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[Turning Tradition Into Something New](#) [Lily Cai's latest dance to premiere Friday](#)

- Peter Stack, Chronicle Staff Writer
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It's hard for Lily Cai to find words to describe the mesmerizing dances she has choreographed for the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company. They really can't be captured any way except in the language of body movement.

``Oh just watch, just look," Cai said during a rehearsal of her company.

``Some of these girls will be in tight skin-tone costumes. As if naked. And that S-curve she's doing, that is very old. It's from 1,500 years ago, from Tang Dynasty, a very famous move."

Cai was referring to a sassy series of moves in a new piece having its world premiere Friday and Saturday at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Her ``Southern Girls" is a hypnotically sensual series of duets for seven dancers using 12-foot-tall cylinders and a rain of feathers. Although meant to reflect the style and attitudes of young women in Southern China, the dance transcends place.

The piece is set to new music by Shanghai-born composer Gang Situ and will be performed live by San Francisco's Alexander String Quartet.

Judging from the rehearsal, the work is trademark Cai -- filled with unusual moves that bring the sensibility of athletic, theatrical modern dance to the traditional reserve and rituals of coquetry found in Chinese dance. Situ's music is a haunting yet sometimes amusing interplay of melody and torn lines.

``I like breaking classical rules," said Cai, who lives on Russian Hill. ``Whether Chinese or Western, I take many ideas and turn them here or there and come to something new."

That's exactly what Cai has done since establishing her own company in San Francisco a decade ago. Her blending of Chinese dance gestures -- from both classical and folk traditions -- and the spare, often edgy style of modern and postmodern Western dance has resulted in a remarkable new dance language.

Cai's all-female company (with some dancers also playing male parts) has won exuberant praise from critics and passionate applause from audiences across the United States.

“I argue with myself all the time about whether I should leave out the word Chinese in the name of my company,” said Cai, a Shanghai native and former principal dancer with the Shanghai Opera House.

“But I always come back to the reality that I am Chinese. So how can I leave out that part?”

Cai was trained in both classical Chinese and Russian ballet. But she's also an expert on folk dances, and in her dances she uses regional material -- fans, ribbons, lantern rituals and caricature poses -- as well as aspects of classical forms drawn from dynastic histories.

“There are 56 different minorities in Southern China alone,” Cai said. “In China there aren't freeways, and there is little in the way of TV or radio, so dances tend to stay home within the area of a particular minority. I feel lucky that I can pick out things from so many distinctive cultures.”

Cai designs her own costumes -- sometimes dazzling elaborations on traditional Chinese styles, but just as often designs inspired by the lean, suggestive plainness of American modern dance.

The use of only women has been a source of curiosity about the company. But Cai has her reasons.

“Male dancers aren't reliable,” Cai said. “That's been what I have found. It's too bad because I love male energy, the strength and power. But what good is it if they don't show up for rehearsals?”

Cai said she never had any such problems with female dancers.

And she has other reasons for her all-female approach.

“As choreographer, the dances are an extension of me,” she said. “So I sometimes feel that if I am using seven girls, and I am saying I love you, that it is not just me but seven girls saying it. That's a lot more power.”

At this weekend's concerts, the Lily Cai dancers will also perform two other pieces that have become major hits with audiences -- the hypnotizing “Begin From Here” (music by Situ and Gary Schwantes), which blends ribbon dance and modern Western moves, and “Candelas,” a sensual dance, set to the fourth movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 5, in which the dancers illuminate their moves while holding candles.