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# Lion Dance in the United States: Exploring Panethnicity and Identity Through Performance Arts

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LION DANCE IN THE UNITED STATES: EXPLORING PANETHNICITY AND IDENTITY THROUGH  
PERFORMANCE ARTS

by

RACHEL WATFORD

Under the Direction of Faidra Papavasiliou, MA/PhD

ABSTRACT

Lion dance in the United States has gone through drastic changes since the 1990s. These changes have created a multicultural, pan ethnic, and diverse art form that communities from all over the nation use to connect to their heritage and identity. While many Asian Americans use this lion dance as a way to connect to their heritage, lion dance has also being transformed into part of the American culture. There are also a lot of parallels with the directions that the lion dance community and Asian American community are heading in terms of visibility. Lion dance has become a proxy of Asian American struggles in the U.S. for many of the performers. This thesis looks at how lion dance is growing and spreading in the US, how it has turned into a multicultural and pan ethnic tradition, and the subtle ways it is use politically in the U.S.

INDEX WORDS: Multicultural, Asian American, Heritage, Tradition, Globalization, Diaspora



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by

RACHEL WATFORD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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PERFORMANCE ARTS

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my lion dance group, Colorado Asian Cultural and Heritage Center. As soon as I joined the team in 2013, CACHC accepted me into their team and family and I never felt out of place with them. They brought me back into the team during the small time I was able to perform with them during my graduate program as if I had never left the team and that feeling of belonging is immensely appreciated. They taught me what it meant to be dedicated, determined, and compassionate in everything you do. That it takes hard work to get to where you want and that it is worth the hard work to get to that point. They helped me find my passion for lion dancing and I never would have taken the direction I did without them. My master and teammates have helped me in so many situations and I appreciate everything they have done to help me get to where I am today. Thank you, CACHC.

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Lastly, I want to acknowledge the United States Dragon and Lion Dance Federation and all the board members and teams associated with the federation. They taught me many things about lion dance I previously was not aware of and showed me a community brought together through a shared love of lion dance. I met a lot of new people that I hope to continue getting to know through future championships and events. Without the federations help, this thesis would not have been able to blossom to what it has become today.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>VIII</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Globalization.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.2 Identity through Ethnicity and Race.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1.3 Identity through Heritage and Tradition.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1.4 Performance and Dance Theory .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2 METHODS.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.1 Background.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2.2 Denver .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.3 Boston.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>2.4 Atlanta.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3 FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.1 The History and Politics of Lion Dance .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b><i>3.1.1 Influence from the Chinese Diaspora .....</i></b>	<b><i>30</i></b>
<b><i>3.1.2 Influence of the Vietnamese Diaspora.....</i></b>	<b><i>33</i></b>
<b><i>3.1.3 Malaysian Influence in Lion Dance .....</i></b>	<b><i>35</i></b>
<b><i>3.1.4 The United States Dragon and Lion Dance Federation.....</i></b>	<b><i>38</i></b>
<b><i>3.1.5 The Parallel Between Lion Dancing and Asian American Communities..</i></b>	<b><i>41</i></b>

<b>3.2</b>	<b>Symbolisms of Lion Dance .....</b>	<b>43</b>
3.2.1	<i>Fat San Versus Hok San .....</i>	<i>43</i>
3.2.2	<i>Symbolic Meaning.....</i>	<i>46</i>
3.2.3	<i>Myths of Lion Dance.....</i>	<i>55</i>
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Motivations: Why Do Americans Perform Lion Dance .....</b>	<b>57</b>
3.3.1	<i>Community and Family .....</i>	<i>61</i>
3.3.2	<i>Appropriation of lion dance.....</i>	<i>64</i>
<b>3.4</b>	<b>Pan ethnicity and Diversity of Lion Dance .....</b>	<b>65</b>
3.4.1	<i>Gender Politics of Lion Dance .....</i>	<i>67</i>
<b>3.5</b>	<b>Homogenization: Is this the Direction Lion Dance is Going in?.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>73</b>
	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>77</b>

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1-1 One of the groups performing at the National Championship .....	2
Figure 1-2 The Denver group performing at the Dragon Boat Festival .....	8
Figure 3-1 Lions preparing to eat oranges and lettuce at an event .....	52
Figure 3-2 Grand opening performance in Denver.....	54



## 1 INTRODUCTION

In a small high school gymnasium in Quincy, Massachusetts, drums, cymbals, and gongs rang out as lion dance groups from around the country paraded around the gym floor for the opening ceremony of the first ever National Lion Dance Championship. Colorful dancing lions, flag holders, and team members from twenty-two different groups lined up around the competition area for the opening ceremony. These teams composed of martial arts schools, youth groups, and non-profit groups that consisted of a mixture of Asian Americans (mostly of Chinese and Vietnamese descent) and non-Asian Americans. The president of the Lion Dance Federation that was created in 2016 rang a celebratory tone: "What we are actually doing is bringing a large community together from across the country. Every time zone of the U.S. is represented here." The musicians play softly as the Master of Ceremonies (MC) introduces all the teams and their leaders. She expressed how momentous of an occasion this event was as a yellow, pink, and purple dragon snake up and down the gymnasium and the teams parade around the floor by stating:

We have made history. We did it! And yet this is just the start. Project our vision out there that we see dragon and lion dance be included, whether we push ourselves in there or we're invited in the Rose Parade in Pasadena, California or the Macy's Parade in New York City or even the U.S. Presidential Inauguration. We are a strong and vibrant part of the American cultural, social, and historic fabric.

As the MC welcomes everyone to the first national lion dance competition, musicians from multiple teams pick up the volume as the dragon twirls around the gymnasium and the lions dance to the beats. It was so loud your ears were ringing but no one seemed to care. Multi-colored lions danced and people clapped to the beats of the drums. You can feel the excitement in the air as if it was electricity. As one of the chairmen exclaims during the open ceremony, "This moment, this

weekend, brings forth for the very first time that the nation is gathering together as one united community under the passion of dragon and lion dance!"



*Figure 1-1 One of the groups performing at the National Championship*

This championship took place in May of 2018, two years after the formation of the United States Dragon and Lion Dance Federation (USD LDF). In the early 2000s, lion dancing in the U.S. was able to spread outside of Chinatowns and more into the public eye with the help of technological growth and globalization. It was because of this spread and growth that the lion dance federation was even able to form in 2016. The community of lion dance is shifting from an artform exclusively performed in (and by) Asian communities to an activity increasingly entering the mainstream culture of America. This mainstreaming is evidenced by the fact that the state of Massachusetts recognized the USD LDF championship as one of the 18 signature sports events of the year. This recognition is an important step for the lion dance community in being considered a vital part of the American culture instead of a tradition that is being preserved by Asian

communities across the nation. In addition, there is a parallel with the growth of lion dance in the U.S. and with the visibility of Asian Americans increasing in the country. Even though, local lion dance groups would hold small competitions with each other, this was the first time a championship at such a large magnitude had been organized in the United States. This championship presented how lion dance in America is transcending its customary ethnic and cultural boundaries and increasingly being hailed as a type of globalized or cosmopolitan heritage. As one of the Vice Presidents of the federation expressed during the opening parade, lion dancing highlights "an art and a sport that engages multigenerational and multicultural individuals." This thesis looks at many parts of lion dance including why, how, and among whom is lion dance spreading in the U.S. and how do the practices of performance and community building association contribute to lion dancing emerging as at once an element of "authentic" cultural heritage harkening to a non-U.S. past, and a vehicle for the constitution and negotiation of an Asian pan-ethnicity as a cultural identity within the contemporary U.S.? The championship showed how diverse lion dance groups are becoming as many groups were a mix of different Asian ethnicities and non-Asian ethnicities. It is still unclear the direction the tradition will go as lion dance is expanding and forming as I conducted this research. Many performers expressed concern that the growth and direction of lion dance will make it homogenized while other performers do not view lion dance as growing but instead staying in small niches of Asian communities around the United States.

For this thesis, I conduct a multi-sited research on lion dance groups in the U.S. I concentrated on three cities during my fieldwork: Denver, Colorado, Boston, Massachusetts, and Atlanta, Georgia. Most groups I interacted with are part of the federation and have similar expectations of what it means to be a lion dancer. I will argue that lion dancing is becoming a pan

ethnic performance in the United States where people of all nationalities and ethnicities partake through either performing or viewing the performance. This pan-ethnic performance is conceptualized by practitioners as a way to connect to their culture and race in the context of the U.S. Although majority of lion dance performers in the U.S. are of Chinese or Vietnamese descent, many Asian Americans throughout the U.S. use lion dancing to connect to their heritage and culture regardless if they are of Chinese or Vietnamese descent or not. There are also many people who are not of Asian descent (myself included) that perform lion dance today. A majority of these performers were introduced to lion dance through participating in martial arts schools. Therefore, lion dancing offers a lens through which to trace evolving conceptions of ethnicity, race, culture and connection in the contemporary U.S. In particular, it illuminates the rise of an Asian American pan-ethnicity, as heritage and performance constitute and negotiate identities and political relationships.

Even though many studies have been conducted on Asian American pan-ethnicity, a group of various ethnic groups placed together under an umbrella term through cultural, geographic, or linguistic similarities (Espiritu 1996; Han and Hsu 2007; Ma and Cartier 2003; Ho 2015), as Li (2017) explains, lion dancing has, for the most part, been ignored in the academic world. This is because, in the past, lion dancing was only seen as an event that happened during the Lunar New Year, an Asian festival that celebrates the beginning of the new year on the Chinese calendar, and was not seen as a tradition to explore further than its association to the Lunar New Year. Academics did not begin exploring lion dance as its own tradition until the 1980s (Li 2017:291). Therefore, when lion dance was written about in academic papers, it would be as a section exploring the lunar new year festival (Yeh 2004; Chang 2010). A few academic articles on lion dance have been published in the mid and late 2010s (Avaunt 2016; 2018; Hayes 2014; Young 2006) which can



show that mainstream culture is slowly recognizing lion dance as part of the American culture. In the United States, lion dancing has been able to grow through panasianism and at the same time has helped panasianism grow, as Asian Americans turn to lion dance to connect and co-construct the pan Asian identity and its associated notions of heritage.

Since the late 1800s when Chinese immigrants first arrived in the US, lion dance in the United States stayed mainly in Chinatowns and Asian communities. Jiaolong, a master of a martial arts school, explained that until the late 1980s, lion dance groups in America were rivals with one another. If the teams ran into each other, they normally would fight as it meant that one of the teams was crossing the other's turf. During this time, lion dance groups did not seem to want to interact with each other, yet this sentiment has drastically changed over the past few decades as groups began to interact with each other through seminars hosted by international teams or through receiving training from other national teams. Still, whether groups wanted to interact with each other or not, it was difficult for groups to create communities and connections together because they did not have the opportunities or the abilities to expand outside of the community they were part of, therefore they would stay within their own city's communities. It was not until technological advances grew that included the internet, could groups connect with one another nationally and internationally. Globalization and technology advances have helped lion dancing in the U.S. expand and grow at a rapid rate than ever seen before. Teams and groups began to connect through social media sites including Facebook and Instagram while watching performances and competitions on YouTube. For the first time, lion dance groups from across the United States were able to create a community within their practice and work together to learn and grow. USD LDF was created in 2016 in order to create a way for groups from across the country to interact and connect with one another. The vision of the federation is "to create opportunities for all styles of

dragon and lion dance teams to express and develop themselves, through friendly regional, national, and international training and exchanges, enrichment programs, and quality tournaments with the highest standards" (USDLDF.org 2018). Many of the groups I spoke with stated that this community and interaction is needed if lion dance is to survive in the United States.

Performers of lion dance in the United States are mainly of Asian American descent, specifically of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Malaysian ancestry (Loo and Loo 2016; Li 2017; Edwards 2013; Avaunt 2016). There are many reasons people perform lion dance, yet there were a few keywords that popped up in every interview I have conducted. Many performers were interested in connecting to their Asian heritage and learning about the traditions of lion dancing. Some performers expressed that while they could say they performed to learn about their heritage they only did lion dance because it was fun. The performance of lion dancing is no longer only about preserving the art form but also to promote it. With this shift in perspective, lion dance has become more than just a way to maintain and preserve an ancient, yet modernized, tradition. It has become part of the American culture for these performers. They are remaking what "American culture" and Asianness means through lion dance. The practice has been reterritorialized which is when a culture is relocalized through time-space contexts in specific cultural environments. It has transcended specific territorial boundaries and while does not mean that the tradition has lost its place, it no longer belongs to one particular place (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:14).

On a bright Saturday morning, The Denver lion dance group arrived at Sloan's Lake, a large park in Denver, to perform for the Dragon Boat Festival. The Colorado Dragon Boat Festival heralds itself as the largest in the U.S. These are festivals where multiple groups will race boats shaped like dragons, similar to rowing races in the Olympics, and promote Asian heritage and culture. There were multiple stages set up around the park for dance groups, music groups, and

martial arts groups to perform throughout the weekend. The group set up their equipment to prepare for the routine. Three large blue flags that stated the team's name towered behind the musicians. Three lions, two golden lions and one blue lion, and two Buddhas lined up in front of the musicians as people sat on the grass or on chairs to watch the performance. The drummer struck the drum indicating that the show was starting, "TAK! TAKTAK!" The three lions danced the routine in unison as the drummer played the beats to indicate which pattern to perform. For one pattern, the dancers would push the lion head above their own head as they leapt forward before dropping the lion head back on their shoulders and hopping backwards to continue to the next pattern. After five or so minutes, the Buddhas directed the lions to roam around and play with the audience. The audience members smiled and laughed as the lions playfully investigated the people. Many people took photos of the lions while others would pet them when they walked by. The lions paid extra attention to the children who were amazed by the colorful lions. Once the lions had interacted with everyone in the audience, the Buddhas would help direct the lions back to the stage where they picked up scrolls to unfurl. The scrolls had messages that wished the audience good luck and good fortune. The dancers placed the scrolls on the ground before taking the costume off and bowing. The performance ended after the lions performed one more pattern to simulate a bow.



Figure 1-2 The Denver group performing at the Dragon Boat Festival

The vignette above describes a typical lion dance performance in the United States. These performances will take place at festivals or events that are directed towards heritage and culture promotion. The routines normally last between ten to 20 minutes long and can be broken into three parts: the main routine, interacting with the audience, and the closing routine. The dancers will perform ten or more patterns for the main routine. This includes the three bows – a pattern where the lions will hop forward with the left foot in front and swing the lion head around the right side of their body. They will then switch feet and swing the lion head around the left side of the body before repeating the right side once more. The style that the Denver group performs is called Hok San which is a popular style performed in Malaysia and Singapore. Hok San was a popular style among lion dance groups that are not associated to martial art schools as it is associated with jumps and stacks (when the head is lifted onto the legs or head of the tail). Another popular style performed in the U.S. is Fat San, a traditional style that is associated with showing off a person's

martial arts skill and power. In Fat San, the three bows is performed differently where the dancers will lift the head above their head and walk three steps forward then lower the head and take three steps back before repeating the move two more times. While there are more differences in the two styles that I will go into later in the paper, it is important to know what these styles are as I interacted with multiple groups that performed one of the two styles.

In this thesis, unlike past papers that concentrated on one specific group for their research, I took a different route in exploring not only in the social dynamic within a group, but also the social dynamic among the groups across the U.S., especially with the formation of the federation. This research also examines who performs lion dance, why they perform it and the influences and place it has in their lives as lion dance seems to be a proxy of Asian American identity. Lion dance is a mostly invisible tradition practiced in the U.S. that the performers are attempting to make the tradition more visible throughout the nation. This takes on a similar parallel with the directions that Asian Americans have taken in the U.S. as they are also mostly an invisible group in the U.S. pursuing to become more visible. I was also interested in what similarities and differences in styles, histories, myths, and symbolisms that may (or may not) exist among the different groups and different locales. For these reasons, conducting a multi-sited study gave me a well-rounded examination of lion dance by exploring the art through the performer's gaze in Colorado and the audience's gaze in Georgia. It also allowed me to view lion dance through the lens of a cultural tradition and through the lens of a sporting event.

I was able to interview a few groups in person including two groups in Colorado, two groups in Georgia, and a group in California. The majority of the research took place in July 2018, in Colorado, where I worked with a lion dance group I was originally part of in 2013 and 2014. It was easier for me to work with the group during my research because of the fact I had past

experiences with them. I went to their practices and performances during the summer while in Denver. These performances ranged from various types of events including teaching adopted children how to dance, dancing for the dragon boat festival, and dancing at a grand opening for a restaurant. I also conducted interviews with multiple members of the group and with another lion dance group located in Boulder, Colorado as well. While in Boston, Massachusetts, the championship allowed me an easy way to observe multiple groups' performances in a small span of time in order to compare the routines and examine lion dance through the gaze of a sporting event. The last site I conducted research was at the Chinatown shopping center in Atlanta, Georgia. The center holds a festival for lunar new year every year that takes place in February. For two days, two to three lion dance groups perform at various businesses in the shopping center and one large lion dance performance will take place in the parking lot behind the center. I was able to observe the lunar new year festival in both 2018 and 2019. By observing this festival, I was able to see the multiple ways that lion dancing is used during the new year. These festivals also gave me the opportunity to examine lion dance performances through the lens of the audience which is a rare lens for me to view lion dance as I am usually part of the band or helping groups in the background by taking photos and setting up equipment. Most groups I interviewed took place over the phone or by email as I interviewed groups from Hawaii, Texas, Massachusetts and other states. Interviews took place over the course of 2018 and 2019.

## **1.1 Globalization**

Advances in technology and the sharing of ideas from one culture to another associated with the process of globalization have led the lion dance community in the US to connect with one another. In the 1990s and earlier, lion dance groups had a difficult time contacting each other and getting resources and materials for the performances. Globalization has also changed the dynamics

of the lion dance groups, not only in the US, but around the world. In the past, lion dancing was used to show the strengths of a martial arts school (Yap 2016:110). Many times, if two groups ran into each other on the streets a fight would break out. There are many older Chinese and Vietnamese people who still see lion dance groups as street gangs. Yet, over the past decade or so, lion dance groups have been cooperating and dancing together. Dance styles have become more standardized as groups begin to learn similar styles. Unfortunately, there is a growing separation between the lion dance groups in the US that see this standardization as a good thing or as a bad thing.

Globalization is a relationship between the global and the local. Location must be understood with reference to the meanings that the action has for the actors and for its audience (Kinnvall 2005:3). There is an intensification of global interconnectedness that is created through movement, contacts, linkages, and persistent cultural interactions and exchanges (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:4). There are three main ways that globalization has affected societies through scale, speed, and cognition. Scale is the extent to which the number of economic, political, social, and human linkages between societies are greater than at any previous time in history. Speed is how globalization is conceptualized in time and space. Cognition is an increased awareness of the globe as a smaller place (Kinnvall 2005:4). Transportation and communication technologies have made it easier and quicker for people, things, and ideas to travel around the globe (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:6). There is a reduced significance of borders, distances and states to global flows of both tangible and intangible factors such as goods, services, technology, people, and ideas (Kinnvall 2005:4). Global flows of a more social and human nature are the rapid diffusion of information and knowledge that is both connected and dependent on advances in technology which has facilitated communication (Kinnvall 2005:4). It is the compression of time and space which speeds

up the economic and social processes that shrinks the globe. Distance and time are no longer major constraints in organizing, much of it though this makes disjuncture even more pronounced – what’s less connected is in some ways more remote, human activity (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:8).

As theorized by Appadurai (1996), there are five ways global cultural flow takes place: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples. Ethnoscaples is the scape that lion dance most likely was introduced to the United States. Ethnoscaples is where information is transferred through tourists, immigrants, refugees, and others (Appadurai 1996:33). Lion dance was brought over to the US through immigration from China and Vietnam in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Cultural deterritorialization has been taking place as well with the tradition which is the process of general weakening of the ties between culture and place. Culture flows do not float around the globe but are reinscribed in cultural environments (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:14). Lion dance was able to spread and grow in the United States through the help of the technoscape. Technoscape is where the fluid global configuration of technology moves at faster speeds and across multinational boundaries (Appadurai 1996:34). This speed of information allowed lion dance teams to be able to learn new styles and moves that they otherwise would not have had access to through connections with masters from other countries by social media and faster travel time to study with them. The increase in technological advances has also allowed groups to buy new equipment more easily. In the past, people would have to fly to China or Malaysia to get new lion dance equipment but today they are able to order the equipment online without any problem.

Production in cultural industries is largely grounded in uniquely place-specific cultural heritages yet at the same time cultural industries are also increasingly dependent upon global demand for culturally distinct music and art form (Aoyama 2016:1). The cultural lines that connect the world is dense and mass consumption increases through the encounters between people and



cultures from around the planet (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:6). Although globalization is frequently viewed as synonymous to cultural convergence across society, a reverse process of cultural intensification is also in progress where cultural distinctiveness becomes a highly sought-after commodity (Aoyama 2016:1). The American consumers, since the 1990s and particularly those in the urban areas, have begun to appreciate arts and cultural activities that incorporate diversity and global dimensions (Aoyama 2016:17). The processes that operate on a global scale cut across national boundaries that integrate and connect cultures and communities in new space-time combinations (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:6).

## **1.2 Identity through Ethnicity and Race**

Identifying to one's ethnicity was an important part of performing lion dancing for many of the performers I interviewed during my fieldwork. It is a way for the performers to relate to their Asian side while living in the U.S. Rather than choosing, assuming they have a choice, between being American or Asian, Asian Americans located positions between the two (Varzally 2008:10). What one sees as real is often due to what one's worldviews predispose their minds to see (Goodman et al. 2012:2). This worldview creates different versions of what it means to be American since the U.S. is a melting pot of various ethnicities and cultures from all over the world. What one person views as American culture and daily life can be completely different compared to how another person views it. Race is a cultural invention about human differences that had its basis in social, political, and economic conditions (Goodman et al. 2012:21). Even though race is a social construct, racial identities still affect people every day, especially people of color in the United States. By interpreting culture through the ambiguity that is race we can truly see what race is: fluid, slippery, continuously changing across time and space, and open to multiple interpretations regardless that we use language that treat race as steadfast and unchanging (Ho

2015). Therefore, every person has multiple and interlocking identities and cultures (Crennan 2010:6). We, as individuals, are not bound to one identity or culture. We are always flowing from identity to identity based on the structural power, political power, and historical power of the groups we surround ourselves at the time.

Ethnicity can be both inherited and chosen (Walsh 2016:25) since identity extends beyond one's country of origin (Walsh 2016:30). The possible selves are the selves that are rooted in what others believe is important or may be rooted in one's own values, ideals, and aspirations (Crennan 2010:115). We fear disappointing groups by failing to attain the group's norms and standards (Crennan 2010:117). This struggle to live up to a group's norms and standards is especially muddled for people who identify as Asian American since there is an ongoing idea that one cannot be Asian and American at the same time as these identities are seen as being opposites of each other on the made-up spectrum that is race. Asian Americans have to prove their Americanness instead of it being assumed. They are considered "foreign" until proven otherwise. An example of this happened to my lion dance team in 2014 when we went on a hiking trip in the Rocky Mountains. It was a popular hike with a beautiful pond and waterfall at the top of a hard trail up the side of a mountain. We were in the line slowly making our way to the top when a man next to us asked the dreaded question: Where are you from? One of the older team members replied that they were from Denver and returned the question which the man replied embarrassed that he was from Denver as well.

The Asian American movement took place in the 1960s when the civil rights movements were taking place. Before the 1960s, Asians in the US normally practiced ethnic disidentification which is the act of distancing one's group from another in order to not be mistaken and suffer the misdeeds of said group (Hayano in Espiritu 1996:20). Asians in America were not able to unite

together before the 1960s as most were foreign-born and did not share a common language. Americans of Asian ancestry, specifically people with backgrounds from East and Southeast Asia, united against racist institutional structures and asserted their cultural and racial distinctiveness (Espiritu 1996:25). Even today, Asian Americans must prove their Americanness instead of being presumed (Wong 2016:3). As Ho (2015) explains:

The rubric "Asian American" allows [them] to consider a shared history of oppression and discrimination, most notably marked by the ways that various Asian-ethnic groups were transformed into aliens ineligible for citizenship and as Yellow Peril foreigners who threatened the white sanctity of the United States.

The way that people tend to view identity is constrictive, yet it is still able to transcend boundaries. Many Asian Americans tend to struggle to claim and create a space that represents their multiple identities (Kinney 2007:52). There becomes a delicate balance of what it means to be both Asian and American. Asian Americans live in a limbo of being considered part of the "foreign" or "other" while at the same time being part of the "local" or "citizen". If they become too American then they are seen to lose their Asian side and yet, if they are seen as too Asian then they are seen as non-American and foreign. Still, being Asian American is not just a juxtaposition between being Asian and being American. Instead, it is creating a new identity that is neither Asian nor American (Chen 2007:102).

### **1.3 Identity through Heritage and Tradition**

Heritage is a main reason for many people to start performing lion dancing in the US. Every participant in my research has mentioned heritage being an important part to why they continue to perform lion dancing into their adulthood. Yet, what is heritage? It is not as easily a defined word as one might think as anything could be considered part of heritage. Rodney Harrison describes heritage as "an all-pervasive aspect of contemporary life" (2017:1). It can be used to describe anything from buildings, monuments, songs, festivals, or languages. It describes the large and the

small, the natural and the constructed. The practice of "cultural forms" or heritage is seen as an essential element for performing identity (Wong 2016:13). For people that practice lion dance, whether as performers or viewers, the tradition is used to connect and celebrate to a past identity. Heritage is a celebration of the past for communities (Sandis 2014:12) and still it is not about the past, but about the relationship with the present and future (Harrison 2017:4). To expand on this idea, Harrison explains that heritage is not a passive process of preserving the past but is an active process assembling selective objects, places, and practices that are associated to particular sets of values that communities wish to take with them in the future (Harrison 2017:4).

Lion dance would fall under what Harrison describes as "unofficial heritage". Unofficial heritage "refers to a broad range of practices that are represented using the language of heritage but are not recognized by official forms of legislation" (Harrison 2017:15). This includes social practices that surrounds official heritages yet are not protected by legislation (Harrison 2017:15). An example would be a historic Chinatown being recognized by legislation as a heritage site, yet the lunar new year performed at the Chinatown is not considered a heritage tradition by the legislation. Unofficial heritage can also represent values and practices that exist at a local or community level (Harrison 2017:16). It is normally what someone would describe as custom or tradition; a practice that has ritualized practices linked to the values and memories of the communities in the present with those of the past (Harrison 2017:18). Harrison explains that traditions are aspects of culture that are not considered "heritage" unless a risk or threat is perceived to be detrimental to the community (Harrison 2017:18).

There are many people that prefer a tradition to stay "authentic" by not changing through social changes. Authenticity is seen as an important aspect of tradition within marginal and immigrant communities. It is a way to help the communities be seen instead of staying invisible

or misrepresented (Wong 2016:15). In many traditions that are part of a cultural heritage, social changes are seen as a negative consequence (Halbertsma 2011:34). As Halbertsma et al. (2011) explains, traditional performance placed on exhibition implicitly presents to the audience a conventional and static image that could only be set in motion by the addition of contemporary and international elements (Halbertsma 2011:38). Wong explains that there are two functions "authenticity" gives to the communities: a call for the return to a more "faithful" past and to return to the roots of the ethnic origins (Wong 2016:15). Sar ping Hok san could be considered "innovative" and "modernized" compared to the traditional fat san style. Something considered innovative or modernizing is only regarded as so in relation to something that is perceived "traditional" or "conventional" (Halbertsma 2011:38).

Acknowledging the heritage forms is part of the ethics of remembering. Removing something from one's culture does not eliminate it from one's heritage (Sandis 2014:13). In some ways, "tradition" that is passed as being old or ancient are usually recent in origin or invented. Invented traditions are a set of practices that ingrain certain values and norms by repetition that implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983:1). The act of tearing cultural elements from their original context may change their meaning, even to those who created them (Sandis 2014:171). Cultural heritage is a shape shifting thing whose contours may be contested even by those who create it (Sandis 2014:178). Adaptation takes place for old uses and old models to be relevant in new conditions and new purposes (Hobsbawm 1983:5).

#### **1.4 Performance and Dance Theory**

It is a common assumption that dance is a "universal language" and may be interpreted without understanding the dance form's cultural context and without knowing the cultural movement language (Kaepler in Walsh 2016:25) but multiple negotiations of identity, including

local and national, are often embedded in dance performances (Pine and Kuhlke 2015: IX). "Cultural performances" is the idea where members of a community put themselves on public display for others to see and hear (Singer in Korom 2013:3). Performances are practices whose repetitions place actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities through patterns of behavior, ways of speaking and manners of bodily behavior (Korom 2013:2). Performances are a representation of an effort to establish a relation with oneself (Halbertsma et al. 2011:32). Malinowski stated that only recording the spoken word verbatim is not enough to capture the tradition or culture as it misses the sociological and cultural milieu in which the utterance achieves communicative meaning and significance. Writing words without evoking the atmosphere of the performance gives us nothing more than a mutilated bit of reality (Malinowski in Korom 2013:2). While it is possible to write only about what lion dance performers have told me in their interviews, there would be a significant piece of the tradition lost in paper as I am unable to clearly articulate the social aspect of the tradition without exploring the performance and how it affects both the performers and the audience. The audience is as much part of the performance context as the performers themselves (Korom 2013:3).

Hybridity is used to describe the new forms of "mixed" traditions that emerged from global flows (Kraidy in Korom 2013:4). Cultural hybridity is the results of the global diffusion of dance styles that challenge the beliefs of what authenticity, tradition, humanity, and locality is when it concerns dance traditions (Pine and Kuhlke 2016: VII). It is assumed to be fluid and not particularly geographically rooted, yet it has increasingly become a specific target of consumption in some cases and a highly effective strategy for place-marketing in others (Aoyama 2016:2).

Dance is often tied to the construction of spatial bodies, such as cities or nations (Kuhlke in Pine and Kuhlke 2016: VIII). Dance traditions struggle to maintain local character, identity, and

authenticity in a globalized world increasingly influenced by the diffusion of styles, practices, music and clothing (Cresswell in Pine and Kuhlke 2016: IX). Authenticity is often assumed to be place specific. In reality, authenticity is constructed often staged by multiple stakeholders who include not only the producers but also the consumers, as well as the state (Aoyama 2016:2). Cultural traits are often held more intimately by those living in the diaspora than those living in the homeland as a way to cling to the imagined community that their ancestors left (Walsh 2016:32). Identity replicates itself through the proliferation of more creative products. A significant means of analyzing identity takes place from the construction of identity through dance as it is used as a means of establishing distinct cultural places in North America (Walsh 2016:36).

## **2 METHODS**

My research on lion dancing in the United States required interviewing and observing multiple groups across the nation. One of the main questions this study aims to answer is how the art form has spread (and is continuing to grow) across the United States in the last two decades. In order to research how lion dancing has spread and grown across the United States I had to contact groups from different states. If I conducted research with one group, I would only see lion dance through the lens of the one group. In order to avoid this narrow view, I conduct my research in three states: Colorado, Massachusetts, and Georgia in order to research different characteristics of lion dance in each state. In Colorado, I worked with a group to explore the practices and performances a group must go through. This was a way to look at the different situations that a lion dance group works in and how each performer contribute to the performances and practices. I was able to explore lion dance in an intimate direction with the group. During my research, the United States Dragon and Lion Dance Federation held their first championship in Boston, Massachusetts. While conducting research in Massachusetts, I observed how lion dance is

performed in a sport setting. It also allowed me to contact more groups from other around the country to get an even broader comparative perspective. Lion dance has slowly become not only a folk art and traditional dance but also a sport where groups compete against each other in championships around the world. In Georgia, I conducted research with two local groups at various performances they carried out during the Chinese Lunar New Year. During these performances, I viewed how the audience and the performers interacted with each other. The audience is just as much part of the performance experience as the performers themselves. I normally do not get to observe lion dance performances through the lens of an audience member as I had always been a performer or helped with setting up the performances so the groups in Georgia gave me a new perspective I otherwise would not have seen.

I interviewed individuals from a number of different groups from Georgia, Massachusetts, Colorado, Texas, California, Wisconsin and Hawaii including masters and leaders from eight groups and performers from six groups. It involved finding times that were good for both sides to contact each other between work schedules and different time zones. There were a couple groups I was able to meet in person for interviews including the Denver, Colorado group, Boulder, Colorado group, Atlanta, Georgia group, Chamblee, Georgia group, and San Jose, California group. In total, I interviewed 20 people from 11 lion dance teams across six different states. Seven of the performers I interviewed were masters or leaders of their respected lion dance groups. The performers I interviewed ranged in age from 18 to 50. Eight performers identified as Vietnamese American, four identified as Chinese American, one identified as Hmong American, one identified as Malaysian American, one identified as Asian American, two identified as non-Asian American, two identified as mixed Asian American, and one unknown as they filled out an anonymous questionnaire. 16 of the performers I interviewed were male while three were female and one



unknown, again through the anonymous questionnaire. Interviews took place in a multitude of locations and scenarios. Most interviews I conducted in person were carried out at the practice locations of the teams. These locations all varied wildly as each group practices in different environments including a martial arts school, a warehouse, and the team leader's house. Majority of these interviews took place while the teams were practicing. Three interviews took place at a coffee shop inside a grocery store, a restaurant, and a boba tea shop. One interview was a group interview of three performers conducted at the team member's house. I conducted telephone interviews with the leaders of two groups from Austin, Texas and Worcestershire, Massachusetts. Four other groups from Georgia, Wisconsin, Hawaii, and Texas filled out a questionnaire version of my interview and emailed their responses to me.

There were many limitations that came with conducting a nationwide study including difficulties in contacting and interviewing group members from other states. One board member of the federation from Massachusetts and I tried multiple times to conduct a phone interview together yet each time our schedules would fall apart, and we would be unable to contact each other. A group in Hawaii worked with me through both email and phone for multiple weeks to set up a live stream of their practice so I could observe how their team conducts their practices. This team was also going to have multiple of its members talk to me throughout the practice and give me their interpretation of lion dance and how it has affected their lives. Unfortunately, every site we tried to use to view the practice would not work the day we planned to have this take place. We tried multiple times, with multiple devices, and multiple apps and sites with no luck. It was an unfortunate turn of luck for us as it was clear how interested this team was in the research I was conducting. Afterwards, they became busy with Lunar New Year and we were unable to keep in touch to retry. In fact, many groups I contacted were interested in this research, yet they were

unable to participate because of their busy schedules through preparing for Lunar New Year, competitions, or just life in general.

Performers exclaimed how excited they were for the research I was working on when I introduced myself to groups at the championship and through emails. Every time I introduced myself and my research to a group or a person, they were always interested in the fact that someone was researching lion dance and happy to help if they could. Majority of the performers I interacted at the time were leaders and masters of groups as I would introduce myself and tell them about my research. I also always mentioned that I was part of the Denver group as to show how I connect to the lion dance community. Unfortunately, it was impossible to introduce myself to all the groups while in Boston, Massachusetts because of the hectic nature of the championship. Every group was busy preparing for their routine and rarely had any free time during the weekend. Yet, the groups I was able to interact with would suggest other teams to contact and a few members sent word of my research to other groups as well. During an interview I had with the Boulder team leader, he told me that he would have loved to have done a thesis on lion dance when he was in school if lion dance had been more accepted at the time, yet he feels like today, people are more accepting of a thesis on lion dance and was happy to see someone working on the research.

## **2.1 Background**

I was first introduced to lion dance when I served in the Navy back in 2004. I was a Cryptologic Technician Interpretive (CTI) which is a person who translates one language to another. I went to an intensive language school to learn Chinese Mandarin in California. During one class on Chinese culture, my teacher played a video of lion dancers jumping and dancing on various sized poles that were from three feet to twelve feet tall. I would later learn when I joined my group that these poles are called "jongs". I was mesmerized in how these dancers were able to

leap from pole to pole while under the lion costume and maintained the facade of a lion as they danced. I fell in love with the agility and power the dancers had as they sprung to each pole. The class was shown this video of the lion dancers because a few days later we went on a field trip to San Francisco's Chinatown for Lunar New Year. Lions and Dragons paraded around the bustling streets of Chinatown. Stores sold new year trinkets that were red and gold. I bought a small lion marionette from one of the stores. This was just one way how an ancient tradition was becoming commodified. About ten years later, the opportunity to join a lion dance group appeared to me.

I joined a group located in Denver, Colorado in 2013 when I came across their website one day while searching for a community center where I could refresh my Chinese language. I felt a little out of place at the first practice since I was both older than everyone else and the only non-Asian American there. Yet, everyone in the group accepted me and treated me like another member so I quickly became comfortable with the group. During the winter, practices took place at an elementary school's gym while during the summer we would practice in a parking lot outside a closed down department store. There were a couple of other new members of the team that joined around the same time I did. A couple of the teammates would take us to the side and teach us the dance moves and cymbal beats. We would start by clapping out the beats with our hands and once we felt comfortable, they would give us the cymbals to practice. The first performance I performed at with the group was for a banquet for Lunar New Year that took place about a month after I joined the group. I had not learned all the cymbal beats by the time I performed with the group even though I had practiced for hours. I was extremely nervous and afraid I would mess up and make the performance sound bad, but I was determined to be part of the group so during the performance, I watched another cymbal player's hands and mimicked his patterns. By the end of

the performance, I had the beats memorized and could watch the lion as it played with four cabbages on the stage.

After a few months practicing the dance, I performed as the lion for the first time at a small event for a company. Half way through the performance, I froze up because the patterns left my mind. I still was not comfortable with the entire performance even though I knew all the steps. The girl that was performing as my tail traded places with me as we walked around the back of the room as the lions interacted with the audience. After this performance, my master explained to me that forgetting moves is ok. It happens. He advised me that if a person forgets a step, they should do something like triangles. Triangles is a step where the performer controlling the head of the lion will shift the lion head from left to right while waiting for the signal from the drummer for the next section of the dance. Instead of placing me back on the cymbals because of my slip up during the performance, my instructor continued to have me perform as a lion at the various events. I mainly performed as the tail of the lion, the second person in the costume, as I preferred that position when dancing because it allowed me to be the lion while not be the center of attention. The instructor knew when someone on the team was dedicated to the team and determined to do better. Instead of placing people in the same roles for every performance, he would push us to step outside our comfort zones to grow as a person and as a team.

The time I spent with the team from 2013 to 2015 pushed me to study lion dance and the social aspects of the tradition. I was interested in learning more about the history and lore of the tradition. Unfortunately, it was extremely difficult to find anything written about lion dance outside of children's books. This lack of written information on the tradition pushed me to conduct this research. Lion dance is still a very niche activity, yet it is becoming more visible thanks in part to

social media and video sites. My hope is that this research can help forge lion dance into becoming more accessible to the public through the transmission of written information.

## **2.2 Denver**

In Denver, I participated and observed a lion dance group during their practices and performances. This lion dance group was the case study for the bulk of my research. I conducted a mix of participation and observation during my time with the group. The Denver group is the team I was part of from 2013-2015 therefore I was able to observe and participate with the team interchangeably without the members really noticing that I was there. These members are my friends, and in some ways, my family so we had a close intimate relationship that helped with the research. Practices took place on Friday nights from 5pm until 8 or 9pm and on Saturday mornings from 9am until 1pm. During most practices, I would participate in the practice for the first half and sit on the side of the warehouse and observed what the team members were working on during the second half. Occasionally, a team member would ask me what I was doing but then would return to what he was working on exclaiming how much I had written in my book once I explained to him my research. I mainly participated in Saturday practices as those are more focused on actual lion dance techniques while Friday practices are usually used to practice dragon dance techniques. Before arriving to Denver to work with the group, I emailed the leader of the group to ask if I could do my research with them. Once I arrived, I explained my research to the group and let them know that if they are uncomfortable being part of the research to let me know and I would not include them. Everyone in the group was more than happy and interested in being part of the project.

While working with the Denver group, they performed multiple dances for separate venues. For most of the performances, I took photos for the group. This allowed me to observe the group during their performances and assist the members when they needed help. I also performed with

the group by playing the cymbals for a few routines and dancing as the tail of a lion for one performance. Even though performing as a lion made me realize how out of shape I had become, it also provided a glimpse into what it was like to be a lion dancer. The dancers must perform their routine by memorization as there is limited vision in the costumes. The tail has minimal vision as they are mainly looking at the floor the entire performance. Team members must have a strong sense of trust with each other in order to perform gracefully.

### **2.3 Boston**

In Boston, Massachusetts, the first national championship took place on the last weekend of May 2018. Over twenty groups from all over the country arrived in Boston to participate in the championship. I was able to observe the tradition from a broader perspective while examining the championship. It allowed me to view lion dance through the lens of a sport rather than as a symbolic tradition. During this time, I observed through a nonreactive style of research. This unobtrusive observation allowed me to view the performances at the championship without interfering (Bernard 332:2018). I watched each team perform their dances in a systematic way throughout the competition. During the performances, I observed the similarities and differences in dance styles and music styles each team had. Many of the groups performed a similar style although each group had its own flair to the dance. These differences were subtle to notice during the performances. The championship spanned over the course of three days and included freestyle competition, drum competition, jongs (poles) competition, and dragon dance competition. It was through this busy and hectic weekend that I was able to observe the direction the lion dance in the United States seems to be heading or, at least, the direction that the federation hopes lion dance is heading.

Since the championship took place over the course of three days, there were very little opportunities to speak to the various groups participating in the competitions. Each group was busy preparing for their routine. There was hardly a moment of rest for any of the performers during the weekend. I introduced myself and described my research to a few team leaders and federation board members during the weekend. I emailed the groups once I returned from Massachusetts and the chaos of the championship had worn off.

## **2.4 Atlanta**

During my time in Atlanta, Georgia, I was able to observe two Lunar New Year festivals (2018 and 2019) that took place at the Chinatown shopping center. At the festival, two different lion dance groups performed at different events over the two days the festival took place. One group that was associated with the Chinese Culture Center would perform a lion dance and a dragon dance in the parking lot of the center. This performance would attract a large group of spectators as it was the main performance for the festival. The other group, a stand-alone lion dance group from Chamblee, would perform a dance in front of the shopping center with a woman MCing the dance and explaining the context of the dance. Afterwards that group would go from business to business to bring good fortune to the business owners for the following year. Each year, the schedule was the same, so I was able to see these performances multiple times. A third group that is associated with a martial arts school from Atlanta also performed multiple times over the lunar new year. I was able to observe multiple performances of this group in different settings. They performed for a grand opening at a public library, at a mall for new year, and at a community center to raise money so they could open a new location for their school as gentrification had pushed them out of the neighborhood, they had practiced in for the past twenty years.

The performances in Atlanta gave me a unique experience as I was able to observe solely as an audience member. This was a unique experience because in both Boston and Denver I worked with my group therefore I was always viewing the performances through the lens of a performer or a team member. Being in a situation where I was not with my team allowed me the opportunity to see the lion dance through a different lens. I used this time to observe how the audience and the team interacted with each other during the performances.

### **3 FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 The History and Politics of Lion Dance**

Before going into the bulk of my ethnography, it is important to explore the history of lion dancing to really understand why it was brought to the United States by both Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese immigrants when they first arrived in the country. Lion dancing became popular in China since the Ming dynasty (1368 AD -1644 AD) yet the origins are a little foggy as it is unclear exactly when the tradition began. (Loo and Loo 2016:131). There have been dances and rituals in China since the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC - 256 BC) that lion dance performances still use today. These were stylistic of martial arts dances that were used to display power and were used to display military exploits and intimidation (Yap 2016:18). Lions were introduced to China during the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 BC) through the Silk Road Trade from India and Persia (Yap 2016:19). It was also during this Dynasty that Buddhism was first introduced to China. As Yap explains, when Buddhism entered the country, elements of ancient traditions may have been adopted to make them more suitable to new perspectives. Lion dance is a large part of Shaolin Buddhism today as it used to show the martial skills of shaolin artists. During the Tang Dynasty (618 AD - 907 AD) lion dance began to develop into what is performed today. A historical



document from the Tang Dynasty described a ritual called "Lion Dance of Five Directions" that although, is different from the tradition seen today, does have similarities with the dance as it is performed today (Thompson 1987; Yap 2016). The lions would face the five directions while they danced, and the colors of the lions corresponded with the directions (Thompson 1987:33). While directions are important in lion dancing today, they are normally used when dancing at temples. During the Tang Dynasty, the lion masks were made of wood with golden eyes, silver teeth, and wore a pelt from cow hide with the tail and beard made from hemp (Thompson 1987; Yap 2016).

It was not until the Northern Song Dynasty (960 AD - 1127 AD) that martial arts were connected to the dance. The wooden masks and headdresses were exchanged for papier-mache to be lighter and easier to carry. Strands of hemp was added to the body and dyed in bright colors to give the lion a shaggier coat (Yap 2016:28). A majority of lion costumes are still made of bamboo and papier-mache today. The hemp has been replaced with synthetic materials like polyester and the lion coats are decorated by a multitude of colorful items including paint, colorful "fur", and sequins. It was during the Qing Dynasty (1644 AD - 1912 AD) when one of the most famous styles of lion dance, fat san, was created by incorporating both martial arts and local folk traditions (Yap 2016:32). Lion dance groups were traveling martial arts troupes that would visit towns in the countryside during the New Year. After the lions performed other members of the troupe would demonstrate their martial arts (Thompson 1987:34). It was customary to support the troupe by offering food and shelter after the performance which was known as "supporting the lion" (Thompson 1987:36). Today, lion dance is performed to ward off evil spirits and to bring good luck and many restaurants that lions perform at during grand openings or new year will feed the group once the performance has ended. This is perhaps a left over from "supporting the lion" centuries ago. Lion dance also began to spread around the world during the Qing Dynasty when

the Chinese diaspora began to reach other countries (Yap 31:2016). The Chinese would bring aspects of their culture with them when moving to new locations including lion dance which is a beloved art form with how colorful and boisterous the performances are. The Qing Dynasty was also a time when lion dance groups were connected to political dissent (Yap 2016:31) as it is hard to miss the groups since they are loud and colorful. Andrew, a Chinese American who is the leader of the San Jose group, explained that during the Qing Dynasty lion dance groups were used to commit espionage against the government. During certain performances, they would climb poles to see over walls and the scrolls they used at the end of performances would have code words for the spies to pick out. I was unable to find historical evidence of how lion dance groups were used politically during the Qing Dynasty so it is possible that the use of groups as espionage could be nothing more than a legend. Still, lion dance has been used in political ways throughout history in multiple countries, including the US, therefore, during the time of Mao's regime, many martial arts and dance schools fled China and took lion dance with them in fear of being persecuted (Yap 2016:34). During the early 1900s, there were a lot of hostility between the various groups and schools in the US and it was not uncommon to see the groups break out in fights on the streets, but these rivalries have been slowly turning into the tournaments and competitions that take place today (Yap 2016:34; Thompson 1987:37).

### ***3.1.1 Influence from the Chinese Diaspora***

There is not much written on how lion dance arrived in America and how it thrived in Chinatowns across the country. This is mainly because lion dance is traditionally passed down through oral transmission from master to student. Nevertheless, lion dance was one of the cultural forms the Chinese immigrants brought with them when they came to the United States. Lion dance troupes have been performing at New Year events in U.S. Chinatowns since the 1800s (Takaki

1993: 217). Since lions bring good fortune and luck to people for the year, it makes sense that they would want to bring this tradition with them to a new land where they are looking for opportunities to prosper and thrive. Chinatowns, at this time, were largely made of men as they would work in the U.S. to send money back to their families in China (Lary 2012:111). The men that came to the U.S. were those that were not working on farms in China, men who had just left the military or were part of a martial arts group (Thompson 1987:34). These are also the groups who mainly performed lion dance in China at that time (Thompson 1987). The political turbulence and anti-Chinese sentiments that took place from the 1870s -1940s created a hostile environment for Chinese Americans and migrants outside of the communities they had created in cities around the U.S. (Misiuna 2019:156). As a result, lion dance would have stayed relatively hidden from mainstream culture for decades as acculturation was near impossible during these violent times (Lary 2012:111).

Chinese immigrants began to move to the United States, during the 1840s, because of a growing demand for mining laborers in California during the gold rush (Portes in Misiuna 2019:154; Lary 2012:92). The global building spree created an immense demand for labor to build railways, dams, and canals. Many of the Chinese laborers were indentured to their employees or debt bondage because they would only get paid once their contract was over. During their contract, money would be deducted to cover travel, food, accommodation and gambling debt (Lary 2018:93). When the Transcontinental Railroad was completed many of the Chinese that lived in the U.S. suddenly found themselves without employment. They looked for jobs at cities and farms along the railroad yet because there were droughts and an economic recession also taking place, anti-Chinese sentiment began to spread across the country (Misiuna 2019:156). There were a lot of racial harassment towards the Chinese especially from Irish and Italian Americans (Tang

2016:43). These tensions and harassments would lead to riots that would attack the Chinese communities. The Chinese laborers would move to a new town or mining camp as they were unable to prevent these attacks (Misiuna 2018:157).

In 1868, the Burlingame-Seward Treaty was signed that granted the Chinese the right to free immigration and travel within the United States (Misiuna 2018:157). Yet, by the 1880s the anti-Chinese movement had grown so large, the U.S. imposed multiple treaties and acts that restricted Chinese immigrants from entering the country (Misiuna 2018). By the 1890s, Chinese immigration into the U.S. was banned and Chinese people already living in the U.S. had to carry around certificates of identity and of residence (Misiuna 2018:158). America's view of Chinese people would not shift until 1937 when the Sino-Japan war began. Suddenly, America and China had a common enemy and America's gaze went from China to Japan. Finally, in 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act (Misiuna 2018:159) yet it would not be until 1965, when the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments was created that the national origins quota system would be abolished and eliminate national origin, race, or ancestry as bases for immigration in the U.S. (Fan 2003:265). Chinese Americans, and Asian Americans as a whole, were not able to expand and integrate into American culture until the late 1960s which is why lion dance would stay a hidden tradition among the Asian community until the 1970s or later, as it was difficult for the community to practice the dance outside of their neighborhoods.

Throughout the decades of treaties and acts that were created in the U.S. that banned Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S. or become citizens, Lunar New Year and lion dance were both used in the larger Chinatowns around the country as a way to maintain their traditions and also to generate political and economic resources (Yeh 2008). In 1876, over a dozen Chinese immigrants were arrested at the San Francisco lunar new year for violating the city's ban on

fireworks. The ban on firecrackers was attributed as a discriminatory policy since fireworks was allowed during the Fourth of July (Yeh 2008:15-16). In 1912, when the Republic of China (ROC) overthrew the Qing Dynasty, the Chinese New Year was abolished in China. Many leaders in the U.S. supported this policy to follow the footsteps of China's "modernization" effort. Still, even with fewer people participating in the traditions, other Chinese Americans continued to practice Lunar New Year in order to oppose the ROC (Yeh 2008:16). A debate on whether the community should practice the traditions continued until the Cold War era, when the celebrations were seen as a "valuable tool to help conform to US political ideologies" (Yeh 2008:16-17) since celebrating Lunar New Year and performing lion dance was seen as expressing opposition towards the ROC. Up until the late 1990s, festivals that lion dance groups performed at in Chinatowns would foreignize Chinese Americans by erasing the multiplicity and hybridization of the cultures that flowed through Chinese Americans. Festivals and parades in Chinatowns would "highlight exotic Chineseness" which would cause Chinese Americans to appear as "unassimilable foreigners who were too backward and exotic to be part of modern America" (Yeh 2008:158). This exoticizing of Chinese culture was created as a way to fulfill mainstream audience's crave for exoticism (Yeh 2008:157). Even though Lunar New Year and lion dance is still commoditized in the U.S. today, many Asian American communities have reclaimed the traditions as a way to express their Asian Americanness.

### ***3.1.2 Influence of the Vietnamese Diaspora***

My intention for this section is not to paint Vietnamese Americans as vulnerable refugees. Instead, I want to take a moment to quickly explore how and when the Vietnamese diaspora came to the US since lion dance is as an important part of the Vietnamese American culture as it is with the Chinese American culture. In 1975, South Vietnam fell to communism which caused thousands

of Vietnamese to flee Southeast Asia. The first wave of refugees that fled to the United States trekked through the Philippines, Guam, or the Wake Islands (Espiritu 2014:26). Camp Pendleton housed over 50,000 refugees between April to August 1975 (Espiritu 2014:26). The Vietnamese were welcomed by U.S. policies that embodied ideals of moral responsibility, duty, and multiculturalism because the Vietnamese were refugees fleeing communism within the context of the Cold War. This arrival even propelled the rewriting of the Refugee Act in 1980 (Ninh 2018:7). Yet, there was strong opposition by state officials and adverse reactions by the public at the influx of refugees. Some states initially refused to accept refugees or postponed the arrival date forcing many Vietnamese people to live in makeshift camps in military bases around the U.S. for an extended time (Espiritu 2014:32). As of 2016, there are more than two million Vietnamese Americans. Majority of whom arrived in the United States as refugees in 1975 or were US-born descendants of those Vietnamese refugees (Ninh 2018:7).

Lion dance has been practiced in Vietnam since 600 AD. Although, the beast in the dance is known as a unicorn who brings good fortune in Vietnam instead of a lion (Yap 2016:70), I only came across one group in the U.S. that performs the Unicorn Dance during my studies. Still most of the performers I interviewed during my research were Vietnamese. Like other groups that made their way to the United States, the Vietnamese brought their cultures and traditions with them which included lion dance. They felt the need to forge unified histories, identities, and memories (Espiritu 2014:3). When the Vietnamese refugees first arrived in the U.S., they intentionally resisted being assimilated into the society or even belong to any one particular nation. Instead they traversed through boundaries to create their own alternative transnational community (Ninh 2018:3). While there is not any documentation to confirm how Vietnamese lion dance came to the U.S., it most likely was brought with the refugees in the 1970s. Performances such as lion dance

were censored by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, therefore the Vietnamese diaspora continued performing lion dance in Little Saigons around the U.S. as a way to maintain their cultural practices and to politically state their opposition to the Socialist Republic (Avaunt 2016:15). This alternative cultural group that also brought lion dance to the U.S. would help turn it into the multicultural tradition that is seen today in America as it was no longer only Chinese who were practicing the tradition in the U.S. but also the Vietnamese as well. It was no longer only a Chinese tradition in America but an Asian tradition as Vietnamese churches and youth groups started small lion dance groups in the community.

### ***3.1.3 Malaysian Influence in Lion Dance***

Lion dance was brought to Malaysia in the late 19th century with the immigration of the Chinese population to the country (Loo and Loo 133:2016). As lion dance become more popular in Malaysia, the tradition began to transform into something new. It kept the colorful costumes, but the tail became shorter in order to perform more complex acrobatic feats. The shape of the head also changed from a curved mouth to a straight mouth. This change constricts the already limited visibility that the dancer has while wearing the costume. A riot caused by the Chinese that advocated for identity and cultural preservation caused the Malay groups to enforce the New Culture Policy in 1971 which made it illegal to perform certain Chinese traditions in the country including the lion dance. And yet in 1979, the Malay group decided to combine the lion dance and a tiger dance that had been around for hundreds of years in order to make it "more Malaysian" since there are tigers in Malaysia (Loo and Loo 135:2016). It was not until 2010 that lion dance in Malaysia was seen as a multicultural art form (Loo and Loo 136:2016). Unity is now an important part of Malay ethnic identity and the government wanted to instill respect toward each cultural ethnicity within the country (Loo and Loo 137:2016). As of today, Malaysia

is seen as a huge influence in lion dancing around the world. It is where the largest annual international championship takes place and many of the grand masters of lion dance are from Malaysia.

It is important to explore how lion dance emerged in Malaysia because many groups in the United States perform a style that is based out of Malaysia. The grand master and great grand master of the Sarping style have based their schools in Malaysia and multiple groups in the U.S. perform this style of lion dance. The Sar Ping style was founded in China in the 1940s. In the 1980s, the art was passed on to Master Chan Siew Kee, the Master of the Denver group and many other groups in the US. In 2004, Master Chan Siew Kee founded the Sar Ping Lion Dance Centre in Singapore in order to preserve and promote the Sar Ping lion dance (Cheong 2013:1). In 2006, the Confederation of Sar Ping Lion Dance was founded in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia that had similar objectives as the Sar Ping Lion Dance Centre and also unified all Sar Ping teams from around the globe (Cheong 2013:2).

A master and grand master of lion dance are instructors that were successful enough to have students who continued the style of dance and had students as well. Grand masters from various countries including Malaysia, China, and Singapore will visit Western states to teach their styles of lion dance to groups that are interested in learning it. Even though masters have traveled to other countries to teach their styles for centuries, the practice has become more prevalent today. In 2014, Danh, 45 Vietnamese American and the leader of the Denver, Colorado group, flew to Seattle for a seminar on Sarping style. Many people from all over the United States attended the seminar to learn this new style including George, a non-Asian American master of a Shaolin school in Atlanta, Georgia. This was an intensive workshop that took place over a weekend that taught people the dance moves, drum beats, and the gong and cymbal beat



of this particular style. While many people go to these seminars to learn the new styles to incorporate into their team's dances, others attend to know the direction the tradition is going in. When Danh returned to Denver, he immediately began teaching the group this new style. On the other hand, George continued teaching the Fat San style he originally learned in Taiwan to his school.

The sporting aspect of lion dance made its start in Malaysia in 2000 when the first Malaysian national lion dance championship was held in Genting, Malaysia (rwgenting.com 2019). This was a drastic change to how lion dance was viewed in Malaysia compared to the 1960s and 1970s when riots took place. As many of the performers I interviewed stated, the championship in Genting is the largest lion dance competition in the world now. In 2016, the Denver group visited Malaysia to observe the championship. Several of the performers professed that they hoped to compete at the championship in the future. Lion dance groups in Malaysia has taken on a more multiracial presence by incorporating Malay instruments and including members of various ethnicities including Malay and Indian (Loo and Loo 2016:139). The Malaysian group, Kun Seng Keng (KSK), has become a huge international influencer for the lion dance communities around the globe. Teams from all over the world have traveled to Malaysia to train with KSK who holds thirty-four world and forty National Champion titles as of 2016 (Loo and Loo 2016:140).

Teams will also go overseas to train with the grand masters or groups in other countries in order to get hands on experience with the styles. Multiple members of the Denver group have received training in Malaysia and Singapore. The group practiced their dragon dance moves in Malaysia by a well-known master who is famous for winning world competitions with his troupe. James, Gwen, Nhat, and I sat around the coffee table at James' and Gwen's living room. I

was nearing the end of my time in Denver and we took this time of hanging out after a long day to conduct the interview. As the interview progressed, Nhat would answer the questions by stating he wanted to be a cat or make cat like noises and imitate what a lion would do. During the interview, they described their time training in Malaysia. James, 35 Vietnamese American from Denver, described the leader as "the Gordon Ramsey of lion dance." "It is a desired training," he continued, "but it is not a walk in the park." As Gwen, 27 mixed Chinese American from Denver, and Nhat, 24 Vietnamese American from Denver, described, the team would practice 8-10 hours a day while there. It was not necessarily because they were being over practiced but as Gwen said, "It's what happens when you take high altitude people to low altitude places to train." Dante, 24 Hmong American from Denver, added that while they did not perform in Malaysia, their practices were in front of many of the masters which would create an environment where the group would want to try their best while learning. He equated practicing in front of the masters to performing in public because of the stress of being in front of so many experts. The influence of lion dance has traversed more rapidly across the globe at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Lion dance in America is no longer a separate entity from lion dance in Asia as groups in the U.S. are performing, competing and training in other countries of influence. Groups and performers from all over the world interact with each other through social media, internet, phone, or in person through travel. While there may be different reasons why people perform the tradition based on the location they live, they still work together to better understand lion dance.

#### ***3.1.4 The United States Dragon and Lion Dance Federation***

The United States Dragon and Lion Dance Federation (USDLDF) was founded by two of the board members when they attended the 2016 Genting World Lion Dance Championship in Malaysia. They met with the Vice President and Secretary of the International Dragon and Lion

Dance Federation (IDLDF) to learn the details of forming, organizing, and running a federation that would be eligible for membership with the IDLDF. Once back in the U.S., multiple lion dance leaders and school owners formed a committee to focus on the development of the USDLDF. They reached out to other leaders and coaches to seek insight and opinions on how the organization should function and help develop the tradition. The federation was registered as a 501(c) 3 status Nonprofit Corporation. Meetings were held to discuss the structure, membership, fundraising, competitions and rankings, and other topics (USDLDF.org 2019). The mission of the federation is “to preserve and promote the arts of dragon and lion dance as a cultural tradition and sport throughout the United States and abroad.” Their vision is to create opportunities for all the styles of lion dance teams to express and develop themselves through friendly training, exchanges, programs, and tournaments. USDLDF is also an official casting partner of Cirque Du Soleil (USDLDF.org 2019). At the time of the research there were 22 lion dance groups listed on the website that are part of the federation located in 13 different states and more that are not listed as it depends on the membership the team chooses (USDLDF.org 2019). There is an annual membership for individuals (\$35USD) and schools (\$150USD). Memberships allow individuals to compete with their team at national and international levels and serve as judges and officials at USDLDF events. School memberships allow teams to be ranked and compete at national and international level events, given exposure through being listed on the website, and having the benefits of being under a recognized organization. Individuals and teams can also become members just to support the federation in the preservation and development of dragon and lion dance in the U.S. as well (USDLDF.org 2019). Majority of the sponsors of the federation and championship that took place in 2018 are martial arts groups, businesses that specialize in art and lion dance equipment, Asian associations and businesses around the U.S., and various donors.

In August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the federation held an inauguration gala banquet to celebrate the start of the “new and exciting era in the world of dragon and lion dance in the U.S.” (USDLDF.org 2019). The gala took place in Denver, Colorado and included drum, dragon, and lion dance performances and kung fu demonstrations. A friendly competition took place during the inauguration as well which the Denver team took first place. The federation has presented multiple seminars and classes around the U.S. on drumming techniques, dancing techniques, and techniques for fixing lion heads. When I first started this study, I did not realize how young the federation was since it was introduced the same time that I began my graduate school. My research would have gone in a different direction if it was not for the USDLDF because through the federation I was able to meet and interact with groups from around the country in person.

In May 2018, the USDLDF held the first National Championship in Boston, Massachusetts. Over 20 teams from across the U.S. traveled to Boston by plane and by car to attend and compete in the championship. The championship took place over two days with the free style competition taking place on the first day and jongs, drum, and dragon competition taking place on the second day. During the opening ceremony, the USDLDF president explained that while it is a championship and a competition, the most important thing to take away from the event is the community. He advised the teams to leave the event having made new friends. One of the Vice Presidents of the federation stated that the event was recognized in Massachusetts as one of the 18 signature sporting events. She continued that the event was not just for people who were obsessed with lion dance but that it was for team building, team spirit, the passion, the skills, and learning about one’s responsibilities and inabilities. The speeches given during the opening ceremony made sure it was clear that they wanted the championship to be about unity, growth, and becoming visible in the United States. The competitions were secondary to these visions. She ends with

stating that their vision is to see lion and dragon dance included in America. “Wherever you are, you make sure that we, as the US dragon and lion dance community will be seen, heard, respected, and praised and included.”

Most of the teams I interacted with and interviewed throughout my study were part of the USDLDF. The members that are part of these teams were excited to see the direction that the USDLDF would take the community. For them, it represented growth and visibility for the tradition. Gwen explained that the Denver team indirectly helps with the federation’s activities since the group was part of the original founding teams for the federation. While the team hosted the inauguration of the federation in 2017, they help more with drawing more attention and interest in joining the federation. The USDLDF is perusing to establish a network of teams across the U.S. so that they can share lion dance experiences and knowledge with each other. Gwen adds that competitions is a new aspect of the lion dance community in the U.S. but to her it is more of a way to promote the culture and sport of lion dance. While Jiaolong and I talked in a conference style room of the martial arts school, students practiced their lion dance routine in the next room. The drum beats and ringing cymbals drifted into the room as we conducted the interview. Jiaolong expressed his excitement to see where the federation takes lion dance in the future but, he has qualms about it as well as he is afraid the federation will speed up the homogenization of the tradition. It is difficult to say which direction the lion dance community will head since the USDLDF is such a young organization, but the board members of the federation are determined to create a community where lion dance can become more visible in the U.S.

### ***3.1.5 The Parallel Between Lion Dancing and Asian American Communities***

Throughout the history of the United States, Asian Americans have led contributions to the country while remaining as invisible communities. Asian Americans have been fighting for the

recognition of the contributions they have given to the U.S. for decades. In many ways, the paths that lion dance has taken and been used in the U.S. has paralleled the history of Asian Americans in the country. During the 1800s and early 1900s, lion dance was mainly performed by Chinese immigrants in Chinatowns around the nation. It stayed relatively hidden from the rest of the U.S. as Chinese immigrants stayed mostly in Chinatowns since there was aggression directed towards them from other groups in the country. When the ROC took over China in 1912, there were disputes within the Chinese communities as to whether continue performing lion dance or to stop since it had been banned by the ROC. Lion dance was performed less often during this time but was still utilized by many people within the Chinese communities as a way to display opposition towards the ROC. A similar situation with Vietnamese immigrants also took place in the 1970s, when they arrived to the U.S. The SRoV also banned lion dance which Vietnamese immigrants used the tradition as a way to display opposition to the regime as well. Interest in Asian cultures started to take place in the U.S. in the 1960s when the Asian American civil rights movements took place. This was a very Orientalized and exoticized interest in the cultures that Asian communities around the country took advantage of to commodify lion dancing in order to produce income. This intense commodifying of lion dance took place until the early 2000s and in some ways is still taking place albeit in a less intense form. Today, lion dance is used in a more subtle political way, especially by lion dance performers, as it is used as a proxy for Asian American visibility. Many of the speeches given at the lion dance national championship could interchange “lion dance community” with “Asian American community” as the more visible lion dance becomes so too, will the Asian American communities in the U.S. Every achievement for the lion dance community is also an achievement for the Asian American community.

Majority of Asian Americans that perform lion dance come from an ethnicity that practices the tradition in Asia. While there are people who perform lion dance that are not part of these ethnicities, an overwhelming number of the performers are of Chinese or Vietnamese decent. This gives the question if U.S. panasianism is even a concept to connect to lion dance in America since the main idea of panasianism in the U.S. is uniting together against similar structural racism directed at Asian communities in the United States. It is the idea that all Asian cultures are united as “one culture” but this is not the case as every ethnicity has their own traditions and customs. There is also a dichotomy within the pan-Asian idea where the needs of the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans come first before the needs of other Asian communities in the U.S. Still, lion dance in America takes on a pan-ethnic identity where multiple ethnicities perform and practice the tradition for their own reasons.

### **3.2 Symbolisms of Lion Dance**

#### **3.2.1 *Fat San Versus Hok San***

"Fat San. Hok San. It doesn't matter. We all move the same. We all have the same reasons for moving." Jiaolong, 40s mixed Chinese American who is a leader of the Boulder, Colorado group, recounted a story of when a team from Malaysia watched his team perform. One of the members of the Malaysian team told Jiaolong that the argument of which style of lion dance is "better" or "more authentic" is problematic because what is important is the dance itself. The philosophy of the technique and stance is secondary. Both styles traditionally perform for the same reason; to scare away evil spirits and bring good luck and fortune to the audience. Many styles arise when a new type of lion costume is created. The length of the body and the shape of the head is different therefore new instructions to how to use these lion costumes will be introduced. These styles become a specific way of how to use the lions.

At times, teams will work together for events and performances or one will visit another team to learn different techniques and forms to enhance their performance. During a long day of multiple performances separated by the normal Saturday practice, Dante and I found time to sit down at the back of the warehouse to conduct the interview while everyone else split to work on individual move sets. A few of the younger boys would play with the drum as we discussed lion dance which we would then ask them to wait until the interview was done. Dante told me that he performed with a group in California that performed fat san style. He recounted how powerful the team shakes the lion heads and how hard they beat the drums. It made him realize that they needed to practice harder in order to become better for themselves and not to just get the moves down. He wanted to practice seriously in order to show how powerful their music could be and how fierce their lions could be. Gwen recounted a time when the team performed with a team from Seattle, Washington. The Seattle team also performed fat san style like the group from California. The two teams mixed their members during the performance where the Seattle team performed their fat san style while the Denver team played their Hok san style drumming. She explained that the Seattle group's routine was a very traditional performance using tangerines as props.

Fat San styles are usually associated to a martial arts school. Martial arts masters define a school's kong fu through their lion dance. If the school performs exceptional lion dance performances, then their martial skills are also considered exceptional. Fat San style is about power and displaying the power the group can produce. The motions are large, and the strikes are strong. The idea of rooting, a pause and stop motion that demonstrates power and restraint, is significant aspect to performing traditional Fat San. What people see when you perform is who you are in that moment. It is your skill set and what you have achieved in that moment. The spirit of the lion is the ferocity and energy that is shown while performing the dance. The ability to express the



ferocity of the lion was a way to show one's skill. A unique aspect of Fat San is that the performer can make up the dance as he is going through the stances. The dancers are taught basic choreography and steps that will be bridged together. The drummer will then find beats that fit with the movements that the lion performs during these bridging moments. The performers will incorporate and transfer the martial technique and stances they have learned into their dancing since they spend more time during the week working on these techniques and stances. Jiaolong stated that he has threatened his students that he would get them Hok San lions to practice because his students do not like them. Fat San lions have a curved mouth while Hok San lions have a flat mouth. There is extremely limited visibility when dancing with a Fat San lion but the Hok San head has even less visibility. Yet, many Fat San dancers do not care for the Hok San lions, not because they have less visibility, but because the lions are "cute and fluffy". They are not fierce looking like the Fat San lion heads.

Hok San is about artistic expression. There is something new that a person must learn in order to perform Hok San properly. The dancer cannot just make it up as they go along which as James states is indicative of the Fat San style he originally learned to perform. The dancer becomes something other than themselves. They become the lion. It is proving that one can become something else while performing. There are techniques and strict motions to Hok San that must be followed. It takes a different skill set to perform Hok San. Gwen expressed that while some Fat San teams may take on the role of "becoming the lion", it is a modern idea as old martial arts films that incorporated lion dancing were two people doing martial arts under a lion costume and showing off their skills instead of being the lion. As we sipped coffee at the coffee shop located inside the local grocery store, Vien, a 19-year-old Vietnamese American, stated he preferred Hok San because it is the team's signature style. To Vien, the team is able to express itself through the

dance to other people and other teams. Jiaolong declared what I also have come to conclusion about why people prefer Fat San or Hok San. It is based on the person's personality and many times it is also based on which style they were taught first.

### **3.2.2 *Symbolic Meaning***

Lion dance is a strikingly symbolic and ritualistic tradition. Even today, with the dance developing into a competition style sport, the symbolic aspect of lion dance is still the most important aspect of the art. A majority of the performances that groups dance for are either to bring good luck to the audience or to promote and preserve the tradition. Every detail of the dance has meaning to it; the color of the lions, the different pieces on the lion head, the techniques, the drum beats, and even the routines. The main purpose of the dance is to chase away evil spirits and bring good luck and prosperity. Danh, the master of the Denver team, and I sat on a red wooden bench at the back of the warehouse to have the interview as the rest of the team ran laps around the warehouse parking lot. Rows of colorful lion heads lined the wall behind us. We took this time to do the interview since I had recently injured my leg and was unable to run laps with the team. He explained that people can be superstitious in Asia and believe the lions can chase away the bad energy so the families can be happy, healthy, and lucky. The lions also show prosperity and joy for the people. In the US, these dances usually take place during the lunar new year, but it is becoming more common for lion dances to perform at weddings, birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries. Nils, the leader of the Wisconsin group originally from Brazil, explained that usually teams perform at businesses or homes to exercise the demons away and promote good fortune.

One of the most traditionally significant ceremonies that almost every group participates in is the eye dotting ceremony in order to give life to the lions. Gwen explained that in order to give life to the lion, someone who has a respectful position in society or has high stature has to

perform the ceremony. A mayor, priest, or monk could perform the ceremony. The idea is that the more respect a person has that performs the ceremony the stronger life the lion will receive. The person of prestige will go from lion to lion, who are sleeping, and dot red paint on their eyes, ears, mirror, mouth, back, and paws. This represents the blood flowing through the lion which brings it life. A ribbon will be placed around the horn to represent that the lion has been tamed. The lions will then wake up, dance, and bow to the person. The eye dotting ceremony I participated in took place at a small Buddhist temple in Colorado. Once the lions woke up, they bowed to the statues to show respect to them. There is not much literature on the eye dotting ceremony for lions as every group performs it slightly different. Gwen believes the reason for not writing down the steps of the eye dotting ceremony has to do with the fact that there could be a lot of discrepancies to the ceremony that keeps it from being "authentic" to various groups since many of the groups have their own rules and rituals that they feel is the authentic way to perform the ceremony. By writing down a specific way of performing the eye dotting ceremony would neglect the various ways groups from around the world performs this specific ceremony.

Showing respect is a crucial part of performing lion dance. There are many things that a lion can do to show respect to an establishment and just as many things that if done will show disrespect and by proxy send bad luck to the businesses. There are also certain procedures the lion should follow depending on what deity the owners of the shop worship. Before entering the business, the lions will bow to the heaven, the Earth, and the business. Three is an important number in lion dancing because it represents the heavens, the Earth, and the people. Many of the techniques in lion dance will be done in sets of three. Most of the dances start with "the three bows" which is where the lion will bow three times to show respect to the three entities. While performing for the businesses, the lions will also lick the doors of the business to bless them.

Although Licking doors is a subtle action that many groups do not practice today. It is also considered rude for the lions to rush into a store and dance. This is seen as giving the store bad luck and is not proper etiquette. Lions must bow to altars when they walk by them. When the lion does bow to the altar, it must be low and not aggressive. The lion should never be above the deity that the owners' worship. When the lions leave the store, they must back out of the store to, again, show respect. It is considered bad luck if the lions turn their back on the store when leaving as this is perceived as the lions turning their backs on the business and leaving bad luck. Usually a person dressed as a Buddha will help guide the lions out as they walk backwards since they cannot see what is behind them.

There is also a ceremony that took place when two teams run into each other on the streets. It does not happen much in Colorado because there are not many lion dance groups. It is a ceremony for the teams to show respect to each other and to show that teams are not considered aggressive. Lions are not supposed to raise the head aggressively to the other team or blink excessively as that is also a sign of aggression. The lion also should not turn its tail to the other team. These are all signs of aggression towards the other team and are old Fat San guidelines for lion dance groups that are not practiced much anymore in the United States. Jiaolong grew up on Long Island, New York where his father ran a martial arts school and lion dance team. He recollected on times when he, as a kid, witnessed groups getting into altercations with each other when they came into contact while in Chinatown while he was growing up. These altercations take place because if teams run into each other on the streets, especially during the Lunar New Year time frame, then it is seen as teams encroaching in on another teams' turf. Lion dance teams will sometimes split up an area so that the teams will not fight over who dances for the businesses. Sometimes, teams will ignore this and will invade another team's territory to dance for more

businesses which will cause the quarrels. The ceremony to show that a team is not aggressive is to show that they are not there to steal the other team's business.

Outside of performances that are staged at Lunar New Year events and other events to bring good luck and fortune are routines that have a story to them. They are all performed with an objective in mind. These performances are normally executed at competitions and championships and show the technique and skill of the dancers. There are many stories that the performance may represent. One common story is that of the lion getting the chang (or flower). In this story, the lion may cross a stream, a mountain, or both to get to the chang so he can eat it because it is one of the lion's favorite treats. Another story is the drunken lion. The lion will usually wake up in its cave and see a wine bottle with a chang on it. The lion will inspect the bottle cautiously before finally eating the change and drinking the wine. It stumbles and falls around as it is drunk before finally returning to its cave to sleep off the wine. There are many other stories that are told during performances including Buddha playing with the lion and the lion helping a baby bird back into its nest. At the championship, one team told the story of the lion rowing a dragon boat. All these stories follow a similar technical blueprint since they show the dancers interacting with multiple props, both large and small, to show that the lion has the agility to work with smaller items. It will also show the various skills and jumps the dancers can perform since most of the performances will end with the lions jumping and stacking on benches or poles.

The first performance I participated in with the Denver group was for a summer camp intended for adopted children. The group gave presentations on lion dancing throughout the day to various groups of children and teenagers for heritage weekend. These presentations were split into three sections: music, lion dancing, and dragon dancing. Each presentation lasted around 15 minutes so that each group of children would get a chance to try out every section. The performers

would explain the moves and the beats along with the symbolisms and meanings to the moves. Gwen would point out every part of the lion head's anatomy as she explained the meanings to them. She motioned around the forehead of the lion that has a mirror connected to it. The mirror is convex in order to push away bad luck and evil spirits. The mirror is seen as dirty from reflecting the bad spirits therefore one does not want to touch the mirror, or they could draw in the bad luck from the mirror. The lion also has a horn on top of its head that represents the strength of the lion. Even though it could be easy to do, performers never pick up the lion head by the horn as a sign of respect. The performers then taught the children a small sample of the routine they perform: the three bows and the happy lion. The three bows are where the lion will whip its head around in a backwards "C" three times to show respect to the heavens, the Earth, and the people. The happy lion is when the performer will lift the lion's head above her head and shake it in sharp deliberate motions four times before jumping forward.

The color of the lion is also an important part of the tradition. George explained that the importance of the colors differs depending on the location the dance is performed. A lot of groups almost never use white lions as they are associated to mourning and death. This could be seen as bringing bad luck to a business if a group uses a white lion during their performance. Sometimes this idea also extends to silver lions as it is close in color to white. George exclaimed that this superstition is "bullshit" because how can something that brings luck be unlucky? Yet, white lions are usually only used during funerals. Once the dance is done, they are technically meant to be burned immediately following the performance. The dance performed for a funeral is different from the ones that are performed at celebrations or for businesses. The group in Denver is not sure they know anyone who can perform the funeral dance correctly. It is performed rarely. I have never observed or participated in a performance for a funeral.

For traditional Fat San lions there are three main colors: rainbow, green, and black. These three colors represent the three general brothers: Liu Bei, Guan Gong, and Zhong Fei, three warlords during the Han Dynasty. Traditionally, black lions are seen as aggressive as they represent aggression and anger. In the past, if there was a confrontation with teams, having a black lion would be seen as an act of aggression. A black lion should perform by itself instead of in a group of other lions during the routine. In Hawaii, Michael, a Chinese American, explained that black lions and white lions represent young and old. The black lions are youthful, and the white lions are wise. White lions are reserved for the more senior or longest running lion dance groups while black lions are used by the younger groups. This is an old tradition that is not practiced as much anymore in Hawaii, yet he described how one of the oldest groups in the state still uses black lions because there are groups in Hawaii still performing that are older. George, the master from Atlanta, also explained that in Taiwan, green lions are seen as patriotic because green is the governing color of Taiwan. Lion dance routines performed with green lions in Taiwan are seen as a rebellion against China. This is yet another way that lion dance is used in political motives because of how visual and familiar the dance is in many Asian cultures.

Fruits and vegetables are symbolic in lion dance as well. They are auspicious offerings for the lion that represents luck and wealth. The idea is that by giving a gift to the lion, you will be given a gift back in return through wealth and luck. Audiences will normally see routines that use these props during grand openings or new year blessings. The meaning of the fruits and vegetables are based on homographs, words that sound the same but have different meanings, in Chinese Mandarin and Cantonese. Oranges or tangerines are popular to use in performances because they have a similar sound to happiness or blessing in Mandarin (Zhi) and money in Cantonese (Gam). The lion will eat the orange and the performer will open it in for parts to represent a flower. This

represents is symbolic of the business growing and blossoming like a flower. Michael described how his group will sometimes roll an orange into the business's front door which represents money going into the business. Apples are used to represent peace as they sound similar in Mandarin (ping). Pomelos sound like "to have" in Mandarin (you). Pineapples sound similar to "Prosperity arrives" in Taiwanese (wongloi). Bananas represent "to invoke" in Cantonese (jiu) and coconuts sounds like grandfather in Mandarin (ye) which is a reference to the "God of Longevity". The most common item a lion eats during a performance is lettuce or cabbage. Lions eat lettuce during a routine and throws the pieces of lettuce at the audience. The lettuce represents gaining wealth as the word sounds similar to money in Mandarin (cai). Every fruit and vegetable have its own set way that the dancer must present it to the audience in order to bring blessings to the area. As Nils stated, "This could be a very long discussion".



*Figure 3-1 Lions preparing to eat oranges and lettuce at an event*



There are multiple purposes that drum beats give to lion dances. It can denote a groups affiliation to a particular style or school of dance. Nils explained that the music associated to lion dance was originally beats used as military commands on the battlefield that were modified over time to fit with the dance and its steps. Drum beats have different meanings depending on what the lion is doing during the performance. When the lion is excited, the drum will beat faster but when the lion is "tired", the drum will beat slower and softer. It is meant to express the lion's emotion and behavior throughout the dance as the drum can also represent the lion's heartbeat as well. During the presentations at the summer camp, Vien taught the drum to the campers explaining the various ways to hit the drum head to make different sounds: on the edge, in the middle, and a slam where the stick hits the drum long ways. The performer will say "tak, dun, saang, or jit" when voicing the various drum beats. He showed the kids how to play the first pattern, the three bows, on the drum, cymbals, and gong. The kids would then split up and get a chance to try each instrument.

Near the end of one Saturday practice, my master took me aside as the other teammates practiced their routines and tricks. He wanted to show me what the drum beats meant and would tell me to write down the meaning between each pattern. While I always knew that each drum pattern had a meaning, I never knew their individual interpretations. Danh explained the Chinese name and its meaning before demonstrating the drum beat. Afterwards, he would ask if I could hear how the drum beat was interpreted as that meaning. "Do you hear how it sounds like raindrops hitting the drum?" I nodded. The beats sounded like rain hitting the roof of a house. The drum beats rang out through the warehouse as he played the patterns for me. He explained that the common routine that the team performs is an 18-pattern set. The routine always starts with the three bows before going into the happy lion which is when the lion grows like a flower to bring

good luck and beauty. I would like to add here that I am not sure the exact spelling of the drum beats and tried my best to spell them correctly based on how they sound and based on my knowledge of the Chinese language. Gufa tao is the "presentable flower head". Saw tim and Mak tim both mimic the sound of raindrops. Saw tim is when it is lightly raining. The drum beats are light and soft. Mak tim, on the other hand, is hard and loud. It mimics a storm. The next patterns are jun jin and ha jin which are played when the lion is investigating an item. Jun jin is played when the lion inspects the item before approaching it. Ha jin is performed when the lion has made its approach and is crouched low as it investigates the item. Once the lion has inspected the item, usually a fruit or a "chang" which is a flower the lion likes to eat, it will eat the item. The drum pattern for eating is played by having the stick bounce on the drum while the other hand is placed on the drum to soften the sound. During this pattern, the lion will look up and mimic a gulping motion three times before throwing the item.



*Figure 3-2 Grand opening performance in Denver*

### 3.2.3 *Myths of Lion Dance*

There are multiple folklores and myths of how lion dance was first created in China. Within these stories are multiple versions that have formed over the generations through being passed down orally from teacher to student. During the interviews, I asked the performers which myth or story they were taught by their team. Leaders and masters of the teams would describe multiple stories and the history of lion dance while the performers described the story they were taught. Out of all the stories detailed one story, in particular, was popular among all the groups around the U.S. This version of the story, that tends to be the "generic" outline of the myth, was the one that I was taught when I first joined the Denver team in 2013. Every year, a monster would appear in a village once a year to terrorize the people and tear up the farmland. The monster in these stories is called a Nian which sounds like the Mandarin word for year (nian). While I was never told how the Nian beast looks like, it is said that the beast has one eye and a horn on its head (Yap 2016:36). One year, a lion appeared and scared the monster away. Yet, when the monster appeared the following year, the lion did not return and the monster began tearing up the farm lands again. The villagers decided to take matters into their own hands and created a costume to look like the lion. The men in the costume danced around like the lion while people played loud music and burned firecrackers. The monster was scared by the loud noises and the lion costume and ran away. Afterwards, the village would perform the ritual every year to remember how they scared away the monster.

Variations of the story change from team to team and even from teammate to teammate within the same group. These variations tend to be small changes in the story, for example the monster being described as a ghost or demon, yet sometimes two myths would be mixed together. An example of this was the story told to me by Jiaolong, one of the masters at the Boulder,

Colorado school. This version mixed the generic story with the "lion kicked from heaven" story. He explained to me that he teaches his team a "G-rated" version of the story he was taught as a child because there are children as young as four that attend the martial arts school and he does not want to scare them. He normally teaches what he calls the "generic story" of the Nian since the version he was taught could be seen as a religious experience because Chinese culture is so intertwined with Buddhist teachings. In this story, the lion was cast down from heaven and its tail cut off for causing mischief. The goddess came down to the Earth to check on the lion and saw it was not acting any better. Yet, the lion fell in love with the goddess and began to behave in order to see her again. The goddess saw that the lion was behaving himself and she returned to give him his tail back. She told him she would not place it on his tail but instead would tie it on his head so he would remember what he had done. "This is where the horn came from," Jiaolong told me, "Thus the ribbon around the horn and the lion wishing good luck."

A few of the other stories described to me during the study included "The Emperor's Pet Lion" which is about the emperor owning a pet lion who died. The caretakers decided to pretend to be the lion in order to not get in trouble and imitated the lion so well the emperor did not realize it had passed, and "The Emperor's Dream" where the emperor dreams of a monster arriving to kill him so he has his council create a costume to scare off the monster when it arrived. These two stories were described to me by leaders and older performers. It is unclear why the nian story is the most popular story among the groups since I spoke to multiple groups that perform different styles. It is possible that the reason the nian story is so popular is because it is the easiest to remember and least offensive of the other stories. Still, the symbolic and traditional aspects of lion dance, including the myths of how it came to be, are normally transmitted by word of mouth which is why aspects of the dance and myths vary from group to group and from person to person.

### **3.3 Motivations: Why Do Americans Perform Lion Dance**

Why do people perform lion dance? What motivates them to continue performing it into adulthood? When I first joined, I was drawn to the power and grace that the lions had when they danced. The way the dancers moved when performing intrigued me as I had grown up as a ballet dancer and loved seeing power and grace mix together since many aspects of American society teaches that one cannot be both powerful and graceful at the same time. The traditions and symbolisms of the dance also intrigued me. I did not know much about lion dance, outside that it was a Chinese tradition, until after I had joined the group. Learning that every little aspect of the dance had meaning to it was fascinating to me. There was always something new to learn at every practice and every performance. Lastly, the lion dance community is a very welcoming one. Even though I was not Asian American, the team welcomed me without any hesitation. Being part of a lion dance group feels like being part of a family. Everyone works together and helps each other out in the team. Performing lion dance is a way to connect with likeminded people through events and tournaments. There is a social aspect through traveling and seeing new areas through lion dance. These reasons also came up during the interviews I conduct during my research, yet one of the main reasons that everyone explained to me was because simply they enjoyed doing it. Simply, it is fun to do. As James said, "There ain't no party like a lion dance party because there is random kung fu and people getting on top of each other's heads randomly around the place. It's a lot of fun." The performances are boisterous and colorful. They are hard to miss when the teams perform at a festival or event. Jinhai, a Malaysian American in his twenties that is a co-leader of the Chamblee, Georgia team, mentioned that while he could claim that he performs lion dance for the cultural reasons and to connect to his heritage, he mainly performs the dance because it is fun to do. While conducting a phone interview with a team from Massachusetts, one of the team leaders

described that when he first joined the team, he was nine and as a kid it was the social aspect that drew him into the group. His friends were part of the team and it was seen as the cool thing to do. As he got older, his reason for being part of the team shifted more towards the heritage and cultural aspects of the tradition. It was still a social and fun thing to do but he became more interested in the meaning of lion dance as he got older.

Most of the performers I interviewed began performing when they were in their late teens; around 16 to 18 or early twenties and most of them was introduced to lion dance through either their friends or martial arts classmates. This came as a surprise, since most of the groups' members are minors. It is possible that most of the children that joined lion dance groups because their parents had them join them, saw the tradition as an extracurricular activity to participate in after school. Many of these members leave the team once they graduate high school and start going to college or working at a job. A few others, mostly the leaders and masters I spoke with, have been performing since they were small children. Usually these performers joined at young ages because their parents or family members also performed lion dance, or they were part of a martial arts school. While interviewing Jiaolong, one of the masters of the Boulder martial arts school, another master entered the room for a second to ask if he told me about the story of when he was four and would pretend to dance lion with a waste basket as the lion head while his father's team practiced. Jiaolong laughed and added that he would imitate the moves the dancers were performing while wearing a waste basket on his head until he was old enough to learn lion dance.

We waited in the hallway of the main building at the heritage camp until it was time to perform, resting from giving workshops on how to dance for the entire day. Danh used this time to explain to us his plans for the future of the team including new uniforms and routine ideas. He also expressed his gratitude for us being part of the group. He explained to us that the lion dance

group would not be here if it was not for the members. He was thankful that we stuck through the hardships the team went through. Lion dance is not just a hobby for the performers. It is a passion and a way of life. Lion dance is not a tradition or sport that a person can just pick up. It takes a lot of hard work to become decent at the techniques. It takes a lot of work ethics, commitment, and motivation to perform lion dance. As we sat in the living room of the San Jose leader's house, members of the team entered the house to start practice as the interview continued. Shae explained to me during this interview, "I'm not always going to get it right away and that is absolutely acceptable. Before lion dance, I was so hard on myself. I had to do things right the first time. After lion dance, I realized there are so many firsts you go through in lion dance that you don't always have to get it perfect right then and there." The performer will fall a lot when practicing head stacks or jongs but as Dante explained, "you pick yourself back up and try again." The dancer cannot be afraid to fall because you can always try again. They do not want to fail as an individual but also as a member of the team. During the middle of a practice, I noticed a small yellow paper hangs on the side of the warehouse slightly hidden behind the dragons stacked along the wall. It has a list of ways to think in order to get ahead in lion dance. "It is ok to fall. It is ok to cry. But do not give up. Always give it your all," the paper stated. The leader of the Denver group is always teaching the members of the group to give it their all; to play the drums loud and if you make a mistake, just continue playing and to dance with confidence and if you miss a step, do not worry and keep dancing. He has shown the team to work through their mistakes because that is how you learn, it is how you better yourself, and it is how you improve. Yet above all he told us to never give up and that everything is possible.

Lion dance becomes integrated to other areas of the performer's life. Every time I asked the question "How does lion dance integrate with the rest of your life," the dancers would laugh.

"Lion dance is life," Shae, a female Chinese American from the San Jose group, expressed. "Lion dance takes it over," James stated. "It's become a big part of my life whether I meant it to be or not when I started it," Gwen added. Through the practices and performances, lion dance members have very little free time between their school or job and the tradition. James and Gwen even performed lion dance at their own wedding as a surprise for their guests. Lion dance demands a high level of commitment compared to other hobbies and sports. Gwen explained that when they start training for competition, there are two or three months dedicated only to lion dance. Yet as James explained, to not do it would feel worse. Their lives would feel empty. Many members of the teams around the United States dedicate their weekends to lion dance for practices and performances. Many performers explained that they tailor their workouts throughout the week around lion dance as well. These workouts are focused around endurance and strength. They are always looking for ways to improve their techniques and better themselves as a whole.

Culture and heritage were two other important reasons why people wanted to perform lion dance. Performers feel connected to their culture whether it be Chinese, Vietnamese, Malaysian or other Asian cultures. "It is no longer only Chinese culture anymore. It could be Vietnamese. It could be Malaysian. It could be any Asian culture. That's why we named the team "Asian cultural". It is the whole world now. Americans are now doing it too." Danh explained. The importance of the cultural aspect constantly came up during the interviews, events, and the championship. James stated that performing for Lunar New Year is a great way to celebrate the new year because "You are pretty much Santa Claus for however long the season lasts." Danh expressed that performing lion dance is a way to preserve their culture. Vien, a 19-year-old Vietnamese American from the Denver group, expressed that he saw lion dance as a way of peace, tranquility, and prosperity. It helps to distress and lower the team member's anxiety. The music was a favorite part of the dance



for many as well because it was fun and vibrant but also carried meaning to the beats. For performers like George and Tony, who are both non-Asian Americans, they felt it was important to help preserve and pass on the tradition, so it does not disappear. George expressed that he felt that many Asian Americans were not as interested in the tradition today because they did not want to be stereotyped as foreign or “other”.

### ***3.3.1 Community and Family***

It was a sunny Saturday morning as a drum beat rang out across the aluminum warehouse where the Denver group practiced every weekend. Colorful lion heads hung along the left-side of the warehouse and scrolls and banners of other lion dance teams from around the nation and world hung along the right-side. Each member grabbed a practice lion head, ones that are old beaten up and no longer used to perform and lined up in three rows to practice how to correctly leap forward. The leader explained to us that we should push off with our back leg while thrusting the lion head above our head and land lightly on our feet ready to pounce like a cat. For at least an hour we practiced this move, jumping forward to the sound of the leader mimicking the drum beat “DUN! TAKTAK!” We repeated the jump until we ran out of room to move forward in the warehouse. We turned and continued the leaps until half the team had leapt their way outside the warehouse. People working on a car a couple spots over stared at us in curiosity as we leapt our way back into the warehouse. The only moment of rest was when the instructor stopped us to explain how to hold the lion head when you land; mouth open, face forward as if the lion was investigating a prey or offering. Sweat rolled down my face and my arms were weak from constantly pushing the lion head above me and yet I continued to leap and bound forward with my teammates determined to improve myself.

Practices are a large part of performing lion dance as members are able to correct their forms, techniques, and skills. A large part of how lion dance is taught is through repetition where the moves are repeated, first without the costume, until the dancer can perform the move without thinking about it. When I first joined my team in 2013, I was taught how to play the cymbals by clapping out the beats of the music. I practiced clapping for hours before finally trying the beats with the cymbals. Learning the dance moves happened at a similar pace. I would learn one pattern and repeatedly practice it until I was comfortable before learning the next pattern to add. These patterns, 18 in total and explained in the symbolism section, are connected together to form the main routine that the group performed at majority of their events. Team members are able to perform these routines easily as these moves are practiced and performed numerous times. Repetition is an important aspect to performing lion dance since the tradition is taught orally and through demonstrations. Over time, the members will become so comfortable with these moves that before performances the leader can show the group how he wants them lined up and which patterns to use by drawing imaginary lines in the ground and the team is able to perform the changes without a problem.

Every group had their own typical practice days. Many practiced during the weekend as that was the only time members could participate outside of school or work. The Denver team I worked with practices on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. Gwen explained that while it was never explicitly stated, one of the reasons the practices take place on Fridays and Saturdays was to keep kids off the streets on Friday nights. By placing practices on Fridays and Saturdays, it took away the time that teens and young adults normally use to go out at night. By dedicating your Friday and Saturday to lion dance, that aspect of your life does not exist. “You really have to pick and choose what you really want to do,” James added. Danh, the leader of the Denver group, wanted

to create a space where minors and young adults could grow in a safe and encouraging atmosphere. Community is a large reason why people stay in the lion dance groups. To the performers, their groups are seen more as a family than just a dance or martial arts group. These are people who spend at least around four to eight hours a week during practices and more time together when there are performances. The performers will have holiday dinners and parties with each other, and it is common during Lunar New Year for team members to be together for entire days from morning until late at night performing at multiple events throughout the days.

Trust among the team members is an important element to creating this familial bond that the team members create. Most of the members grow up together while part of their teams since so many of the members join at early ages. Older team members will take on a familial role while part of the group, including older brother, older sister, uncle, or aunt, to the younger team members. I have even noticed this happen to myself where I act and feel more like an older sister to many of my team mates. This familial bond blossoms through constantly working together in situations that requires both trust and concentration. Team members are constantly lifting each other on their legs or heads during performances. The performer who dances as the tail of the lion has limited vision and must rely on the performer dancing as the head for directions and refrain from running into the audience, an inanimate object, or a wall. Team members form a bond through practicing and performing because they must be able to work together as one in order to successfully give the illusion of the lion being alive. Performing lion dance is an intimate experience for the team members. The close interactions during practices and performances create close bonds between the team members.

### 3.3.2 *Appropriation of lion dance*

During my fieldwork with the Denver group, I observed a moment when the group was used as a tool of appropriation. It was a Saturday afternoon as we headed to a hotel to perform for a dog adoption gala. As we unloaded and set up the equipment, we started to ask ourselves how lion dance fit into the theme of dog adoption. The tables around the banquet hall were decorated with Chinese paper lanterns and guests were handed paper foldable fans at the entrance. A few women walked around wearing old style Chinese dresses. I came to the realization that the gala was “Chinese” themed because it was the year of the dog and the team was invited to perform to play into that theme. The organization saw the group as an “authentic-looking” and “authentic-sounding” Chinese tradition that they hired as an uncontextualized, ahistorical, and apoliticalized practice (Wong 2010:10). One member mentioned that she was unsure how she felt about the theme of the gala as it was based on an ethnicity and ethnicities should not be used as a theme. It was clear that this was an accidental use of appropriation, yet it was still appropriation as it was clear the organization found “Chinese” styled items to create a “year of the dog” themed gala.

George described yet another way that lion dance is appropriated in the United States. Many people will join a group to learn the dance patterns and drum patterns. They will then quit the group, buy a lion and a drum, and perform for owners and businesses. “It’s easy money,” George explained, “Each red envelope can contain \$20 to \$100 inside. So, it adds up quick.” These small groups will perform only for the money while ignoring the traditional significance of the dance. George, Danh, and Thomas, non-Asian American and leader of a team in Houston, Texas, all mentioned how some members of other teams will show up at their performances or even their practices to steal their routines. When I was first with the Denver team, Danh would warn the younger members about who they show the dance moves as other teams will take those moves and

incorporate them into their routines. George exclaimed that he no longer posts videos of his team's performances online so their routines will not be stolen. "I know others will upload videos of the performances online and that is ok but I am cautious about what is put on the internet." Thomas explained that the teams in Houston do not get along as routines have been stolen in the past.

### **3.4 Pan ethnicity and Diversity of Lion Dance**

During the 1970s, lion dance was only performed in the Chinatowns of San Francisco, Boston, or Los Angeles. During this time, only Asians would perform lion dance but that is not the case anymore. Danh explains that today people from all over Asia are arriving in the US for school or work and they bring their culture with them. One of the most important cultural tradition of Asian cultures is the lion dance. Everywhere the Chinese went, they would bring the dance with them. So, lion and dragon dance are one of the most important cultural aspects in Asian cultures. Danh continues that this is the reason lion dance is performed where ever there are Asians in America. A lot of influential people within the lion dance community in Asia will travel to America to help promote the tradition. Gwen adds that these grand masters are open minded with who performs lion dance. In the past, the old masters would have said that lion dance is only for Chinese performers, yet it has become an international phenomenon. There is a mutual understanding that for the culture to live on it needs as many people backing it as possible. Gwen expressed how when she first began lion dance people would do double takes when she would dance as a lion because she is both female and as a mixed Chinese American does not look phenotypically Asian. Yet now she does not see people doing that as much when she dances. Dahn expressed that "Lion dance has become a world culture. It is not only an Asian culture anymore. It is for everybody and that is a good thing."

Lion dance in the United States has been slowly moving towards a pan ethnic identity through the years. There are many reasons why this turn to a pan ethnic identity is happening including non-Asian Americans learning of the tradition through martial arts schools or at festivals and many Asian Americans using the tradition to connect to their culture and heritage. This is because lion dance is vibrant, boisterous, and colorful and is an easy tradition to recognize because of the drumbeats and acrobatics. Although, there seems to be a division among lion dance groups with whether lion dance is becoming pan ethnic and why lion dance is becoming pan ethnic. A member from the Houston, Texas group sees a lack of diversity in lion dance as most teams only consist of Asian members. Yet, he expressed that people of all backgrounds coming together to learn about lion dance would be a beautiful sight. Tony also expressed that teams are predominantly Asian American as well, yet teams do not have a problem with non-Asians joining and performing the tradition. He has not encountered a barrier with non-Asians wanting to learn how to perform lion dance. Instead, he mentions that there is a lack of interest or knowledge of the tradition among non-Asians. Jiaolong also feels that while lion dance is becoming more diverse, it still has a long way to go. Majority of the groups that represents the United States in international competitions have members that are all Asian. As Jiaolong expressed:

Would I like to see more diversity? Absolutely. But at the end of the day I want to see good lion dance. I want to see people experience it. And I want to see people enjoy it but not feel like, "I can't lion dance because I'm not a guy," or "I can't lion dance because I'm not Chinese." I don't want kids to feel that way and I try to make sure it doesn't happen here.

On the other end of the spectrum, the master of a group in Atlanta sees lion dance as extremely diverse and pan ethnic. He feels that many Asian Americans are moving away from the traditions of their cultures because either they are more interested in western hobbies or they do not want the stigma that is placed with being considered a stereotype. He describes his school as

"common diverse" which as he explains is "everyone but Asians." Nils also has a team that is mainly composed of members that are non-Asian American. He described that at times people will ask why his team performs lion dance since they are not of Asian descent but over all his time as a lion dancer has been positive. The lion dance community itself has not shown any animosity towards members and groups that are of non-Asian descent. There is a larger diverse composition in martial arts schools which is due in part to the study being open in teaching anyone regardless of gender or ethnicity. Yet, Nils recognizes that lion dance groups that are not associated with martial arts schools are mainly composed of Asian American members.

Dante, a member of the Denver group, is neither Chinese nor Vietnamese descent. He is Hmong American. He joined the group in 2011 when his friends invited him to check it out. As he explained to me, lion dance is not a part of the Hmong culture and his family had never heard of it. Dante is working on introducing the tradition to the Hmong community because he wants to show them how interesting and fun the dance can be. He has shown the tradition to his family in California and his church and while the community finds lion dance interesting, they will not allow their children to join the team. As Dante explains, there is a long history between the Chinese and the Hmong. Some will say they are close and on good terms while others will say there was a war and the Hmong people were kicked out of China. Therefore, there is some apprehension in the Hmong community to accept lion dance. Yet, Dante is determined to be the first Hmong American to introduce lion and dragon dance to the community.

### ***3.4.1 Gender Politics of Lion Dance***

During the interviews, I purposely did not ask questions about gender roles in the lion dance community mainly because every group in the federation and every group I interacted with had female members. At the same time, I kept the question on diversity in lion dance broad in

order for the interviewee to interpret the question however they wanted. I was curious what diverse meant for the performers. Interestingly, multiple groups mentioned the change in lion dance and how the community has slowly accepted women into the roles of performers. Specifically, female performers mentioned how it was to perform as a female in a tradition that, in the past, did not allow women to perform. Women were not allowed to perform lion dance as it would bring bad luck if the performer was menstruating. It was a recent change in lion dancing for females to perform. In the 1990s, if females performed lion dance, they normally only played the cymbals or gong. In 1998, an all-woman group formed in Boston, Massachusetts. Since then, more and more women have been joining lion dance to perform and compete next to their male teammates. During the national championship in 2018, one group that competed composed of all females including the lion and the musicians. Multiple other groups had females perform as part of the lion or part of the musicians. The Denver group also had an all-female lion and wanted to have an all-female music team yet, they did not have enough females who could travel to the championship to do this.

Gwen, James, and I sat around their living room couch as Nhat sat on the floor and played with one of the pet cats with a wand cat toy. The interview was near the end, which was a good thing as Nhat was fidgeting. “How do you view yourself as part of the growth in the US?” I asked the group. “Sometimes I feel like I’m just along for the ride,” Gwen answered. James interjected that she is humble and modest but is inspiring to a lot of people as a competitor. Younger performers will see her compete and ask for tips and help from her. “She’s very humble about it but she can be quite a driving force whether she wants to admit it or not.” He finished. James and Gwen explained that when they first started lion dancing, it was not traditionally open-minded for women to perform as the lion. When Gwen did perform as a lion, people would



be shocked at the fact that a female was performing, yet these shocked looks have slowly disappeared as it has become more common for females to perform the art. Gwen stated that she does not like talking about gender because she does not like making it a focus. She continued:

For me, the greatest form of gender equality is to not talk about it. Not make it a thing at all and just assume that everyone can do whatever it is that they're doing. That being said though, very silently and internally, there's this fight in the community to prove that (everyone can perform) .... I think one big aspect that I try to do in the lion dance community is to show, not tell, that certain things can be done no matter what gender you are.

There are many female performers performing lion dance in the US, who perform difficult techniques and skills, changing the traditions of lion dance by being progressive in lion dancing, both culturally and competitively. Gwen continued that she thinks there is a mutual understanding that in order for the culture to live on, it needs as many people backing it as possible, whether through participation or understanding.

Shae, from the San Jose group, stated that she had always wanted to learn lion dancing but as a girl, she never felt she was allowed to do it. When she joined the group in 2017, she wanted to both challenge and respect the tradition. She stated that the group she joined empowered women and girls to be involved in every stage of lion dance. The San Jose team is known for placing women into positions of leadership and performance roles which is becoming more common, yet even ten years ago would raise eyebrows from the community. Andrew, the leader of the San Jose team, conveyed a story of the lion head of his team being a female when his team competed in 2005. The other teams claimed it was a "cheat code" to have a female perform as the head of the lion even if she was performing difficult techniques at a high level. Andrew exclaimed, "It's not a cheat code. It was a they-can-do-it-too code." He added that they have helped make lion dance more ethical by showing that females can perform with their male teammates.

### **3.5 Homogenization: Is this the Direction Lion Dance is Going in?**

The differences in how lion dance is performed in other countries compared to how it is performed in the United States are insignificant. Danh explained to me that the way lion dance is passed down is similar to how martial arts is passed down. When you learn a style from one country and take it to other countries, they are still doing the same techniques and skills. It is the same format and the same theory that is passed down from master to student. There may be a small change from group to group, yet overall the tradition is performed the same way. Hok san is extremely popular around the world right now and the most famous style of Hok san is the Sar Ping style which was founded by a master in Sarping, China. Gwen explained that every few years, an ancestral worship ceremony takes place in China for the founder of the Sar ping style. Teams that perform Sar ping from all over the world will contribute one or two lions (two to four dancers) to perform at the ceremony. Eight lions would perform a special dance during the ceremony because eight is a lucky number since it sounds similar to the word for "fortune" in Chinese Mandarin. While Gwen and Dante were not able to perform part of the ceremony, they did participate in a smaller dance in China. All the groups that learn Sar Ping are learning the same steps and techniques therefore there is not a big change from group to group. Even though when I was last part of the group in 2014, we did not perform the Sar Ping style, I was still able to pick back up the cymbals beats quickly during the closing ceremony at the national championship which shows the similarities in the beats with the various Hok San styles. Gwen expressed that it was a refreshing validation in having a consistent system and being able to dance with other groups around the world. Danh explained that there were very subtle changes between how groups in the U.S. performed versus how groups in China performed that were developed over time from different teams training in the style. As a result of Sar Ping Hok San style being such a popular

style world wide right now, lion dance groups can collaborate with other teams from across the world with minimal training. Everyone knows, more or less, the same styles and same techniques. Michael, a Chinese American part of the Hawaii team, does not necessarily agree with only learning one style as he feels new students do not learn or experience the foundation and true nature of what lion dance means. The Sar Ping style turns lion dance into jumps and tricks to the new students instead of the tradition of blessing people.

However, Michael explains that one can tell which group is performing in Hawaii by listening to the music they are playing. Newer generation groups that were created after 2005 tend to play Hok San style while older generation groups will play Fat San style. Many groups can perform both styles, it just depends on the type of performance they are doing. Vien, Vietnamese American from the Denver group, expressed that the routines performed by other teams during the championship were much different from the ways his team would have practiced them. Dante, Hmong American from the Denver group, stated that while the groups perform in similar ways, their performances are different through their styles. Competitions are usually performed "free style". This is where the groups are given 12 minutes to perform their own dance. This dance will usually tell a story of the lion searching for food, drinking wine, or helping a bird into its nest. Jiaolong enjoys watching modern lion dance and competitions for the techniques because they are so acrobatic and creative. Their dance may have a specific story to it, or it may just show off their athletic prowess. Yet, each performance is different through the dancers' personalities and uniqueness. Each person brings their own flavor to the tradition. Gwen revealed how eye opening it was to attend the championship in Boston, Massachusetts and see the different styles every team performed. Each style is unique and varied in how the lions move, the techniques used, and the music played. Many of these various teams may all perform Sarping style lion dance, yet every

team and member brings something different to the style through the unique and different teachings. The variations in the routines between the groups left many of the members of the Denver group thinking of how they can enhance their practices and work on their routines more.

Based on the interviews I conducted, there is an ambiguity with which direction the lion dance community could end up in the United States. Jiaolong explained that in the 1980s and 1990s, martial arts groups in the United States and Canada created a federation to grow and connect the community. Yet, the federation did not last and martial arts groups and schools in America splintered over the years because of opposing views. Jiaolong is hopeful in the lion dance federation and does not want to see the lion dance community go in the same direction as the martial arts community. Still, he has witnessed, in the past, groups splitting over opposing views in the lion dance community. Many people in a group may not see eye to eye with what the team is doing and will split off to start their own team. Michael described this scenario that took place in Hawaii a few years ago when a team began to have a fallout. Friction between the groups is still high today yet, He stated that he hopes that in time the tension will disappear, and they can work together again. Many people want to see lion dance groups maintain being a community without becoming homogenized. Jiaolong feels that the techniques and move sets are becoming easier in order to get more students. A few groups from around the U.S. (most being Fat San groups) see the federation as a great idea and way to connect groups yet are afraid that the creation of the federation will speed up the homogenization of lion dancing. Homogenization of lion dancing in the U.S. has been taking place since the late 1980s when performers began incorporating stacks, when the head performer is lifted onto the tail performer's head, and modern techniques in the routines and with adding jongs routines in 1994. Jiaolong expresses that it is great that grand masters from Asia are recognizing lion dance teams in America and are traveling here to teach the

teams their styles, but he wants to keep the uniqueness of lion dance where each team has their own vibrance and own flair. Jiaolong does not want to see lion dance get to the point where every team plays the same beat and dances the same moves.

Every Fat San group I talked with saw the creation of Sar Ping Hok San as speeding the process of homogenizing lion dance. Jiaolong stated that when he searches for lion dance videos that did not have Sar Ping music on YouTube, yet it was all he could find. He states that he loves the fact that masters from other countries travel to the U.S. to teach Sar Ping, but he is afraid this is causing the homogenization of the lion dance groups. To Jiaolong, lion dance has been slowly heading toward homogenization for the last century, but Sar Ping style has helped speed up the process. He does not want to see every team playing the same beat and performing the same moves. Tony, the leader of the Austin, Texas group, stated that he was sad to see groups moving towards Hok San as it is not as strong as Fat San. He added that the face of lion dance is changing, and teams will have to adapt.

#### **4 CONCLUSIONS**

Lion dance has been used as a means of political discourse since the Qing Dynasty because of how visible the tradition can be. This political discourse is the reason why martial arts groups fled China during Mao's reign as they were afraid of persecution. The Chinese diaspora and Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. used lion dance as a way to display their political opposition to the communist parties of their home countries. How lion dance is used in the US today may be for different reasons but there is still a political agenda with the direction that the tradition is heading in America. There is a parallel in how Asian Americans are viewed in the U.S., as invisible others, and the push to make lion dance more visible in America by the community. As stated at the opening ceremony of the National Championship, the federation hopes to help the lion dance

community grow and become more visible in the U.S. as part of the American culture which parallels the sentiment of numerous Asian Americans who want their communities to be more visible in the U.S. as they are Americans.

The tradition was brought to the U.S. in two main separate events; when Chinese immigrants traveled to the U.S. for work in the late 1800s and when Vietnamese immigrants arrived in the U.S. during the Vietnam war in the 1970s. Lion dance began to slowly move out of Chinatowns around the U.S. with the help of Vietnamese communities creating groups and martial arts schools setting up outside of Asian American communities in various cities. It was difficult for teams to connect with each other and to buy equipment until technology and the internet developed over the early 2000s. Groups in the U.S. began to have the ability to interact with groups in Asia through the increase of social media and internet usage. The technology boom pushed lion dance masters and trainers from Singapore, Malaysia, China, and other Asian countries to travel to the U.S. to teach their style as the interest in lion dance that groups had in America became more visible to the rest of the world. U.S. teams began to travel to Asia to train with specific masters and teams. These interactions boosted the visibility of lion dance teams in the U.S. to federations and organizations in Asia which helped teams in the U.S. come together to form the USDLDF in order to become members of the International Dragon and Lion Dance Federation located in Malaysia.

Lion dancers in the U.S. view their teams as a second family. There were a multitude of reasons why people perform the tradition, but the main reasons were to connect to one's heritage, promote and preserve the tradition, and because it is fun to perform. A majority of the teams mentioned that there was a shift in the early 2010s from preserving the tradition to promoting the tradition as it becomes more visible and easier to access to the public. A couple of teams felt that the tradition was not spreading or growing as it is a very niche tradition. They felt that younger

Asian Americans were losing interest in lion dance as they had more interests in Western hobbies and sports. There seemed to be a correlation with these thought process as the groups who felt this lost of interest was increasing were in cities with smaller Asian American communities. A majority of the performers are of Vietnamese or Chinese descent. There is a small percentage of non-Asian Americans that perform lion dance. Most of these performers were introduced to the tradition through martial arts schools. There was an agreement among the groups that the tradition is still mostly lacking in diversity. The San Jose group stated this is because the tradition is a cultural activity and many non-Asian Americans have not encountered a performance. Women are also joining groups to perform a tradition that historically was only performed by men. But, the diversity of lion dancing is slowly shifting to be more inclusive as teams in the U.S. and in other countries are recognizing that they need to be more open to who performs the tradition so it does not disappear.

The symbolism of the art form was similar between each group. The only difference was how the Hawaii group viewed black and white lions compared to how the rest of the teams across the US viewed the lions. The folklore of how lion dance was created shifted slightly between the groups and between members in the same group which suggests that the lore is an oral tradition. There was a slight division between people who preferred Hok San style to Fat San style. Everyone who performs Fat San style exclaimed that they preferred this style more as it is more traditional and grounded and shows the person's martial skills. These groups expressed that they were afraid that the introduction of Hok San was shifting the art form away from the traditional meaning. They also stated they were afraid that lion dance was shifting towards becoming homogenized with the federation possibly speeding up the process. However, the groups that perform Hok San did not mention the idea of homogenizing lion dance. They described a community with different styles

and personalities where groups who did train in the same style could perform together with little preparation.

The federation and groups connected to it want to see the tradition grow and spread across the U.S. and become more visible among the masses. It is seen as a way to unite people in a friendly environment through a connected interest in the tradition. By lion dance becoming more visible in the U.S., it also helps Asian American communities become more visible as well. The organization also hopes to become more visible among the international scene too so that groups in America have chances to compete in the internationally recognized championships. It is still uncertain how American lion dance will shift through the social dynamics of both the U.S. and the world since the federation is young and has only started to make its marks in the community. Nevertheless, the community is optimistic in the direction the community has gone over the last year and feels that American lion dance groups will receive the recognition they feel it deserves in the U.S. and the world.



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