

*THE CROWD IS SILENT. A head of lettuce stuffed with money dangles from above. Brilliant red, gold and green capes rustle under the weight of giant, fantastical lion heads, lined with fur and bursting with intricate hand-painted detail. Crouched underneath one of them, I hold my breath, waiting for the signal. At once, the crack of the drum, crashing of cymbals, exploding fireworks—the lion head whips into life and jerks its draped body from the floor of the crowded restaurant. And through the gaping mouth, amidst the cheers of the audience, I can see all the excited faces beaming with anticipation. The lion dance has begun.*

Nothing rings in the New Year quite like the lion dance—well, that is, the Chinese New Year—and for this lion dancer, every performance is a whole new experience.

Four years ago, I didn't know quite what to expect when I joined the Ling Nam Siu Lum Kung Fu Academy, and considering that the school has been performing lion dance shows for restaurants across Long Island since 1984, I knew that becoming a full-fledged lion dancer would not be easy. Prior to the month-long schedule of performances to usher in the Chinese New Year season, beginning this year on February 18th, months of arduous practice and conditioning take place. The result of such training is a dramatic exhibition of skill involving weapons, forms, music and, of course, the traditional southern lion dance. Sifu Michael Manganiello made it clear from the start: "Ling Nam Siu Lum students are known for their lion dancing. They train in Hung Gar, one of the most physically powerful of the martial arts, and that strength translates into the sharp, intense movements of the lion that people have come to expect at our shows."

Whenever I say "lion dancing," I am often met with raised eyebrows, confused stares and perhaps two or three people who thought I said I wanted to go "line dancing." It just isn't very common. So before even picking up a lion head my first time around, I was briefed on the history behind the spectacle. During the New Year, the lion's role is to bestow blessings, prosperity and good luck on all who are present. The tradition can be traced back thousands of years and the legend of its origin varies. One story tells of Nian, a fierce beast that terrorized villages every year until it was defeated and chased away by a lion. Upon the monster's return the next year, Chinese villagers created a lion

costume and used it to scare Nian away. Another tale is of the emperor of the Tang Dynasty who had a dream where a mysterious creature resembling the Western lion saved his life. In honor of the creature that saved him, the emperor commissioned the lion dance. Whatever the story may be, the lion dance is integral to the celebration, scaring off evil spirits and welcoming a bountiful new year.

*The noise of the celebration fills the restaurant as the lion dance gets underway. With only minimal vision through the mouth of the lion, I weave my way between the tables. Waiters run past, cameras flash and children inch up to get a closer look. Sweat beads drip down my face as the heat swells under the head. I move with caution, especially*

*since my partner in the lion's tail is following my every move, flapping the majestic cape and keeping up with each of my steps.*

The most popular style of these dances performed in the United States is the southern lion dance from the Guangdong (Canton) province of China and the mythical creature looks nothing like what you might expect. Every lion head is characterized by bright colors, each having its own symbolic significance—large eyes, a horn at the head's center and a wide, flowing cape. Ling Nam Siu Lum has collected a spectacular array of them over the years from Malaysia and Hong Kong. More than just elaborately designed, the heads are heavy, yet extremely fragile. Becoming the lion is a lesson in teamwork as one person, with the massive head placed over his or her shoulders, works to animate the face while the other controls the movements of the tail. And, before the inevitable question arises, the lion dance is not the same as a dragon dance. The simple way to differentiate, thereby avoiding the all-too-

frequent confusion, is to note that a dragon is not operated by hand, but by poles held by a team of ten or more dancers.

So what exactly does lion dancing have to do with kung fu? Everything. A school's lion dancing reflects its particular fighting style and demonstrates the expertise of the students. It was once also a major form of financial support for a school. Rival schools would go face to face in lion dance competitions trying to outperform each other and in doing so, gain the respect of their town. In many ways, lion dancing was not just entertainment when it first began over one thousand years ago, it meant



survival. Even in more recent years, the competitive nature of students was such that a momentous celebration could escalate into violence. In the case of Ling Nam Siu Lum, while performers might not be duking it out in the streets, lion dancing is considered of foremost importance—every show is an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they train for year-round, specifically the Hung Gar system.

*The lion's dramatic head thrusts and elaborate dance moves are all rooted in deep, low stances, powerful movements and explosive energy, but no amount of practice could prepare me for the feeling of the actual performance.*

At different intervals during the show, performers often switch in and out of the lion, making sure that each person gets a chance to breathe and recharge before going back under. "It takes a consistent effort to perform the lion dance. Your fatigue and mistakes are projected through your performance, so one can little afford to slack off," says Alexander Kalogiannis, fellow kung fu student and lion dance performer. "We push ourselves to perform difficult, fast-paced movements under the weight of the lion head, while at the same time maintaining control and remaining aware of our surroundings." Depending on the size of the restaurant, up to four lion dance teams can be scheduled to perform, each one making its way to all the tables.

*As the drum beat changes, I jump onto the nearest bench, still moving the lion head to the beat. My knees shake, but I don't fall. It's no longer me the audience sees, but the lion. As I balance ever so carefully over a table full of diners, the eyes of the lion blink once, twice, three times as the mouth flaps open and shut. The head snaps down and sees smiling, laughing faces, as hands reach up and reward the lion with a flurry of stuffed red envelopes.*

Imagine the arena: Restaurants booked to capacity, elaborately strung decorations, tables end to end, waiters rushing past with trays full of food and drinks. Oftentimes, the lion dance begins outside. Red fireworks hung from trees erupt and fill the air with a haze of smoke and colors. In the midst of all the chaos, the lions awaken and make their way inside, as the pounding of drums reverberates through the restaurant, infusing the celebration with hypnotic, tribal-like rhythms. Each lion begins its search for the hung pao, or red envelopes. Diners place money inside these envelopes and literally feed it to the lions as they pass by, who in turn bestow on them the gifts of prosperity and luck for the New Year.

Poise, strength, stamina and kung fu skills all play a part in bringing the lion to life, from moving the eyes, ears and mouth of the lion head to interacting with the audience members, who are as much a part of the show as the lion dancers themselves. Few understand this better than veteran lion dancer and instructor Timothy



Chan, who reminds his dancers during practice that incorporating acrobatics and play into lion dancing brings up the thrill level for the audience as much as it does for the performers. "People should always expect to have a great time," he says about the performances. "The lion will jump up on chairs, wrap its leg around your neck, tease the kids and anything else I can think of to entertain the audience." Under the lion head, the dancer has to move in step with each different string of beats played by the musicians, but when strategically placed obstacles, space constraints and crowds alter the surroundings, he or she has to be ready to improvise and put into action the lion's most show-stopping moves. "My teammates are just amazing to watch, and it inspires me," says Annemarie Fulfaro. "People come up to us, take pictures, even try to dance with us. These beautiful, colorful lions really look alive because that is what our Sifu stresses the most." And just like any live show, each performance is different from the last, so the audience should be prepared for absolutely anything.

The climax of the dance still remains as exciting as the first time I took part in it. The eating of the "greens," often signified by a head of lettuce filled with hung pao, harkens back to the days when a kung fu school's reputation was at stake during the lion dance. "A lot of times it's customary for the restaurant, or whoever is sponsoring the lion dance, to put out some type of obstacle for the lion to surmount," says Sifu Michael. "Lion dancing shows a student's grace under fire, and a lion dancer has to keep his or her focus under such duress, say while balancing on a sawhorse or stone urn and doing the various movements." This is the moment of truth for the well-trained lion dancer. Total strength and concentration are required to reach the greens placed high above, sometimes even hung from the ceiling.

*The drumming continues as the crowd watches the lion approach the lettuce. Reaching up for the hung pao, I find it's hung too high. In one final attempt, I approach cautiously, the lion's majestic colors drawing the audience's attention to the center of the room. My partner hoists me up to form a tower. Standing on his knees, I reach once more, leap into the air, and grab the lettuce with the mouth of the lion. The audience erupts in applause! With the hung pao safely in tow, the lion head shakes and spits out the lettuce leaves, scattering them across the room. I drop the ceremonial scroll to the sound of more cheers. The performance then ends as it began, with all the lions bowing to the audience, as a final gesture of blessing to the restaurant.*

Ling Nam Siu Lum's annual school show will take place Saturday, February 10th at 8pm. For more information about scheduling a lion dance performance or attending a restaurant show, please contact Ling Nam Siu Lum Kung Fu Academy at (516) 796-1008 or visit [www.lingnamsium.com](http://www.lingnamsium.com). 📧