pre-k-12.**
pg. 10-11

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**Images for Silk Ribbons**

- Waterfall, rainbow,
- ocean waves,
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- snake, cloud

Encourage students to create their own movements inspired by their natural environment!
Music Suggestions

A Tayal Folk Song/ Capriccio For Chinese Flute: by Ming Flute Ensemble - Chinese Bamboo Flute Music
Capriccio For Chinese Flute
The Lofty Mountain And Running Water: by Xiang Sihua- Guzheng - Classics by Chinese Guzheng Masters
Fireworks/ Tea Picking Girls and Butterfly Dance: by Heart of the Dragon Ensemble
Harvest Celebration/ The Dance of the Yi People: by Anna Guo-Chinese Traditional Yan-Qin Music

Lead a discussion with the students about the music they heard in the performance. During the discussion have pictures of various instruments from China.

Traditional Chinese Instruments

Percussion:
gongs, symbols, drums

Wind instruments:
bamboo flute, dizi, xiao, etc.

String instruments:
erhu, (two string fiddle)

Plucking instruments:
pipa, moon guitar, guzheng, dulcimer

Supplemental Resources

http://www.angelfire.com/ca4/GlenDoyle/liondance.html
http://kids.asiasociety.org/explore/explore-china
https://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/worldhistory/silkroad/
https://www.mocany.org/
7. 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 of China, there are at least 35 other dialects.

Area: 3.705 million 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. Millions of people live near the mouth of the Yangtze River. The fertile soil supplies 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: China is the world’s most populous country. 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; hundreds of millions 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-fifths 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. The name Hong Kong means ‘Fragrant Harbor.’ Historians believe that the name came from the city’s past trading of spices and incense.

8. History of China

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

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

2696 B.C. Silk fabric was invented.

2000 B.C. Shang Dynasty: Priest-kings presided over ancestor cults in villages on Northern China plan.

1600 B.C. Oldest embroidery on record from the Shang Dynasty

551 B.C. Confucius was born.

220 B.C. Qin Dynasty: China unified by Qin Shi, the first emperor. Great Wall was built.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event/Invention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>126 B.C.</td>
<td>Han Dynasty: Chinese explorers forayed into Central Asia. Silk ribbons used for dancing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>105 A.D.</td>
<td>Paper and books: Cai Lun developed paper by pounding together ingredients like bamboo, hemp, bark and spreading the pulp flat.</td>
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<tr>
<td>220 A.D.</td>
<td>Buddhism spread in China.</td>
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<td>400 A.D.</td>
<td>Sui Dynasty: Began work on the Grand Canal.</td>
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<td>600 A.D.</td>
<td>Tang Dynasty: Trade blossomed with the West through the route across Central Asia called the Silk Road.</td>
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<tr>
<td>690 A.D.</td>
<td>Empress Wu: the only woman emperor in Chinese history.</td>
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<tr>
<td>850 A.D.</td>
<td>Gunpowder: Alchemists worked with saltpeter for medicinal purposes and mixed it with charcoal and sulfur. The explosive properties that resulted were used in warfare to propel arrows and fireworks in Tang Dynasty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1400 A.D.</td>
<td>Ming Dynasty: Culture and art flourished in China.</td>
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<td>1840-1842</td>
<td>The First Opium War: Great Britain flooded the country with opium, causing an addiction crisis. The Qing Dynasty banned the drug, and a military confrontation resulted. The British force shut down Chinese ports, resulted in a treaty that handed over the control of Hong Kong for 99 years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Dr. Sun Yi-Hsien (A Western trained M.D.) led the Wuchung uprising, overthrowing the Qin Dynasty and established the Republic of China.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1921  Chinese Communist Party formed in Shanghai.
1949  Chiang Kai-Shek, President of the Republic of China, fled to Taiwan leaving China in Communist hand. The era of the People's Republic of China began.
1966  The Cultural Revolution: This campaign was initiated by Chairman Mao to erase Capitalist and traditional Chinese influences of the People’s Republic and introduce the philosophy of Maoism to fill the ideological gaps. Schools were closed and Chinese youth directed to take the lead in change, resulting in youth gangs known as the Red Guards who attacked undesirable citizens. Chaos led to martial law, Communist Party purges, and 1.5 million deaths.
1989  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  Hong Kong returns to China: In a midnight ceremony with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Hong Kong was given back to China after 156 years. China agreed to preserve the island’s capitalist economy as part of the handover agreement.
2010  China becomes the world’s second-largest economy with a population of 1.5 billion.

Further Reading on China

For Students:


For Teachers:


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

Nai-Ni Chen

About This Study Guide

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

Programs of the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company are made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey Cultural Trust, the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Hyde and Watson Foundation, E.J. Grassman Trust, The Horizon Foundation for New Jersey, the Cultural Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, the Live Music for Dance Program of New Music USA, the Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, the Rapid Response Program of American Dance Abroad, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters’ Cultural Exchange Fund, supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, PSEG, Proskauer, WAC Lighting, the Glow Foundation and MOCA.