

njpac
arts
education

**schooltime
performance
series**



nai-ni chen

year of the horse

teacher resource guide

about the performance

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's signature Lunar New Year productions celebrate the holiday with vibrant cross-cultural artistry, blending centuries-old Chinese traditions with contemporary dance. Performances feature flying dragons, leaping lions, dazzling acrobatics, colorful silk costumes and live music on traditional instruments such as the erhu and gong, creating a sensory-rich experience for all ages. The choreography combines athleticism and grace, drawing inspiration from martial arts, Chinese opera and symbolic movement patterns rooted in Taoist and Buddhist philosophy.

Each program evokes cultural legends and seasonal spirit — such as the wisdom of the Snake or the luck of the Dragon — through immersive storytelling and festive pageantry. Mythical figures, zodiac animals and natural elements like fire and wind come alive on stage, offering audiences a deeper appreciation of Chinese cosmology and folklore.

This year's celebration honors the zodiac Horse, symbolizing freedom, speed and endurance. Dances inspired by horseback traditions, especially from Inner Mongolia, capture the Horse's dynamic spirit through sweeping movements, driving rhythms and symbolic design. Blending tradition with innovation, Nai-Ni Chen's productions honor heritage while radiating modern vitality, cultural pride and communal joy.



cultural connections

Nai-Ni Chen: *Year of the Horse* is steeped in Chinese cultural tradition while also speaking to broader themes of identity, migration and intercultural exchange. At its core, it uses the Chinese zodiac symbol of the horse — which connotes energy, vitality, speed, transformation and freedom — as a metaphor for personal and cultural renewal.

One major way the show connects to culture is through its incorporation of traditional ritual dances. The Lion Dance and Dragon Dance are prominent — ancient folkloric forms that invoke good luck, drive away evil spirits (Lion Dance), and symbolize prosperity, wisdom, rain and auspiciousness (Dragon Dance). These serve not only as spectacle but also as deeply symbolic touchstones linking performance to ancestral values.

Another strong cultural thread comes from the showcasing of regional/ethnic dance traditions of China. Among the new works for the Year of the Horse are *Mongolian Festival* (by Lawrence Jin), which draws on nomadic horseback culture in northern China, and *Ultimate Journey* (by Zhongmei Li), inspired by the Dunhuang Cave murals on the Silk Road. These pieces bring in geography, history, myth and the lived reality of cultures both Han and non-Han, emphasizing diversity within “Chinese culture.”

The show also connects Chinese cultural heritage to contemporary forms, especially in its fusion of traditional movement forms, costume and motifs with modern choreography and staging. Nai-Ni Chen's own artistic background — trained in both traditional dance (folk, martial arts, opera) and Western/modern dance — profoundly shapes this aesthetic bridge. The company's work tends to use the natural world (animals, landscapes, elemental forces) as sources of inspiration, building movement vocabularies around ideas of nature, environment and harmony.

Finally, there is a strong connection to the immigrant experience and cross-cultural identity. The company is Asian American, and its works often reflect “the immigrant's journey of crossing cultures and adapting to a new home,” as stated in its mission. The show presents Chinese cultural symbols in a U.S. context — making them accessible, visible, and resonant for diasporic communities and wider audiences alike.

vocabulary

Acrobatics

The performance of gymnastic feats, such as walking on a tightrope or swinging on a trapeze. Acrobatics requires excellent balance, agility and coordination. In China, this ancient art form traces its roots to the Xia Dynasty 4,000 years ago

Calligraphy

The art of beautiful handwriting

Chinese Zodiac

A classification system based on the lunar calendar that assigns animals and personality traits to 12-year cycles. The 12 animals include the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig

Choreography

The art of designing dance movements and sequences

Contemporary Dance

A style of dance that embraces innovation, blending techniques from various genres, including ballet, jazz and modern

Costume

Traditional and colorful clothing used to enhance cultural storytelling

Folklore

The traditional stories, songs, dances, sayings and beliefs of a group of people that are passed down through generations. Folklore often teaches lessons, shares values and keeps a community's culture and history alive

Heritage

The traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices passed down from previous generations, including language, art, music and values that shape a community's identity

Immigrant

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

Lunar New Year

A traditional celebration marking the beginning of the new year based on the lunar calendar, rather than the Gregorian (solar) calendar. It is widely observed in many Asian cultures, including Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Mongolian communities

Martial Arts

Codified systems and traditions of combat practiced for self-defense, competition, physical fitness and cultural preservation. Examples include kung fu, tai chi and karate. Many martial arts movements are incorporated into Chinese dance



Prop

A prop, formally known as theatrical property, is an object that actors or dancers use during a performance or screen production that is not part of the set or costume

Ritual

A religious or formal ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order

Symbolism

The use of symbols (objects, colors, images or actions) to represent ideas, feelings or concepts beyond their literal meaning

Taoism (daoism)

A Chinese philosophy that influences themes of harmony and nature in the dances

inspired learning for the classroom

Teacher Focus		Student Activity	NJ Student Learning Standards	
P	Prepare	<p>Discover what your students already know about this art form, topic or type of performance. Then explain more fully what they will see at the theater and why it's important. This can be accomplished by sharing images, vocabulary, videos or context that might help them appreciate the performance more fully.</p>	<p>Begin with the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “celebration?”2. Have you ever seen a performance that told a story without words? <p>Introduce students to Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company by explaining that Nai-Ni Chen was a Taiwanese American choreographer whose work celebrated cultural heritage, storytelling and symbolism while fostering connections across Eastern and Western traditions. Inform students that the performance will be a tribute to the Chinese New Year or the Lunar Year.</p> <p>Share the following with the class:</p> <p>Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company website</p> <p>Video Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company: Year of the Horse trailer</p> <p>Article “Significance of Horses in Chinese Culture”</p> <p>Video Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company: Year of the Dragon</p> <p>Video The Myth Behind the Chinese Zodiac</p>	<p>Dance 1.1.5.Re7b, 1.1.2.Re7b 1.1.8.Cn11a</p> <p>Social-Emotional Learning Relationship Skills Sub Competency 16</p>
E	Experience	<p>For some students, this may be their first time in a theater. Review audience etiquette and go over expectations for arrival and departure from the theater. Before watching the show, provide a discussion question for them to consider during the performance.</p> <p>Optional: At school, let students share a one-word answer to a prompt about how they feel (eg. which TV character do you feel like today? If you were a texture, what texture would you be?). After the field trip, ask students the same question and let them explain why they feel the same or why they feel differently.</p>	<p>Before the performance, go over audience etiquette. Provide students with the following questions to consider while watching the show:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What symbols (like animals, colors or props) do you notice in the performance, and what do you think they might represent in Chinese culture?2. How do the dancers use movement, music and costumes to tell a story or share a tradition without using words?3. How does this performance mix old traditions with new ideas, and why do you think that's important for sharing culture today?	<p>Dance 1.1.8.Re7a, 1.1.8.Re8a 1.1.8.Cn11a</p> <p>Career Readiness, Life Literacies & Key Skills 9.4.8.Cl.4</p>
R	Reflect	<p>Give students a moment to think about their answer to the discussion question you introduced in the Experience section. Then allow them to share their response out loud with the class. Next, have students reflect on the skillset of the performers they saw in the show. Go around the class and have each student fill in the following statement: “I can already _____ like the performers did, but I can’t _____ yet!” After everyone is done, remind them that with enough time and practice, they can accomplish anything they set their minds to.</p>	<p>Lead a class discussion based on the questions from the previous section. Allow students to share their answers. Then ask the students to reflect on elements from the performance and to identify the ones they are already skilled in or would like to explore. Finally explain to students that with hard work and consistency, one could have a career in the arts.</p>	<p>Dance 1.1.5.Re8a, 1.1.5.Re9a 1.1.5.Cn10a</p> <p>Career Readiness, Life Literacies & Key Skills 9.4.5.GCA.1, 9.4.8.Cl.4</p>
F	Focus	<p>Use this time to review the Vocabulary section and complete the SchoolTime Activity Sheets.</p>	<p>Using the provided Vocabulary and Resources, as well as knowledge of the show, have students complete Activity Sheets.</p> <p>Activity Sheet link</p>	<p>English Language Arts NJLSA.R4</p> <p>Dance 1.1.8.Cn10a</p> <p>Social Studies 6.1.5.HistoryUP.7</p>
O	Originate	<p>After reviewing vocabulary, write a class poem about the performance, where each student adds a line. Once the poem is complete, read the poem as a class three times with each student saying the line they wrote. Before each repetition, give them a prompt to inform how they deliver their line (eg. say it like you’re excited, scared, angry, etc.).</p> <p>Optional: To reinforce learning from the focus section, encourage students to incorporate all the vocabulary words.</p>		<p>Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standards 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10</p> <p>Social Emotional Learning Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making</p>
R	Rehearse	<p>Have each student draw their own picture inspired by the show and their class poem. As they are working, use this time to walk around and ask them each about what they are drawing, the materials they are using and what inspired them.</p>		<p>Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standards 1, 2, 7, 8, 10</p> <p>Social Emotional Learning Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making</p>
M	Mix it all together!	<p>Allow each student to present their artwork and discuss why they drew what they did, giving them an opportunity to express themselves visually and verbally.</p> <p>Between presentations, allow two or three students to describe their reactions to the artwork that was presented. Encourage them to use phrases like “It reminded me of _____” or “It made me feel _____” rather than describing the art as good or bad.</p> <p>Once everyone is done presenting, put the artwork up on the wall with the class poem to complete your students’ poem gallery.</p>		<p>Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standards 5, 6, 7, 8, 10</p> <p>Social Emotional Learning Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making</p>

curriculum standards

Career Readiness, Life Literacies, & Key Skills

9.4.8.CI.4
Explore the role of creativity and innovation in career pathways and industries.

9.4.5.GCA.1
Analyze how culture shapes individual and community perspectives and points of view.

Dance

1.1.2.Re7b
Observe and describe performed dance movements from a specific genre or culture.

1.1.5.Re7b
Compare and contrast qualities and characteristics to another dance genre or culture. Use basic dance terminology and elements of dance to describe the qualities and characteristics.

1.1.8.Re7a
Use genre-specific terminology to compare and contrast recurring patterns of movement and their relationships in dance in the context of artistic intent.

1.1.5.Re8a
Interpret meaning or intent in a dance or phrase based on its movements. Explain how the movements communicate the main idea of the dance using basic dance terminology.

1.1.8.Re8a
Examine a dance and explain how artistic expression is achieved through relationships among the elements of dance, use of body, dance technique, and context. Interpret using genre specific dance terminology.

1.1.5.Cn10a
Describe feelings and ideas evoked by a dance that are observed or performed and examine how they relate to personal points of view and experiences.

1.1.8.Cn10a
Explain how the perspectives expressed by the choreographer impact personal interpretation. Consider how personal background and experiences influence responses to dance works.

1.1.8.Cn11a
Research and analyze how dances from a variety of cultures, societies, historical periods, or communities reveal the ideas and perspectives of the people from whom the dances originate.

English Language Arts

NJSLSA.R4
Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Social Emotional Learning

Responsible decision making
Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school; Identifying solutions for personal and social problems; Learning how to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts; Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness

Relationship skills
Communicating effectively; Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving

Relationship Skills Sub Competency 16
Utilize positive communication and social skills to interact effectively with others

Self-awareness
Integrating personal & social identities; Identifying ones’ emotions; Linking feelings, values and thoughts

Social-awareness
Taking others’ perspectives; Showing concern for the feelings of others; demonstrating empathy and compassion

Social Studies

6.1.5.HistoryUP.7
Describe why it is important to understand the perspectives of other cultures in an interconnected world

Visual & Performing Arts

Anchor Standard 1
Conceptualizing and generating ideas

Anchor Standard 2
Organizing and developing ideas

Anchor Standard 5
Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation

Anchor Standard 6
Convey meaning through presentation of artistic work

Anchor Standard 7
Perceiving and analyzing products

Anchor Standard 8
Applying criteria to evaluate products

Anchor Standard 10
Synthesizing and relating knowledge and personal experiences to create products.

additional resources

NJPAC

About NJPAC
njpac.org/about

NJPAC’s Arts Education programs
njpac.org/arts-education

NJPAC’s David G. Berger Master Class Series
njpac.org/berger

Nai Ni Chen: *Year of the Horse* Activity Sheets
njpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/NaiNiChen_YearoftheHorse_ActivitySheets-2.pdf

Websites

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company website
nainichen.org/company

“Remembering Nai-Ni Chen: Inventive, Prolific Dance Artist Dies at 62”
njarts.net/remembering-nai-ni-chen-inventive-prolific-dance-artist-dies-at-62

“State of the Arts: Choreographer Nai-Ni Chen Remembered”
njpbs.org/programs/state-of-the-arts/unity-choreographer-nai-ni-chen-remembered-v02hxc

“Chinese Symbolism” – China Collection
china.lu/en/symbolism-34

Significance of Horses in Chinese Culture
helloteacup.com/2018/03/08/horses-chinese-culture

The Who, What and Why of Chinese Martial Arts
studycli.org/chinese-culture/chinese-martial-arts

Eight Mesmerizing Chinese Dances That You Should Know
theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/8-mesmerizing-chinese-dances-that-you-should-know

Chinese Dance: Ancient Art Form Across Time and Space
chinafetching.com/chinese-dance

10 Disappearing Chinese New Year Traditions
chinahighlights.com/festivals/chinese-new-year-disappearing-tradition.htm

15 Fun Facts About Chinese New Year
chinahighlights.com/travelguide/festivals/new-year-facts.htm

Videos

Around Queens: Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Rings in the Year of the Dragon
youtube.com/watch?v=nTFBjzTndgc

Living Heritage: Chinese Calligraphy
youtube.com/watch?v=aDeszso8Nrw

Taoism (Daoism) Explained by Taoist Master
youtube.com/watch?v=kij4kKSGzCE

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company: Long Spear Dance at Battery Dance Festival
youtube.com/watch?v=_emUB31CGmA

Bamboo Rap Demo
youtube.com/watch?v=HeLsgbJ3OiQ

Classical Traditional Chinese Dance for Beginners
youtube.com/watch?v=Jytmu8QL7o0

The Myth Behind the Chinese Zodiac
youtube.com/watch?v=may2s9j4RLk&t

Year of the Pig Celebration
youtube.com/watch?v=547TZ0d6B5k

Chinese Music (Free to Use)
youtube.com/watch?v=Q_h7XszYtsw

Chinese Dragon Dance
youtube.com/watch?v=vi95ZTEHoL8

See Hong Kong’s Dazzling Fire Dragon Dance
youtube.com/watch?v=04CGkm6-wDc

bring the arts to your school

In-School Residencies

NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible in-person residencies are designed to meet your needs and you'll have a dedicated program manager to help you every step of the way. It's the perfect program to keep your students creating, connecting and expressing themselves through the magic of the arts.

Professional Development

Calling all educators! Expand your teaching skills, deepen your curriculum and give yourself a creative boost in NJPAC's forward-thinking professional development workshops. Our virtual PD programs are for teachers all the way from pre-K to high school and include hip hop, dance, storytelling, theater, music and more. Not only will you learn something... you'll also have fun and be inspired.

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