teacher resource guide assembly series

nai-ni chen dance company

red firecrackers: the legend of the first chinese new year
about the performance

The Legend of the First Chinese New Year

People all over the world, from New York City to Manila, celebrate the Chinese ( Lunar) New Year with parades, special food, decorations, gifts of money stuffed in red envelopes, and cleaning one’s home from top to bottom!

How did the first Chinese New Year come about? There is an oft-told legend that a beast named Nian would come from its hiding place, either from the sea or under the mountains, and would eat everything. It was hungry! Around every time of the Chinese New Year, Nian would come out, scare villagers, and eat crops and then unlucky children. The villagers were in despair as to what to do. They did not want to lose any more children and their food. An old man suddenly appeared one year and told them he would help them seek revenge on Nian. The villagers thought this was impossible and crazy when he told them his plans. But they agreed to see what would happen. After the villagers went into hiding, the old man put red paper decorations all over the village and set off noisy red firecrackers. The villagers came back the next day and saw that their homes were fine and nobody was eaten. The old man must have been a deity or a benevolent spirit, they thought. The mysterious old man never came back, but the villagers learned a few tricks from him to keep away Nian. Every Chinese New Year, the villagers would set off firecrackers to scare away the beast and decorate their homes with red lanterns and wear red clothes. Nian was not just scared of the noise but it was also scared of the color red. During the New Year, villagers also performed the Lion Dance while wearing a stylized lion head during parades and festivities. This was also a way to keep away Nian. Ever since the first Chinese New Year, Nian has not been seen!

Why is the Lunar New Year important in Chinese culture?

The Lunar New Year Celebration in China is also called the Spring Festival. It is a celebration at the end of the winter to welcome the coming of the new spring season. It is also a time for family reunion. Many of the family members may be far apart from each other. For this important festival they travel a long distance to come together to their hometown or to their grandparents’ house. It is like Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Year all together in one holiday.

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Choreographer Nai-Ni Chen draws from a rich dance tradition that began in her homeland Taiwan. Her dance career started at age 17 when she served an ambassadressial culture missions to nineteen countries as a renowned traditional dancer. Her modern dance training began in 1976 when she performed as the youngest principal member of the Cloud Gate Dance Theater in Taiwan. After graduating from the Chinese Cultural University in 1982 (all the while maintaining her professional dance career), Nai-Ni Chen moved to America to explore her own voice in the dance world. In New York, she continued her studies with renowned modern dancers and received her Master’s degree from NYU. After performing in Broadway musicals like The King and I and Tony Award® winning play M’Butterfly, she began setting choreography on a small group of dancers, eventually founding the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in 1988. Nai-Ni Chen’s unique approach to choreography merges traditional and contemporary styles and aims to “fuse the dynamic freedom of the American spirit with the grace and splendor of the Asian soul.” The New York Times has called the company’s dancers “endlessly proliferating forces of cosmic energy.”

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Choreographer Nai-Ni Chen brings American artists of Asian heritage together on stage to perform to traditional Chinese music and dance. Her programming is a celebration of cross-cultural collaboration.

What are the main themes behind the performance?

To tell the story about Chinese New Year which involves a monster called Nian and how the villagers use their wisdom and courage to fight against this monster. Some Chinese traditions, such as burning the firecrackers and wearing red color clothing and decorations during Chinese New Year, were passed down for generations and are told in this production. The audience learns about the origin of Chinese New Year by watching a fun and exciting dance drama. As mentioned, each dance in the production has a theme. The first is Peach Flower Dance, followed by Dance In The Rice Field, then the struggle with the Nian is depicted through martial art dances. Finally, we show the joy and celebration of the victory using the color red and firecrackers.

How have people responded to the performance?

Teachers and students really enjoy learning about the Chinese New Year customs through this popular folk tale that resonates with them on many different levels. We hope that through this production, the audience not only learns about the story behind Chinese New Year in a fun way, but also related some of the key points such as unity, family, courage, and friendship that are expressed in this program, to their own lives. We surely hope that the audience will remember how to celebrate Chinese New Year, and the reason families and communities need to come and celebrate together.

Has there been a resurgence of interest in Chinese culture, especially with the rise of China as an economic and cultural powerhouse? Or has the interest always been there?

As China’s economy grows and becomes one of the largest economies in the world, there was a growing interest to study Chinese culture. There was a strong interest in the past, but there is definitely more today than before.

What's the significance of firecrackers in Chinese culture?

Firecrackers are used during ancient rituals to expel evil spirits. The loud sound of the firecracker is like thunder which precedes rain. And rain is good for the harvest. So, the firecracker is used extensively in the celebration of the Spring Festival or the Lunar New Year Festival. The loud sound of the firecracker is also the Chinese people’s prayer for rain and for an abundant harvest. 12am on the Lunar New Year Day is the time that every family lights up their firecrackers, which makes the sky so bright on a dark night. And the loud sound chases away the evil and welcomes a new year ahead of them.

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Is the story told in your performance based on an ancient folk tale or a story that you created, drawing from different sources? What’s the inspiration behind the performance?

Red Firecrackers: The Legend of the First Chinese New Year is an ancient folk tale. To tell the story, I had to create a series of dances that portray the emotion and feeling of each scene. There are characters created in the program. Spoken words are used to connect the dance scenes. A story line is built in to the program to tell the origin of Chinese New Year celebration. For instance, the first dance—the Peach Flower Dance—shows the peacefulness of the ancient agricultural village. Later, you see the Peach Flower Dance, which shows the determination and courage of the villagers to fight against the monster. And the end scene is a celebration of dances with colorful ribbons with lots of red color which is a costume passed down for generations.
**Inspired Ideas in the Classroom**

### Prepare for the Performance
- Have the students become acquainted with some aspects of the Chinese culture. Locate China on the globe.
- Expose them to Chinese music and dances, especially The Lion Dance [https://youtu.be/guwPTBmUn8L] (3:01 minutes) and The Ribbon or Red Silk Dance [https://youtu.be/MxMDzQq (6:29 minutes)]
- Share with them books about the Chinese New Year and its traditions.
- Read together the legend of Nian and/or show them videos of it: [https://youtu.be/guwPTBmUn8L](3:01 minutes)
- Have the students act out the story.
- Discuss Chinese inventions including silk, fireworks, and fireworks.

### Experience the Performance
- Explain to students that dance is a language that expresses ideas and emotions without words but with movements and gestures and with resources such as props, music, costumes, and sets.
- In addition, point out that some dances tell stories, so the students have characters that go through a sequence of events.
- With younger students the teacher can coordinate and combine the ideas given by the students in a whole group dance.
- Divide the class in trios. Each trio will choose 3 needs from the web to collaboratively create movements to represent those needs.
- With younger students the teacher can coordinate and combine the ideas given by the students in a whole group dance.

### Reflect, Respond and Read
- As a class, identify the main theme of the legend: all working together as a team to overcome an obstacle and to gain peace.
- Introduce and define tradition.
- Explain that many cultural dances were inspired by the belief that they could help the community satisfy its needs and provide happiness. A community works as a team to keep the traditions that make the Chinese culture, the lunar New Year traditions, and the legend of Nian.
- Have students consider how the purpose of the dances may have changed over time.

### Focus
- Make sure your body is present and dancing while moving the ribbons.
- Find a safe space to explore the idea looking for different ways to move with the ribbons making designs in the air varying the size of the movement, using levels in space, and in place and traveling actions. Get ideas from the designs you drew in Activity #1.
- In your trio, work together to express the 3 needs in movement with your ribbons. Include a variety of actions in place and traveling, levels, sizes of movements, and qualities.
- Make a “dance board” with pictures that represent those moves. You can add notes.
- Add a beginning and an ending group shape (statue) that may be ones you saw in the performance.

### Originate
- Just like The Lion Dance and The Ribbon Dance are believed to help the Chinese people meet their basic needs, we are going to create dances that we believe that will help our needs be satisfied.
- Lead a brainstorm session on “What do you need to be happy?” and make a web or have students draw and write about 3 things they need to be happy and give the reasons why.
- Direct students to make a ribbon wand by attaching a yard-long piece of ribbon or a piece of crepe paper to a pencil using a rubber band, tape, or glue.
- Divide the class in trios. Each trio will choose 3 needs from the web to collaboratively create movements to represent those needs.
- With younger students the teacher can coordinate and combine the ideas given by the students in a whole group dance.

### Rehearse
- Have students practice their dances trying to eventually leave the dance board behind.
- Play Chinese music.

### Make Magic
- Organize a performance event in which all dances are shared.
- Create a performance space that includes the performers’ area and the audience area.
- Create a performance space that includes the performers’ area and the audience area.
- Now you are going to take turns performing your dances in your teams of 3 and watching them. Tell the audience the needs that your dance is based on.
- Present them with enthusiasm, confidence, and pride. You are going to be a respectful, active, thoughtful, audience.
- The best audience will perform next. This is the group that is attentive and shares a reaction about the dances seen.

### Student Activity
- What do you know about China or about Chinese people?
- Knowing the performance you will attend at NJPAC will be about the legend of Nian, what can you predict you are going to see in it?
- How can you act out the Nian story? Who are the characters? How can you show the problem?
- How do you show the solution?
- Write a response to the videos in the form of an opinion piece about 1 of the 2 videos, stating the topic, the opinion, the reason for it, and a conclusion.

### NJ Student Learning Standards
- English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL2.
- English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL1.
- Social Studies 6.P.D.4
- NJ Arts Standards 1.1 The Creative Process 1.2 History of Arts & Culture
- English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL2.
- English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL1.
- Social Studies 6.P.D.4
- NJ Arts Standards 1.1 The Creative Process 1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique
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- English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL2.
This performance introduces students to the elegance and beauty of Chinese culture. Through the language of movement, the dancers reveal the richness of China’s long history and complex heritage.

China is one of the oldest and continuous cultures in the world, with over 5,000 years of recorded history. In the program, students will see the skill and excitement of Chinese acrobatics, and dances that meld both traditional and Chinese dance as well as original modern dance reflecting the cross-cultural experience of the choreographer Nai-Ni Chen.

Traditional Chinese dance can be divided into two broad categories: Court Dance and Folk Dance.

Court dances date back to the Qin Dynasty (220 B.C.) and were performed in the palace of the emperor. The court dance reached its height of sophistication in the Tang dynasty and was depicted in the poetry, paintings and sculpture of that period. There are two kinds of court dances: those based on the Chinese warrior exercises such as martial art fighting forms and those based on the Confucian etiquette and ritual codes.

Today, aspects of these ancient court dances can still be seen in traditional Peking Opera and ancestral ritual ceremonies in Confucian temples. Folk dances in China vary from region to region and include dances from over 50 distinct indigenous ethnic groups within China.

A Chinese dancer today is expected to study the classical court dances embedded within the Peking Opera movement style as well as numerous forms of folk dance. The Chinese dancer must begin training at a very young age and is required to study martial arts, acrobatics and stylized theatrical movements on a daily basis. Dance technique typically includes work with such props as handkerchiefs, ribbons, ritual weapons and fans.

The most obvious difference between Chinese and Western dance styles is the emphasis on shape. Typically, in both court dance and folk dance forms, the movement are often spirals and circles because the Chinese often use circles to symbolize harmony. Western dance forms such as ballet and modern dance tend toward linear and elongated movements.

Furthermore, the complex hand and finger gestures as well as hand-eye coordination found in Chinese dance is mostly absent from the traditional Western forms.

In all of Nai-Ni Chen’s work, three important elements of Chinese art are present: Jin (Concentration), Chi (Flow of Energy) and Shen (Spirit). These aesthetic values are distilled from the major philosophies (Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism), which constitute the cultural values of the Chinese civilization.

Some Characteristics of the Chinese Dance Form
- Emphasis on Hand and Eye coordination
- Use of circular patterns in space with every part of the body
- Extensive use of props
- Stylized steps and gestures
- Unique emphasis on movement accents in relation to the music
Acrobatics
The performance of extreme gymnastic feats, such as walking on a tightrope or swinging on a trapeze. Acrobatics require excellent balance, agility, and coordination. In China, this ancient art form traces its roots to the Xia Dynasty 4,000 years ago.

BCE
“Before Common Era,” meaning any date prior to the year 1 CE (Common Era). BC (Before Christ) means the same thing as BCE. AD (Anno Domini, which is Latin for “in the year of the Lord”) means the same as CE.

Buddhist
Someone who practices Buddhism, a nontheistic religion (a religion that does not believe in a creator or god) or philosophy largely based on teachings attributed to Gautama Buddha, commonly known as the Buddha (“the awakened one”).

Characteristics
Features or qualities that typically belongs to a person, place, or thing and serves to identify it.

Choreography
The art or practice of designing combinations and sequences of movements of physical bodies. The person who creates the steps, combinations and patterns of a ballet or dance is called the choreographer.

Erhu
A traditional Chinese two-stringed violin or fiddle, played with a bow. The erhu dates from the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD).

Immigrant
A person who migrates from one country to another, usually for permanent residence.

Pipa (pronounced “pee-paa”)
A four-stringed lute, somewhat like a guitar. With over 2000 years of history, the pipa is one of the oldest Chinese musical instruments.

Repertoire
A stock selection of plays, dances or pieces that a company or performer knows or is prepared to perform.

Taoist
Someone who follows the philosophical Chinese tradition of Taoism. This philosophy emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao which means the “way,” “path” or “principle.” The Tao Te Ching is a book that contains the basic teachings Lao Tzu, whose writings are considered the keystone of this philosophy.

Websites
Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Official Website
www.nanichen.org/index.php
Spotlight on Nai-Ni Chen: Not Alone: A Modern Dance Performance at Aljira
aljirablog.tumblr.com/post/100252679993
Chinese New Year
www.history.com/topics/holidays/chinese-new-year
10 Interesting Facts about Chinese New Year
Chinese Immigrants in the United States
www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states
10 Disappearing Chinese New Year Traditions
Chinese New Year Food
www.foodandwine.com/chinese-new-year
Celebrating on Chinese New Year’s Day
www.thoughtco.com/chinese-new-years-day-687469

Books
Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company – Red Firecrackers: The Legend of the First Chinese New Year
In-School Residencies: Drama + Social Studies. Dance + Math. It all adds up in NJPAC's In-School Residencies in which professional teaching artists partner with educators to bring the arts into the classroom. Each 7- to 10-week program culminates in a student performance or an interactive family workshop. All programs address state and national standards. NJPAC is the regional provider in New Jersey for international arts programs like the NJ Wolf Trap Program and Dancing Classrooms Global.

Assemblies: NJPAC presents engaging school assembly programs that are presented by professional artists that invite students into the enchanting world of live performance. NJPAC's assembly series promotes cultural awareness and invigorates learning by presenting works that are connected to your school's curriculum.

Professional Development: NJPAC Professional Development engages classroom teachers, arts specialists and teaching artists as integrated teams that combine arts pedagogy, content, classroom management and social behavioral strategies to ignite and inspire arts-rich classrooms. Working as a team empowers teachers to share practice and strategy. Our goal is to inspire artistic and intellectual capacities in students, building competence and confidence in both students and teachers.

Saturday Programs: NJPAC's Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level—from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in film, contemporary modern dance, hip hop, jazz, musical theater and symphonic band.

Summer Programs: Want to begin to explore the arts? Or immerse yourself in the study of one genre? Then join us at NJPAC next summer in one of seven programs that spark the creativity in every child through the study of music, dance and theater.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call our education sales team at 973.353.7058 or email artseducation@njpac.org. Visit www.njpac.org/education