

**CREATAHOLIC**

# BLESSED BE THE LION IN TORONTO



© 2005 Donna Boucher BFA, BEd, MA

---

**~ Blessed Be the Lion in Toronto ~**

**GR/MUSI 5010.06 (Fall Term 2005)**  
**Instructor: Prof. Wrazen**

**Donna Boucher**  
**92 100 033 6**  
**December 3, 2005**

---

The Chinese Lion Dance is now a worldwide phenomenon seen in cultural celebrations and rituals in addition to competition and entertainment events. This paper will outline the cultural origins of the Lion Dance and its mythological history and relationship to the Chinese belief system. The music and dance will be illustrated placing it into the context of the greater Toronto area and showing contemporary variations.

Although the lion is not native to China, it is an important Chinese totem symbolizing power, majesty and courage. Found guarding the entrances to palaces, offices and residences, the lion is believed to be capable of warding off evil spirits and bringing good fortune, and is regarded as a peaceful creature.

The lion is said to have appeared during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-24 A.D.). The dance includes “Religion (Taoism, Buddhism, Feng Shui, and astrology), History (myths, fables, legends and fact), The Arts (Chinese opera, acrobatics, martial, music, and calligraphy), science (astronomy, seasons, and agriculture), Language, and even Food” *sic*<sup>1</sup>.

There are several stories documenting the origin of the Chinese Lion Dance, most based on mythology and folk tales. The most widely quoted story is,

of a mythical lion originating in heaven was reborn. Being very mischievous and having a fondness for practical jokes, he created a great deal of trouble for everyone. On one occasion, he decided to play a practical joke on the Jade Emperor. Angered at the trouble the lion caused, the Jade emperor killed the lion by cutting the lion’s head off and separating it from its body. He then threw both the head and the body of the lion down to the earth to rot. Upon discovering the fate of the lion, Kwan Yin (the goddess of mercy) felt sorry for the lion and decided to help him. Using a long red ribbon, she tied the lions head back on and brought him back to life. This red ribbon is still seen today, and is said to have the ability to ward off the evil spirits. Kwan Yin also adorned the lion with a horn and mirror to drive away evil spirits.<sup>2</sup>

The Lion Dance was, and still is, a superstitious ritual to chase away evil spirits, performed by Chinese Peking Opera troupes, bringing good fortune to the Chinese communities. It evolved into a highly cultivated form of competition and entertainment. It is an extension of the Chinese martial arts, specifically Wushu (Kung Fu) and is always performed by martial artists. All of the movements of the lion are based on stances and positions which are designed to develop strength and endurance in its performers due to the acrobatic and energetic demands of the routines. Today, Kung Fu schools all over the world offer lessons in Lion Dance.

The Lion Dance is used to consecrate temples and buildings, to bless new businesses, at harvest celebrations, and religious rites. The dance is considered to be “a vehicle for dispensing all the good

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.travelchinaguide.com> accessed October 3, 2005

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hongluck.org/lion-dance-history.html> accessed Oct 3, 2005

“blessings of heaven to the whole community” and “represents the hopes and aspirations of the Chinese people for all the good things life holds”<sup>3</sup>.

One specific example of a Kung Fu school in the Toronto area is the Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre. The school recently celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and has affiliate locations all over Canada under the direction of Sifu Sunny Tang. Sifu Allan, his son, is involved with the Lion Dance productions at both the Mississauga and Scarborough locations under the direction of drumming coach Herman Lee, and in 1998, the National Dragon Dance Team of China. The school considers the Lion Dance to be a “celebration of Chinese culture and martial arts spirit” and a “source of tradition and cultural enlightenment”<sup>4</sup>. The Dance Troupe was created in 1982 and has performed for her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on two separate occasions in addition to the Canadian National Exhibition, a Tribute to Jackie Chan, business openings, and weddings. Students are coached on the “importance of effort, dedication, confidence, time management, determination, physical challenge, but above all else friendship”<sup>5</sup>.

There are two main types of lions: Northern and Southern. The Northern Beijing Lion resembles a Pekinese dog and dances often involve giant balls and seesaws. The Northern Lion is used primarily for entertainment, and not rituals and ceremonies. On a personal note, the Northern Lion reminds me of “Barclay” from the children’s show “Sesame Street” and may in fact be modeled after the Northern Lion. The Southern Cantonese Lion is the more popular of the two and is performed by Kung-Fu clubs, although originally, the dances were performed by actors and dancers of the local opera troupe.

Colours are chosen carefully for a new lion, following Chinese cultural/religious beliefs. The meanings of all colours and their locations on the lion are important and are usually based on the primary colours of the five Feng Shui elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These colours form interrelationships that help to produce and nourish one another maintaining the ever-important balance of Yin and Yang. “The lion supposedly possesses mystical properties: When paired with the five colors (yellow, black, green, red and white) as the costume is colored, it is said to have control over the five cardinal directions.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://a2amas.com/liondance> [accessed Nov 24, 2005]

<sup>4</sup> Tang, Allan, Ed. Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre 30th Anniversary Commemorative Journal. 2005. Toronto: privately printed.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> <http://a2amas.com/liondance> [accessed Nov 24, 2005]

An example of colour associations is ‘silver’, which is believed to be a precious metal, and may therefore be mistaken for a good colour choice. “However, the character for silver is known as yin, but there is another character similarly pronounced that means death/dead/corpse. Along with the character *shih* (lion) which also sounds like the character for guiding/ leading, when combined, it forms the phrase “leading a dead corpse.””<sup>7</sup> Certainly not the symbolism one would wish to portray for a lion that is supposed to bring good fortune and luck!

The spirit of a new lion must be brought forth from heaven and awakened before the lion may be used in dance. This ritual is called “Hoi-Gong” or “Eye Opening” Ceremony and involves painting the eyes on the lion before the start of the dance. Any lion used without this ceremony is believed to bring misfortune and bad luck. The Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre included the former Mayor, Mel Lastman, in one of its “Eye Opening” Ceremonies, bestowing on him the honour of painting the Lion’s Eyes.<sup>8</sup>

Two dancers help to bring the lion to life, the head and the body. The lion’s head is the leader and manipulates the lion’s eyes, ears and mouth using strings and levers. The body follows the dancer in the head and is the main support for many of the acrobatic movements. Great strength and balance, from both dancers is needed to perform many of the lion’s actions. Both dancers must coordinate their footwork with each other in order to produce a “feline” quality to their Lion. In addition, both dancers must follow the musicians. Together, the dancers are able to give life to the lion, showing its emotions and movements, which include, sleeping, waking up, scratching, stretching, playing, eating, jumping, and resting. The quality of the dance is dependent on the skill and ability of the dancers.

In addition to the dance routine, dancers must maintain certain protocols of etiquette when moving around other club’s lions. For example, when two lions from different clubs pass each other they must lower their heads. Insults and fights can result if rules of etiquette are not followed.

The Lion Dancers are generally accompanied by three musicians, although there may be more or less depending on the occasion or circumstances. For example, the Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre will often include more than three performers, perhaps to allow for the inclusion of students<sup>9</sup>. The instruments used include drum, gong, and cymbals. Originally, wooden clappers were used, but this is now accomplished by using the rim of the drum. “The drum was a very important part of Chinese Culture in that it was used for military, civil and religious purposes as well as for musical performances”

---

<sup>7</sup> Lee, William K. “The Chinese Art of Lion Dancing” Written 2001 Revised 2004

<sup>8</sup> Tang, Allan, Ed. Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre 30th Anniversary Commemorative Journal. 2005. Toronto: privately printed.

<sup>9</sup> Video Citation

and “represents the Lion’s voice or roar and thus its mood or emotion. The drummer sets the tone for the Lion, but with a good team, the drummer can and will follow the Lion’s lead.”<sup>10</sup> In some modern performances, the Sunny Tang performances, for example, a “sound system” may be incorporated into the production providing modern and contemporary sounds and beats.<sup>11</sup>

The percussionists play music set into beats and patterns (7 star and 3 star patterns) which the Lion follows. In observed performances, I have noticed that the Lion and the musicians rely on each other to stay in time, instead of one leading the other and that the dance is usually initiated by the drummer. It is remarkable how the dancers can stay in beat with the drum, and *vice versa* considering they do not have any eye contact with each other during the performance.

The music and dance are transmitted orally from sifu to student. Students learn the basic skills and stances in a group Wushu class and may then ask, or be invited, to work with the Lion Dance troupe. There are some attempts to modernize this traditional method, with videos being produced that claim to teach Lion Dance.

The Lion Dance has evolved from a simple ritual used to chase away evil spirits and bring good fortunes, into a form of entertainment and competition throughout the world. *Jong* (pole jumping), is a form of competition where the lion must climb a mountain of poles ranging in height from 3 to 9.5 feet portraying a story about the search for the “flower of immortality”. The dancers must be extremely precise and agile with their footwork and balance because the plates where they place their feet are only 12 inches wide. Judges, similar to figure skating award points based on, “character (best portrayal of a lion), difficulty and completion of tricks, and synchronization of the drum and lion”<sup>12</sup>

Modern theatrical performances include “Cirque de Soleil” and the Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre Performances. Cirque de Soleil has a production named “Dralions” which blends Chinese Dragon and Lion Dances. The performers complete technically demanding routines incorporating “wooden balls which they roll under their feet and on which they perform somersaults”.<sup>13</sup>

International Action Design Entertainment, affiliated with Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre, performed a Lion Dance at the 2005 Dragon Ball in Toronto, Ontario.

The performance begins with a martial arts display by monkeys (other students at the Kung Fu school). The monkeys playfully move about the stage until the larger monkey enters. He moves towards a cave opening. The lion begins to emerge and is teased by the monkeys. Eventually the lion

---

<sup>10</sup> Lee, William K. “The Chinese Art of Lion Dancing” Written 2001 Revised 2004

<sup>11</sup> Video Citation

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.daldic.ca/history.html> [accessed Nov 24, 2005]

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/CirqueDuSoleil/en/showtickets/dralion/acts/dralion.htm> [accessed Nov 24, 2005]

deems the steps to be safe and moves up onto them. The lion is searching for the Tsai-Chiang (Choy-Chang), which is a gift that the Lion must find and open. In this case, the Chiang was a scroll that, when unfurled revealed the title of the event, “The 2005 Dragon Ball”. When the scroll was unfurled firecrackers and exciting music played in celebration of the Lion obtaining the Chiang.

The following emotions were easily visible by watching its behavior and listening to the drum in the Lion Dance performance: happy, curious, angry, scared, sleepy, or surprised. When the drum rolled, the lion portrayed sleepiness by moving into a sitting or lying position. Curiosity was portrayed by the lion looking at an object from different directions while the music plays repetitive rhythms. This is because a lion must always check before entering an area or climbing up “onto the mountain” to ensure there aren’t any traps. The lion allows one of the monkeys to ride on its back as it leaves the stage.

Their performance integrated additional performers into the dramatic production. The lion was accompanied by modern sound and lighting systems complete with pyrotechnics. In Sunny Tang’s commemorative journal<sup>14</sup>, they stated that:

In a diverse and ever changing society, innovation has always been a major factor in performance. Influenced by the arts and rich traditions of the Chinese culture, our performance troupe is proud to represent the time-honoured ceremonies of the Chinese people with a modern approach.

We have taken conventional performing arts and have transcended beyond the limitations of the traditional mind, to create ideas and performances that are able to depict our culture to the vast majority of audience. utilizing the entities of martial arts, dance, song and film, we have taken the initiative to compliment one with the other. As a result, what we have is a brand new look and feel to what we have always cherished about our heritage.

With the martial arts, lion dancing and dragon dancing so embedded into the Chinese people, we would like to see these spectacles presented to future generations in a positive and memorable way. Through our performances we encourage audiences of various ages and backgrounds to learn about and to appreciate the culture that we represent. To do so, as with other innovations in life, we strive to modernize and to create an image of uniqueness and enchantment in the form of entertainment.

This video shows how the once, ceremonial Lion Dance, has lead to a new era of theatrical productions and also illustrates how the Lion Dance may possibly be a descendent of the elaborate Peking opera productions.

The cultural origins of the Chinese Lion Dance are still present in today’s elaborate performances, such as “Dralions” or “The Toronto Dragon Ball”. It is a Chinese cultural celebration that is gradually evolving into an entertainment production for all people to enjoy regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

---

<sup>14</sup> Tang, Allan, Ed. Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre 30th Anniversary Commemorative Journal. 2005. Toronto: privately printed.

### **Sources Consulted**

<http://a2amas.com/liondance> [accessed Nov 24, 2005]

<http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/CirqueDuSoleil/en/showstickets/dralion/acts/dralion.htm> [accessed Nov 24, 2005]

<http://www.daldic.ca/history.html> [accessed Nov 24, 2005]

<http://www.hongluck.org/lion-dance-history.html> [accessed October 3, 2005]

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com> [accessed October 3, 2005]

International Action Design Entertainment, Live Show Productions. Produced by Alan Tang and Peter Ming Wong. IADE, 2005. DVD.

Lee, William Y.K. The Chinese Art of Lion Dancing. 2001/Rev.2004. Available from  
[http://home.att.net/~supertechwlee/wsb/html/The\\_Chinese\\_Art\\_of\\_Lion\\_Dancing.htm](http://home.att.net/~supertechwlee/wsb/html/The_Chinese_Art_of_Lion_Dancing.htm) [accessed November 24, 2005]

Tang, Allan, ed. Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre 30th Anniversary Commemorative Journal. 2005.  
Toronto: privately printed.