

# The Nashville City Paper

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## Dance group brings Chinese street performers' dances to local stage

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In western culture the dragon signifies a fierce, fire-breathing beast poised to rip a man limb to limb. But in Chinese culture the scale-skinned and dagger-toothed creature is a symbol of life.

"The Chinese dragon is a legendary, sacred, holy animal. They control water so that's why they are so important to our culture," said Jen-Jen Lin, the director of the Chinese Arts Alliance of Nashville. "The [Chinese] civilization depends heavily on agriculture and water is very important to the harvest. The dragon controls the rain, the river, everything with water."

Sunday's performance by dance company Hung-Sheng Lion Dance Theater will give a glimpse into the theatrical representation of the Chinese dragon as well as other symbols and folklore. The event, which is free and open to the public, is in celebration of Asian/Pacific American Heritage month.

"People should not come in with any images and just accept what they see, that's the best way to appreciate it," Lin said.

Dragon and lion dances are forms of traditional dance in Chinese culture, in which performers mimic the lion or dragon's movements in a cloak of the animal's costume. The colorful, acrobatic dances are usually performed at important holiday festivals or events like the Chinese New Year or building a new structure, and signify good fortune and the driving away of evil spirits.

What: Hung Seng  
Lion Dance Group  
When: 7:15 p.m.  
Sunday  
Where: Harpeth Hall  
School's Frances Davis  
Bond Theatre, 3801  
Hobbs Rd.  
Cost: Free and open  
to the public, but  
reservations are  
required  
Info: [chineseartsalliance.org](http://chineseartsalliance.org)



Performers use drum beats of varying tempos to symbolize story characters like tigers or actions like chariots tracing toward battle. (photo courtesy of Hung Sheng Lion Dance Theater)

The first Lion Dance group out of Taiwan, the Hung-Sheng Lion Dance Theater combines the lion and dragon dance choreographies and religious rituals with folk story and myth plots to create a story line adapted for stages.

"The director [Yuan Jung Chang] has been very innovative to create a new form from the traditional Taiwanese street performers' form," Lin said. "They take the festival street performers and place them in a theater — transferred it to a theater format — to preserve it and to give more people access to this performing art."

Lin describes the performance as both a sport and an art. Dancers flow across the stage in a vigorous choreography of dance steps, tricks, martial arts, acrobatics, drumming and running, she said.

"It is fascinating to see how they manipulate themselves. People can expect to see a very visual, active, energetic performance," Lin said. "But it has a very traditional sound for the Chinese ear but not necessarily for a westerner's ear."

The event is valuable for giving Chinese culture and art a voice in Nashville society where often its traditions go unnoticed or appreciated, Lin said. Viewing the performance also gives Chinese Americans a sense of identity and connection, she added.

"To be harmoniously living together in peace, it is important to communicate with each other and to learn from each other and this is a good opportunity to do that," Lin said. "For Chinese people who have never experienced their own heritage, it is important for them to see and experience it. For people of non-Chinese descent, it is important for them to know about Chinese culture just like the Egyptian art exhibit at the [Frist Center for the Visual Arts] — we need to learn about other cultures to create our own, too."