The Lion's Roar in Taiwan

Genealogy of a Traditional Dance

By Tsun-Hui Hung

The colorfully dynamic spectacle of the Lion Dance is now a seemingly requisite part of celebratory events in Chinese communities around the world. Documentary evidence for the performance of dances featuring lions can be traced back over a thousand years. But since lions have never been a part of China's natural environment, how did they come to be such iconic inhabitants of the Chinese cultural landscape? In this article, I will focus on changes and developments in the Lion Dance in response to social and political conditions in Taiwan during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Due to Taiwan's political separation from mainland China, the style and practice of the Lion Dance in Taiwan has diverged from its original Chinese form.

Immigrants from mainland China began arriving in significant numbers in Taiwan in the seventeenth century, and the island was governed by Japan in the early twentieth century. In 1949, Taiwan was established as the seat of the Chinese Nationalist Party, or the Kuomintang (KMT), after the Chinese Civil War ended, and with rapid economic growth began to be affected by globalization in the 1980s. Like many traditional arts, the Lion Dance faces the impacts of globalization and replacement by foreign traditions, such as ballet or opera. These ongoing challenges have dramatically influenced the socioeconomic status of dancers, their performing styles, music selections, and the social function of the Lion Dance.

Origins of the Lion Dance

Lions were first introduced to China during the Han Dynasty (221–207 CE), when China was already one of the world's great premodern empires. As a means of staying on good terms with the Chinese imperial court, major and minor Asian states entered into tributary relations with China, sending gifts to the court—including unusual or highly prized animals and plants.

Lions were apparently brought as tributary gifts from west Asia via the Silk Roads. The Chinese first thought of the lion as a ferocious wild animal; however, during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), the lion's image changed as Buddhist paintings, figurines, and texts began to be transmitted into China. Among these were objects and illustrations depicting Manjusri, the *bodhisattva* most closely associated with transcendent wisdom in Mahayana Buddhism, riding on a lion. Through these images, the lion came to be understood as an icon of celestial power—even a deity in some ways—that was intimately associated with religious veneration.[1]

By the early Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), the image of the lion and its association with power and wisdom were so well-established that dance performances using lion costumes became part of imperial court ceremony and entertainment. The first documentation of its performance at court is found in the *Old Book of Tang, Chapter of Music* published in the early eleventh century:

> *Taiping Yue was developed by Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou (543–578 CE). It is also called the "Lion Dance of five positions." This dance imitates the movements of lions and birds from Tianzhu (modern-day India). Two dancers are covered by a lion costume that is attached to their feet by strings. Dancing, they look like a tame dog having fun, with the two dancers moving as one lion. Five lions stand in five different locations, performing with a choir of one hundred and forty people. The music is called Taiping Yue. The choir members are dressed to look like people from Kunlun [the area of modern-day Tibet].*[2]

Due to the popularity of Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty, the Lion Dance began to appear in *yanyue* (court banquet performances). Yanyue were performed in informal settings, often touched on religious themes, and also often included foreign stories.

After its origins during the Tang Dynasty, the Lion Dance underwent considerable evolution. By the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), it had become a popular element in many classical and folk traditions. Eventually, it spread throughout the Chinese cultural sphere, including parts of East Asia, such as present-day Korea, Việt Nam, and Taiwan. As with many other Chinese folklore traditions, several genres of the Lion Dance developed based on different performance practices and regional variations; Northern Lion and Southern Lion were the two most popular genres.

The Lion Dance in Taiwan

The *Hoklo* communities from southern Fujian Province, who were part of the Qing (1644–1911) immigration from the mainland to Taiwan, may not have brought or sustained Lion Dance practices during the beginning phases of their immigration. However, to protect themselves from Taiwan's original, non-Chinese inhabitants, or from competing immigrant Chinese clans, a tradition of martial arts training developed. This training apparently included the use of shields emblazoned with a lion totem, reflecting the Chinese association of the lion with physical agility and power. It is not clear to what extent the use of lion totems was married to the Lion Dance form. But even as late as the beginning of the twentieth century, the Lion Dance in Taiwan featured the use of a *rattan*, translated as lion "shield" rather than a lion "head" (Figure 1).

The first documented Lion Dance group in Taiwan—the *Dalongdong* Golden Lion Dance Troupe—has more than 200 years of history.

Figure 1: Dalongdong Golden Lion. Source: Provided by the Dalongdong Temple.

All performances belong to the genre of *Tin-thau* (Mandarin: *Zhentou*), a performance group that encompasses many martial arts performances.

Figure 2: Tin-thau performed during the festival of FaZhu (a Daoist god), year unknown.
Source: Provided by the Dalongdong Temple.

The first documented Lion Dance group in Taiwan—the *Dalongdong* Golden Lion Dance Troupe—has more than 200 years of history. Dalongdong is a Daoist-Buddhist temple originally built in 1742 in Taipei. The area around this temple is the site of one of the first neighborhoods where Han Chinese immigrants settled during the Qing Dynasty. Because they were newcomers, military and self-defense skills were a necessity. Besides routine practices to keep up basic physical fitness, men would perform martial arts during Daoist or Buddhist festivals to show off their military prowess to their own clan members, as well as to any actual or potential enemies who might be present.

Gradually, the Lion Dance became part of temple festival performances everywhere in Taiwan, and the performances were often dedicated as a ritual of thanksgiving to the gods and ancestors.[3]

Development and Practice

In addition to the Lion Dance, there are other types of performance such as the Dragon Dance at temple festivals. Although similar in form to the Lion Dance, the costume used in the Dragon Dance has an elongated shape and more performers are required to animate it. All performances belong to the genre of *Tin-thau* (Mandarin: *Zhentou*), a performance group that encompasses many martial arts performances. Tin-thau plays an important role in festivals, and almost every wealthy temple maintains a Tin-thau. The temple's reason for having a Tin-thau is similar to a village's reason for supporting lion dancers. However, instead of demonstrating military force as in earlier times, Tin-thau now is a demonstration of village wealth (Figure 2).

In Tin-thau, the Lion Dance was performed mainly at festivals, including weddings, deities' birthdays, and—in rare cases—funerals. When a Lion Dance master passed away, his students performed the Lion Dance in his honor at his funeral. Traditionally, students learned the Lion Dance through direct transmission from a master. Once a master accepted a disciple, he mentored him throughout the student's life. Usually they lived together and the students shared in the household work. The relationship that developed was extraordinarily deep, and the students' performance of the Lion Dance at a master's funeral was a final show of respect and appreciation for the master's lifelong teaching.[4] In contemporary times, many people include Lion Dances at funerals, but they do so for quite different reasons. Most people believe that a lively Lion Dance keeps sorrowful thoughts and bad spirits away, thereby facilitating the deceased person's journey to heaven.

Over the course of its history in Taiwan, police and military have assumed the Lion Dance's original martial and protective functions. Nevertheless, the Lion Dance remains an icon of power and a ritual of protection for communities as well as individuals.

Competitions and International Diffusion

Due to political circumstances in the late twentieth century, particularly the Cultural Revolution that shook China from 1966 to 1976, creative forms and new interpretations of the Lion Dance were more prevalent in Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong than in mainland China. In 1995, the International Dragon and Lion Dance Federation (IDLDF) was established in Hong Kong. The organization hosts Dragon and Lion Dance competitions in Southeast and East Asia, and also undertakes the training of dancers, coaches, and referees. Like gymnastics and ice skating, the Lion Dance is not only performed as a type of art or cultural practice; it is also performed or "played" as a competitive sport. Set routines and standardized formats have been developed for competition purposes and are now institutionally regulated.

In 2003, Taiwan established its own chapter, the Chinese Taipei Dragon and Lion Dance Federation (CTDLDF), which works closely with the IDLDF. Taiwan began to train their athletes according to IDLDF regulations, and these performers actively interact with Lion Dance teams from other countries.

In fact, Lion Dance competitions in Taiwan started long before the advent of professional Lion Dance organizations. For example, Lugang, Taiwan's second-largest city in the seventeenth century and a cultural hub for temples and traditional arts, hosted a national folklore competition in 1978. Such competitions have become increasingly popular, but at the same time, controversies have emerged about how to judge performances. Because the Lion Dance was very localized, every city or village had its own style, from the costumes and music to the martial arts movements, and judges often had their own preferences. Most competitions had their own committees, and national standards were not fully developed or enforced.[5]

When the CTDLDF was established in 2003, instead of trying to standardize the performance of every Lion Dance team, the organization helped train and encourage interested teams and athletes to participate in international competitions. The hope was that the Lion Dance could retain its diversity, even as the IDLDF tried to standardize it for competition purposes. The organization offers qualified referees and coaches courses and certifications, and ensures that athletes understand IDLDF rules and techniques for international competitions. The Lion Dance tradition is receving more and more international attention, but fewer and fewer Lion Dance performances take place in temple festivals. CTDLDF hosts many competitions to select the best-qualified athletes for international games, and those competitions have become a more popular setting than temple festivals. Even in international competitions, though, the size of audiences is decreasing. [6]

Lions in Higher Education

The Lion Dance in Taiwan has been affected by larger geopolitical developments. For example, when Taiwan was ceded to Japan, the most Westernized Asian nation of the late nineteenth century, as a result of the 1895 Chinese defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War, the whole education system from elementary grades through higher education was Westernized. Taiwanese students began to learn science, mathematics, Western musical instruments, and baseball; but traditional music, arts, and sports, including

the Lion Dance, were not included in the curriculum. The Lion Dance was considered a folk performance and was not accepted as a proper academic subject. After the Japanese relinquished control of Taiwan in 1945, and the KMT government led by Chiang Kai-shek established political control over the island, the incorporation of traditional arts into the school curriculum was a slow process.[7] It was not until 1991 that Taiwan's Ministry of Education started funding Lion Dance clubs at primary and secondary schools, as well as universities. In 2007, the Chinese Culture University established the first Lion Dance major in the Department of Chinese Martial Arts. Most professors are certified coaches and referees from both IDLDF and CTDLDF.

Unlike local villages and temples, universities provide a series of training activities to prepare students for international competitions. All students in university Lion Dance programs are required to practice routine movements, and martial arts basics and training activities incorporate modern technologies and scientific methodology. For examples, practices are videotaped and analyzed to ensure that every movement is completed properly. Sport scientists help athletes reach maximum efficiency during practice sessions and work with them to complete each of the movements correctly. Professors then undertake an overall assessment of each student's abilities and assign roles to them as they prepare to compete (Figures 3 and 4).

Some students studying in formal academic settings remain in traditional master-student relationships with their professors. Although they no longer live with their masters, students are still expected to show great respect for their teachers. This may include, for example, preparing tea for professors before each class and bowing to professors after classes. Also, university professors commit to taking care of not only their students' academic progress, but attending to their personal lives as well. [8]

In many modern education systems, the study of folk traditions is often one of the last subjects to be included. When institutions of higher education in Taiwan finally began to include the Lion Dance in their course offerings, this cultural practice became legitimized as something more than *just* a folk practice; it became something "worthy" of being studied in a formal educational environment. The presence of the Lion Dance in Taiwanese higher education is a result of the national government's realization that the tradition is vanishing in one of its major geographic locales and that bringing it into the fold of formal education may be one way of saving it.

Conclusion

From warriors to dancers to athletes, the performers of the Lion Dance have witnessed remarkable social changes over the last 200 years. The Lion Dance as a performance was not a new idea in China. As early as pre-Tang Dynasty China, the Lion Dance was already a court performance. Unfortunately, like most court performers in Chinese history, Lion Dance performers always had a low socioeconomic status. Though performing at palaces or temples conferred some prestige, Lion Dancers were never treated as well as calligraphers or scholars, which stunted the Lion Dance's development. Even today, some people still believe that becoming a Lion Dancer is not a good career choice because the athletes are underpaid and still treated as low-status performers.

Before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the IDLDF tried to promote the Lion Dance to become an Olympic sport but was unsuccessful. As the performance of the Lion Dance has decreased in temple festivals, performers continue to seek out new venues to keep the tradition going. When Taiwan's Ministry of Education began supporting the Lion Dance in school and university curricula, athletes became eligible for jobs as coaches in schools and universities. The new titles of "teacher" and "professor" raised

Figure 3: Lion Dance as a stage performance. Source: Provided by Chung-Yu Chen, Professor at National Taiwan University of Sport.

Figure 4: Lion Dance as a stage performance. Source: Provided by Chung-Yu Chen.

their social status. Compared with other folklore arts, such as Taiwanese opera and Chinese crosstalk (traditional comedy), the Lion Dance has a higher status in the contemporary era.

From a local art to an international sport, the Lion Dance has changed rapidly. Traditionally, Lion Dancers performed with live percussionists, and the interaction between percussionists and lions could be the most interesting part of the performance. Now, recordings have been accepted as a substitute for live percussion, and the tension of improvisation has been lost. The Lion Dance in Taiwan was originally designed to demonstrate martial prowess. Although its function as a form of fighting no longer exists, the Lion Dance is still "fighting" to find a position in the modern world. Thanks to local and international competitions, the Lion Dance is still being performed, but keeping its tradition and spirit alive is an ongoing challenge. ■

Sample Lion Dance performances are available in a special eight-minute video developed by the author and the Wei-Chun Lion Dance group at http://tinyurl.com/njoy92r.

NOTES

1. Yin-Bo Liu, *Zhong Guo Gu Dai Za Ji* [Acrobatics in Ancient China] (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1993).
2. Translation from the Old Book of Tang, Chapter of Music published in the early eleventh century
3. Tian-Si Chang, "History of Dalongdong Lion Dance," interview by Tsun-Hui Hung, July 14, 2014.
4. Ying-Tao Wu, *Taiwan MingSu* [Customs in Taiwan] (Taipei: Jong Wen Book Co., Ltd., 1990).
5. Teng-Da Wu, *Taiwan Mingjian Wushi Zhi Yanjiu* [Study of the Lion Dance in Taiwan] (Taipei: Da Li Press, 1984).
6. Jen-Ping Tang, "Lion Dance in Sport," interview by Tsun-hui Hung, July 20, 2014.
7. Zhi-Ting Wong, *Taiwan JiaoYu Shi* [A History of Education in Taiwan] (Taipei: Taiwan Press, 1957).
8. Chung-Yu Chen, "Lion Dance in Universities," interview by Tsun-Hui Hung, July 25, 2014.

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