

PHOTO
FEATURE



Lion Dance Roars on

by Joyce Lee, Lotus Lau and Yvonne Yeung



In a stadium filled with the sound of clashing cymbals and beating drums, an energetic little boy in an oversized martial arts T-shirt runs forward. Pretending to hold a lion dance costume above his head, he looks up with an innocent smile.

"Daddy, I'll be the lion head and you'll be the lion tail," beaming three-year-old Savio Chan Sze-lok, tells his father. Unlike other children who might be scared of the deafening sounds, Savio is comfortable talking even when the loud lion dance music is being played right next to him.

The boy's father, 36-year-old Vincent Chan Hing-tung, who is the second-generation chairman of the Chan Sun Fat Martial Art Association of Faction of Seven Star Mantis, says that learning lion dance increases ones' confidence. Children who learn to lion dance are more disciplined and cooperative. This is one of the main reasons why Vincent Chan allowed his son to learn it as soon as he had learnt to walk. He has himself been practicing the lion dance since he was six.

The boy's grandfather, 68-year-old Chan Sun-fat is also in the stadium watching his team compete in this international lion dance competition. He is content to see his son and grandson following in his footsteps. "I am really happy because I feel like I have achieved my lifelong dream of carrying this tradition from one generation to another," says the elder Chan.

He hopes that one day his grandson will inherit his martial art association as did Vincent before him.

The way the lion dance is taught has been changing over the years. Vincent Chan has been teaching lion dance since he was 21. He says that, in the past, learners were not allowed to pick up the lion head until they had mastered all basic martial art skills. This takes at least a year of training. But today, it is impossible to ask an adolescent to train for a year before he is permitted to handle the lion costume.

Chan admits that nowadays most students' interest in the sport is short

lived. At the end of the day, only a few have the passion and determination to stay with it. "If you ask him to squat (as if he is sitting on an invisible chair) for an hour in the first lesson, he will definitely never come back again," says Chan.

"It's a different generation. When I was small, we didn't have much entertainment so I put my heart in lion dance. Nowadays the kids have TV and internet. They have many other choices."

Nonetheless, some students do persist and a few go on to win many competitions and become masters.

Chan adds that lion dance builds up young people's confidence and teaches them discipline. It can help to keep them out of trouble. "Some kids are not good at studying and hate school. In lion dance, they regain confidence and get a purpose in life. They start to look forward to going to school."



According to some traditions, the Southern style of the lion dance originated in the early Qing dynasty when a group of nationalists wanted to overthrow the Manchu Qing and reinstate the Han Ming dynasty.

Since the nationalists were not allowed to mention revolution in public, they organized lion dance dramas that featured stories of historical figures in the Three Kingdoms period, such as Liu Bi, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, so as to highlight the importance of righteousness and justice. Symbols and metaphors can still be found in the lion dance today.

"To laymen, lion dance appears to be lion dance merely. But it actually presents various Chinese historical stories, and every single detail inside the performance has a deep connotation," says Keung Wai-chung, the chief director of Keung Wai Chung Dragon and Lion Dance Team.

Keung, 46, says he has been exposed to lion dance ever since he was born. Over the years he has worked with the dance form, he has witnessed the highs and lows in the development of the lion dance.

It has not been plain sailing. From the 1950s to 1960s, the lion dance was widely associated with triads and gangsters. With the help of government promotional support, the public's perception is changing over time, but the stereotype still lingers in many people's minds.

"It is a pity that an ill-educated generation of people took over the development of lion dance," says Keung. "And that's exactly why we now need to work extra hard to get rid of this notorious stereotype."





In order to achieve this goal, Keung and his team tried to introduce bold reforms to enhance the entertainment element of the lion dance. For instance, they organised an unprecedented cross-over project with hip-hop dancers and musicians in 2003.

The different parties spent half a year together remixing a song that blends hip-hop music into a lion dance song. The two styles were harmonised and the hip-hop dance synchronised with the "lions", creating a fresh image.

Even though some lion dance masters are unhappy with the reforms and criticised Keung for violating the tradition, his determination is strong. He believes this is the right way to attract more people to the lion dance.

Keung believes that as long as they keep the core values of the lion dance, it is not a violation, but a modernisation. While his modification of the dance is bold, he insists that however it is transformed, the base must always be Chinese tradition. The stories and characters in the lion dance have to come from the classics.

"We aim to do better than the tradition, without losing the tradition," Keung says. For this advocate of modernisation, the crux of the challenge is to strike a balance between tradition and innovation, "for innovation today is tradition tomorrow." ▽