

# The mane attraction

From Internet websites to glow-in-the-dark lion heads, lion dance troupes here are moving into the 21st century with a roar



Hong Xinyi

LION dance troupes here are taking the next great leap forward. Where they were once seen as rather shady get-ups, today's troupes are more tightly regulated and new members are giving the art form a new roar.

Quite a few troupes are now using the Internet to advertise themselves, and enthusiasts even use Internet forums to discuss the latest events on the scene.

About 30 educational institutes offer it as a co-curricular activity, and women are allowed in these school troupes.

Mr Andy Fu, 26, represents the new face of lion dance. For the greater part of the year, he lives like your typical yuppie, watching movies with his girlfriend, playing basketball with friends and working as a bank officer at United Overseas Bank.

Come Chinese New Year, however, and Mr Fu, who studied electronics at Temasek Polytechnic, finds his other identity as a lion dancer taking over.

As leader of the 14-year-old Kuan San Tang Dragon And Lion Dance Troupe, he can take part in up to 30 dances a day during the festive period. He performs at private homes and hotels.

"A friend introduced me to lion dance when I was 14, and I really love the sense of satisfaction I get during competitions when we do better than others," he says.

The Chinese believe that lion dance performances during the Chinese New Year will ward off evil. Fees during the festive season range from \$200 to \$2,000 for a 15-minute performance, depending on how long and elaborate it is.

There are said to be 400 troupes in Singapore, a mix of professional and non-profit bodies formed by organisations ranging from clan associations to martial arts groups.

Performers usually get a token hongbao of about \$60 a show. The rest of the money goes towards operating costs for the rest of the year.

Given that most troupes train their members for free, it is not surprising that they do all they can to secure as many engagements as possible to tide them over the year.

Apart from the new year, they also get invited to perform at events like the opening of a new building.

Lion dance troupes are usually more popular than dragon dance troupes as it takes only eight people to perform the former, whereas the latter needs at least 16 - which means that they require a bigger hongbao.

The rivalry among troupes means that they must harness new ways to stay one leap ahead.

Mr Fu, for instance, created a website for Kuan San Tang (<http://www.kuansantang.freehomepage.com>) after he took a computer course last year. The site lists its e-mail address and contact number, along with a brief history of achievements and background. "I'm trying to enable the site for online reservations too," he says.

He is not alone in trying to bring this 1,500-year-old tradition up to date with modern technology.

The industry players Life! spoke to estimate that about 20 out of the 400 lion and dragon dance troupes are now using the Internet as a publicity tool.

In recent years, online forums have also sprung up among members. The most high profile is [www.sgwtan.com](http://www.sgwtan.com) where enthusiasts discuss the angst of losing contests and the latest gossip in the scene.

Younger members are making their expertise felt. At the 46-year-old Singapore Dragon & Lion Athletics Association (SDLAA), member Frankie Lim has created a website.

The 30-year-old software engineer also mooted the idea of informing members about engagements via SMS and online notices. "It's much more convenient than having the committee members call everyone else, like they had to in the old days."

Along with 30 members of the Henderson Secondary School's lion-dance club, he joined SDLAA when he was 13. SDLAA's leader, Mr Ting Wan Kee, 49, was their coach in school.



Step by step, lion dance troupes are moving into the 21st century as educational institutions encourage more young people, as well as women, to take up the activity and create a buzz on the Internet.

## Injection of new blood

INDEED, lion dancing as a co-curricular activity (CCA) in schools is the reason new blood is being injected into the scene.

It is offered in about 30 institutions, from primary schools like Lakeside Primary School and secondary schools like Choa Chu Kang Secondary School to tertiary institutions like the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University.

These rookie groups are helping to introduce new ways of doing things. To entice more people to sign up for Hwa Chong Institution's troupe, for example, president Jason Lin, 18, used pamphlets printed with cute cartoon lions.

"I think it worked. We had a lot more interested people," he says. They got 10 new members instead of the five they were expecting.

"Lion dancing is actually a lot more fun than most people think. It's not just making a lot of noise; after I master a stunt I've been learning for a few months, it feels really good," he adds.

Women will also be glad to learn that the traditional taboo of not letting women touch the lion heads is not practised in school clubs, though it is still observed in some of the more conservative professional troupes.

It was believed that women would dampen the auspicious aura of the lion head, although this prejudice has been weakening since the 1970s.

The girls usually undergo the same training as the boys, though they use smaller lion heads to suit their smaller build.

"People usually think lion dancing is very *cheena* but I think it's cool," says the feisty Chan Yu Min, 20, a second-year life science major at NUS, where girls make up one-third of the 30-strong troupe.

## Dyed hair not allowed

THE Singapore National Wushu Federation has governed lion and dragon dance groups since 1967, and has tightened regulations along the way. Those interested in becoming coaches have to pass an examination.

Troupes have to apply for a permit about 40 days before performing during Chinese New Year. This was done to ensure that lion dance troupes would not be mistaken for illegal gatherings.

Earnings from Chinese New Year performances hongbao must be audited by a certified accountant.

The demand for lion dancers has remained consistent over the past decade. While the law of demand and supply is something troupes cannot control, they are doing all they can on their part to keep themselves marketable.

SDLAA members are not allowed to have dyed hair and are expected to keep their costumes neat and behave properly during public performances. "Or I kick them out," Mr Ting says. "We have to be concerned about our image."

Mr Fu of Kuan San Tang makes his teenage members do push-ups if he catches them smoking.

He tells their parents that they can call him if they feel their children's homework is suffering because of practice. "I want the kids to perform well but study hard, too. If they don't know how to do their homework, they can ask me. We are one big family."

Over at the four-year-old Xin Cheng Dragon & Lion Dance Troupe, full-time leaders Silver Low, 28, and Nicholas Cheong, 32, believe in the softer approach.

To bond with their 30 young troupe members, they hang out with them at video arcades and listen to them when they face family or relationship problems.

Unlike the days when he learnt the art form, Mr Low says teachers can no longer be stern.

"My teacher used to kick me when I didn't execute a move correctly, even if I was injured," he recalls. "Nowadays, parents are very protective. When students get only minor injuries, we will start receiving a lot of phone calls."

Mr Ting laments that youngsters now have no stomach for mastering the basic moves over long periods. Even learning a simple horse stance, or the right way to play the cymbals, he says, can take a while.

While the basic moves for lion dance have remained unchanged, some troupes have introduced new elements. Xin Cheng, for example, uses lion heads made with funky glow-in-the-dark material.

Still, some things remain the same. At Xin Cheng's headquarters in Guillemard Road, Mr Low and Mr Cheong make sure that everyone prays at the Guan Gong altar before they change the fur trimmings on their lion heads, as a sign of respect.

"To be honest, it's a very time-consuming job, and you can't make that much money," Mr Cheong says. "But since we have chosen this path, we want to do our best."