

Baruch College Students

LION DANCE GROUP

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**Lion Dancing**

**Chinatown Community Youth Lions**

Since we are studying the immigration of Chinese into the United States, what better way to celebrate the long journey than a Lion Dance? The rich culture of Chinese ancestors has been brought to America by the Chinatown Community Youth Lions, which was formed by an American-born Chinese. We discovered the legends, symbolism, and art of Lion Dancing as well as the goals, achievements and lives of C.C.Y.L. and its members.

The Lion Dance is used because it is believed that he can by dancing chase away evil spirits and brings good fortune to all who honor him. This is done, by giving money as presents to the lion, as he makes his way through the streets. Money is put by businesses and local people into Li-Cee or red envelope and is donated to the community. This is one of the ways that the Chinatown Community Young Lions Club gets its funding, since it is operates on donations alone.

The lion dance symbolizes good luck, turning evil into good and warding off negative spirits. "It is also part of Chinese culture that represents the combination of art and strength."

The firecrackers, a religious ritual, play an important role in the Lion Dance. It is the noise of the firecrackers along with that of the music and the fierceness of the lion that supposedly scarce the evil spirits away. Firecrackers exploded, chasing any lingering spirits of bad luck from the room. It was time for the lions' debut: their first-ever public dance. The firecrackers extend the length of the lucky dances because the lions must perform until the last explosion.

The importance of the symbol of fire can be seen in that it is visible not only in the firecrackers, but is also painted onto the lion's head and the other equipment.

The smoke from the firecrackers is related to the smoke of incense, many religions make use of incense, because the smoke drifts up into heaven along with the believer's prayers, hopes etc. The Chinese do not have to clean up the mess from the firecrackers, as the red paper spreads, so will the luck.

In 1997, New York City's mayor Giuliani banned firecrackers for the Chinese New Year without any understanding of their ritual necessity. Since then, controversy has erupted on how to revive interest in the Lion Dance, which have lost popularity since the ban. Valerie Tom explains that in China the New Year's Day celebrations are more festive and lively with the firecrackers. Meanwhile in New York, a part of Chinese culture has been banned. Valerie compares the firecracker to a candle, "It's like going to church and lighting a candle, or going to a party without any music, how would you like that?"

According to ancient Chinese legends the New Year's Lion Dance came about by the taunting of a ferocious lion-like monster called Nian. The monster was given this name because it means "year" and it appeared annually on New Year's Day. The villagers were scared of Nian because it ate human beings. Hence, people were afraid to come out of their homes for the celebrations. Desperate, the villagers asked God for help. God answered their prayers by instructing them to hang a head of lettuce soaked in a special potion above their front doors and to have firecrackers ready. Nian was attracted by the scent of lettuce and came into the village, but was disappointed to see no people to eat. Hungry, Nian began chomping on the lettuce. Suddenly people ran out from their homes and threw firecrackers at Nian while making loud noises with gongs and drums. After this ordeal, Nian felt sick and threw up the lettuce it ate. Nian then transformed into a caring and kind creature and was appointed by God to be a protector for the people. This was the beginning of Lion Dancing on New Year's Day.

Chinatown Community Young Lions has three locations one on 19 Mott Street, is their main office, another on 70 Mulberry Street, where the classes are held, and the third, where Natasha interviewed Valerie, at 175 Canal Street. They are all centrally located in New York's Chinatown, which gives them a great push forward in

attracting Chinese youths to their excellent program. C.C.Y.L. is a nonprofit organization, which strives to achieve their mission to "...offer and assist any youth a place of belonging. Teaching them performing arts, cultural history, educational assistance, and the trial of growing up." (website)

They achieve this goal by providing a very diversified program to youths from the ages of six to seventeen years old. C.C.Y.L offers activities such as sports, counseling, field trips, arts and crafts, music appreciation, Asian dancing, summer jobs, and of course lion dancing (Website) . It is phenomenal that they have been in business for thirty years while providing so many activities, especially since they depend on community contributions for survival. They have never been sponsored by any City, State or Federal agencies. This says a lot about C.C.Y.L. It translates to a dedicated staff, purely made up of volunteers, of college students and parents. It also signifies the unity and support of the Chinese community when it comes to imparting culture and tradition to the youths of today.

Through the hard work of its founders and members, C.C.Y.L. has grown from nine members to three hundred active members, while two thousand members have passed through their doors (Website).

There are no membership fees charged nor are there any fees to join the organization. Therefore, all of C.C.Y.L.'s funds come from performing at special events and lion dancing on New Year's Day. They have a comprehensive list of celebrities they performed for, such as Cardinal John O'Connor, Former Governor Mario Cuomo, Cardinal Edward Egan, David Letterman, Reading Rainbow and the New York Knicks just to name a few. They have also been acknowledged for performing for the United States Department of Justice, Board of Education and was given honorable mention in the May 31 2001 (No.3259) China Press newspaper.

Due to the affects of September 11, 2001, C.C.Y.L. has unfortunately seen difficult times. They were located only thirteen blocks away from the Twin Towers so the National Guards evacuated that part of the city. According to Valerie, equipment, supplies, and air quality damages were suffered. Classroom had to be cleaned and aired out. Performances, the bread and butter of the organization, were consequently canceled. However, they are currently picking up the pieces slowly. Chinatown Community Young Lions now boasts members from all over the Tn-State area and Staten Island. The increase in interest for a rich cultural Chinese program has forced them to expand their curriculum to satisfy this demand.

### **Interview with Valerie Tom**

In an interview with Valerie on November 13th 2002, Natasha managed to discover the cause behind this culturally committed organization, Valerie Tom. Her great—grandfather emigrated from Canton, China by ship to Chinatown, New York, about a hundred years ago. Valerie recalls that he tried three times, but was caught and deported all three times. On the fourth attempt, he succeeded by status of businessman. This journey, about seventy years later, set the scene for the foundation of Community Chinatown Young Lions. Valerie noticed that "other than Chinese food, there was no culture" experienced by American-born Chinese. Generation by generation, she realized her heritage was pining away. She understands little Cantonese, but cannot speak the language or write its calligraphy. She saw the need for preservation of tradition and culture for children in the community, as well as her own children, Brandon and Brian Tom.

### **Interview with Brian Tom**

Elodie interviewed Brian Tom, the oldest son of Valerie Tom and the one why the organization was founded. He told her that he always wanted to perform the Lion Dance and plays the drums. He started out using a cardboard box for a lion head and banged on tin pots for the drum with pot lids for symbols. In retrospect he told her that he was very fortunate to have two very supportive parents who were willing to indulge in their son's interest. The Lion Dance has had a profound and positive effect on him. It gave him a focus and a sense on belonging to the community. It was a positive distraction from the same thing that plague many urban city neighborhoods, drugs, alcohol and gangs.

The Lion Dance is a form of art and expression with rudimentary dance steps based on martial arts. At that time, "The dance" had been one of the few recognizable demonstrations of Chinese culture. This is before Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan created the whole wave of interest in Chinese Martial Arts. According to a newspaper article written in The Villager, by Lionelle Hamanaka on February 1997, the lion dance costumes cover two dancers, one at the head, which weighs twenty-five pounds, and a second (person) who manipulates the body and the tail.

Growing up in Chinatown at the time 60's and early 70's and being an American-born Chinese (ABC), it was not very easy to join in with the more established Chinese Association during the New Year celebrations. There were not many associations that actually performed the Lion Dance during the Chinese New Year. He thinks there were about 5 Lion groups. Of the 5, only one still performs the Lion Dance today. He would attribute that to the non-easy entry points for ABC. In fairness, he thinks there were two attributing factors. The first being the cultural differences. The ABC has more western or modern point of reference. The other is the language barrier. One of the fundamental principals that the Chinatown Community Young Lions embody is

the blending the American culture in to the Chinese culture. They do that in many ways from the music that they play to the moves that they have created when performing the Lion Dance. As an example, the drumbeat is very fast. When people listen to the traditional Lion drum beats you hear a very slow and rhythmic beat. They modernized the beats by incorporating specific beats and added more strokes per minutes to create and distinguished sound that has become their trademark.

His day-to-day activities are many less than in years past. He is available to assist in any of the group's activities all year round. His personal contribution today is focused on the time and effort required to prepare for the Chinese New Year parades. Preparation usually starts five months in advance, such as, the ordering of equipment and instrument, uniforms and other materials.

They have a few hundred active members with thousands of kids that have passed through the organization over the past three decades. All these members understand the principals and the important role that CCLY plays in the community and the development of their youths. That's why maybe his children do attend Lion Dance and perform for their school during the Chinese New Year celebrations.

### **Interview with Brandon Tom**

Brandon Tom is the youngest son of Valerie Tom who is one of the founders for the Young Lions Dance Club. He is fourth generation American-Born Chinese and currently attends Pace University. He joined the club because his family was involved in the organization and he felt that he too wants to join. He told me " I was born into the lion dance; my older siblings had founded the Chinatown Community Young Lions. So when the coming of age came I just went with the flow of things and continued the tradition."

The organization has taught Brandon many wonderful things. Some of them are kinship and friendship. "To act only as yourself while preserving an apogee of respectfulness towards yourself, your family, your peers, and the "club" this especially is expressed aphetically."

Brandon felt that "...Lion dancing had some effect on my perspective towards the Chinese culture for obvious reasons, but it was mainly the other members that I encounter amid the organization, especially the older members who act as guardians through various conversations and meetings in which they exemplify Chinese culture through values and examples. As far as being an American born Chinese, getting involved in Chinese culture of any sort is a desirable endeavor."

Being a lion dancer is not an easy task, you really have to become one with the costume and one with the lion, you also have to possess physical and mental strength, which takes a great deal of discipline. It also taught Brandon

The actual maneuvering of the lion dance takes considerable amount of strength as well as broadening your mind, in focus of an ideology like no other. In a sense, you are acting as a lion, not as a human when performing, so it takes a strong imagination in coalesce with strength and agility. All of these attributes are acquired within the Young Lions organization."

Being part of the organization and being so involved in it has made Brandon closer not only to his community but also to his culture. "Yes, I definitely feel closer to my culture and community; I feel that I am something of a renaissance man trying to do justice to a community in lack of leadership for its youth. What we do for the community will echo an eternity, but only to those who know and to those who are not in the upper echelon of the community. In Chinatown there are no "boys and girls" clubs, so we as an organization feel closer to the youth of Chinatown because we provide shelter in the means of "belonging"."

Thanks to the organization, Brandon as a fourth generation American-Born Chinese got to experience and be part of his rich culture. He also got to learn more about his history, traditions and values that he might not have had a chance to do, if he did not join the Chinatown Community Young Lions Club.

### **Participant Observation**

#### **Rachel**

Before doing this project, I never heard of the Chinatown's Community Young Lions Club and I never knew what the dance looked like or why it had to be performed. But after researching the topic watching the actual dance and interviewing someone who actually dances has taught me a lot and made me see the traditions and the culture of a different group. The lion dance is a wonderful artistic performance where the folk tale of the past comes alive yearly on New Years. It's a very happy all day and loud occasion, where people delight in the day with food, and money and happiness. I think it's one of the best ways to spend a joyous occasion, with family friends and the entire community.

#### **Natasha**

When I visited Valerie's office, she was busy as a bee. Phones were ringing, two males and another female were conducting daily business and they were visited frequently. One visitor came by to drop off building inspection papers.

However, through all this insanity, Valerie kept up to her promise of providing all the information I could possibly need, without me even asking for it. This proved to me Valerie's dedication of spreading Chinese culture freely and most willingly.

With no prior knowledge of the meaning or intricacies of the Chinese culture, I have learned so much from C.C.Y.L. in just a few interviews and a little research. Their stories of being Chinese while trying to teach culture to generations after them, have taken me back to my own memories of parents telling me to go to Hindi school. It is amazing as to how C.C.Y.L. managed to thread their culture into the lives of so many youth in their community with little funding. Even if I did not witness the Lion Dance during this project, I won't have to worry as long as people like Valerie Tom and her sons, Brian and Brandon, are around to see that the Chinese heritage remains intact for generations to come.

For all the courteous interviews, numerous references, and time the staff at C.C.Y.L. indulged up on me, I must thank them.

They have really put their best effort in helping us attain an A (hint hint!) on this research project.

### **Elodie**

This project was instructive, it helps me understand the

Chinese culture, a culture that I did not really know well, and gave me another idea of this population. By this Chinese's community Young Lions Club I understood how much it is important to be part of a group in a big city like New York where so much things can disturb you from the right way. It also make me understand how much it is important to know your origin, to know where you come from especially in the U.S where so much ethnic group live together. I had little knowledge about the Lion Dance, but with my interview and my research, I know now better the importance of this dance for the Chinese community. I think it is sad that the Chinese in New York can't use firecrackers for the Chinese New Year, a symbol is missing, and I think it is again a misunderstanding of The Chinese culture.

My knowledge of the Chinese culture has been improved, but I have also a different image of the Chinese. I used to see them just as hard workers, now I see them also as people who want to help you when you need them. Brian Tom has been very helpful and kind, he took some of his time to answer my questions; I do not think anyone would do that for someone you do not know. So, I thank him and the association for their help.

TO CCYL

Athi Valerie.

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February 10, 2003

Dear C.C.Y.L,

Many thanks to your staff, especially Valerie Tom, Brandon, and Brian, for taking the time to enrich our lives with your culture. The class enjoyed our presentation and we received an A on the project! This would not have been possible without you guys. Continue doing the wonderful job of spreading tradition to your community, and ours! p.s. Happy New Year! ☺

With appreciation,  
Natasha Ramirez, Rachel Rud, and Elodie  
Humboldt.

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