

Northern Lion Dance



History of Lion Dance

According to experts lion dance originated over 1500 years ago, the lion itself is not native to China. The first one was brought to China as a tribute during the reign of the Emperor Shun (126-145) of the Han dynasty. But China had no zoos, and very few people had actually seen a lion. So how did they go about imitating the lion in their dances? "By looking at the animals around them" Chinese lion dance can be divided into two broad categories:

The Northern style imitates the dog and the Southern the cat. The Northern or Beijing version is short, stocky and furry, much like an oversized Pekinese. It is mainly used by Chinese Circuses & acrobats entertaining audiences with their humor and mannerisms.

There are two styles of Southern lion dance, one style is from Fujian and the other is from Guangdong (Canton). which is also the most popular. The Cantonese lion can be divided into two styles one is Foshan, which is very popular in Hong Kong and most Chinese communities around the World. The other is the Heshan, which is popular in Malaysia, Singapore and with competition teams.

Lion heads are constructed of papier-mache applied over a frame of wicker and rattan, some of the modern heads use aluminum and plastic in their construction. The heads are then painted different colours used to signify different characters, but like women who wear make up so the heads have become more colourful. Here are the colours of the heads and which characters they signify:

Yellow - Liu Bei

Red - Guan Gong

Black - Zhang Fei



Origin of Lion Dance

There are many stories about the origins of lion dance, here are the three most popular stories about the origin of lion dance:

THE LION AND THE NIAN

A long time ago a fierce creature (*Nian) appeared, which terrified the villagers. No one could fight the Nian, so in despair the villagers asked the lion to help. The lion attacked the Nian and injured it, the Nian vowed to take revenge. The Nian did not return this time the lion was unable to help, so the people constructed an imitation lion out of bamboo & cloth. 2 men operated the lion while the rest of the people banged their pots & pans. When the Nian saw the lion and heard the commotion it ran away. The Villagers carried on with this tradition every year to scare away evil.

*Nian in Chinese sounds like Year.

THE LION BREAKS THE ELEPHANT FORMATION

During the Sung Dynasty (420-479), the General Zhong Yue led an army south to quell the country of Lin Yi, located somewhere around Laos & Burma. The King of the Country used an "elephant formation" to stop the army's advance. But the general had an idea, having heard that all beasts submit to the lion. He ordered his subordinates to construct imitation lions and put them on the front line. As soon as the elephants saw them they scattered and Lin Yi submitted to the Sung.

THE LION SAVES AN EMPEROR

Legend has it that the Emperor had a dream one night in which he became separated from his army and lost, with no food or drink he began to panic. He then saw a strange looking animal that protected him and guided him back to the palace. The next morning, the Emperor described the dream to his ministers. One minister told the Emperor that the strange animal resembled a creature from the West, the Lion.