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Chinese Lion Dance as a Strategy of Resistance to Racial Discrimination

The lion dance ritual is a common sight in diasporic Chinese communities formed by migration from southern China. The costume consists of a large head manipulated by one performer and an attached cape that drapes over the back of a second performer to make a body. It is typically seen at events like festivals, store openings and weddings. Cultural insiders know that martial arts groups usually perform the lion dance, which is accompanied by percussion rhythms from a military gong and drum ensemble. In fact, Chinese kung fu combines fighting skills, dance, ritual and music in a way that can be thought of as an overlapping or blurred genre (Downey 2002; Geertz 1983; Lewis 1992). My research investigates the role this interdisciplinary practice plays in Chinese Canadian communities through ethnography of Toronto's Hong Luck Kung Fu Club, and is based on eight years of fieldwork there. I argue that embodied strategies of resistance to racial discrimination are central to the power of Chinese martial arts, lion dance and percussion in Canada.



All larger Canadian cities feature Chinatowns, which historically were ethnic enclaves. The first immigrants from China arrived on Canada's West Coast in the nineteenth century for the gold rush and to labour on building the Canadian Pacific Railway. Throughout this period, the Chinese in Canada were subjected to intense racism, which made Chinatowns both ghettos and safe-havens. At the centre of these neighbourhoods were mutual aid associations (known as tongs) that provided social, political, economic and ritual support to their members.

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During the first decades of the twentieth century, exclusionary legislation slowed Chinese immigration to a trickle. It was not until after the Second World War that laws changed, arrivals from China increased again and xenophobic attitudes began to fade. The organization of Chinatown society was thus established during a prolonged period of racial discrimination, and contemporary practices continue to be influenced by this legacy.

The treatment of Chinese Canadians has improved, but tong associations remain an important part of the cultural landscape. The Hong Luck Kung Fu Club in Toronto's Spadina/Dundas Chinatown is an example of the specialized martial arts tongs that are found throughout the diaspora. It was co-founded in 1961 by Masters Paul Chan and Jin Chan with a group of 11 associates. Their primary goal was to teach and practise the kung fu skills that they had learned in Guangdong province's Taishan county. While the initial members were all Chinese, they soon attracted students and audiences of many ethnicities. Hong Luck has acted as a bridge to other parts of Canada's multicultural society by sharing their practices through both teaching and performance. Over the last half-century, this form of soft power has helped to redefine historical discourses of racism by presenting the cultural heritage of Chinese Canadians in powerful and empowering ways, as well as breaking down barriers between ethnic groups through mutual understanding.

Hong Luck also embodies at least two forms of harder power. Firstly, Master Jin Chan explained to me that training in martial arts makes one disciplined enough to avoid fights, but also tough enough to finish a fight that cannot be avoided. This ethos was especially important in the club's early days due to the racial tensions of the era. Secondly, the ceremonial logic of lion dancing is predicated on the fierceness of its performers, which is manifested in the martial movements that trained fighters incorporate into the routine. An original Hong Luck member known as "Uncle" Wing has elucidated how the vigour of the ritual destroys nefarious energy (Cantonese: *chèh hei*). Lion dancing thus uses martial movement, sound and energy to accomplish exorcisms. I propose that the way this multivalent performance embodies the cultural ideal of a warrior spirit signifies the resilient identity of Chinese Canadians

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