The Auspicious Lion Dance
William C. Hu

The Chinese Lion Dance, as we know it today, has a continuous history of some one thousand years. However, the first record of the performance of an early and more primitive form of the Lion Dance dates back to the early Ch’in and Han dynasties, or to the third millennium B.C.

This highly distinctive masked dance was made up of various elements – music, song, recitation and movement – some of which as individual items had existed in China for over a thousand years before the Sung dynasty (10th Century) when it became more popular. The final formation of the Lion Dance appears to have resulted from the merging of two existing forms: exorcism ritual dances with the refined court entertainment of acrobatics and gymnastics with a martial air into a dance drama. These were later incorporated as a folk dance with the skills and techniques of the martial arts, which has given rise to the modern Lion Dance.

The Chinese immigrants brought the Lion Dance with them whenever they settled and thus made it world renown. Accepted by all Asians, it is not merely a tolerated pastime, but a very serious activity for the entire community. In the consecration of temples, new businesses, planting and harvesting, celebration of official acknowledgment and public recognition, festivals, religious rites, happy and joyous occasions, victory – for all these and more, the Lion Dance plays an essential role.

The Lion Dance of Ts’at-ch’ing, or “getting the greens”, becomes a microcosm which epitomizes human struggles and survival. All human emotions and expressions are portrayed in the Lion Dance such as lust, joy, frustration, sadness, puzzlement, satisfaction, attainment and happiness. The Lion Dance relates to the struggles of Man with Nature and Society. It is a positive and uplifting manner for significantly viewing life itself. The popular contention that the Lion Dance is only to chase evil should be expanded. Like a tiger roaming in the woods, the mere presence of feeling the aura of the Lion is enough to drive away all malevolence. Besides this great luminous radiation, the Lion is an agent of Heaven and is the harbinger of joy and happiness and all that is good.