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Anthropology 101  
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The art and culture of the Chinese lion dance, as seen through the eyes and experiences of a “Young Lion”. In this report, I will document the art and culture of the Chinese lion dance practiced and performed by members of the Chinatown Community Young Lions in the event of a wedding celebration. The lion dance is a significant tradition throughout China; typically the dance is performed during such festivities like Chinese New Year, the openings of restaurants and weddings. The lion dance is believed to bring luck and happiness.

The lion dance rituals are dated back into the Han Dynasty (205 B.C. to 220 A.D in China) and during the Tang Dynasty (716-907 A.D.) it was at its zenith in tradition and popularity; it is chiefly performed during religious festivals. The lion dance is a ritual not only in China, but also in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The dances are not exactly the same in these countries in terms of style and costumes, but the symbolism is quite similar. The Legend of the lion dance begins with Nian the monster.



Nian in Chinese simply means 'year'. However, it is widely acknowledged that the origin of this word comes from the mythical monster that would come and terrorize humans around the time of the Chinese New Year. Indeed, so fierce was Nian that it threatened to destroy humankind. Legend has it that the fear filled the Chinese Emperor so much that he summoned the wisest man in China to solve the

problem of Nian. Seeing at first hand the destruction that Nian brought to the villagers of China, the wise man carefully approached Nian with a challenge. *"Why do you choose to kill and destroy the humans who are no match for your strength?" he asked. "Prove your real power by destroying the other monsters of the earth."* The wise man hoping that Nian would be destroyed by the other “monsters” of the world and thus free the villagers from his destruction. But Nian being ferocious as ever took up the wise mans challenge and one year later, having destroyed all the monsters of the earth, returned to terrorize the humanity of the villagers once again. However, the day he returned, some children were playing with firecrackers, and they noticed that Nian was afraid of the noise. According to the legend on the following Chinese New Year all the villagers started playing with firecrackers and other fireworks which scared Nian away into the mountains never to be seen again. To celebrate Chinese New Years Chinese people use to play with fire works but due to former mayor Giuliani and his incredulous views on Chinatown, firecrackers are now banned from use in New York City. Today the lion dance, is sometimes referred to as the lost martial art. Quite often people observing the lion dances think that they are looking at dragons. The main difference between the lion dance and the dragon dance is that the latter is performed with more people than two people.



The Chinatown Community Young Lions are a well-established organization located in the heart of New York City's Chinatown. The organization, which has been in existence for over 30 years, was founded in order to generate a cultural program for Chinatown's youth. The Chinatown Community Young Lions are a nonprofit organization that receives funding solely on donations alone. Chinatown Community Young Lions have three locations one on 19 Mott Street, which is the main building for Chinese New Years, another on 70 Mulberry Street where the classes are conducted and equipment is held, and the third location is at 175 Canal Street their main office where all financial transactions are made. All of these locations are centrally located in New York's Chinatown, which gives The Chinatown Community Young Lions a great push forward in attracting Chinese or Asian youths, other ethnicities are not excluded. The Chinatown Community Young Lions Inc. has performed for a variety of events during the past 30 years. Throughout the years, the Chinatown Community Young Lions have performed for New York Knicks half-time show, for former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, the late Cardinal O'Connor, the David Letterman show, and various nightclubs such as Exit and The Roxy. Through the art of the lion dance the Chinatown Community Young Lions have created an organization of up to 250 plus active members. Being apart of the Chinatown Community Young Lions Inc. for a good portion of my life has brought me closer to my community and to my culture; this is why I have chosen to do this as my "Anthropology" ritual.

The ritual usually takes place in a restaurant during the wedding banquets. This does not necessarily mean a Chinese or Asian restaurant. The first thing that we do before the ritual even commences is analyze the restaurant; we look at how the tables and chairs are construed, and where the main dance floor is located. After the analyzing is over which takes less than five minutes we then set up outside of the restaurant, the reason we do this is because most of the time we are a surprise. Not all

Chinese weddings have this ritual and throughout the years, various other ethnicities have been requesting this ritual for their wedding. The lion dance ritual usually takes around 20 minutes depending on the dimension of the restaurant. When we finish setting up outside we wait for an announcement and with the start of the drums, the two dancers enact the art of the lion dance. One handles the head of the lion, made out of strong but light materials like paper-mache and bamboo. The other person plays the body other wise known as the tail, which is a strong cloth attached to the lion's head each lion head costs around \$500 to \$2000. There are four musicians needed and sometimes more used as substitutes if anyone starts to show fatigue. The main musician is the drummer, the one playing the large drum the other two play the cymbals, and one person plays the gong. All of the musicians accompany the lion or lions sometimes there are more than one, as it enters the restaurant. A Little Buddha teases the lions with a fan or a giant ball in fact what they really do is guide the lion so not to break anything or go the wrong way. The head dancer can move the lion's eyes, mouth, and ears for expression of moods. Every kind of move has a specific musical rhythm. The music follows the moves of the lion: the drum follows the lion; the cymbals and the gong follow the playing of the drum. The lion dance is believed to bring good fortune to all who honor the lion, by dancing the lion chases away any evil spirits which may bring bad luck through-out the year. The dramatic climax of the Lion Dance is the Choi Cheng or "Picking the Green". The green here refers to vegetable leaves usually a head of lettuce, which is then tied to a piece of string and hung up high. There is also a red envelope or li-cee attached to the string containing money. The money is for good luck. The string is usually hanging in front of the bride and groom or sometimes the bride and groom hold out the lettuce for the lion to eat. The lettuce is then "chewed" by the lion while the musicians play a dramatic rolling crescendo. The lull is broken as the lion explodes back into activity while spitting out the leaves of the lettuce. This is a symbolic act of blessing by the lion,

with the spitting out of the lettuce leaves signifying that there will be an abundance of everything good in the coming year for the bride and groom and their family.

The members of the organization who participated in the ritual are mostly Chinese ABCs (American born Chinese), they range from 9 years old to 35 years old. There can be anywhere from 12 to 25 performers depending on the size of the restaurant and the requested length of the performance. When speaking with some of the older members who have been in the organization since the beginning, I asked them how they feel about performing this ritual. The consensus is that they feel it brings them closer to their roots, being an American born Chinese kid growing up in New York City's Chinatown the lion dance ritual symbolizes youth and simply put fun. Amongst the members within the organization whenever anyone gets married, the club performs at their wedding as a gift. My participation, in the ritual is usually drumming and the lion dance. I perform the ritual because it is something that I can do for my culture and it is a lot of fun.