

History of Phoenix Dance Chamber
Written by Diane Letoto for PDC's 20th Anniversary Concert
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In 1988, Rumiko Okaze and I were enrolled in the Dance Ethnology Program at the University of Hawai'i. Rumiko studied in Szechuan Chinese language and Tibetan dance for two years and entered the ethnology program with a desire to continue her studies in Tibetan dance. However, she was unable to find a school of dance that taught Tibetan or Chinese dance. After hearing of my experience with Chinese dance, she wanted me to teach her Chinese dance. At around the same time, Alice Ma (Mali) and a group of Hawai'i Chinese Youth also approached me to teach them dance. Due to these urgings, I applied and received grants to study dance in Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Taipei. After I returned, the fall semester kicked off what became the beginning of the Phoenix Dance Chamber.

In 1989, the University of Hawai'i in collaboration with the State's celebration of the Chinese Bicentennial, master teachers of a variety of art forms were invited from Mainland China, Taiwan and the continental U.S. to teach at the University of Hawai'i. This event brought Prof. Liu Youlan, an ethnic folk dance specialist for the Beijing Dance Academy, to Hawai'i to teach Chinese folk dance classes. Her teachings stimulated several of her university students to learn more Chinese dance. Those students, Earl Chang, Lishan Chong, Rumiko Okaze, Alice Ma and me, not only wanted to learn more dance but also became the founding members of the Phoenix Dance Chamber. Perhaps it was because of our passion for dance (since we were nowhere near the caliber of the professional students of the Beijing Dance Academy) that Prof. Liu agreed to extend her stay in Hawai'i to the spring of 1990 to teach us more dance. Because of the excitement and passion that I had for the diverse movement styles of Chinese dances, I felt frustrated that there were no schools of Chinese dance in Hawai'i while there were several schools of other dance forms such as Japanese buyo or ballet. The "dream" of the Phoenix Dance Chamber was to develop a school of Chinese dance and Prof. Liu agreed to help me with this endeavor.

After the founding dance group was established, Anna Tam Chung, Tiffany Goo Wright, Cheryl Kohashi and Ed Baxa joined the company. By 1992, the Phoenix Dance Chamber grew in membership with Linyu Gu, Gina Ling and many others who trained and performed with the company. The Phoenix Dance Chamber began to have more public appearances in the community and with that exposure, children and teens became interested in learning Chinese dance as well. Eventually the curriculum of the school grew into a comprehensive program for ages 5 to adult. The curriculum includes basic Chinese dance technique, codified genre movements and skills that develop rhythm, coordination and performativity. Every year students are assessed in an annual examination process.

Unique to the Phoenix Dance Chamber curriculum is its cultural exchange tours to various provinces in China. These tours were encouraged by Prof. Liu who felt that it was important for students in Hawai'i to experience the dance and culture in China firsthand. Thus, every 3 to 4 years, the Phoenix Dance Chamber sends its students on these exchanges through scholarship awards. The exchanges are organized with both amateur and professional dance academies, villages in rural areas and tourist venues so that the students can have a broader perspective of dance. Some of the experiences that these tours have provided are dancing around a bonfire on the Mongolian grasslands, observing a harvest celebration dance of over 100 dancers in a Shandong village or participating in Miao folk dances in Guizhou.

In addition to the cultural exchanges, the Phoenix Dance Chamber sends a delegation of dancers to participate in the North America Chinese Dance Competition in Vancouver, Canada. At the competition, dancers are able to see dance of other overseas organizations that further broadens their understanding of Chinese dance as being diverse, non-linear tradition that is fluid and constantly changing (ergo my preferred term, dancescapes). The comprehensiveness of the Phoenix Dance Chamber curriculum has also nurtured instructors among its dancers. For example, in 1997 Tiffany Goo Wright taught adult, teen and keiki classes and was artistic director for the performance company until she moved to California in 2000. From 1999-2007, Gina Ling was Keiki class instructor. In 2007, Karen Chan took over the Keiki classes when Gina Ling moved to Maryland and Leon Letoto taught the teen classes and acted as artistic director of the performance group while I was on hiatus for a year. He continues to be primary instructor of the male dancers. Kimberlee Au is our youngest Keiki class instructor who has grown up with the Phoenix Dance Chamber for the past 12 years and also choreographed one of the keiki dances that will be performed in tonight's concert.

