

# Song in motion

Choreographer joins Eastern and Western forms for a moving experience.

By Donald Munro  
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**T**hink of two passing trains coming from opposite directions — each having their own sound and rhythm as they roar through the landscape. When they meet, the combination of all the sounds creates a new song.

That's how choreographer H.T. Chen describes what happens when he blends Western and Asian dance.

In 1983, the H.T. Chen & Dancers company performed in Fresno. Since then, the Manhattan-based group has become one of the leading Asian-American dance companies in the nation. Shanghai-born Chen, who was raised in Taiwan, has lived in New York since 1971.

The company returns to Fresno with a public performance Sunday that marks the opening of the second two-week session of the California State University Summer Arts program. (A free student culmination will be presented 4 p.m. July 28 in the John Wright Theatre at Fresno State.) We caught up via e-mail with Chen's longtime associate director, Dian Dong, and asked her about the company's second visit to the city.

**Question:** What do you remember about that first Fresno performance?

**Answer:** It was quite a long time ago! We have fond memories of being in town for the performance, of meeting very nice people, and a warm reception.

I can tell you that Fresno has changed a lot in the past 23 years. Beyond personnel changes, how has your company changed during that time? Has your mission or style evolved?

Since that time, the company has expanded its repertory and toured throughout the U.S. and Asia.

The dance company's last performance in Fresno took place in 1983. This visit brings an expanded repertory and touring experience throughout the U.S. and Asia.



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE BEE

H.T. Chen & Dancers will perform the West Coast premiere of "Shift" at Fresno State as part of Summer Arts.

Our mission to provide moving experiences in Asian-American performing arts and contemporary dance is realized through the performances and outreach of the company, and through our theater and school in Lower Manhattan.

**H.T. Chen & Dancers is known for infusing Western modern dance with the strength and beauty of Asian aesthetics. Is it accurate to describe it as a hybrid between two cultures?**

H.T. Chen's work reflects his background in Chinese dance, Chinese Opera movement, experimental theater and Western modern dance. It takes years of training to learn these forms, and then years of creating to break through those forms.

## If you go

- **What:** H.T. Chen & Dancers
- **When:** 7 p.m. Sunday
- **Where:** John Wright Theatre, California State University, Fresno
- **Tickets:** \$15-\$23
- **Details:** (559) 278-5109, [www.csusummerarts.org](http://www.csusummerarts.org)

Which skill set is it harder to find in the dancers who audition for you — that of Western modern dance or that of Asian aesthetics?

Most modern dancers in the U.S. do not have extensive Chinese dance and martial arts training. As our choreography embodies these aesthetics, our dancers are "re-trained" in this style to perform the work.

At Fresno State, you'll be performing the West Coast premiere of "Shift," which is based on the poetry of Vijay Seshadri. Tell us about this poet and

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## Dance: 'Shift' premieres

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why you decided to choreograph a piece to his work.

H.T. Chen had not known about Vijay Seshadri's work until after he completed the choreography of "Shift." The week before the premiere, we came upon this beautiful poem with several phrases that seemed powerfully connected to the imagery of the new dance. Vijay consented to the phrases to be used as section titles for the work.

The first part of "Shift" is called "Street Scene." It begins with the lines: *"The job of redemption, with its angels and lawyers, / runs late into the morning."* What does this mean to you? How do you represent it on stage?

Our working title for the first section was originally "Downtown Manhattan." The external and internal feel of "angels and lawyers" is both harsh and surreal. Fitz Patton's electronic score includes subway sounds, street noise, and percussion. Eric Harritz' set for "Shift" is very spare — just four white benches. Nancy Brous' costumes help create the black and white world, and through Joe Doran's lighting we are transported into another dimension.

Another element in "Shift" comes from traditional Chinese opera, where "prop men" dressed all in black move and rearrange the stage furniture as if they were

invisible. Each arrangement is symbolic of a landscape or interior. For instance, two chairs at a table could be a meeting area, but a chair on top of a table might represent a mountain. However, in "Shift," the "real" people are dressed in black and the angels/propmen are in white.

**What does the title of "Shift" refer to?**

There are many meanings to the word shift. It can mean a job, a change or transformation, or perhaps another way to look at things. The work is also a departure for H.T. as a creator. Over the years, he has choreographed a body of works celebrating Asians in America, works based on story lines, and beautiful and

abstract works that blend Chinese dance and martial arts in contemporary expression.

For this new work, he wanted to move on and find the "ghost" behind the movement. The work is like a spiritual journey with five sections and no story line. The viewer brings to "Shift" their own interpretations. The phrases from the poem are markers evoking images.

**In addition to your public performance, you'll be working with students at Summer Arts in an intensive two-week workshop.**

**What skills will you be teaching them?**

The workshops at Summer Arts will take dancers through the foundations of H.T. Chen's movement vocabulary. The classes present traditional Chinese Dance and martial arts exercises, and variations of these aesthetics. The first day of classes begins with calligraphy and movement, followed by the use of props and body percussion, leading to technique and repertory.

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