

"The Brightest Flowers" dance is based on a true story from 1964. Two sisters, ages 9 and 11, protected a herd of sheep during a blizzard in Inner Mongolia. The girls became famous for their bravery and resourcefulness.



A time to dance

How a local family celebrates the lunar new year with tradition, costumes and the spotlight.

By Maren Longbella
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We celebrate the New Year twice at my house: on Jan. 1 and when the lunar new year begins with the new moon.

My oldest and youngest daughters are from China, and for the Chinese people, the 15 days from the new moon until the moon is full, also known as the Spring Festival, is the equivalent of the holiday season in the Western world.

CHINESE NEW YEAR

If you know nothing about Chinese New Year but you have seen restaurant menus with the Chinese zodiac, consider that your introduction.

Twelve animals represent various years and characteristics. To be born in the Year of the Monkey, the sign for 2016 and the ninth animal of the zodiac, for example, is to be imbued with curiosity, mischievousness and cleverness. Those characteristics will be the themes for the celebration to come.

This year, the Spring Festival kicks off Feb. 7 (New Year's Eve) and ends with the Lantern Festival on Feb. 23, during which lanterns are made and parades are held.

Traditions vary, but some things seem to be generally true: Houses must be cleaned thoroughly, and hair should be cut before the new year celebration begins. New clothes are bought, especially for children, and red is the best color to wear and to use in decorating your home because it symbolizes prosperity. Little red envelopes are filled with money and given as gifts.

Gathering with friends and relatives is key — as is eating, especially dumplings, or jiao zi. Sometimes a coin is hidden in the dumplings, and if you happen to be the one to bite into that dumpling, you are the luckiest of all.

CELEBRATING THROUGH DANCE

Inextricably linked to my family's New Year celebration is CAAM Chinese Dance Theater's annual production, intentionally held in January to usher in the New Year.

At one time, all three of my daughters were involved in the St. Paul school, which has been in existence since 1992.

My oldest daughter, 13, began dancing when she was 4; my youngest, now 9, started when she was 3. The two of them have been part of the productions almost since they began taking lessons, and every January since then has been devoted to rehearsals.

Ninety-five students of all ethnicities (being Asian is not a requirement), ranging in age from 3 to 63, travel from all over the Twin Cities — the farthest from Wyoming, Minn. — to take lessons at CAAM CDT. It is not unusual for entire families to dance.

This year's show, "One Earth, One Home," is the creation of artistic director and teacher Lili Teng of Eagan, with the help of fellow teacher and outreach coordinator Ying Li, also of Eagan, and a coterie of volunteers, including producer Yanhua Wusands of Maple Grove and Shul-

ing Lai of Woodbury, who stage manages and is responsible for the look of the show, from set design to lighting. Lili Teng's husband, Aiqun He, composes the music.

Teng, 67, called Teng Laoshi ("Teacher Teng" in Mandarin) by her students, was a renowned dancer in Shanghai from 1964 to 1978, after which she took up choreography and teaching. She and her husband came to the United States in 1999, and she continued teaching at CAAM CDT, where she has helmed the annual productions since 2005.

"Each show is a challenge, and I want to do something different," she said through an interpreter. "The challenge inspires me."

The annual production is a massive undertaking that begins immediately after the previous show ends, according to producer Wusands.

Teng, whose "major drive when putting a show together is to introduce Chinese culture to a Western audience," comes up with the idea, and then she, her husband and stage manager/designer Lai hash out the themes of the show.

Lai has been connected to the school for 20 years. As a child, she danced in her native Taiwan, and after coming to the United States, she found herself dancing and teaching at CDT and then moving into the stage-managing/designing role. Her two daughters danced at the school, too.

For this year's production, Teng chose 12 dances, and it took "a couple of months of thinking of how to put together" the show, Lai said.

It became clear that the "relationship between animals and nature and animals and people" was "the core, the subject for the project," she said.

"It's a popular subject in the West and Chinese culture," Lai said. "The whole universe is one, a Confucius ideal."

SO WHAT IS CHINESE DANCE?

According to the school's website, Chinese dance "incorporates a variety of forms and styles of movement derived from 53 diverse ethnic groups' traditions," and it also includes the "cultural and historical basis of the dances."

Mostly, it's not Chinese opera, dancer Anya Mazar, 13, of Woodbury wants to make clear, even though last year's production, "Dancing in Chinese Opera," was about that very thing.

"Everybody thinks the music to Chinese dance is the screaming opera," she said, "and that there is the very heavy, make-up with the weirdest costumes, which is sometimes true, but it's not as crazy as you think it will be."



The fast rhythms and joyful mood of "Songs of Happy Magpies" signify the birds that the Chinese believe to be signs of happiness and good fortune.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JIJUN HE

"Rivertown Life," the CAAM Chinese Dance Theater's opening number, represents the teeming life of a southern China rivertown.

And the dances performed are not Americanized, they are authentic, said dancer Alexa Lutz-Chase, 13, of Eagan.

"It's like Chinese food," she said. "You have that American style of Chinese food, and then you go to China and you get the real stuff, you go, 'Whoa! This is really different.'"

For dance teacher Ying Li, the most important element "is the soul. It is why some dances, even when we watch many, many times, they still aren't tired of them. That is why some dances, even watched only once a long time ago, are still vivid in our minds."

HOW TO MAKE DUMPLINGS

If you are thinking about having your own Chinese New Year celebration, you'll want to make dumplings.

CHINESE DUMPLINGS

Makes 36 dumplings.
1 pound ground sausage or turkey
1 clove garlic, chopped
1½ teaspoons ginger
2 tablespoons brown sugar
A drizzle of sesame seed oil
1 package of round dumpling wrappers

To prepare water: Fill Dutch oven or stock pot (the deeper the pot the better) three-fourths full of water. Bring to a boil.

To make filling: Meanwhile, in bowl, mix meat, garlic, ginger, brown sugar and sesame oil.

To assemble: Working with 1 dumpling wrapper at a time, dip finger into small cup of water and run it along wrapper edge. Drop small spoonful of meat mixture onto wrapper. (Note: Smaller amounts cook more thoroughly and quickly.) Fold wrapper in half. Pinch closed with pinch-and-fold motion.

To cook: Drop dumplings, 5 at a time, into boiling water. Boil for 2 minutes or until dumplings float to surface. Using slotted spoon, remove to plate to drain. Eat immediately with soy sauce. Or for crispy dumplings, fry them.

IF YOU GO

What: "One Earth, One Home"

When: 7 p.m. Jan. 30 and 2 p.m. Jan. 31

Where: The O'Shaughnessy, St. Catherine University, 2004 Randolph Ave., St. Paul

Tickets: \$15 in advance, \$20 at the door; <http://oshag.stkate.edu/event/caam2016>

For more information: caamcdt.org; <http://oshag.stkate.edu/event/caam2016>