

Stuart Hamby writing sample

Lions and Tigers and...Kung Fu? Oh My!

It's a sight frightful enough to stop Dorothy dead in her tracks. First one, then another two, then three more colorful lions dance into the square, leaping, prancing, scratching their tails, and taking the occasional nip at each other.

No, it's not the Cowardly Lion's family reunion, but a whole other breed of cat that danced its way through shops and restaurants belonging to the local Chinese community on January 30th.

Amid machine-gun bursts of firecrackers, Chinese revelers bring in the new year with dancing lions manned by kung fu practitioners who train year-round for the strenuous task of dancing like wild beasts, all the while shouldering 25 pounds of highly decorated and stylized lion head.

1998, Chinese Year of the Tiger, looks to be an auspicious year for Boulder's Shaolin Hung Mei Pai organization, led by Shifu ("Teacher") Howie Solow: this is the first Chinese New Year in which his students have fielded six dancing lions. In years past, his students have welcomed the New Year with two lions, and the group has performed up to five heads on other occasions, but the sixth lion is a first for both the group and the region. "Nobody in Colorado is performing six lions", says Solow, the pride easily recognizable on his face.

Solow's kung fu class, together since 1993, has performed in Boulder and Denver for the past three years during Chinese New Year. Before that, Solow says, the group was neither large enough nor ready enough to perform, and he returned to his native New York to bring in the New Year the Chinese way. But 1995 marked the turning point: "By then, several of our members had been studying for a couple of years, and they were ready to perform. It is important to display good kung fu in a lion dance, to show that we are an authentic school – not just a bunch of guys who get together once a year to perform the lion dance for money."

This year, the group has expanded to well over 40 members, "including the kids' class" – clearly enough to field several lions. While only two performers are required per lion head, others are needed to play drum, cymbals, and gong – ensuring that the lion dance will

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be loud enough to drive away the evil spirits, who, like many in the crowd that thronged Denver's IndoChina Center to watch the spectacle, are intimidated by loud noises.

While a typical lion dance only lasts about 8–10 minutes, Chinese New Year is a special time, requiring the performers to improvise longer routines inside Chinese shops and restaurants. Outside, the lions rear up to capture “hong bao” – red envelopes filled with money that shop owners offer in return for the good luck brought to them by the lion dancers. Says Shifu Solow, “The shopkeepers challenge you to get the hong bao, and every year, they raise the stick a bit higher”. The challenge this year? A hong bao dangling tantalizingly from the roof a good fifteen feet above the heads of the onlookers. “No problem,” laughs Solow, who immediately brings out the “show-stopper” – a giant catapult-looking device that deftly raises a lion over the heads of the onlookers and well within reach of its prize. “Great job!” cheers Solow, who immediately turns reflective and asks, “Now what will they do to us next year?”.

While certainly the most visible of performances, Chinese New Year is not the only time of year the lion dancers stretch their muscles – requests for performances come in year-round for almost any gathering of the local Chinese community. Upcoming performances by Hung Mei Pai include the Boulder Creek Festival, the Chinese Adopted Children's fair, the Pueblo Zoo, as well as several performances for local businesses. “We get calls all the time to perform all over Colorado,” explains Solow, “but we like to get the chance to perform in our own back yard – you don't get any new students by performing in Steamboat Springs”.

With so many lion dances slated for the group, the local Chinese communities of Boulder and Denver can look forward to a prosperous Year of the Tiger. And a comforting absence of evil spirits.