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**In a Chinatown Rite, Cymbals And Symbols; Lion Dances Fuel Rivalries  
And a Debate Over Tradition**

**Christine Haughney, Washington Post Staff Writer**

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It shimmies and shakes, and boasts the longest false eyelashes in New York.

The four-footed Chinese lion sashaying through Manhattan's Chinatown streets every Lunar New Year with a band of cymbal-clashing and drum-beating revelers is perhaps one of the neighborhood's most popular images. On Saturday, a dozen of the lion groups will wend their way through Chinatown, dancing for shop owners, who reward them with red envelopes stuffed with cash.

But beneath these well-primped lion heads and dazzling performances lie passionate rivalries and a sometimes angry debate about how best to preserve the cultural tradition that generations of Chinese American men have grown up with.

On one side are young members of some dance groups who have performed on the "Late Show With David Letterman," and who use the dance to raise money to pay for such all-American activities as softball, hockey and football leagues.

"The lion dance, it preserves the cultural aspect of our background," said Brian Tom, 40, whose mother started one group, called the Chinatown Community Young Lions. "It also pays the bills."

On the other side are staunch traditionalists who feel the lion dance is a cultural heritage to be preserved. Chief among them are many of the shopkeepers whose cash rewards each year fuel the rivalry. Depending on the performance and the lion group's status in the community, shop owners say they may give a group \$ 5 to \$ 500.

"At Chinese New Year, they come out in droves. You never see them again," Don Lee, a local community board member and traditionally trained lion dancer, said of the new generation. "To them, it's a fundraiser. But where is the discipline?"

Chinese lore says that a lion-like monster came out every New Year to prey on the Chinese people. To avoid their being eaten alive, God instructed the Chinese to hang potion-laced lettuce heads above their front doors to lure in the monster.

Some groups say that as the lion munched on the lettuce, the Chinese surprised it with gongs, drums and firecrackers to drive it away. Other groups say the firecrackers put the lion to sleep.

The contemporary dance may tell the story of the lion awakening, an ancient Buddha taunting a sleeping lion or a lion passing through an obstacle course of feats. Through all of these variations, most lion groups agree that the lion wards off evil spirits and searches through the bed of lettuce for a red envelope of cash.

For students such as Eric Lau, learning the lion dance means studying the ancient martial arts of their male ancestors. Lean and glinting with a mouth of braces, Lau, who is 14, commutes from Staten Island to Chinatown to rehearse at the Wan Chi Ming Hung Gar School.

He takes the same martial arts classes his father had taken, rehearsing on slender stilts and donning a 30-pound, lemon-colored lion's head. For the nearly four-hour rehearsals, cymbals clash, his special kung fu master barks in Chinese and Lau shakily perches on his troupe-mate's shoulders. But he strives to perfect every flapping eye and gaping mouth.

"I've always wanted to do this," he said.

It's that compliance with the past that Chinatown's traditional dancers often cherish.

Paul J.Q. Lee, a former Wan Chi Ming Hung Gar School student and manager of his family's 111-year-old Mott Street General Store, reminisces about how his kung fu club required months of martial arts classes taught in Chinese before his special master deemed him prepared to learn the lion dance.

From his dusty shop shelves, Lee pulls out albums filled with photographs of lion dancers in traditional garb, and describes how his father used to serve tea each lunar New Year to the liveliest performers.

"A lion dancer never had no do-rags. Also, a lion dancer never wore

sneakers," he said. "There is a very, very deep tradition, and these kids barely touch the surface."

When a lion dance group appears at his shop, Lee tests the members' knowledge of tradition by not coming out of his shop to greet them. He says newer groups rarely notice the slight and, instead of waiting for his greeting, dance into his shop unbidden.

For the traditionally trained martial arts groups, Lee sets up a series of rice bowls for the lion to walk over, a succession of three dozen tangerines to devour or a live carp swimming in a tank for the lion to swallow. Over the years, groups are getting more and more lax at following those old traditions, he said.

Still, for other groups it's more important to make the lion dance accessible to a Western audience. The Young Lions, started 31 years ago as an alternative to Chinatown's older groups, offer classes in English and welcome Westerners and women. The Young Lions also have updated the dance with faster rhythms.

The group has trained more than 2,000 students who have danced for mayors, marched through the United Nations and appeared on David Letterman's show. The Young Lions use money raised from performances to help pay for traditionally American sports leagues.

Some shop owners who dole out these red envelopes find themselves caught between these competing currents of respecting tradition and balancing their books. Many shops close on the Lunar New Year to avoid the cost of choosing between, and paying, lion dancers. Other owners, such as Lena Yu, who runs J and J Toys, will assemble 35 to 40 envelopes on Saturday and give more than one to the better troupes.

"Some of the newer groups, they dance a little sloppier. They don't dance to the beat," she said. But she doesn't turn down their visits.

"That means you refuse good luck," she said. "That's not polite. I never do that."