

Chinese Dance

China is a vast country with numerous ethnic groups and Chinese dance has over a five thousand year history. Until the Han dynasty (206 B. C. - A. D. 220), most Chinese dances originated from folk tradition. During the Han period, a musical entertainment court was established for the imperial family, which systematically documented folk songs and dances. Dance particularly flourished in the Tang dynasty (A. D. 618 - 907) which is regarded as the golden age for dance in ancient China.

During the early Tang period, Buddhism was introduced to China and trade and social relationships with other countries also rapidly expanded. Chinese dance was influenced by the folk dances of other countries such as India, Rome, Persia, Korea, Cambodia, Burma, Vietnam and other Central Asian countries. Dance also combined with other forms of fine art such as painting, poetry, classical music and drama.



DunHuang dance

DunHuang, an ancient city in Gansu Province, Western China, was the gateway to the "Silk Road" leading to Central Asia and Europe. It is famous for sculpture and fresco paintings from 4th - 14th century China which reflect aspects of Chinese religious life, arts and customs. Over 1,000 caves were cut out of the cliffs in Dunhuang and a wide variety of coloured frescoes and murals were preserved in these caves. DunHuang is regarded as a national treasure of China.

The DunHuang frescoes depict images from Buddhist stories and sutras. In the late 1980's, leading Chinese dance experts created "DunHuang Dance." It has great beauty and elegance and reflects a rich and distinctive dance tradition in China. The traditional Chinese ribbon dance in the illustration is from the classical DunHuang 'flying figure' dance.

Chinese Theatrical Dance "wuju"

This dance-drama style develops themes from Chinese Opera. Chinese operas have complex story lines and can feature singing, acting, music, acrobatics and story telling. In theatrical dance, the main themes from the stories are performed.



Chinese theatrical dance traces its origin to court celebrations in ancient China. With the influence of Russian Ballet techniques after the 1949 Revolution, Chinese theatrical dance became a national project. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese ballet became known as Revolutionary Ballet with its themes of proletarian solidarity and Communist political leadership.

The illustration shows a piece from Chinese theatrical dance or *wuju*, based on a 2000-year-old folk tale. A girl named Zhu Ying-Tai disguises herself as a man in order to attend school because women were not allowed to study in ancient China. She becomes very close friends with her classmate Liang Shan-Bo. Liang accidentally discovers Zhu's true identity and falls in love with her. The traditional tale ends in tragedy. Both lovers die broken-hearted, crushed by the invincible obstruction from Zhu's family, a kind of Chinese Romeo and Juliet tale. The costumes and the folding fans are from the traditional design of Peking Opera.

The Dragon Dance



This is a form of traditional dance and performance and is most often seen in festive celebrations. In the dance, a team of people carry the dragon on poles. The lead dancers lift, dip, thrust, and sweep the head, which may contain animated features controlled by a dancer and is sometimes rigged to belch smoke from pyrotechnic devices. The dance team mimics the supposed

movements of the dragon in a sinuous, undulating manner. The dragon dance is a highlight of Chinese New Year celebrations. Dragons are believed to bring good luck and also represent power, dignity, fertility and wisdom.

The Dragon Dance itself originated during the Han Dynasty. It is believed to have originated from the farming and harvest culture and is also associated with healing and preventing sickness.

The Chinese dragon is a mythical creature revered in Chinese culture. Its physical form is a combination of many animals, including the horns of a stag, ears of a bull, eyes of a rabbit, claws of a tiger and the scales of a fish, all on a long serpent's body. It was believed that dragons could move on land, fly through the air and swim in the sea and could control the weather. Dragons are also the emblem of Imperial Authority.



The Lion dance

This is another form of traditional dance in Chinese culture, in which performers mimic the movements of a lion. The lion costume is operated by a pair of dancers forming the back and fore legs of the lion and the eyes are also made to move. The dance is traditionally accompanied by cymbals, a gong, drums and firecrackers. The instruments play beats which the lion responds to.



The Lion Dance originated in China close to a thousand years ago. It is often confused with the Dragon Dance which involves many performers. The Lion Dance usually consists of two people. The Lion Dance is also performed in New Year celebrations.



There are two main types of lion dances known as the Northern and Southern dances. The Northern lion is usually red, orange, and yellow, shaggy in appearance and has a golden head. The Northern dance is acrobatic and is mainly performed as entertainment.

The Southern dance is more symbolic. It is usually performed to exorcise evil spirits and to summon luck and fortune. The southern lion has a distinctive head with large eyes, a mirror on the forehead, and a single horn at the centre of the head and can be any colour.