

## [Lily Cai's modern-dance alchemy](#)

### [Choreographer's company blends Chinese traditions, Western aesthetics](#)

- Joshunda Sanders, Chronicle Staff Writer

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When Lily Cai moved to California from Shanghai in 1983, the first thing she noticed about Americans was how little they knew about Chinese culture. "They know Chinese food and acrobatics, but not much about our dance," Cai said during a rehearsal at Dance Mission in San Francisco's Mission District. "They don't know a lot about where we're coming from."

That's where part of Cai's mission began -- fueled by an affection for dance that began when she was 5, dancing on her bed for her siblings. It developed into a passion that led her to become a principal dancer for the Shanghai Opera House as a teenager.

Speaking little English and having no idea how to create a dance company, she nevertheless established the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company in 1988. Soon after, she was recognized as a unique

force in both Chinese and American dance circles -- not only as a dedicated choreographer with a profound eye for the harmony of movement, lighting and music, but also as a detail-minded artist who works with new composers whenever she can and even sews costumes for her seven dancers.

A prominent alchemist of dance who blends traditional Chinese forms with Western aesthetics, Cai is also an instrumental part of her community -- she performs dozens of charity shows annually and provides a free after-school program at Redding Elementary School in San Francisco, where 71 percent of the students speak limited English or none at all.

## **ART AS HONORABLE GOAL**

Tatwina Lee, a volunteer with the Chinese Culture Foundation, met Cai when the dancer had recently immigrated and was working with local troupes. She says Cai inspires Chinese Americans to regard art as an honorable and respectable goal.

"The arts are usually not high on the list of what Asian parents want their children to become," Lee said. "We have very few role models for successful artists in Chinese culture, but Cai stands as a good example of why the arts can be a valid mission in life."

Even as she has gained prominence among young Chinese Americans, her work has been met with some resistance from older members of her community who are shocked by her nontraditional use of color and her exploration of gender politics. But her ultimate goal, to give "American dance a Chinese face," has started to win over older generations.

A demure woman with an endearing smile and a heavy accent, Cai (who declined to give her age) appears coy at first -- but she is as driven and electric as her work.

She has toured the United States and Europe as a soloist, although she rarely dances anymore. She has received Isadora Duncan Awards, given for Bay Area achievement in dance, for choreography and company performance. Her future plans include opening a dance school in San Francisco and expanding the company's activities from 20 hours a week to full time.

Gail Chen, a lawyer and philanthropist, said Cai's work preserves Chinese culture while being innovative enough to appeal to audiences across generations, and explores transformative themes that help to dispel perceptions of Chinese women as reticent and meek. "Our identity is not a developed enough topic," Chen said. "Cai's work explores the trouble we have determining what our exact identity is in America."

It also gives a voice to the lives of contemporary Chinese women -- which Cai says are shrouded in mystery -- by gazing into their history in China and here. From intricate early pieces like 1993's four-part "Dynasty Suite" and the hypnotic "Begin From Here" to her newest creation, "She," Cai continues to experiment with form, emotion and narrative.

The strength of her dancers, all trained in the martial art qigong, allows them to perform with a mixture of intimacy and precision -- evidenced in the painfully seductive "She," a portrait of the internal journey of Chinese women that begins with controlled foot movements that evoke the legacy of foot-binding.

## **A STRONG FOUNDATION**

Though Cai's training in the 5,000-year history of Chinese dance has provided a strong foundation for her work -- from classical refinement to the folk tradition's exploration of daily life -- the sensual facial expressions and overall fluidity in her work are decidedly Western influences. Mikhail Baryshnikov and the groundbreaking Pilobolus Dance Theatre are also among her influences. Even as they mix education and entertainment, Cai's pieces captivate audiences with their theatricality and elegance.

Yet, as she expands the horizons of American and Chinese dance, it is the support of her community that gives her the most pride.

"It's a challenge, but I've been lucky," Cai said. "The company and dancers are wonderful, and without great people, I couldn't do it."