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## Embracing China

A center on Long Island  
helps Chinese-Americans  
stay in touch with  
their culture

G4

PHOTO BY BRUCE GILBERT

Ali Bartoldus spins her colorful umbrella during a dance class at the Chinese Center on Long Island in West Hempstead.

**INSIDE:** GARDEN DETECTIVE EYES THE CATALOGS **PLUS:** REAL ESTATE ADVERTISING / CLASSIFIED



# Holding on to heritage

Chinese Center helps young people embrace their ancestral culture

BY KATTI GRAY  
Special to Newsday

Inside the glass-paneled studio, Nick Lew, a college senior from New Hyde Park, has been demonstrating for his younger charges the leaps and bounds of an age-old dance in which humans are costumed as a lion, folkloric protector against evil and bearer of good fortune. Lew models the jungle cat's stealthy legs, paws, head and chest. He mimes a piercing stare at an imagined spot on a wall straight ahead.

A trio of teens manages the percussion. The three pound a kettledrum, clang cymbals and a gong as Lew crouches behind a solo dancer under his tutelage. He steers her backward glide. They pounce left, then right, and her 5-foot frame is hoisted above the polished wood floor. The two are flushed, breathing hard and laughing at their goof-ups. This is fun but also part of the Chinese Center on Long Island's earnest exercise in sustaining ancient traditions in America.

"A lot of the performances have meaning behind them," said Lew, 22, one in a roster of

Girls and boys at the Chinese Center on Long Island, in West Hempstead, practice the age-old lion dance on a recent Sunday.

NEWSDAY PHOTOS BY BRIDGET GABERT



center alumni who now are volunteer instructors.

Among Lew's favorite choreography is a piece starring a head of lettuce. The lions "blink at it. They dance around it," he said. "Eventually they eat the lettuce, though at the end they spit it out at the audience. That is a symbol of spreading joy and prosperity to the people around you. My grandparents had been telling me about these things since I was a little kid. Performing these dances has helped to keep the stories stuck in my head."

The West Hempstead center's classes include written and spoken Chinese, traditional Chinese dance, martial arts and Gu Zheng instrumental music. The youth have performed outside of the center and taught their technique at high schools, among other venues. It is an atmosphere where just about everything is used to teach a lesson. If, say, a center-sponsored event has Mandarin fare on the menu, no adult can eat — and no child enlisted as a waiter can serve or eat — without naming the food in Mandarin.

#### A cultural center

A visceral embrace of Chinese thought and culture has been the ultimate goal of the Chinese Center. It is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, which, by the Chinese lunar calendar, is year 4078, the Year of the Tiger. Though the center's slate of classes, workshops, lectures and cultural stagings extends to adults, its primary target has been Chinese progeny. These days, they increasingly include Chinese-born children adopted by non-Chinese American parents and multiracial American-born kids with one Chinese parent.

"It's just a sign of the times," said Patty Chow of Garden City, the center's co-president. "We have so many cultures represented in our membership, not just Chinese people. We have so many bringing and blending."

The Fongs of East Meadow reflect that trend. Alex Fong is Chinese-American, and his wife, Samantha Fong, born in Guyana, is of African and East Indian heritage. "We want them to learn the culture and the language, the heritage," Alex said of his daughters. "It will also help them out in the future, especially with the world's economy shifting toward China."

Olivia Fong, 4, and Alyssa Fong, 7, show up for the five hours of instruction offered on Sundays at the center. "We learn Chinese on it," Alyssa said, eyeing the computers in a base-



Sisters Alyssa Fong, 7, and Olivia Fong, 4, are among the students who are taking classes in written and spoken Chinese at the center.



Leland Chan clangs cymbals, as percussion is traditional accompaniment to dance. Sustaining ancient traditions is key.

ment classroom of the two-story building the center occupies. More than that, Alyssa said, she likes the mushroom dance. "It excites her," her mother said.

"It's how we celebrate the harvest season," said Canton-born Lotus Wu, who is co-princi-

pal at the center and runs its language program. (A Beijing-born dancer runs the dance program.) The center has 150 children enrolled in its Sunday classes. Language lessons are \$300 a year, and dance classes are \$325.



Gianna Burke, 5, takes part in a dance class for petite juniors. A Beijing-born instructor runs the center's dance program.

#### Abandoning 'Chinese-ness'

The first waves of Chinese immigrants to the United States were a demurring lot, co-president Chow said. Refugees from political and cultural repression and the toils of Chinese agrarianism, they were bent on not sticking out in their new land. They dispensed with public display of China's ways. What was abandoned in public often got ignored in private.

"My father came over in the '50s," said Chow, whose four offspring attended the center and remain active as volun-

See CHINESE CENTER on G6

#### Anniversary celebration

The Chinese Center on Long Island hosts its 50th anniversary banquet at 6 p.m., Saturday, March 6, with a live band, cultural performances and a nine-course Chinese meal at East Manor restaurant in Flushing. For more information visit its Web site: [ccliny.org](http://ccliny.org)

Information about its Sunday Chinese school for youth is available on that site as well.



# Learning to embrace their Chinese heritage

CHINESE CENTER from G4

teers. "He came to Baltimore, and at that time they felt you needed to speak English. 'Suppress your Chinese-ness and assimilate.' That generation of Chinese-Americans wanted to succeed in America. And to achieve that, they thought they had to learn to do everything the way Americans did."

Further into their immigrants' odyssey, however, a group of Long Island mothers "got together secretly because they wanted to keep the traditions, and also wanted to share their feelings about the hard times they were having making it in America," Chow said. Like immigrants before them, they were outsiders, struggling with the language and frequently with such daily matters as paying for household upkeep.

There were other issues to address. Some non-Chinese bought into myths about the Chinese in America, said Edward Chung of Jamaica Estates, Queens, who sits on the center's board of directors. "My thought in bringing my own child here is to bring the best of the West and Asian cultures together," he said. "There's been way too much stereotyping, this thinking that everyone of us is either Bruce Lee or that our girls are whores." The latter was rooted in the reality of Asian prostitutes serving American and Japanese soldiers in World War II in the Pacific.

That reality is placed in context, age-appropriately, for the center's youth. Unvarnished, too, are, for example, the facts of female infanticide that persisted for centuries in China, and abandonment as a result of China's one-child policy. Girl babies and handicapped boy babies were left in farm fields or, if they were lucky, on the doorsteps of churches and orphanages, said Helen Chin of Port Washington, another board member.

Explained, as well, is the history of the imperial courts and why they were revered; and how the Year of the Tiger commences on Feb. 14, ushering in, according to the Chinese Zodiac, a period marked by optimism and courage.

## Growing appreciation

Birthing the center seemed especially helpful, given the comparatively few Chinese-

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Americans on Long Island in 1960. "You want your children to have a sense of identity," said Linda Sau, the other co-president.

"One of the things highlighted in the adoption paperwork is that there should definitely be a tie to their culture so they do not lose that sense of cultural identity," said Ronnie Dart, of Williston Park, mother to Lieren Dart, 12, and Catherine Dart, 10. The Chinese-born girls have attended the center for six years.

Sabrina Cortor, also 12, started classes when she was 3, enrolled by a Chinese-American mom and part-black, part-white dad concerned that a child of many mixtures might have an even more difficult time figuring out who she is. "I have to constantly say to her that you're Chinese but not just Chinese," Jennie Cortor, of Seaford, said. "She does ballet and tap, and the Chinese dances. Coming to the center has really helped her appreciate her Chinese side." It has achieved the same for

April Leong, 15, of New Hyde Park, a Chinese-American who has been at the center since she was 5. She was under instructor Lew's supervision that recent afternoon. "The lion is trying to get the orange," she said, giving her take on the lion dance. "To accomplish that, he has to get through some obstacles. . . . I'm here to learn about Chinese culture, to get to know a little more about what it's all about."

Coming up, Chow said, she regrettably had no such option. "Most of the Chinese-American families back then were

restaurant and laundry owners, laborers with language barriers," she said. "I didn't know as a child how to write the Chinese characters. My parents wanted us to succeed. I woke up one day and saw that my generation has all these master's degrees from universities. But I said to myself, 'Why can't I read Chinese?'"

"I knew that when I had kids, I wanted them to keep these things. Maybe they cannot know all of it 100 percent, but it's really important that they know some aspects of this."



Center students are exposed to an array of cultural classes. Above is a ribbon dance. At far left, Kelly Ng and Baylee Kilfoil-Greaves take a break from instruction in the beating of drums, below.



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