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Alumni News Spotlight

Bridging the Cultural Divide

Founded in 2000 by Juilliard alumna Chen-Yu Tsuei (B.F.A. '93, *dance*) and her husband, William Hubler, the Chinese Cultural and Arts Institute in Harrisburg, Pa., serves as a cultural conduit, facilitating a deeper understanding between the Chinese and American cultures through the classical Chinese arts of dance, language, music, and painting.

"The C.C.A.I. is a special blend of who I am," says Chen-Yu, who was born in Taiwan and started dancing there at age 5 before continuing her education in America, where she is now a citizen. Although she left Taiwan as a teenager, her background and culture have always been an important part of her identity. Former Dance Division director Benjamin Harkarvy noticed this and told Chen-Yu that, with her unique background and talent, she should do something "special." And she has—by giving back to both her cultures and positively effecting interactions between them through dance and art.



Chen-Yu performing *Ribbon Greets the Spring*, a classic Chinese dance, at the Sunoco Performance Theater in Harrisburg. (Photo by Dr. I-Yuan Wei)

After Chen-Yu was asked to choreograph a small dance for the Chinese New Year celebration in Harrisburg, several adults and children expressed interest in starting a dance school in their area. What began as one class on the weekend eventually

mushroomed into Monday-through-Saturday offerings at a center for the Chinese arts.

At first, the institute was focused mostly on serving a small Chinese-American population, but that began to change when a group of families contacted the school while searching for a way to connect their adopted daughters from China with their birth country. This shift in the American demographic is creating a need for organizations like C.C.A.I. to be established in small towns like Harrisburg, recently

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rated by several magazines as one of the best mid-sized cities, with an increasingly diverse population that reflects the growing trend toward multicultural adoptive families.

The powerful drive to effect change kept Chen-Yu's desire strong, even when she and the center didn't have the full support of the community. "Although the population is changing, it is much more difficult to survive here than in a big multicultural city," she observes. While the densely packed international landscape of New York City would support a variety of Chinese cultural efforts, she says, "we are the only institution of its kind in the mid-state area."

The Chinese Cultural and Arts Institute provides traditional, classic training in Chinese dance as well as ballet. The technical aspects of both styles relate to each other, says Chen-Yu, and have similarities that allow her students to better grasp both techniques. "These kids are American, and I want them to be proud of and understand both their cultures. The parents realize the value in C.C.A.I.'s education, seeing that their kids aren't just learning a dance style—they are learning to value their heritage."

The curriculum also builds their confidence. "The arts aren't just the arts," Chen-Yu explains, "they are related to life. I don't just want to train kids to become artists, I want to be more honest and educate kids about their reality." With a focus on the arts instead of language and history, C.C.A.I. is unique among its Chinese school counterparts. "Since my life focus has been the arts," says Chen-Yu, "they are the most natural communicative tool for me."

Now in its sixth year, C.C.A.I. presents two to four professional shows and 30 to 35 smaller shows per year. They rent a 2,400-square-foot warehouse, which houses all their classes and has a small performance space. Their long-term goal is a lofty one: In the next five years they want to raise \$25 million to build a center for everyone who wants to better understand the Chinese culture. The building will house a library, theaters, a gallery, dance studios, and rooms for music and cultural arts study. In keeping with her dance roots, Chen-Yu also wants to develop a professional dance company in residence at the center to further the institute's educational programs in the city and surrounding schools.

It is a difficult job, but Chen-Yu loves it. "I am so glad I had Juilliard training, then went back to rediscover my roots and connect them together." She believes everything in life mirrors tai chi—a delicate balance between two completely opposite forces. Using that philosophy, she does not strive to combine her two cultures, but to connect them through the arts and use that balanced connection to teach others. "Sometimes," she explains, "you have to see what is different to see how we are all the same."

—Emily Regas
Associate Director of National Advancement and Alumni Relations

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