

teacher resource guide

**schooltime
performance
series**



**nai-ni chen
dance company**

*red firecrackers:
the legend of the first
chinese new year*

**arts
education
njpac**
discover. create. grow.

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 often 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 festivals. This was also a way to keep away Nian.

Ever since the first Chinese New Year, Nian has not been seen!

about nai-ni chen dance company

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is one of just a few professional Asian American dance companies in the United States. The Company's productions take the audience beyond cultural boundaries to where tradition meets innovation and freedom arises from discipline.

The Company has produced more than 20 national tours reaching 41 states; nine international tours to Europe,

Asia and the Americas; and regular New York and New Jersey seasons.

In addition to its extensive season of touring and performing, the Company has developed Arts in Education residency programs integrating dance, music, and poetry with multiple academic disciplines. Its community outreach programs include workshops with immigrant Chinese American children in Edison, NJ to help preserve Chinese cultural heritage.

the legacy of nai-ni chen

"Since I was a child, the floating cloud in the sky often touched me. It was the wondrous shapes they made as they were blown by the wind. And when I heard the powerful sound the pine forest made in the wind, it fascinated me. Off the coast of Keelung (a city in Taiwan) where I grew up, I also remembered watching schools of tropical fish swimming in the blue water forming diverse patterns and color which made me want to join their joyful dance right there. As I grew older, I loved the mountain. Its magnificent strength embodies the power of the earth, and all the living things around it. In our life, every day is a fascinating journey of discovery. Each discovery we make has a significant influence on our future. As I looked back, I realized how much of an impact the surrounding has made on me as an artist. And now, when I walk on the streets in America, I feel the enormous freedom and vitality of the people of this land. That's what nourishes me for the past fifteen years. My dance reflects what I am and how I feel about the world. I believe dance is a way to express the passion of life in all of us. An expression beyond words; it can cross cultural boundaries and be shared by all people."

– Nai-Ni Chen

Nai-Ni Chen drew from dance traditions that began in her homeland of Taiwan. Her career started at 17 when she served on ambassadorial culture missions to 19 countries as a traditional dancer. Her modern dance training began in 1976 when she performed as the youngest principal member of Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theater. Upon graduating from the Chinese Cultural University in 1982, Nai-Ni moved to New York City to find her voice. There she studied with renowned modern dancers and



received her master's degree from NYU. She performed in Broadway musicals like *The King and I*, as well as the Tony Award-winning play *M'Butterfly*. Nai-Ni began choreographing small groups of dancers, and founded the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in 1988 with her husband and executive director Andy Chiang.

Her choreography merged traditional and contemporary styles and aimed to "fuse the dynamic freedom of the American spirit with the grace and splendor of the Asian soul." *The New York Times* called the company's dancers "endlessly proliferating forces of cosmic energy." With her repertoire, Nai-Ni brought American audiences closer to Chinese art. Her choreography reflected Asian themes like the struggles of the Chinese people in the 20th century; the Buddhist and Taoist vision of fate, destiny and human relationships; the beauty of Chinese traditional philosophy and the natural world.

"I remember as a child I would sit in my grandmother's room and see the raindrops falling on the ground," she told *The Record of Bergen County, NJ* in 2003, when her work was being presented at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, a frequent stop for the troupe. "It made such an interesting sound — dut-dut-dut. It was very playful to me. Mysterious. It brought me wonder."

Nai-Ni Chen passed away on December 12, 2021 in Hawaii. She is survived by her husband Andy Chiang and daughter Sylvia. Nai-Ni Chen's legacy will live on through the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, which will continue to connect Chinese and American communities through outreach, new works and education.



in the spotlight

An interview with Nai-Ni Chen (2019)

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 grandparent's house. It is like Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Year all together in one holiday.

Why is dance an effective way to communicate different cultures and experiences?

Dance is the movement of language. Many dances are created by people which relate strongly to their cultural beliefs, customs, geography, ceremonies and celebrations. The uniqueness of movement styles, costumes and the music used in dance can certainly take the audience to a different place and time.

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.

Is the story told in your performance based on an ancient folktale 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 folktale. 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 *Iron Fan Dance*, which shows the determination and unity 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.

What are the main themes behind the performance?

To tell the legend of Chinese New Year which involves a monster called Nien 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? What do you hope the audience gets from the performance?

Teachers and students really enjoy learning about the Chinese New Year customs through this popular folktale that resonates with them on many different levels. We hope that through this production, the audience not only learned 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.



Nai-Ni Chen, Photo by Steven Vandervellen

inspired ideas in the classroom

Teacher Focus

Student Activity

NJ Student Learning Standards

P

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 (1:29 minutes) and *The Ribbon or Red Silk Dance* (6:08 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** (3:01 minutes)
- Have the students act out the story.
- Discuss Chinese inventions including silk, firecrackers, and fireworks.

- 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 can 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.

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL1.
NJLSA.SL2.
Social Studies
6.1.P.D.4
NJ Arts Standards
1.1 The Creative Process
1.2 History of Arts & Culture

E

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, masks, 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.

- Observe:**
- What actions do the dancers do? How do they move (qualities)? Slowly? Fast? Moderately? With strong, soft, heavy, or light moves?
 - What feelings do they show? How? How are they moving with the music?
 - How many dancers are there? Do they dance all together all the time? How do they dance with each other?
 - What props do they use? How do they use props? Do they move in different levels (heights)? What shapes (statues) do they make alone or with others?
 - Do you see any elements of the Nian story or the Chinese New Year traditions in the dances? What do you think each dance communicates?
- **Complete Activity #1.**

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL1.
NJLSA.SL2.
Social Studies
6.1.P.D.4
NJ Arts Standard
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique

R

Reflect, respond and read

- Have a discussion about the performance and about the students' responses. Reflect on the aspects of the Chinese culture, the lunar New Year traditions, and the legend of Nian in the performance. Students' responses can be organized in a web or chart.
- Share the origin of *The Ribbon Dance*. The ribbons represent a way to wake up and attract the gods to make the clouds rain. This way a good harvest will provide people with food.
- *The Lion Dance*, acrobatic in style, is to scare away evil and bring good fortune, prosperity, health and happiness.
- Have students consider how the purpose of the dances may have changed over time.

- **Complete Activity #2.**
- Turn and talk about Activity #2 with a partner. Tell your partner something you like about his/her work and why. Are there any similarities or differences between the activity sheets?
 - Who wants to share your partner's response to the performance with the class? Can you find any connection between what we learned about China and Chinese culture and the performance?

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL1.
NJLSA.SL2.
Social Studies
6.1.P.D.4
NJ Arts Standards
1.2 History of Arts & Culture
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique

F

Focus

- 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 them feel connected.

- What traditions do you have in your family, in your culture? What does your family celebrate? How?
- Is there a story from your culture that you can share?
- Is there an object from your culture that you can use for "show and tell"?

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL2.
NJLSA.SL1.
NJ Arts Standards
1.1 The Creative Process
1.2 History of Arts & Culture

O

Originate

- Project:**
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.

- Make sure your body is present and dancing while moving the ribbons.
- Find a safe space to explore this 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 trios, 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.
- Move safely and take care of the props.
- 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.

NJ Arts Standards
1.1 The Creative Process

R

Rehearse

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

- Focus on all members of your group moving at the same time. That's called unison.
- Decide how many times to do each move.
- Adjust the moves to the music.
- Repeat the sequence 3 times.

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL1.
NJ Arts Standards
1.3 Performance

M

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.
 - Review the expectations for appropriate performer and audience behavior. Establish a protocol for audience response appropriate for the age group, which may consist only of applause or it can also incorporate observations, thoughts, opinions, and feedback about the dances.

- 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.

NJ Arts Standards
1.3 Performance
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique

curriculum standards

National Core Arts Anchor Standards

- 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- 3: Refine and complete artistic work.
- 5: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.
- 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

common core state standards

NJ Arts Standards

1.1 The Creative Process

All students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles that govern the creation of works of art in dance, music, theatre, and visual art.

1.2 History of Arts & Culture

All students will understand the role, development, and influence of the arts throughout history and across cultures.

1.3 Performance

All students will synthesize skills, media, methods, and technologies that are appropriate to creating, performing, and/or presenting works of art in dance, music, theatre, and visual art.

1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique

All students will demonstrate and apply an understanding of arts philosophies, judgment, and analysis to works of art in dance, music, theatre, and visual art.

FIND THE STANDARDS

For more detailed information on the standards, visit these websites:

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy

NATIONAL SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

socialstudies.org/standards

NATIONAL CORE ARTS ANCHOR STANDARDS

nationalartsstandards.org

English Language Arts

NJLSA.SL1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

NJLSA.SL2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Social Studies

6.1.P.D.4

Learn about and respect other cultures within the classroom and community.

cultural connections

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



vocabulary

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

A feature or quality 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 children’s story about magical and imaginary beings and lands.

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.

resources

Websites

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Official Website
nainichen.org/index.php

Spotlight on Nai-Ni Chen: Not Alone:
 A Modern Dance Performance at Aljira
aljirablog.tumblr.com/post/100252879993

Chinese New Year
history.com/topics/holidays/chinese-new-year

10 Interesting Facts about Chinese New Year
chinahighlights.com/travelguide/festivals/new-year-facts.htm

Chinese Immigrants in the United States
migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states

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

Chinese New Year Food
foodandwine.com/chinese-new-year

Celebrating on Chinese New Year’s Day
thoughtco.com/chinese-new-years-day-687469

*Nai-Ni Chen, Whose Dances Merged
 East and West, Dies at 62*
nytimes.com/2021/12/13/arts/dance/nai-ni-chen-dead.html

Videos

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Demo
youtu.be.com/lxGaPU19FaA

Watch auditions for Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company
youtu.be.com/skzcAgt5StU

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company: Song of the Phoenix
youtu.be/hop81BHvn_A

Traditional Chinese Dance
youtu.be.com/Nom1B1JJ3k

Beijing residents celebrate Chinese New Year
 with fireworks displays
[theguardian.com/world/video/2015/feb/19/
 beijing-celebrates-chinese-new-year-fireworks-displays-video](http://theguardian.com/world/video/2015/feb/19/beijing-celebrates-chinese-new-year-fireworks-displays-video)

Books

Ruby’s Chinese New Year
 Vickie Lee and Joey Chou
 Henry Holt and Co. (2017)

Bringing in the New Year
 Grace Lin
 Dragon Fly Books (2010)

Chelsea’s Chinese New Year
 Lisa Bullard and Katie Saunders
 Millbrook Pr Trade (2012)

*The Chinese in America:
 A Narrative History*
 Iris Chang
 Penguin Books (2004)

Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond
 Wesleyan (2016)

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the arts in your school

In-School Residencies: NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school — online — to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible virtual 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.

study the arts at njpac

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 hip hop, jazz, devised 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 email our education sales team at artseducation@njpac.org. Visit njpac.org/education

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