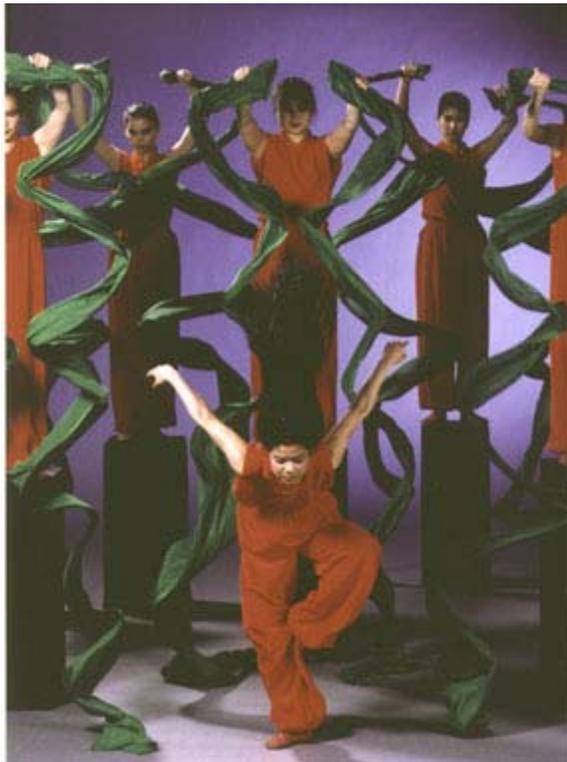


## Silken Illusions

**15th Anniversary Performance**  
**Lili Cai Chinese Dance Company**  
**Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater**  
**San Francisco, California**  
**November 15, 2003**

**by Paul Parish**  
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The most interesting part of the Lili Cai Chinese Dance Company's fifteenth anniversary show last Saturday night was the series of stunning clips in the video retrospective, which was screened just before the intermission. The marvelous deep, high stage of the theater at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts downtown had just been filled with the snaking whorls of traditional Chinese ribbon dancing, beautifully lit, which at moments caught me up in complete fascination, watching the gorgeous silk reveal the inner secrets of turbulent currents, but then left me wool-gathering, reflecting (for example) on the possible debt of Loie Fuller to this form of Chinese dancing. The three dances performed that evening were too similar. In all of them, the dancers were there to make other things dance—you followed the movements of cloth, or of flames, not the bodies of the dancers. Which that night, for me, let me drift off

into thought. But the clips in the video arrested me, held me tight, impressed me repeatedly with how strong the company is, how varied their repertory, how open they are to new influences and how successful they are in collaborating with artists from other cultures. I found myself wishing they were performing at least one dance that was more rhythmic and embodied, like their award-winning *Common Ground* (which they co-created with the African-heritage Dimensions Dance Theater) and is strong, earthy, and grounded.

The video made clear just how *much* Lili Cai's work is a spectacle. When they opened for the Grateful Dead a few years back, the crowd at the Coliseum went wild when they did their hundred-armed Buddha effect, it was the image that did it. The effect is a traditional Chinese dance-theater optical illusion, created by lining all the dancers up perpendicular to the audience and having them open their arms in an elaborate sequence—which may look even better on video than in 3-D, because it is designed to create a mythic pattern in two dimensions, like a painting. Similarly, many of the ribbon dances look in some ways MORE stunning in two dimensions than in three, like calligraphy of the utmost fantasy--and certainly the video collaboration they did with Ed Tennenbaum, who let the trajectories of the ribbons lay down tracks one upon another on his screen, looks like a new form of action painting—on-going marbling. It was a light show that did not stop being fascinating.

Cai, who came to San Francisco from Shanghai, where she was a principal dancer with the Shanghai Opera House, came to the Bay Area twenty years ago and quickly set about teaching and making contemporary dances using traditional Chinese materials. The civilization of China is an ancient one, of course. It embraces many cultures, has gone through many stages, and has survived and assimilated the cultures of conquerors and the conquered. It's humbling for an outsider like me to begin to imagine how ignorant I am of what goes into this art. One thing that seems to pervade Chinese art, though, is a fascination with the beauty of that which vanishes. The beauty of the ribbon dances is both philosophical and sensuous—you see the consequences of very small movements (made by the dancers' hands) as they are played out in the yards and yards of silk that have been set in motion and are being pulled through serpentine paths—it's like being able to see the wind, or the passage of time itself, watching the silk whorl and ripple and curl back on itself, all going by so fast you can't be sure what you saw. In the interstices of the movement, I found myself reflecting on the Chinese fascination with fireworks—which is also a vanishing act that takes place in the air, in the dark—and with gambling, the manifold unknowable unforeseeable permutations that can come from a single initiative.





*Candelas*, an adagio for five women in flesh-colored unitards carrying a candle in each hand, opened the second half. What a relief it is to see a culture where feminism has not made women self-conscious about seduction. *Candelas* looks to me—admittedly, very much an outsider—like an outgrowth of the dance of concubines: it is a high-minded, even sublime setting of the Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony, the best dance setting I have ever seen to that music (and there have been many). What makes it work for me is the

basis of the movement in an erotic mode of contortion. The dancers reach behind themselves (holding candles, remember)-- investigating the possibilities of rotation in the spine, the shoulder and elbow, that will allow them to move these flames in figures of eight with maximum amplitude and grace. The difficulty is the measure of its generosity. The silhouette in this dance looks astonishingly African; the pelvis is marvellously atilt, the lumbar arch is pronounced, the arms serpentine, the knees almost always bent, sometimes all the way to the floor. The ballerina repeatedly does a fondu all the way down on the right foot, with the left extended in tendu, as she reaches forward in the breast, all the while bearing a living flame in slow wreathing circles. At the last great climax in the music, the candles suddenly configure in a huge oval that reminds me of Tantric images of the Buddha, and reminds me that the Tantric path ("the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" is a line from Blake, but it encapsulates Tantric thought) is the high erotic mode, with much in common with Rumi, The Song of Songs, and indeed, the Fifth Symphony of Mahler.

The evening's premiere, *Si Ji* ("the Four Seasons"), is a veil dance: each of the dancers is covered with a good ten yards of sheer silk organza, which they poke and poke and poke and poke and jump about inside, causing the stuff to do what you'd expect. BEAUTIFUL stuff, beautifully lit (by Clyde Sheets) in colors designed to suggest the changing seasons. The dance could not hold my attention, despite its arresting score, composed for the occasion by company's co-



founder, Gang Situ, and brilliantly played by the solo cellist, Robin Bonnell. Again, I found my mind wandering: the last section, which the dancers performed with the organza tied around their bodies under the breast, brought back such stunning memories of Balanchine's *Bugaku* (where the ballerina performs pirouettes and other movements of grand adagio while swathed in an awful lot of very similar cloth), made me wonder if this is an ancient genre in China which the Japanese adopted into Gagaku and Balanchine incorporated into his piece.

So they look like jellyfish, or like chicks about to hatch, or silk-worms struggling to be born. Or like Wilis preparing to dance. Except that none of these made much impact on me, and the idea of the four seasons would never have occurred to me if I had not read about it. What I missed most was a sense of rhythm, trajectory, and ballon in the allegro, which to me seemed choppy and frantic rather than airborne and natural (which I presume is the intention, but I admit that is a LARGE presumption). I'm not blaming the dancers for not providing these qualities. Perhaps, on another night, I would have been able to do without them. The dancers are lovely and certainly jump well—they are all beautifully trained, finely disciplined theater artists. Their names are Yan Hai, Quiong Huang, Tammy Li, Ada Liu, Chih-Ting Shih, and Phong Voong.

Photos:

First: *Begin from here.*  
Second: *Strings Calligraphy*  
Third: *Candelas.*  
Fourth: *Si Ji*

Photo credit: Marty Sohl

To learn more about the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company. Visit [www.ccpsf.org](http://www.ccpsf.org)

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