

Fan "Mimi"
Mang Mang



Photograph © Daniel Whiston

Western Promise

As Chinese New Year approaches, **Marianka Swain** learns about the art of Chinese dance

Many dance forms have a rich heritage, but few can claim to have survived intact for nearly 5,000 years. "When I first encountered it, I was only four, so I didn't really understand the history, but I fell in love with this physical language," explains Chinese dance specialist Fan "Mimi" Mang Mang. "It's so intricate and there are so many variations – I thought it would be the most amazing thing, to be able to tell all these stories and communicate with people in this beautiful way."

Unfortunately, that wasn't a privilege afforded to everyone: "My mother was training to be a dancer, but she had to give it all up during the Cultural Revolution. It was a huge loss to her, not having that artistic outlet, so she really wanted me to learn. But I didn't need her to push me – some kids do it because their mothers tell them to, but right from the beginning I was fascinated by the hand shapes and what each movement represented. It felt very natural to me."

Mimi's innate ability was quickly spotted. She went from twice-weekly classes to attending an intensive boarding school, training in ➤

dance and acrobatics six days a week. "It was very hard at first – I was only ten when I started, and I cried almost every day. But my mum kept telling me it would be OK, and as much as I missed my family, I did love everything I was learning, both at school and later at the Beijing Dance Academy.

"In Chinese culture, dance isn't just physical; it's a way of recording history, celebrating, sharing your soul with others, and also expressing your – or your choreographer's – thoughts about the state of the nation. There are countless regional forms, with 50 ethnic groups developing their own kinds of

"The joy of learning this dance form is that you're also learning about history and culture. The traditional dances tell us so much about the people who created them, so when you dance those steps, it's like reaching back in time and making a direct connection with people who lived very different lives to yours."

Mimi believes that richness is a big part of Chinese dance's global appeal. "I was fortunate enough to tour around the world, dancing and choreographing, and wherever we were, from Japan to Germany, audiences really responded. You don't have to know about technique,

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movement and each village or community has distinct dances within those, everything from praying for a bountiful harvest to showing off fighting skills.

"It wasn't until the Han Dynasty (206BC–220AD) that the imperial family established a musical court where all the dances could be brought to one place and recorded. They preserved the folk dances and built on them to create performance pieces, everything from the ribbon dance and silk fan dance to the sword dance and dragon dance.



Photograph © Paul Charles

Fan "Mimi" Mang Mang performs for an audience. Below, with her students



perhaps feeling something was missing, and their families are thrilled as well; back home, every child learns dance as part of their development."

Mimi notes some self-consciousness on the part of British students, "but I introduce props to give them something else to focus on, and they love wearing traditional costumes for performances." Those performances, which include Chinese New Year celebrations in Nottingham, Lancaster and Manchester, have encouraged Mimi to start her own company. "Lots of my students enjoy doing a few classes and a

quick show, but some want more than that. I know from personal experience that it takes at least five years of hard training to get to a high performing standard, and I would love to introduce that level of Chinese dance to this country."

One initial barrier was that of language – "I couldn't speak much English when I came here, so I had to demonstrate lots of things in class rather than explain them, but I'm improving all the time. I've taught my husband some elements of Chinese dance and he's helped me with English; he tries to teach me tap as well, but I've found the English more useful!"

Mimi is excited about the year ahead, kicking off with more New Year festivities. "It's the biggest celebration in China, where you can embrace happiness in the present and hope for the future. My hope is that more and more people in the UK fall in love with Chinese dance." ●

because it's a fantastic form of storytelling and it's mesmerising to watch. It represents real life, and when you dance it with commitment, you embody the spirit of Chinese culture."

Fan has brought that spirit to our shores by teaching classes and workshops in Manchester, where she lives with her tap dancer husband Paul. "We met in China and decided to move back here. I wasn't sure how people would respond to my classes, but there's a real interest in China, perhaps because of its

rise as an economic superpower, and people here are very open to learning and trying new things.

"I do classes at schools, combining dance with culture and history, explaining where each dance comes from, and I also teach adults. Some of my students with Chinese heritage have really embraced this connection with their roots,

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