



By Nelda Stuck, Our Town Editor
Wednesday, August 21, 1996

Chinese dancers draw enthusiastic crowd

The Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company of the Bay Area was making its debut performance Tuesday night at the Redlands Bowl, so anticipating the audience response to a new group was a puzzle.

My guess was that Chinese dance would be too specialized an entertainment to draw a large crowd whose attention would not be easily held. Decidedly wrong on both accounts! The Bowl was nearly full, and people stayed.

Lily Cai and her six dancers were charming, smashingly visual amid their swirling color of silk scarfs, sweetly enticing, pettily slim, supple in movement requiring amazing muscle strength, and wonderful interpreters of a mysterious 5,000-year culture we're eager to understand.

Cai and her company combined an element of naivete with a very professional sense of production and lighting, and a pride and exuberance in sharing their culture. Enthusiasm for what you believe in goes a long way.

The brief 25-minute first half of the program opened with a quick review of Chinese dynasties – four interpretations from 770 B.C. to A.D. 618 to 1644 to a new presentation of Dai dance style. The effect was wide contrasts in style beginning with sedate movement depicting working women with baskets suspended on long poles.

Also featured were erect dancers in high bejeweled headdresses and slender Chinese red brocaded attire, moving in mincing half-steps on three-inch platformed sandals from the days when women's feet were painfully bound to keep them small – a sign of beauty and a requirement to be marriageable.

Then Lily Cai, wanting the public to understand Chinese movement in modern interpretation, soloed as the "Straw Hat Girl." She wore her large hat vertical to hide the top half of her face, and enticed us with bright red smiling lips, long spike fingernails, and impressive flexibility in backward thrusting hips – all enveloped in the visual and musical aura of traditional China.

Cai also soloed as a happy shepherd in a Mongolian folk dance, explaining the difference in her movements from that of Tibetan dancers, who bend forward as though with the heavy burdens being carried up the mountainside, and with head and eyes tipped upward to see the mountains. She demonstrated typical movement of Mongolian dancers living

in the vast grasslands of China, with upright posture, arms flung wide to the skies and imitating the eagles and other birds. She said that her loose shoulder movements and shimmying upper torso reflected the Mongol horseback riders' way of relaxing stiff muscles.

The scarf and fan dances proved totally fascinating – first for the constantly changing patterns of swirling silk colors, but also in watching how the dancers keep the 20-foot-long streamers separate, how they can once or twice untagle a length caught on a hairpiece, and how their supple arms have the stamina to keeping up the wide-swinging motions.

Whereas the movement earlier this summer of the women of the Avaz company was predominantly a swirl of skirts, the culture coming through with the Lily Cai Chinese dancers was a subservient, or perhaps demure, constant and very supple bending at the waist. At times the women were crouching as though planting rice or scrubbing floors in wide circular motions, sometimes using the swirling scarves. Often their movement incorporated slow-motion while balanced on one foot, or near-splits to the floor requiring tremendous strength in the legs.

Other dances featured instantly short jerky motions, particularly in the Peacock Dance. No one in the future watching a real peacock walk will forget how these dancers captured that movement.

Cai's brief narration was totally charming as she spoke slowly and decisively to make sure her accent was understood. Speaking of her recent citizenship as "a very high honor," and obviously excited to introduce her dance culture from Northern California to the Bowl, she said, "This is a very quiet and beautiful city with parking no charge and nobody has seen Chinese dance. I wish you enjoy and have good time with us."

The intermission speaker, University of Redlands president James R. Appleton, reflected on the privilege of seeing the Chinese dancers. "Most of us over 50 grew up without television and we didn't travel until we were older," he said. "Now our UR students travel and understand the global village, and we have the opportunity to bring this village to our Redlands Bowl stage."