

Into the Lion's Mouth

by Caroline Ang, '04

It is the last Saturday in September and the Brown University lion dance team is about to perform. Eleven students sit on the floor of Leung Gallery. The nine team members walk to the front of the room, seven Chinese, two Caucasian. Each wears a shirt bearing a black and white lion design on the front and the words "Brown Lion Dance" emblazoned across the back.

The boys who will make up the two lions - Grant, John, Chris and Michael - wear bright yellow pants with orange and gold tassels encircling each leg, meant to mimic fur. The instrumentalists, Cisco and Larissa, wear black pants and black shoes, and Peter Quon, the teaser, sports a navy blue silk ensemble reminiscent of a rich man's pajamas. He dons a mask made of brightly lacquered peach paper mache, with pink dots for cheeks, ruby red lips and thick, black eyebrows. He will signal the lions into place for each stunt.

The four boys disappear underneath the heads and tails. The team's captain Brian Fong welcomes the freshmen, but keeps his remarks brief. He can't convey this magic - this magic that keeps him and his team here, week after week, year after year - with words.

Brian and the team members move into place. Cisco raises his drumsticks and brings them down hard on the drums. The cymbals crash. The performance begins.

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Historians trace Chinese lion dancing back to a band of roving Persians who traveled to China via the Silk Road during the T'ang Dynasty (618- 906 A.D.). They performed their *Nevruz* ("New Day") festival for the emperor who, like his people, had never seen a lion before. The Persians' dance pleased the emperor so much that he ordered the lion to be incorporated into the most important of Chinese festivals, the Harvest Moon and New Year's celebrations. The Chinese, however love to tell another story of how this art form came to be: *the Legend of the Nien*.

In ancient times, a creature called the Nien roamed throughout China, devouring man and beast. News of these atrocities reached a remote mountain village and prompted its inhabitants to seek protection from the mighty lion.

When the Nien finally stormed into the village, the lion intercepted him and the two beasts fought a terrible battle. The lion emerged victorious and the wounded Nien slunk away into the shadows of the forest, vowing to return in exactly one year to exact vengeance.

The year passed quickly. The people searched for the lion, but found that he now guarded the emperor's own quarters, thousands of miles away. The people despaired, but the wise men of the village proposed a plan. They would build a lion from cloth and bamboo. Two men would hide inside it, and frighten the Nien away.

When the Nien finally approached, the two men danced under the heavy layers of cloth, roaring and leaping toward it. And the Nien fled, terrified, leaving the villagers in peace, to marvel over the success of the very first lion dance.

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The Brown University Illustrious Lion Dance Troupe began in 1992 when a student named Tse Kit Chan brought a lion head with him from his former high school. He found a second student to help him perform; then the An-Liang Association of Rhode Island donated another head, a set of cymbals and a drum. Since then the team has retired the original head and acquired three more: the first, in '96, a rainbow styled head from Hong Kong, the second, a golden lion head from Singapore in '97, the last, a red lion last year from Marin County, California.

In its nine years of existence, the Brown team has grown from two members to ten, then dropped to three, then swelled to its current fourteen. And now, as the team faces the loss of half its members with this year's graduation, its survival is once again up in the air.

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In Chinese tradition, a reputable school of Gong Fu will always have a lion dance team. To form the team, the master of the school handpicks his most talented students, for traditionalists say that a school is only as good as its lion dance team, and a master only as good as the lead lion.

In the United States, however, lion dance and the martial arts do not always overlap. Some people join lion dance to rediscover their ethnic heritage, others perform to build upon a lifetime of cultural pride, and still others dance because they want to connect with a different culture. The Brown team accepts anyone who is willing to learn, partly because it wants to include people of all backgrounds, and partly because such a small team can't afford to be choosy. Sometimes its mantra offends the more traditional, and team captain Brian Fong must take the heat. "Once, after a performance, a man came up to me and said, 'You don't even deserve to have those heads.' That hurt💎 I knew that I was breaking years of tradition, decades of code. But we needed members."

Brian closes his eyes for a moment. "I didn't know whether I should laugh or my heart should break," he says softly.

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Brian fell into lion dancing accidentally, when he was six years old. He was born in San Francisco's Chinatown, where his parents worked long hours as a computer programmer and a chemist. Every morning they would drop Brian off at his grandparents' house, where he would stay until they picked him up on their way home.

Every day Brian's grandparents would take him along to the Fong Family Association, where he would sit on the floor and watch the adults play mahjong. In time the sharp clicks and clacks of the tiles lost their excitement for him, and since the association shared a building with a barbershop and a fortune cookie factory, for a while he frequented them both.

Then he discovered the lion dancers. While his grandmother and grandfather would sit and chat over the hum of table fans and the shouts of fellow gamblers, Brian would creep outside into the alley and watch the lion dancers from the martial arts studio next door. Nothing could compare to the beauty of their choreography, guided by the beat of drums and the clash of cymbal and gong. Vibrant color washed over the dingy walls and jagged pavement of Ross Alley, and young Brian could only gape at the lions as they wove their way around him through the narrow space between the buildings.

One day, the master of the Wing Lum Kung Fu Academy invited Brian to come inside the studio. Perhaps he had looked out the dirt streaked windows of his office and taken pity on the small boy he saw, hunched against the concrete wall of the association, eyes straining to take in every last detail of an afternoon practice. Brian, being only six, was never formally considered a student, but at the end of one year could perform as the head in a simple lion dance. At the end of that year, his parents decided that their son could not receive a proper education in Chinatown's public schools. Thus, the Fongs left their city life behind and moved 45 minutes south of San Francisco to the sprawling, manicured suburbs of Palo Alto.

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Palo Alto proved just the developmental mecca that the Fongs had been searching for. Its public schools surpassed the nation's average in test scores and offered dozens of AP classes. Downtown teamed with academia from Stanford University, and in their new surroundings the Fongs saw only opportunities for Brian.

They stopped speaking Chinese at home, and spoke only English instead. They want their little boy, whose first language was Cantonese, to speak English fluently. They still fed him Guangdong style cooking and encouraged him to attend Chinese school on the weekends, but made it clear that first he should "learn to live in America as an American." As he grew older, Brian came to identify with clean, classy Palo Alto and its sparkling glass office buildings and trendy, overpriced eateries- not Chinatown, where the smells of rotting fish and day old curry wafted through dirty alleyways where dogs and children played. From time to time he wondered why his parents never emphasized their heritage, but in the whirlwind of pubescent academic and social concerns he forgot his puzzlement.

One day, shortly after he began his senior year in high school, Brian drove up to Chinatown to shop for groceries. He wandered through the streets, and passed a familiar alley. He stopped. *Ross Alley*, the sign read, just as it had eleven years ago. An emotion that he could not quite name- guilt? sorrow? loss?- overwhelmed him. He closed his eyes and saw the red and gold lions of his childhood dance before him. He opened his eyes and they vanished. He must have stood outside the studio for ten minutes. He could not bring himself to go inside.

That night Brian decided to do his 40-50 page senior thesis on lion dancing. He made up his mind to rediscover the pieces of Chinese-ness that swirled around inside of him, eluding his grasp, and resolved that he would explore the hyphenated prefix to his identity.

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Brian performed his first real lion dance in the spring of his freshman year in college. The Chinese Church of Rhode Island, then situated in a gothic cathedral-esque building in downtown Providence, had booked the Brown team for its Chinese New Year celebration. Over 300 people - young career types, bored looking adolescents, elderly couples and frazzled parents shushing noisy children - crammed themselves into the church, craning to get a better look at these five black and white clad college kids who claimed to be a lion dance troupe. A photographer for the Providence Journal adjusted his heavy camera to capture the best shot. Brian looked out over the rows of faces and the people spilling into the aisles. His heart pounded as the drum did, and his courage leapt up from inside him and disappeared into the crowd.

Towards the end of the ten-minute routine, it came time for Brian to perform the stunt that he had practiced for the last month and a half. He, the head, would jump onto the shoulders of his partner, the tail, for a double (two-man) stack. At roughly 5 feet 10 inches each, Brian and his partner would create the illusion of a lion standing upright: 11 feet, 8 inches tall. They had done it in practice and were sure they could do it now. Brian's partner crouched and Brian vaulted onto his shoulders. For a moment he was up, standing, balanced - and then his foot caught on the tail. Now his memory blurs. He remembers the crowd's collective gasp. He remembers the jarring pain that racked his lower back and the dizzying heat that rushed to his face. And he remembers choking back tears because in a matter of seconds he would have to perform the double stack again. He could hear the cue, signaling for him to move into position. The choreography would not stop for him to dwell on his mistake.

Brian and his partner executed the second double stack in one fluid motion. Momentarily Brian stood atop his partner's shoulders, lifting the lion's head above his own. The church exhaled as one. The photographer took a picture, which appeared in the newspaper the next day. Brian still has that picture.

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Sometimes Emi Iwatani still cannot believe that after four years, she is Brian's co-captain and the team's main drummer. She joined the team freshman year on a whim. During recruitment at a meeting of the Chinese Students Association, the team had announced its upcoming competition at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Emi was looking for the cheapest way to get to Wellesley, to visit an old high school friend. She signed up for the free trip to Boston. She got herself into four years of lion dance.

"It was different before Brian took over," she says. "Almost no one could make the practices. We'd have a pep talk before every performance. 'If you screw up, don't worry, no one will notice anyway.'" She laughs. "Brian really changed things. Now the practices have structure- and they're mandatory. The more we practiced, the better we got. And for me, lion dance gradually became something really worth doing."

She grew to respect the lion and the drum. "The lion's not just painted paper mache on a bamboo frame," she says firmly. "It's got to be treated with respect and care." Brian has made it clear to the team that no one is allowed to step over the lions or their tails because this would imply that the lions are dead. Emi wants the same respect for her drum. "It's that Buddhist mentality that everything has a spirit inside of it," she explains.

Emi pauses, thinking. "We make the lion come to life visually with our movements and music, but in a sense I consider it already alive." She gestures emphatically in the air. "The lion is not just some thing that we brandish around. It is powerful. It amazes me that when two people climb into the lion, they can bring good luck to other people. I do believe in this."

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Tucked away on the third floor of Faunce House is a musty smelling, dimly lit room that Brian fondly refers to as the team's office. Actually, the team shares the room with two other student organizations - the Chinese Students Association and the South Asian Students Association.

The office, about the size of two walk-in closets, is a mess. The team's equipment takes up about half the room. Costumes hang neatly on a clothes rack along one wall, and a large box of red banners, old drumsticks and bells sits in the corner. The team's three lion heads sit solemnly in a row, presiding judiciously over the cramped space.

The first lion head, dubbed "gold lion" by the team, measures about 3 feet across, 2 feet tall and weighs 10 pounds. It has large, wide set eyes and a white, straggly beard. Metal coils with orange and pink pom poms affixed to their ends spring out of the head, and red and gold embellishments dot its surface. Gold lion always looks as though it is just about to bite something.

Blue lion, the oldest of the heads, is starting to fall apart. The team uses it only during major performances that require three lions, such as graduation. It weighs 20 pounds and has not been washed since 1996 for fear of disintegration. The team's name is painted across its back in Cantonese- *Boi Lei Dai Hok Sing Xi. Brown University Lion Awakens*. Its pom poms and decorative markings sprinkle neon greens and pinks in with the bright blues, reds, whites and blacks. Blue lion's stubby horn resembles that of a rhinoceros, and its elongated mouth looks like it belongs to a whale.

Red lion, donated by the Marin Chinese Cultural Group, still bears the name of its former owners across its neck. Its nose and forehead are tucked closely to its head. It weighs 15 pounds and is painted red with cheerful splashes of pink, orange and yellow. Each head has a matching tail that stretches roughly 9 feet behind it. The tails are folded and tucked neatly inside their respective heads.

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Early on Saturday morning, the Brown lion dance team meets for its first practice of the year in Leung Gallery. Brian leads the team through warm-ups, then Cisco moves to the drum, which stands at knee height, as wide around as a barrel. He holds two thick drumsticks over the bronze skin of the drum and taps them experimentally.

The team pairs off and Brian demonstrates how to move from the starting horse stance into a basic tiger stance. For horse stance, he squats with his feet shoulder width apart and his back straight. To move into tiger stance, Brian lifts his right foot carefully, then places it down perpendicular to his left foot. At the same time he simulates holding the lion's head by sweeping his hands forward, back and from side to side.

The pairs line up and wind their way across the room. There is no drum, only the sound of shuffling feet and heavy breathing. After watching them for a few moments, Brian nods slightly at Cisco, who brings his sticks down hard and shatters the silence. The rhythm, haunting and tribal, somehow compels the team members to pick up their feet and straighten their backs. Each stroke reverberates off the bare walls and empty floor. The beat evokes a sense of tradition and honor, the feeling that generations upon generations have danced to it in China, to the same music that now fills the Leung Gallery of Brown University. It is sobering, and beautiful.

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Occasionally when he has the time, Chris Yee will make plans for next year's lion dance team. Brian and Emi want him to lead the team after they graduate in May. He has more experience than the rest of the team, so his transition to team captain seems natural.

As a freshman, Chris came to the team ready to perform. His troupe in California, the Marin Chinese Cultural Group team, had performed at banquets, weddings, anniversaries, restaurant openings, retirement homes and even the county

fair, sometimes up to six times in one week. Chris had been lion dancing with them since he was seven years old.

"It was difficult," he admits, joining a team as young as Brown's. "They weren't as coordinated as my old team. The drumming and the instruments don't go with the lion, and they should. It's like starting from scratch. People graduate. You're out in four years, whereas at home we'd have kids stay on the team for ten, eleven, twelve years. Most of us started lion dancing when we were in first grade."

Practices ran every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. Chris worked with his partner, his cousin Tasha, for almost seven years. "After dancing with each other for so long, I knew how she moved, and she knew how I moved. We moved as one lion," he remembers. Now, over two thousand miles from home, he wants to focus on his new partner, Michael, and matching their movements. "It's all about trusting your partner," he says. The phrase sounds familiar. Brian has said this before.

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And now, in Leung Gallery, the lions crouch, their eyes closed, heads bowed. The drum thunders and the cymbals ring. The lions spring to life; the drum is the lion's heartbeat. Their eyelids flutter and their mouths open; their backs arch and they leap forward. They perform the three traditional opening bows, mouths so low that their beards touch the ground.

The tempo quickens and the lions fan outward. Red lion snakes up and down the room, playfully snapping at the freshmen, rolling on its back, rolling on its side. Gold lion rears up on its hind legs and paws at the air. The teaser darts in and out of its path. Cisco strikes the cue and gold lion stands upright.

The lions rush forward. The teaser tosses them two short cylindrical objects, which they gulp down before the audience can get a clear look. Seconds later, red scrolls shoot from their mouths, unfurling to reveal the message "Good Luck Seniors." Cisco strikes the final beat and Larissa smashes the cymbals together as hard as she can. The lions thrust their heads high. They hold their poses erect, gravely gazing past the row of students. Brian stands against the back wall, watching them. The audience's cheers echo throughout the room. His face glows with tender pride.

And the lions stand tall, their gold trimmings and round mirrors catching the sun, reflecting the rays upward, through the windows of Faunce House.