

THE ART OF CHINESE DANCE

A STUDY GUIDE



BY NAI-NI CHEN DANCE COMPANY

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1. Introduction

The Art of Chinese Dance introduces students to the elegance and beauty of Chinese culture. Through the language of movement, the dancers reveal the richness of China's long history and complex heritage. China is one of the oldest and continuous cultures in the world, with over 5,000 years of recorded history. In the program, students will see the agility and courage of the Chinese warrior, the skill and excitement of Peking Opera acrobatics, and a variety of folk dances which express the character of the various nationalities within China.

The production features five professional dancers performing both traditional Chinese dance as well as original modern dance reflecting the cross-cultural experience of the 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~

2. Company Biography

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company brings the rich tradition of Chinese Art into the contemporary dance world. Over half a million people around the country have shared the original works created by the company, a multi-racial group of dancers from Asia, Europe, South America and North America.

Choreographer/Dancer, Nai-Ni Chen has been working with her dancers since 1982. Over the years, she has been working on integrating the concepts and aesthetics of Chinese classical art into the world of dance in America. The themes of her work range from the poetic drama in Chinese traditional legends, to the highly abstract, elegant lines of Chinese Calligraphy. Each dance reflects her personal vision as an Asian Artist living in America.

“The Chinese court dances have been re-created from the 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~

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has received grant awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, including the highly competitive Dance Company grant. It has been designated as a Distinguished Arts Organization by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and received an Arts Award from Governor Christine Todd Whitman, as well as continuous generous support from the state since 1990. The company has also received grants from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Ms. Nai-Ni Chen is a recipient of the NEA Choreographer's Fellowship. The company is currently in residence at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and Harlem School of the Arts.

3. About Chinese Dance

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. The court dance reached its height of sophistication in the Tang dynasty and was depicted in the poetry, paintings and sculpture of that period. There are two kinds of court dances: those based on the Chinese warrior exercises such as martial art fighting forms and those based on the Confucian etiquette and ritual codes. Today, aspects of these ancient court dances can still be seen in traditional Peking Opera and ancestral ritual ceremonies in Confucian temples. Folk dances in China vary from region to region and include dances 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. The Chinese dancer must begin training at a very young age and is required to study martial arts, acrobatics and stylized theatrical movements on a daily basis. Dance technique typically includes work with such props as handkerchiefs, ribbons, ritual weapons and fans.

4. Some 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

Questions to Consider

- How does a Chinese Dancer learn to work with props ?
- What do marital arts have to do with Chinese Dance ?





- What did an ancient Chinese court look like ?
- What was happening in Europe during China's Tang Dynasty ?

5. 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.

Questions to Consider:

- 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 ?

6. 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 ?

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.





“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~

After the Performance

- 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 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.

7. Bibliography

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8. 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.

9. 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.





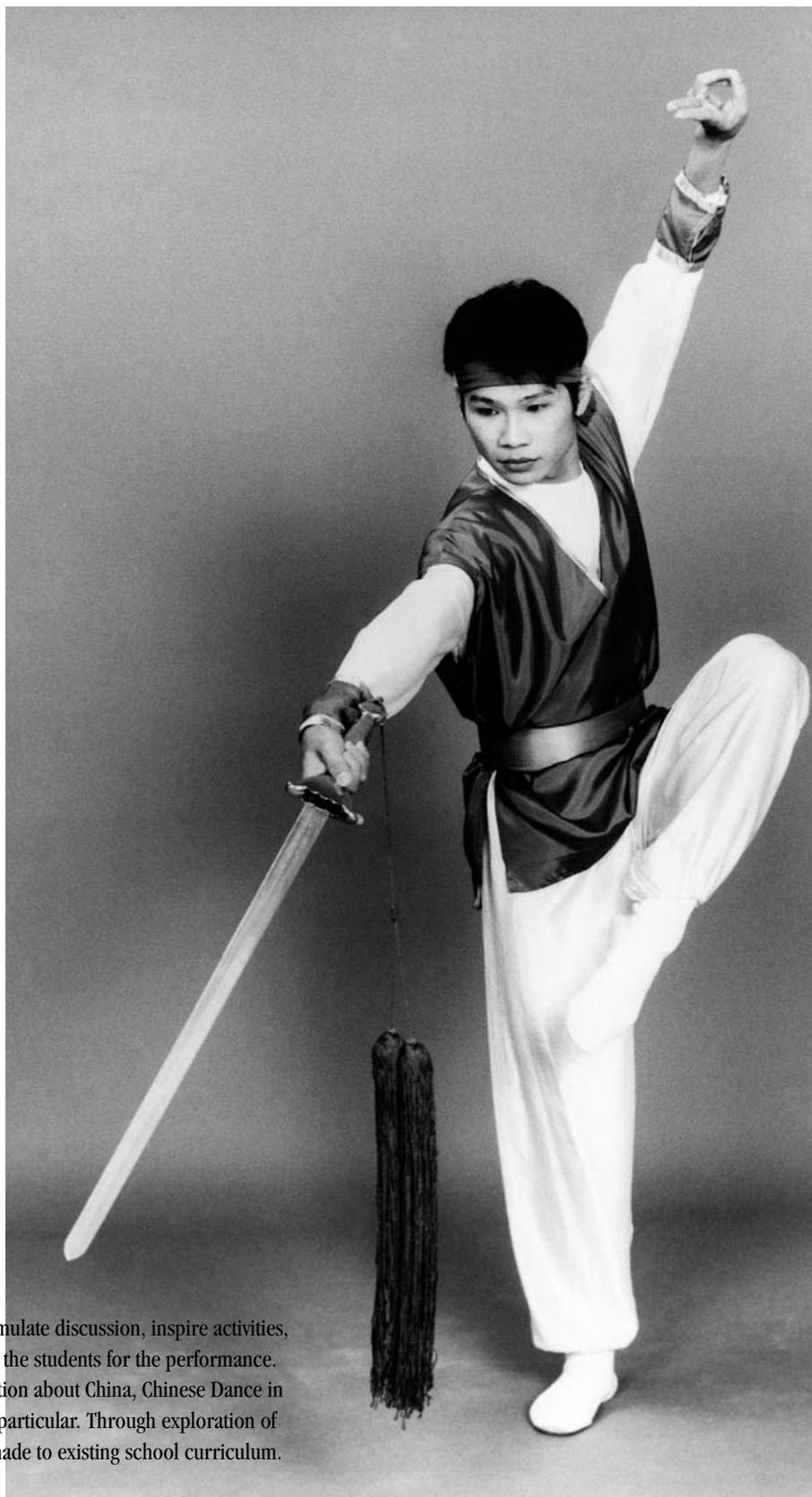
- 690 A.D. Empress Wu, she was the only woman emperor in Chinese history.
- 1086 A.D. Song Dynasty. New census taken. Population: 108 million.
- 1200 A.D. Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty. Genghis Khan and later his grandson Kublai Khan ruled China. Marco Polo visited China in 1271. A unified Chinese theatrical 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 Qin 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.

The People's Republic of China



“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~



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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