Hawai‘i Foundation for Chinese Culture & Art

Mission: To perpetuate the Chinese cultural heritage through various forms of fine and performing arts, and through educational programs.

History: On September 20, 1988, a group of five practitioners formed what later became the White Cloud Chamber, to respond to life’s challenges through the meaningful practice of the Chinese healing arts. Leon Letoto was asked to advise and instruct the members, who met once a week in Kaimuki. At first, the organization focused on instruction in traditional Chinese health practices and philosophy, but has since broadened its mission to include the arts and other aspects of Chinese culture.

Members of the White Cloud Chamber and founding members of the Phoenix Dance Chamber (PDC) joined to form the Hawaii Foundation for Chinese Culture and Arts (HFCCA) in the spring of 1989. The Foundation’s goal was to support teaching and learning the Chinese cultural heritage through personal participation and experience, rather than from an academic point of view. The HFCCA received its non-profit 501 (c) 3 status eight months later on November 9. It is listed as an educational corporation registered in the state of Hawaii. A seven-member Board of Directors runs the HFCCA; day-to-day duties are carried out by the program directors of the HFCCA’s two constituent branches.

Activities: The HFCCA is divided into two main branches: The White Cloud Chamber promotes culture and arts through its classes in Chinese philosophy, herbal medicine and nutrition, massage, acupuncture, moxa therapy and calligraphy; The PDC offers Chinese dance classes, cultural exchange dance tours to China and actively performs for the Hawaii community.

Association president:
1989–pres. Leon Letoto

Membership: The HFCCA has about 80 members, around 60 in its affiliate Phoenix Dance Chamber, 10 in the White Cloud Chamber, and 10 in support. Most members are enrolled in classes. A membership committee is currently being planned.
PhoeniX Dance Chamber

In the Fall of 1989, Judy Van Zile of the Dance Ethnology program at UH Manoa sponsored Chinese folk dance specialist Professor Liu Youlan of the Beijing Dance Academy to teach Chinese dance in conjunction with the Chinese bicentennial celebration. During her stay, two Masters candidates in the program, Honolulu resident Diane Letoto and visiting scholar Rumiko Okaze from Okinawa, formed the Phoenix Dance Chamber and performed for Bishop Museum’s Family Day in November, along with some of the members of the White Cloud Chamber. The intent of the PDC is to provide a dance venue for an international cross section of non-professional performers, who share a common interest in Chinese dance.

Leon and Diane Letoto convinced Professor Liu to stay in the spring of 1990 to privately teach members of the PDC, including Earl Chang, Lishan Zheng, Alice Ma, Chung Yee Lum and Rumiko Okaze. Since then, Professor Liu has maintained close contact with the group, and continues to serve as its mentor.

In the Summer of 1990 the Lion Dance team was formed to perform the Beijing Lion dance style that is prevalent in central and north China, but rarely seen in overseas Chinese communities. The money to buy costumes and instruments was donated by several members of the White Cloud Chamber: Harry Chang, Ruth Denney, Harry Chun, Norma Uehara and Yoshie Mizokami. Lion dancing has become an integral part of the Phoenix Dance Chamber’s repertoire.

In Spring 1991, Professor Liu was sponsored by the HFCCA and the University of Hawaii Department of Dance to return to Hawaii and teach at UH Manoa and in several community classes sponsored by the HFCCA. In an amazing two short years, the PDC has developed a repertoire of over twenty exciting choreographies of Classical Chinese and Chinese Ethnic Minority Dances. The group presently has a repertoire of over fifty folk, classical, ethnic minority and modern Chinese dances.

In 1992, Diane Letoto started a Chinese dance class for four children. The following year, enrollment rose to eleven children, through word of mouth advertising. Participants in these youth classes are of Chinese, Japanese, and Caucasian ethnicity, and range in ages from four to eighteen.
The PDC is the first Chinese dance group in Hawaii to tour internationally. During the summers of 1992, 1995, and 1999, scholarship funds that were raised through its performances and fundraisers took the dancers on a cultural exchange tour to China. These enabled the dancers to visit both professional and amateur dance academies, including the Beijing Dance Academy, the Central Nationalities University, the Guangzhou Dance Academy, the Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts, the Kunming Art Academy, the Shandong Provincial Dance School and the Mongolian Art Institute.

The PDC has also visited several amateur dance groups and ethnic minority dance troupes. Members have also had dance exchanges with village level folk performers, such as Shanghe village Guzi Yangge performers, the Matanggejia minority village performers, the Cai Guan village Earth Opera troupe, and the ShiTou Puyi Minority village performers.

Since its founding, the Phoenix Dance Chamber has won several international and local awards. In 1996 and 1997, the PDC competed in the North America Chinese dance competition held in Vancouver, Canada. The PDC placed either first or second place in the categories entered. The group also received the highest award in 1996 for Best Modern Chinese dance choreography, and in 1997, for the Best Chinese folk dance.

Since 1989 the PDC has delivered over 400 performances on Oahu, Kauai, Maui and Hawaii, underlining its commitment to educating the community about Chinese culture. In 1997, the PDC received the Cultural Preservation award by the Hawaii State Dance Council.

The PDC has established a curriculum in Chinese dance that combines the curriculum established by folk dance specialist professor Liu YouLan and the Chinese dance syllabus of the Beijing Dance Academy. Currently, beginning, intermediate, and advanced level classes are being taught. The group has also offered community classes in 1990, 1992 and 1995.

The PDC has been a registered independent student organization of UH Manoa since 1992. Dance classes are held throughout the year at Moiliili Community Center and the University of Hawaii. The PDC is committed to offering more educational opportunities for our members.

Another noted teacher who has helped the PDC is Du Xiaobo who was formerly a member of the Orient Song and Dance Company of Beijing. She is an honorary member of the Phoenix Dance Chamber and efforts are currently being made for her return visit to Hawai‘i.

White Cloud Chamber

On September 20, 1988 a group of five practitioners formed what later became the White Cloud Chamber, focusing on the Chinese healing arts. Leon Letoto began as the first instructor. The Chamber embraces practices that promote a healthy lifestyle, with priority given to disease
prevention. The group’s intent is to integrate the practical aspects of Chinese medicine into a daily regimen of exercise and diet, to supplement knowledge of academic and theoretical principles. Members benefit from instruction in a broad spectrum of the traditional arts, such as study of the Yijing, herbology, acupuncture and moxibustion, Daoyin exercise, calligraphy, meditation, herbal nutrition and massage. A primary activity is to accomplish health through sitting meditation via dantian and daoyin exercises that promote centering, focus and calmness, after disciplined practice. Participants learn exercise systems such as Ba Duan Jin and Wu Jin Xi and perform them with slow fluid motions to promote the body’s natural healing energy, increase flexibility, develop muscle tone, promote cardiovascular strength, and increase respiratory capacity.

Herbal cuisine is considered the highest form of preventative medicine in the Chinese healing arts. The Chamber has enjoyed studying and preparing many herbal culinary foods over the past decade. It is one of the highlights of each semester to sample the various herbal entrees, soups, wines and teas for increased longevity and health. The most popular sessions include herbal hotpots and traditional Chinese New Year cuisine.

Chinese herbal medicine has an international reputation and is effective both in preventing and treating diseases. Herbs are selected from regions that produce them in high yield and of fine quality, for excellent therapeutic results. Past seminars and classes have focused on topics such as tonic herbal formulae, medications, tinctures, powders, and wines.

Acupuncture and moxibustion have been an integral part of Traditional Chinese Medicine for over 5,000 years. Acupuncture involves the insertion of needles into the body to stimulate Qi, thereby improving harmony and health. Moxibustion therapy uses heat generated by the burning of dried artemisia leaves on acupuncture points.

In addition, a number of additional approaches approximate the effects of acupuncture and moxibustion. Magnet therapy is modern adaptation of traditional techniques to deliver stimulation to the acupuncture meridian system. It is a non-invasive system that allows the practitioner to employ acupuncture techniques without the use of needles. Massage therapy is a monthly activity that has obvious health advantages and is an enjoyable experience. Although members focus on traditional tuina technique, they have been introduced to other methods by guest lecturers focusing on techniques such as foot reflexology, Rolfing, Hawaiian Lomilomi and Reiki. There are eleven registered Reiki Masters in the White Cloud Chamber.

The Chamber occasionally invites experts to share their diverse experiences in philosophy, literature and art as well. These classes aim to broaden our members’ experience in the traditional arts and keep them abreast of the latest in natural medical techniques.

Members participating in these programs come from various walks of life and ethnic backgrounds and attend classes for different purposes.

The group traveled to China in 2001 and stopped in Shanghai, Suzhou, Tongli, Hangzhou Huangshan, and Fuzhou to sample traditional cuisine and visit herb stores and other healing centers.