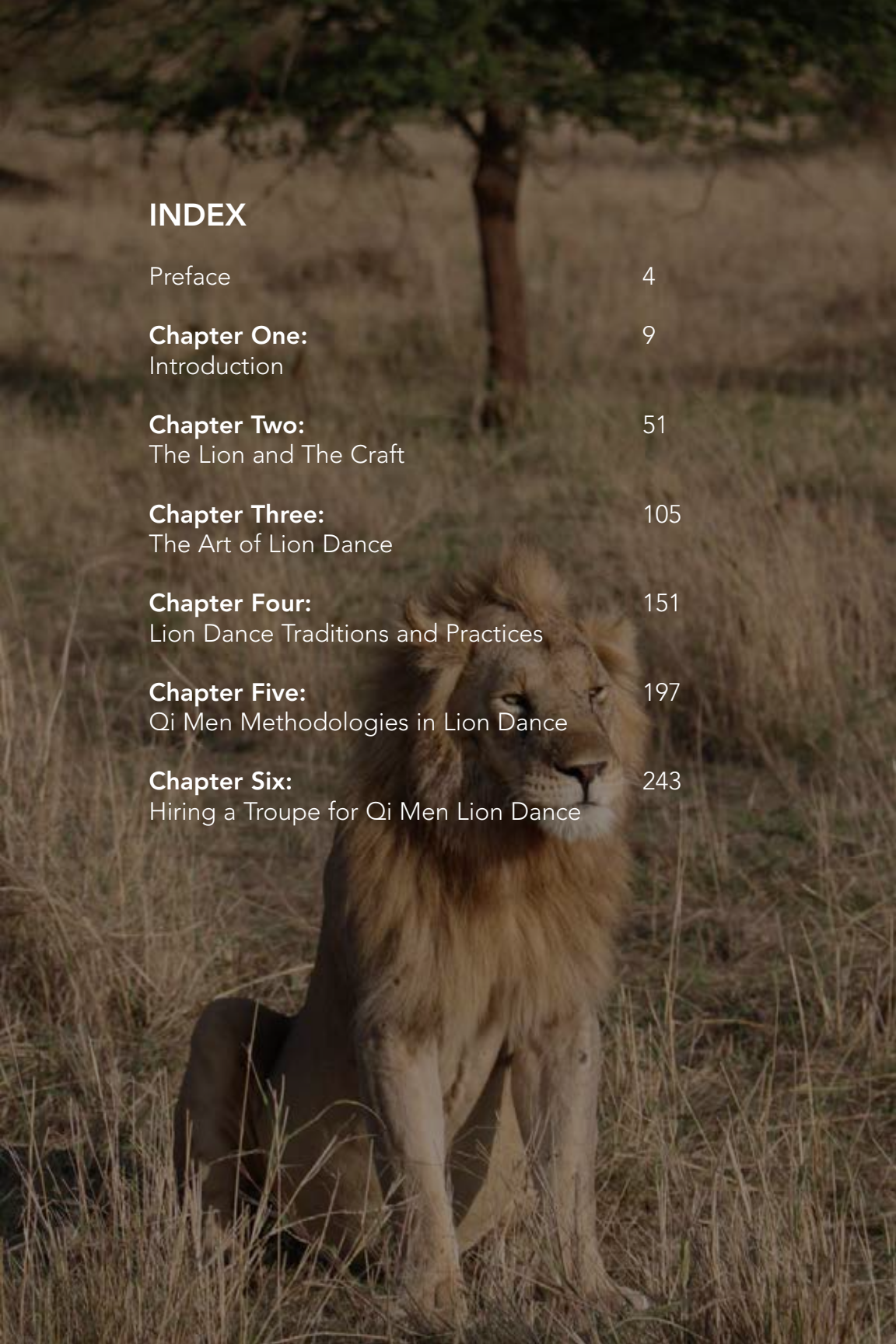
THE ART OF LION DANCE

醒獅

JOEY YAP



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Preface

The Lion Dance is an internationally recognised symbol of Chinese culture. As a young boy, the Lion Dance made an indelible impression on me. My parents would take my siblings and I to watch Lion Dance performances during Chinese New Year. Back then, they were more than just entertaining shows – they were a competitive spectacle! If two dance troupes met they would engage in a fierce showdown of mesmerizing movement, colour and drums!

Because I am a Feng Shui practitioner and scholar of Chinese metaphysics, people often assume that I am clued up on all aspects of Chinese culture, including the Lion Dance. Truth be told, it was only recently that I decided to study its origins and meaning. My research taught me a lot about Chinese culture as a whole. I began to share my findings with some of my students and clients, and it wasn't long before some of them suggested I write a book on the matter.

Researching the Lion Dance, I found that it has strong ties to Qi Men Dun Jia: an aspect of metaphysics that I am especially interested in. This connection intensified my interest in the dance, spurring me to travel to China, Hong Kong and Taiwan to conduct further research. This book is the fruit of my labours.

The ritualistic and metaphysical roots of the Lion Dance are easy to overlook. Perhaps this is because these aspects have been overshadowed by the sheer spectacle and fun of the modern Lion Dance.

Since ancient times, the lion has been seen as a symbol of power, wisdom, longevity and good fortune. Lions are a staple of Chinese folklore, literature and art. In the context of dance, the lion can usher in and activate favourable energy and dispel negativity. In its early incarnations, the Lion Dance was used to invigorate imperial soldiers before they marched into battle. It was also used in civilian ceremonies to help ward off evil.

Today, the Lion Dance is still used in ceremonies and festivities to help usher in positive energy, or Qi – the circulating life force at the heart of Chinese metaphysics. Feng Shui practitioners endeavour to increase one's exposure to positive Qi in a space. In much the same way, one can use a Lion Dance in accordance with metaphysical directions and principles to help usher Qi into their home or business. Choosing the right date and direction for such a Lion Dance is important, a concept also found in Qi Men Dun Jia.

Qi Men Dun Jia is a system used to plot the flow of Qi across time and space. It describes the movement of energy in different directions with great accuracy. With an understanding of Qi Men, a practitioner can identify the time and place where positive Qi will be present. By scheduling an activity with such foreknowledge, one can take advantage of the prevailing positive energy. The Lion Dance ties into Qi Men because it is known that human activity can activate positive Qi. A Lion Dance troupe's performance can amplify Qi; with the right footwork and direction of movement, performers can help bring their audience good fortune.

In this book, you can expect to learn all about the meaning behind the choreography, tools, music, design, blocking, timing and direction that make up a successful Lion Dance. The next time you watch a Lion Dance, I promise you will do so with more appreciation than ever before. Researching this subject has given me a newfound appreciation of why performance artists do what they do. As your knowledge of the Lion Dance grows, you can request one to help further your own personal and professional fortune.

I hope you enjoy reading about this fascinating spectacle and at the very least you'll have a lot to tell your friends and family during the festive season when you hear the gong beats!

Warmest Regards,

Dato' Joey Yap
New York, October 2016

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The Year Beast (*Nian Shou* 年獸)

This is one of the most famous tales. It tells of a strange beast, who in some versions emerges from under the sea and in other versions emerges from under a mountain to make an appearance in the same village every spring around Chinese New Year. Due to the yearly nature of its arrival and the strange noise that it made, which sounded like the word *Nian* 年, the Chinese word for 'Year', the villagers named it the 'Year Beast'.

The Beast was fearsome to behold with one eye and a large horn coming from its forehead but though it struck fear into the hearts of the villagers, who hid inside their homes whenever it appeared, it never did anyone any harm. Instead it would simply feed on the vegetation in the neighbouring fields. The problem was that this vegetation was the villagers' harvest!

One year, the villagers decided that they would no longer cower in their homes and that they would take action against the beast and attempt to save their produce. As the time for the Year Beast to make its appearance approached, the villagers worked to create a rival to chase the beast away. They made a head out of bamboo mesh over which they stuck many strips of colourful paper and they attached a large piece of triangular cloth to the head to act as a body.

Preparing paints for the colouring process.

Unsurprisingly, craftsmen must practise for some time before they will be permitted to perform the most challenging parts of the work. The painting is usually, therefore, performed in three stages reflecting the degrees of skill required at each level. The first stage, mapping the outline of the pattern onto the head, is performed only by the most senior craftsmen. The second stage involves filling in these outlines and giving the pattern colour and depth, this is given to the intermediate craftsmen. The final stage is given to junior craftsmen and this involves checking through the finished pattern to ensure that there are no mistakes and to touch up or fill in anything that looks out of balance.

AWAKENING THE LION

1

An auspicious day and time will be chosen for the consecration or *Kai Guang* 開光 ceremony.

2

The new lion is laid out in front of the altar and covered with a red cloth.

8

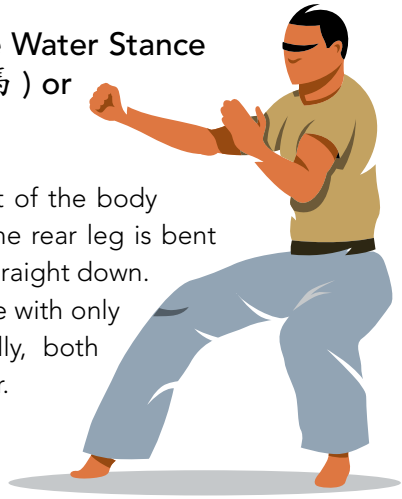
The newly 'awakened' lion then begins to perform for the first time by offering three bows. The lion will then perform *Cai Qing* 採青 by eating the greens and spilling them.

9

The lion then proceeds with the traditional Lion Dance routine.

White Crane Dipping into the Water Stance (*Bai He Ta Shui Ma* 白鶴踏水馬) or Cat Stance (*Mao Ma* 貓馬)

This is a flexible stance where most of the body weight is placed on the rear leg. The rear leg is bent at the knee and the weight is sunk straight down. The front leg is also bent at the knee with only the toes touching the floor. Ideally, both thighs should be parallel to the floor.



White Crane Dipping into the Water Stance

Low "T" Stance (*Di Ding Ma* 低丁馬)

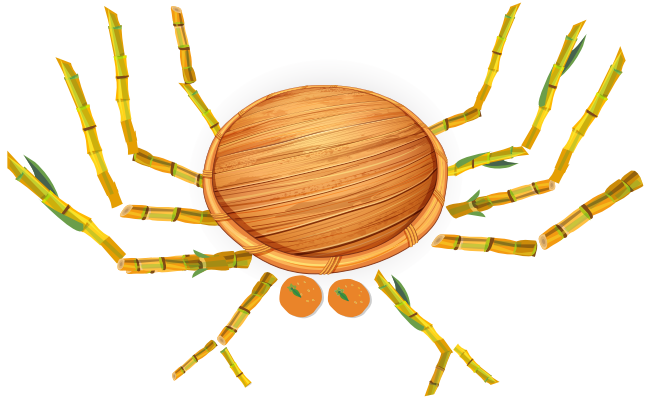
The Low T Stance is a combination of the Horse Stance and Bow and Arrow Stance. Both feet are placed parallel to each other on the ground and the performer faces the front. However, one leg is straightened out, and through this position, the performer is able to lower his body as far as possible, while combining upward and downward movements with both hands like the Horse Stance and then changing the direction to forward and outward movements like the second stance.

Low "T" Stance

Crab Formation (*Xie Qing* 蟹青)

The crab formation is another representation of an obstacle that prevents the entry of good fortune. Since the character for crab (*Xie* 蟹) sounds the same as the word for evil (*Xie* 邪), for the lion to eat the crab represents eating the evil that has been blocking the entry of good fortune.

Formation	Crab Formation
Ingredients	A bowl, pan or bucket (usually green, and never red like a cooked crab), chopsticks or bamboo, lettuce and mandarin oranges.



The Dance:

1. The crab is formed of a body, legs, claws and eyes. With a lettuce placed under a bowl, pan or bucket to make up the body, chopsticks or bamboo are used to represent the legs and claws, and oranges or tangerines are used for the eyes.

THE ART OF LION DANCE

With a history that can be traced at least over a thousand years, the Lion Dance holds an allure of that is part culture, part athleticism and part metaphysics. Being one of the most recognisable traditional spectacles in the world, the masked dance has become synonymous with the Chinese culture. A mixture of dance, acrobatics and Chinese martial and metaphysical arts, the Lion Dance is no longer seen as just an exotic cultural attraction, but has since evolved in the last half of the twentieth century to become a fiercely competitive sport across different continents with competitions held annually in different countries – aside from being an important traditional mainstay in almost every important Chinese event to usher in good fortune.

Despite its popularity, somewhere in its rich history is a mystical aspect that not many know about. Often hidden in plain sight, generations of Lion Dance masters have for hundreds of years used the dance through a combination of music, song, recitation, and movement to channel the energies of the universe to perform multitudes of tasks with specific goals.

Involving the ancient Qi Men Dun Jia art of time, space and energy (Qi) activation, this craft is known only by a select few and is considered a top secret in many traditional Lion Dance troupes. **Joey Yap's The Art of Lion Dance** for the first time, sheds light on this rare mystical aspect of lion dancing aside from peeling back the chapters of history to explore the documented origins, colourful traditional practices and evolution of this multifaceted art. Take an eye-opening journey through this extraordinary cultural heritage and explore its hidden metaphysical secrets.

Key highlights from this book:

- Explore the folklores and development of the Lion Dance through many periods of Chinese history
- Find out about the many different components that come together to create a Lion Dance performance
- Learn about how Lion Dance is used to usher in good fortune and dispel negative energies
- Discover the metaphysical aspects of the Lion Dance and how Qi Men Dun Jia is incorporated to activate positive energies or negate ill fortunes
- Get to know the significance and purpose behind the steps and various symbolic formations of a Lion Dance performance

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