



## [A magical, mystical tour of hybrid dance](#)

### [Lily Cai blends Chinese, modern styles](#)

- Michael Wade Simpson, Special to The Chronicle  
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At a Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company performance, the "turn off your cell phones" speech is made first in English, then in Chinese. Cai, who was a principal dancer at the Opera in Shanghai, moved to the Bay Area in 1983 and has been formulating a blend of traditional Chinese, modern dance and "Russian" ballet ever since.

She has certainly found a niche. Her company tours internationally and has received lots of grants and funding. At a 15th anniversary performance at Yerba Buena on Friday night, the choreographer came out to tell the audience how much she loved America. A videotape rolled offering a short history of the company. What became apparent was that the formula she came up with early on hasn't changed much: A handful of dancers wave long pieces of silk or move like posing statuary. What has evolved are the production values: The music is different, the lighting is gorgeous and the costumes are sexier.

There is something unerringly magical about the play of light on whirling fabric. Her dancers are wonderfully adept at manipulating yards of silk (not to mention hats with braided fringe, and body-wrapping nets of gauze). During moments of some of the pieces seen in excerpts, "String Calligraphy" (2000), "Silk Cascade" (2001) and "Begin From Here" (1997), the never-resting yards of silk animated the stage with amazing patterns of color and line. It was like watching an impassioned painter, a watercolorist, loading his brush with huge globs of paint and splaying them all over the paper in swirls and jutting lines and dots. The lighting, by Matthew Antaky and Clyde Sheet, picked up on all this and played with it.

The company consists of Yan Hai, Quong Huang, Tammy Li, Ada Liu, Chih- Ting Shih and Phoong Voogn, all Asian-born dancers who seem perfectly content to play flag-wavers, props maidens, candle-bearers and shapemakers, rather than to dance much.

Perhaps the real cultural difference lies in this: Cai never buys into the hyper-American choreographer's tendency for multitudes of steps -- and

copious sweat, emotion and physicality. Hers is a dance of simplicity, a music- video-influenced, pedestrian, fashion-model sensuality, with hip-thrusting, back views and group movement that tends to repeat two or eight times before moving on. All this is enhanced by the more dynamic periods of swirling light and color. The company opened for the Grateful Dead at the Oakland Coliseum a few years back, and you can imagine how well they must have played to a stadium of well-primed Deadheads. The images the Lily Cai dancers create are groovy, there's no doubt about it.

The bare-bones movement vocabulary worked best in the 1997 piece, "Candelas." The romantic fourth movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 5 offered its own drama and let the movement of the flickering candles and a row of dancers simply hovering in the glow seem like enough, creating an ambience rather than a dance, with images and color reminiscent of a Maxfield Parrish painting. On the other hand, "Si Ji -- Four Seasons," a 2003 premiere featuring original music by Gang Situ and cello solo by Ronin Bonnell, needed either more contrast in the music or in the movement to indicate any changing of seasons. The prop for this work was a square of netting which the dancers kept flying above their heads for much of the piece. The image in the winter section resembled a fountain of ice water, but once the lighting moved into red, green and yellow, the same netting began to seem limited compared to the lengths of silk used elsewhere. At one point, the company walked out holding their white material wadded up under their arms, and you wished the choreography had an inkling to set them free.