

Nai-Ni Chen

dance company



Teacher's Resource Guide For



YEAR OF THE RAT



Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's *Year of the Rat*

celebrates the Chinese New Year with a festive exploration of dance from the diverse Chinese culture. Dances range from the courts, to ancient farming communities, to highly athletic and contemporary dances that tell the dynamic immigrant story of today's Chinese diaspora in America. It is a wonderful journey.

The Chinese use the lunar calendar for celebratory events which includes the New Year. This falls somewhere between late January and early February. The cycle of twelve animal signs originates from Chinese tradition as a way of naming the years. The animals follow one another in an established order. Each cycle starts with the rat and ends with the pig.



According to the Chinese Zodiac, the Year 2020 is the Year of the Rat. The festival commences on January 25 and ends on February 8. For the Chinese, it is the year 4718. The Rat is the first sign in the Chinese Zodiac cycle and it is a sign of wealth. According to Chinese legends, Rat people are sensitive to other people's emotions and are liked by all. They are instinctive, sophisticated, and alert to nature. People born in this year have a kind personality, but have weak communication skills. Blue, gold, and green are considered lucky colors for Rats. Notable people born in the Year of the Rat include: William Shakespeare, George Washington, Eminem, Mary Tyler Moore, and Mark Zuckerberg.

Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year or Spring Festival is the most important of the traditional Chinese holidays. It is often called the Lunar New Year, especially by people in mainland China and Taiwan. The festival traditionally begins on the first day of the first month (Chinese: 正月; pinyin: zhēng yuè) in the Chinese calendar and ends on the 15th; this day is called Lantern Festival. Chinese New Year's Eve is known as Chùxī. It literally means "Year-pass Eve".

Chinese New Year is the longest and most important festivity in the Lunar Calendar. The origin of Chinese New Year is itself centuries old and gains significance because of several myths and traditions. Ancient Chinese New Year is a reflection on how the people behaved and what they believed in the most.



Celebrated in areas with large populations of ethnic Chinese, Chinese New Year is considered a major holiday for the Chinese and has influenced the new year celebrations of its geographic neighbors, as well as cultures with whom the Chinese have had extensive interaction. These include Koreans, Mongolians, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Vietnamese and formerly the Japanese before 1873. Outside of Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and within China, regional customs and traditions concerning the celebration of the Chinese New Year vary widely. People will pour out their money to buy presents, decorations, materials, food and clothing. It is also the tradition that every family thoroughly cleans the house to sweep away any ill-fortune in hopes to make way for good incoming luck. Windows and doors will be decorated with red color paper-cuts and couplets with popular themes of "happiness," "wealth" and "longevity." On the Eve of Chinese New Year, supper is a feast with families. Food will range from pigs, to ducks, chicken and sweet delicacies. Families end the night with firecrackers. Early the next morning, children will greet their parents by wishing them a healthy and happy new year and receive money in red paper envelopes. The Chinese New Year tradition is a great way to reconcile forgetting all grudges and sincerely wish peace and happiness for everyone.

Stories of the Chinese New Year

The Chinese New Year is now popularly known as the Spring Festival because it occurs at the beginning of spring on the Chinese calendar. The following myth tells one version of the genesis of the celebration. Nian, which is the modern Chinese word for “year,” was the name of a monster that attacked people the night before the New Year. Nian was a massive beast with a huge mouth that could swallow many people with just one gulp. Everyone was afraid. They stayed in their homes for fear that Nian would eat them. One day, an aged man offered to tame Nian. The wise elder strode up to Nian and said, “I hear that you are very capable. If so, can you swallow other beasts of prey on earth instead of people who are by no means your worthy opponents?” Nian rose to the challenge and swallowed many of the other people-hating beasts of prey on earth. After that, the old man disappeared, riding the beast Nian. The man was not a man at all but an immortal god. Nian was gone and the other beasts of prey that were not eaten were scared into the forests. People began to enjoy a peaceful life. Before the old man left, he told the people to put up red paper decorations on their windows and doors at each year’s end to scare away Nian in case the monster returned. Red is the color the beast feared the most. Today the customs of putting up red paper and exploding firecrackers to scare away Nian are still practiced.

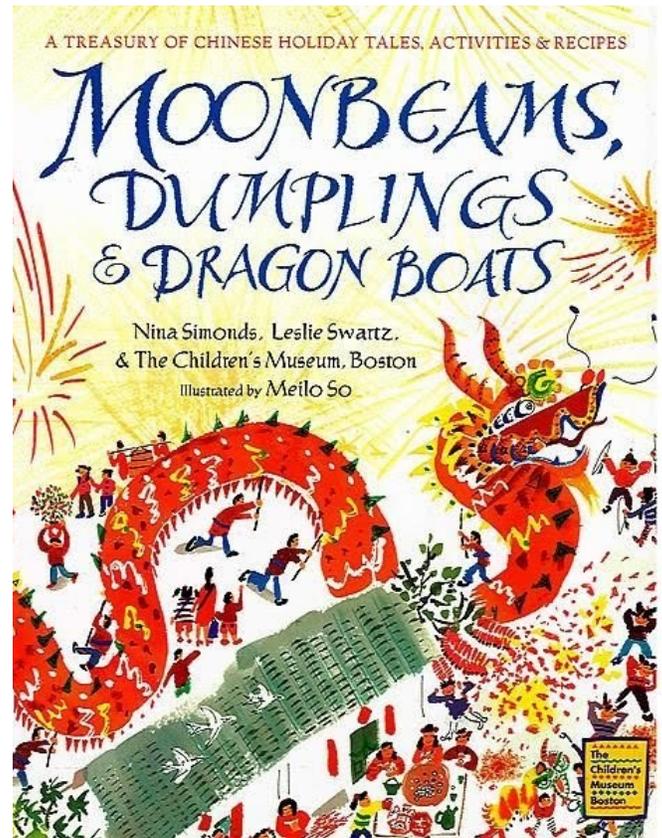
The legendary Kitchen God also plays a role in a family’s celebration of the New Year. Everyone is concerned about the Kitchen God’s opinion of the family. On the twenty-fourth day of the Twelfth Moon (twelfth month), one week before the New Year, a picture of Tsao Wang, the Kitchen God, is hung in the kitchen of all Chinese households. The Kitchen God has two very important jobs. The first is to guard the family’s hearth. The second task, the one that could worry some members of the family, is to keep a check on the family’s morals. Legend says that the Kitchen God ascends to heaven at the end of each year to report to the Jade Emperor about the household he has just left. To protect its interests, the family members smear honey about the god’s picture before they allow the Kitchen God to leave. This ensures that he will only say sweet things about the family. Sometimes, a little wine is also poured on the god’s lips to loosen his tongue. Gold or silver paper is also placed on the picture of the Kitchen God to represent gold or silver that might be needed on his long journey to heaven. When all preparations are complete, the picture of the Kitchen God is set afire. The smoke carries the spirit of the Kitchen God up to heaven where he reports to the Jade Emperor. On the first day of the New Year, a new picture of the Kitchen God is hung, incense is burned and food offerings are presented to honor him.

There are other traditions of Chinese New Year. Even though the climax of the Chinese New Year lasts only two or three days including New Year’s Eve, the New Year season extends from the middle of the twelfth month of the old year to the middle of the first month of the new year. This period is considered a good time for businesses in the Chinese community as people will go to great lengths to purchase presents, decorations, food and clothing. Many Chinese plan vacations around the New Year so that they can travel home for a family reunion. In China and its related countries, the workers in public transportation, especially the railroad, nervously prepare for an onslaught of travelers. Days before the New Year, families work hard to give their homes a thorough cleaning, to sweep away any ill fortune that may have collected and to make room for the hoped-for, upcoming good luck. Doors and window moldings are often given a new coat of red paint and are decorated with paper cut-outs that represent happiness, wealth, longevity and a satisfactory marriage with children. Paintings with the same themes are hung in the house. The New Year’s Eve supper is a feast with all family members dining together. One of the most popular courses is jiao zi, dumplings boiled in water. At midnight, the whole sky is lit up by fireworks and the sounds of firecrackers ring in everyone’s ears. Very early the next morning, children greet their parents and receive their presents. Often this is money wrapped in red paper packages. Then, the families converge in the neighborhood sharing greetings from door to door. The New Year is also a time for reconciliation: old grudges are very easily cast away and the air is permeated with warmth and friendliness.

Classroom Activities & Resources

Dragons symbolize power, strength, importance, benevolence, and good fortune. The Chinese New Year begins with a dragon dance performed in public by men holding sections of the dragon. Students can create their own smaller version of a dragon. Read aloud *Jin Jin the Dragon* by Grace Change or *Moonbeams, Dumplings, & Dragon Boats* by Nina Simonds, Leslie Swartz & The Children's Museum, Boston.

<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/play/view/printable-dragon-craft-for-lunar-new-year>



Using the handout below have students practice calligraphy! To create New Year's decorations, *chun lian*, give each child a red square piece of paper. Use black paint to copy one of the symbols from the handout. Decorate with gold crayon and glitter.

https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/teachers/articles/migrated-files-in-body/china_repro.pdf

http://archive.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/02/chinas_lantern_festival_and_an.html

The Lantern Festival happens fifteen days after the New Year and symbolizes reunions. This festival is a time to socialize and reconnect. It is said that the festival began more than 2,000 years ago in the Western Han Dynasty. Students can make their own lanterns and parade through the school. Have the students recall one fact they learned about China and create a riddle on the lantern based on their fact.

<https://www.firstpalette.com/craft/paper-lantern.html>



2. Company Biography

Bridging the grace of Asian elegance and American dynamism, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is a premier provider of innovative cultural experiences that reflect the inspiring hope and energy of the immigrant's journey. The company's ground-breaking works have focused on themes from ancient Chinese legends reflecting issues of the present time to purely abstract, contemporary dances inspired by the art of Chinese calligraphy. An Asian American company that celebrates the cross-cultural experience, the Company's productions naturally bring forth issues of identity, authenticity, and equality.

The company's accomplishments are evident in its extensive performance history. Our work has been presented in some of the most prestigious concert halls including: Joyce Theater, Lincoln Center, Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts, Raymond F. Kravis Center, Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, and New Jersey Performing Arts Center. We have had television specials on PBS/NJN, ABC, WNYC and completed eight international tours spanning the globe. Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has received grant awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, as well as continuous generous support from the state of New Jersey since 1990. The company is currently in residence at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, and New Jersey City University.



3. The Legacy of Traditional Chinese Dance

Dance reflects the culture, beliefs, and aesthetics of its people. Traditional Chinese dance can be divided into two broad categories--court dance and folk dance. Court dances date back to the Qin Dynasty (220 B.C.) and were performed in the palace of the emperor. Court dancing reached its height of sophistication during the Tang dynasty as evidence by its depictions in the poetry, paintings and sculptures of that period. There are two kinds of court dances: those based on various martial art fighting forms, and those based on Confucian etiquette and ritual codes. Today, aspects of these ancient court dances are still found in traditional Peking Opera, and ancestral ritual ceremonies in Confucian temples.

Folk dances originate from over 50 distinct indigenous ethnic groups within China. A Chinese dancer today is expected to study the classical court dances embedded within the Peking Opera movement style as well as numerous forms of folk dance. Dancers must begin training from a very young age by studying martial arts, acrobatics and stylized theatrical movements on a daily basis. Dance technique typically incorporates work with props like handkerchiefs, ribbons, ritual weapons and fans.

4. Characteristics of Chinese Dance Forms

- Emphasis on Hand and Eye coordination
- Use of circular patterns in space with every part of the body
- Extensive use of props



"The Chinese court dances have been re-created from poetry and paintings of that period in history. Poems describe movements of the Tang dynasty dancers and you see what the costumes and some of the hand and facial gestures looked like from the paintings and sculpture of the time. But you have to use your imagination to recreate these court dances."

Nai-Ni Chen

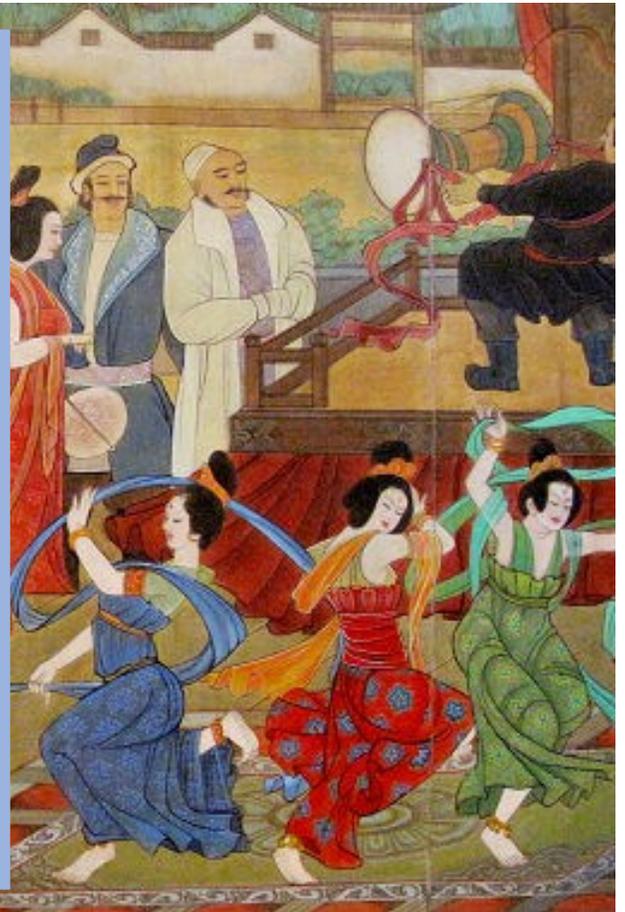
5. Differences from European Dance Forms

The most obvious difference between Chinese and Western dance styles is the emphasis on shape. Chinese court and folk dances typically focus on organic circular movements that represent harmony. Western dance forms like ballet and modern dance tend toward linear, elongated movements.

Complex hand gestures and emphasis on hand-eye coordination found in

Chinese dance is mostly absent from traditional Western forms. In all of

Nai-Ni Chen's work, three important elements of Chinese art are present: Jin (Concentration), Chi (Flow of Energy) and Shen (Spirit). These aesthetic values are distilled from



Elements of Dance



All dance shares three fundamental characteristics:

Space - the place through which a dancer moves.

Time - a measurable period during which movement or dance occurs; the passage of time is indicated in many ways ranging from complex rhythmic patterns to long, unbroken stillness.

Energy - the amount of intensity or force a dancer uses to execute a movement. Energy adds texture, weight and color to a dance.

Nai-Ni Chen's choreography incorporates or is influenced by several dance styles: classical court dances, modern dance, folk dances, ethnic minority dance and ballet. See "Chinese Dance Today," for information on these dance forms.

Many people are involved in the realization of a dance performance:

choreographer - a person who creates and often teaches, the movements of the dance and who decides upon the production elements, such as music, lighting, costumes, casting and overall design. **composer** - a person who writes music. The music may be written specifically for the dance piece or pre-exist and be selected by the choreographer. **costume designer** - a person who creates the clothing worn by dancers on stage during a performance. **dance concert** - a program of several dances, often choreographed by the same person, with each dance having its own choreography, costumes, lighting design and music.



dancer - a person selected by the choreographer or artistic director of the company to perform the dance movements. Generally dancers have extensive training in one or more techniques before they perform in a professional company.

lighting designer - a person who creates the illumination for a dance or theater piece. He or she watches the dances and speaks with the choreographer before creating the theatrical effects on stage.

6. Philosophies

"I believe that Shen (Spirit) is the most important aspect of my work as an artist. It can be expressed through the colors of ink, the lines of the brush stroke or by complex body movements."

Nai-Ni Chen

In China, traditional dance forms are guided by philosophies found within the overarching culture. Traditional Chinese art is heavily influenced by Taoism; the belief that humans are one with nature. Various artistic disciplines share the fundamental interest in finding inspiration from nature to create art. The concept of achieving a balance between Ying and Yang is also essential for poets, musicians, dancers, calligraphers, and painters alike. Examples of this philosophy can be found in the often contrary, but interdependent patterns in nature. The rotation of the earth from sun-rise to sun-set causes changes in shadows and light. The dark side of the mountain becomes bright, water flows in a stream, sounds of pine trees wave in the wind, and the movements of animals are all urging us to observe and feel. The various dynamics, and rhythms of the universe create an on-going energy that seeks to fulfill the circle of life. Circular patterns in dance are symbolic of this ongoing energy.

Chinese painting and dance focus on the same philosophy of four elements. *Chi* describes the breath of internal energy, *Yung* the flowing of rhythm, *Sheng* life, and *Dong* motion, or the ability to evoke liveliness. Each element contributes to a dancer's training and artistry when performing. Music also greatly contributes to the way that traditional dance is performed. The term *Yue Wu*, or Music Dance, was recorded in historical Chinese documents and describes the inseparable nature of the two art forms. In fact, unlike many Western Modern dance forms, music and dance are always performed together.

Questions to ask before the performance:

How do you think dance is the same and/or different around the world?

How do rituals, festivals, and celebrations relate to dance?

Do you think the geographic area affects how dance looks?

Who participates in dance in China? What about in your own

culture?

During the Performance:

Watch how the dancers perform with concentration and control on stage.

Listen to the music and see if you can identify what instruments are being used.

How are the colors and styles of the costumes different from the clothes you are wearing?

Observe how the dancers use their eye focus and hand gestures to add drama and to connect with the audience.



After the Performance:

*Using a map of China, locate the places where the dances in the program came from.

*Turn and talk to a classmate about their reactions to the performance. What did they notice or remember that you had not?

*Have a classroom discussion about what the students discovered.



What's your sign?

The Chinese calendar is based on a 12-year cycle with each year named for a different animal. If 2020 is the Year of the Rat, have students determine under which sign or animal they were born. Have each student list his or her animal's characteristics on the calendar. It is said that a person shares characteristics with the animal associated with the year in which one was born. Ask each student to review the animal's characteristics and write a short essay that uses various aspects of his or her personality to either support or disprove this theory.



Lion Dance Partner Exercise (Improvising)

In the “Lion Dance,” the lion costume is worn by two dancers moving in cooperation and harmony with one another. Ask students as partners to explore ways in which they could move together across the floor in cooperation, while always connected in some way, e.g., holding hands, touching heads, connecting arms. The speed can be varied according to the age and agility of the participants.

Dance Activities for Elementary Students

Using the New York City Blueprint for
Teaching and Learning in Dance

Entry Points for Teaching

Themes relating to social studies

A traditional cultural dance, like Chinese Ribbon Dance

Visual art works

Images for Silk

Ribbons

Waterfall, rainbow,

ocean waves,

whirlpool, dragon,

snake, cloud

Encourage students to create their own movements inspired by their natural environment with silk scarves!

Hand Eye Coordination (Developing Skills and Techniques)

Traditional Chinese dancers must develop their hand eye coordination for stronger concentration. Circular patterns are often used to find harmony within the movements.

To help develop these skills, have students use their finger to trace their names in space. While they do this, have them follow the movement with their eyes. Review the hand gestures that the dancers performed in the show including the Orchid Flower Hand, and Tiger Hand. How many ways can you make circular patterns using these hand gestures?

Dancers must also develop spotting techniques to help them achieve balance. Like the performance, have the students try balancing on one leg while concentrating on a specific spot that they find in the room.

Embroidery and Costumes (Choreographing)

Discuss the symbolism of color and design found in the costumes from the performance. See what symbols the students can identify! Students can create stories and/or poems based on the embroidery they view. From these stories students can choose three action words that identify a beginning, middle, and end. The students then create a movement sentence to perform for the class. Students can also learn each others sentences! Instead of words, students can choose symbols from the embroidery to create choreography from.

Suggested Activities

Perform for peers in dance class

Improvise in response to stimulus

Improvise with props

Class discussions to further

From: *Blueprint for teaching and learning in dance: Grades pre-k-12.*

7. Facts About China



Official Name: People's Republic of China

Capital: Beijing.

Official Language: Mandarin. Based on the Northern Chinese dialect spoken in Beijing, Mandarin is taught throughout all of China, there are at least 35 other dialects.

Area: 3.705 million square miles, the third largest country in the world.

Geography: China is a mountainous country. More than 68% of the country is above sea level. There are two major rivers in China: the Yangtze River is 3988 miles long, the Yellow River is 3011 miles long. Millions of people live near the mouth of the Yangtze River. The fertile soil supplies a tenth of China's rice crop, and the industrial might of Shanghai make it China's most prosperous region.

An Asian Empire: At its territorial height, about 670 B.C., the Tang dynasty directly administered a vast area and received tribute from nearly a dozen kingdoms and territories. Tang rule extended far beyond China's modern western boundary.

Population: China is the world's most populous country. Han Chinese, the predominant ethnic group, accounts for ninety-two percent of the population. The remainder is comprised of 55 recognized minorities. Nearly all of China's people inhabit the fertile, humid lowlands of the east; hundreds of millions live along the coast. Dry western highlands make up more than half of China's territory, yet are home to only six percent of the population.

Republic of China (Taiwan): Four-fifths of the island's 20 million people descend from Chinese settlers of the 1600's. Two million fled the mainland for Taiwan after Mao took power in 1949 during the Communist Revolution.

Hong Kong: Returned to China rule in 1997. The name Hong Kong means 'Fragrant Harbor.' Historians believe that the name came from the city's past trading of spices and incense.

8. History of China

- 5000 B.C. Farmers along the Yangtze River were among the first to grow rice.
- 3000 B.C. Yangtze River settlement produced silk and carved jade.
- 2696 B.C. Silk fabric was invented.
- 2000 B.C. Shang Dynasty: Priest-kings presided over ancestor cults in villages on Northern China plain.
- 1600 B.C. Oldest embroidery on record from the Shang Dynasty
- 551 B.C. Confucius was born.
- 220 B.C. Qin Dynasty: China unified by Qin Shi, the first emperor. Great Wall was built.

- 126 B.C. Han Dynasty: Chinese explorers forayed into Central Asia. Silk ribbons used for dancing.
- 2 A.D. Population in China: 58 million.
- 105 A.D. Paper and books: Cai Lun developed paper by pounding together ingredients like bamboo, hemp, bark and spreading the pulp flat.
- 220 A.D. Buddhism spread in China.
- 400 A.D. Sui Dynasty: Began work on the Grand Canal.
- 600 A.D. Tang Dynasty: Trade blossomed with the West through the route across Central Asia called the Silk Road.
- 690 A.D. Empress Wu: the only woman emperor in Chinese history.
- 850 A.D. Gunpowder: Alchemists worked with saltpeter for medicinal purposes and mixed it with charcoal and sulfur. The explosive properties that resulted were used in warfare to propel arrows and fireworks in Tang Dynasty.
- 1086 A.D. Song Dynasty: New census taken. Population: 108 million.
- 1200 A.D. Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty: Genghis Khan and later his grandson Kublai Khan ruled China. Marco Polo visited China in 1271. A unified Chinese theatrical form begins to take shape.
- 1400 A.D. Ming Dynasty: Culture and art flourished in China.
- 1600 A.D.. Qin (Manchu) Dynasty: The last dynasty in China. Population: 200 million in 1762 and 395 million in 1830. Peking Opera emerged from the combination of four regional styles of acting.
- 1840-1842 The First Opium War: Great Britain flooded the country with opium, causing an addiction crisis. The Qing Dynasty banned the drug, and a military confrontation resulted. The British force shut down Chinese ports, resulted in a treaty that handed over the control of Hong Kong for 99 years.
- 1911 Dr. Sun Yi-Hsien (A Western trained M.D.) led the Wuchung uprising, overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China.



- 1921 Chinese Communist Party formed in Shanghai.
- 1949 Chiang Kai-Shek, President of the Republic of China, fled to Taiwan leaving China in Communist hand. The era of the People's Republic of China began.
- 1966 The Cultural Revolution: This campaign was initiated by Chairman Mao to erase Capitalist and traditional Chinese influences of the People's Republic and introduce the philosophy of Maoism to fill the ideological gaps. Schools were closed and Chinese youth directed to take the lead in change, resulting in youth gangs known as the Red Guards who attacked undesirable citizens. Chaos led to martial law, Communist Party purges, and 1.5 million deaths.
- 1989 Numerous attempts at economic reform fail in the forty years of Communist rule. Protest for democracy at Tienanmen Square gains global attention as the army fires on demonstrators.
- 1997 Hong Kong returns to China: In a midnight ceremony with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Hong Kong was given back to China after 156 years. China agreed to preserve the island's capitalist economy as part of the handover agreement.
- 2010 China becomes the world's second-largest economy with a population of 1.5 billion.



Map Retrieved from: <https://www.kids-world-travel-guide.com/china-facts.html>

Further Reading on China

For Students:

Branscombe, Allison. *All About China: Stories, Songs, Crafts and Games for Kids*. Tuttle Publishing, 2018.

Crane, Carol. *D is for Dancing Dragon: A China Alphabet*. Sleeping Bear Press, 2013.

Jenner, Carolyn. *Welcome to China*. Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2012.

Mah, Adeline Yen. *China, Land of Dragons and Emperors*. Random House, 2009.

For Teachers:

Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. Simon and Schuster, 1991.

Chang, Shih-Ming Li, and Lynn E. Frederiksen. *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond*. Wesleyan University Press, 2016.

Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China*. WW Norton & Company, 1990.



“I use positive and negative space to create contrasting dynamics onstage. What I want to express is the dynamic between Yin and Yang, the soft and strong quality, the heavy and light from the two extremes.”

Nai-Ni Chen

About This Study Guide

It is hoped that the material in this guide will stimulate discussion, inspire activities, promote further research and generally prepare students for the performance. It is designed to provide educators with information about China, Chinese Dance and the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in particular. Through the exploration of this material, numerous connections can be made to existing school curriculum.



Programs of the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company are made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/ Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey Cultural Trust, the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Hyde and Watson Foundation, E.J. Grassman Trust, The Horizon Foundation for New Jersey, the Cultural Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, the Live Music for Dance Program of New Music USA, the Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, the Rapid Response Program of American Dance Abroad, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters’ Cultural Exchange Fund, supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, PSEG, Proskauer, WAC Lighting, the Glow Foundation and MOCA.

