

Lilife

INSIDE
OPTIMUM
HOMES G21

EXPLORE LI
WEEKEND
G15

PHOTO ESSAY

LION KINGS

A WEST HEMPSTEAD
DANCE TROUPE
PREPARES FOR THE
CHINESE NEW YEAR G4

LET THERE BE LIGHT Our favorite Long Island lighthouses newsday.com/lilife

NEWSDAY PHOTO / KAREN WILES STABLE

To celebrate a year of promise on LI

Chinese center rehearses for New Year fete

Photos by Karen Wiles Stable

Text by Katti Gray

As an opening gesture, the dancer adorned in an outsized lion's head appears in the doorway, dramatically halts and brushes some spot along that entrance with his costumed mouth. It represents, alternately, a cleansing, a marking of territory as the lion's own and a bestowal of blessings on those who've arrived to watch the lion preen, leap, lunge and remind them of their connection to an ancestral home.

More times than he can precisely recall, Randy Yung, 29, has played the starring role in local and regional performances of the ancient, ritualistic lion dance that is staged during the highest Chinese holidays. On Jan. 23, as the Chinese diaspora launches a week's worth of assorted New Year celebrations, Yung will supervise the 25 or so lion dance students that he, as lion master, instructs at the Chinese Center on Long Island.

NOW ONLINE

For more photos of Chinese New Year, go to newsday.com/life



Members of the Lion Dance troupe warm up before suiting up with the costumes at the Chinese Center on Long Island.

At 14, he began studying the classic dance and, since 2006, when he succeeded the center's original lion master, Richard Kam, Yung has been passing down the tradition to a next generation during Sunday classes at the center's West Hempstead address.

"In the students who get very good at this, there's just the natural flow and movement of their muscles. You don't think about how you're turning your feet or moving your body or twisting your hip or turning your hand," Yung said. "Also, your mind doesn't think about what's going on inside the lion's

head or how you're presenting yourself to the audience. You take yourself out. And it becomes this weird spiritual thing that I can't exactly explain. I'm not there yet."

By "weird," he means deeply beautiful, reverential and commemorative. Preserving and handing down Chinese tradition to the *Jook-sing*, the Cantonese term for Chinese people born in the West, and sharing those traditions with the broader community are the center's essential aims.

The lion dance is offered within a hopeful context, said Rachel Chow, an Iona College

sophomore and one of Yung's students. "It's all so symbolic, the dance with the lion. It all has meaning," Chow said. "I've been doing this for so long and love how, through dancing, we show other people that my culture is about so much more than food. . . . The lion scares away the evil spirits at the start of the New Year. It brings prosperity and hope, and even brings the troupe closer together."

As for the New Year, the East has its enduring regimens and lore. For example, the dragon — Jan. 23 begins the Year of the Dragon in the Chinese astrological calendar

— is not some evil thing to be hunted down and slain.

"Traditionally, the dragon is one of the most powerful animals in the zodiac," said Patty Chow, the center's vice chairwoman and mother of dancer Rachel Chow. "People look to that . . . and everybody wants a 'dragon' baby because the myth says that this will be a powerful child."

Likewise, the Year of the Dragon suggests a year of promise, she said. "You're saying to yourself, 'This is the year that big stuff is going to happen. . . . This is the year I will make my mark.'"

ON THE COVER

Holding up the lions' heads are, from left: Leland Chan, 16, April Leong, 17, and Aidan Logan, 15. Troupe members say the lion dance helps bring them closer.



Alison Bartoldus, 16, peeks out the body of a lion costume. She tried one out before the new costumes were recently blessed.



Alison Bartoldus, 16, at the drum, which represents the heartbeat of the lion.

Chris Bartoldus, 14, and Annie Vogel, 13, occupy the yellow lion at rehearsal at the West Hempstead center.

Dragon lore

In Chinese tradition, each year is dedicated to a specific animal. This year it is the dragon, the fifth sign in the Chinese Zodiac of 12 creatures. The Year of the Dragon is projected to be marked by excitement, unpredictability, exhilaration and intensity.

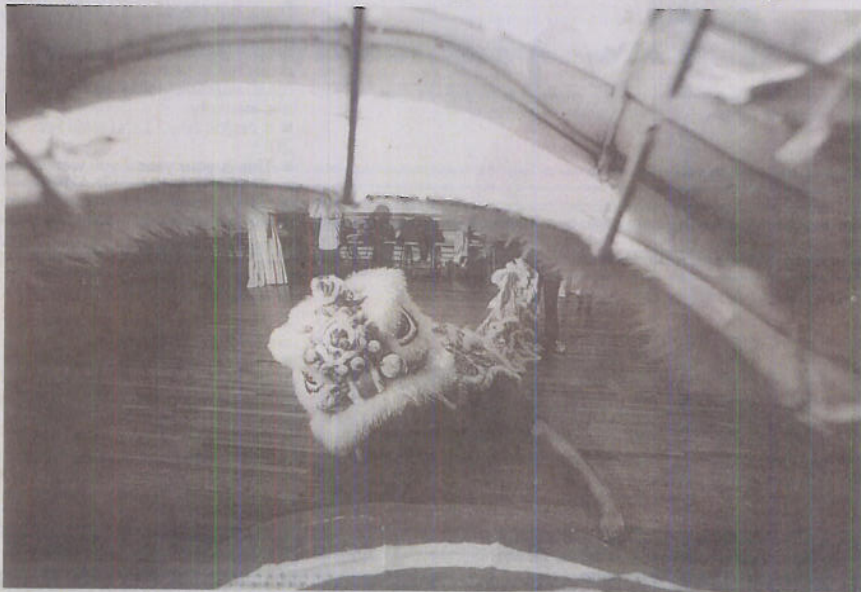
- It begins Jan. 23 and ends Feb. 9, 2013.
- **This is your year** if you were born in 2000, 1988, 1976, 1964, 1952, 1940 or 1928.
- People born in this year are known to be **risk-takers** who are quick-tempered, **confident, ambitious, brave,** passionate and conceited.
- The dragon is a creature of **myth and legend** from which the Chinese are said to be descended.
- In ancient China, the dragon represented power and was the sign of Chinese emperors. Today, it **signifies success and happiness.**
- **Celebrity dragons** include John Lennon, Sandra Bullock, Al Pacino, Courteney Cox, Roseanne Barr, Colin Farrell, Isabella Rossellini and Wynonna Judd.

Sources: boston.com; Chinesenewyear2012.net; chinese-zodiac-symbols.com



After the ceremony, children touch the new lion costumes to bless the heads. The center's goal is to preserve and hand down Chinese traditions to the next generation.

To prosperity and hope



A new drum is put away after practice. The Year of the Dragon suggests one of promise, the center's director said.

The view from inside a lion's head. "Your mind doesn't think about what's going on inside the lion's head or how you're presenting yourself to the audience. You take yourself out," says lion master Randy Yung.