

# FEATURES

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## Belly dancers

shimmy their way  
to bodaciousness



Belly dancer Jenny Lin has been teaching throughout Taipei for five years.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

*Enthusiasts in Taiwan see belly dancing as a form of girl power*

BY CATHERINE SHU  
STAFF REPORTER

*The* popular image of a belly dancer is a scantily clad woman in a darkened, smoke-filled nightclub seductively rolling her hips for the titillation of a male audience. Over the past five years, however, belly dancing has gradually entrenched itself in Taiwan's popular culture — and many dancers view it as a form of female empowerment.

Belly dancing troupes featured prominently on *Wulindadao* (舞林大道), a popular television dance competition, US-based troupe Bellydance Superstars recently made a well-received second tour of the country (and already have another trip planned) and students, who range from kindergartners to office workers and grandmothers, are attracted to the dance's graceful but challenging movements.

Belly dancing classes were initially advertised as a way for girlfriends and wives to please their partners, remembers dancer and instructor Betty Lee (李梅林), who with her troupe the Shimmy Tribe made it to 16th place out of more than 150 competitors on *Wulindadao*. But she scoffs at the notion of belly dancing as a mere seduction technique.

"We have to understand the music and what rhythm is. We have know how to fit the right movements to the music," says Lee. "Dancers don't dance to please men. They do it for themselves."

She also credits belly dancing's popularity to its body-positive message. "When women take up belly dancing, they learn how attractive they are. The dance is based on women's shapes and women's muscles that are totally different from what men have," Lee says. She also notes that routines with male partners are almost completely absent from belly dance choreography.

Lee took her first belly dancing class six years ago. She saw it as an extension of her interest in Arabic culture and was frustrated when her instructor was unable to answer her questions about belly dance traditions. So she decided to do her own research on the Internet, where she discovered the diversity of dance styles and their rich history.

"It was just so amazing to me," says Lee, who has since built a Web site ([www.bellydancing.com.tw](http://www.bellydancing.com.tw)), taken research trips to Egypt and Turkey and performed at Tribal Fest, an annual alternative dance festival in San Francisco. She and her dancing partner, Essa Wen (聞子儀), teach different styles of belly dancing (including a street dance fusion) at studios throughout Taipei and Taichung. In their classes, Lee and Wen emphasize the cultural depth of belly dance, explaining the origin and meaning of dance movements, costumes (coins and shells sewn onto costumes are meant to symbolize wealth, for example) and props like finger cymbals and Moroccan drums.

Students are sometimes eager to jump into choreographed routines, but Lee emphasizes building a solid foundation first.

"Sometimes I tell them to put their hands on my waist and tell them to feel how I use my muscles," says Lee. "Belly dance is all about isolation. The muscle isolation is different from that of other dances, and that's not easy."

In a recent class taught by dancer and instructor Jenny Lin (林麗美) at Songshan Community College (松山社區大學) near the Core Pacific City Mall (京華城) in Taipei City, exercises included practicing how to focus on swaying waists and hips in one direction while keeping arms flowing gracefully in the opposite direction, footwork and dancing with a partner. It wasn't easy — Lin kept a close eye on her students in the studio's mirror, constantly calling out directions and floating from student to student, correcting their posture or the position of their limbs. But there was a lot of laughter and joking among the 38 students, who represented a wide range of experience levels, ages and body types.

"It's very friendly here and after you dance, you feel more relaxed and healthy," said Jean Chen (陳依君), a mother of three who started belly dancing for exercise. Her classmate Sully Lin (林淑娟) added that after a month of classes she'd noticed the benefits. "I feel more graceful. It's been good for my figure, and my body shape has changed."

"Belly dancing has become popular because it is a democratic form of dance. Anyone can do it," said Lin, who teaches students ranging in age from 7 to 83 and is the head of Asmah Belly Dance troupe (阿斯瑪, [www.asmahmiracle.com](http://www.asmahmiracle.com)). She adds that a lot of students come to her class hoping to lose weight, but cautions that belly dance might not be the most effective dieting regime.

"It's such vigorous exercise that often they get quite hungry during class and run out and eat like crazy afterwards. They end up getting plumper!" Lin says with a laugh. "But my students, they end up feeling more comfortable with their bodies."

Lee says that she believes the best way to keep belly dancing alive in Taiwan is to make sure that it reaches a wider audience so popular misconceptions about the dance change. Noting that many people who go to watch belly dancing shows are belly dancers themselves, Lee says that she's made an effort to take Shimmy Tribe to venues that attract a wider range of audiences, including the Taipei Fringe Festival and *Wulindadao*.

Recent tours by Bellydance Superstars helped to raise belly dancing's profile. Melisa Chiao (焦惠芬) of Da Da Arts, an arts promotion group, first noticed Bellydance Superstars in 2003. At that time, belly dancing was relatively unknown to audiences in Taiwan, so Chiao organized dance workshops by the group's dancers instead. In 2003, Bellydance Superstars hosted 12 workshops; by this year the number had doubled to 24. Belly dancing became popular enough in Taiwan to support performance tours last year and this year; each tour included five shows in Taipei, Taichung and Kaoshiung. Plans are already underway for a third tour of the country next year.

Lee hopes that with continued exposure, the one-dimensional image of a belly dancer as a gyrating sexpot will be replaced by an appreciation of the technique and cultural background of the dance.

"If you see belly dancers, don't just point and talk about their bodies. Try to focus on the music and watch their movements and see what a great match they are for the music," Lee says. "Belly dance is not just a dance, for us it is a way of life."

Bellydance Superstars have completed two tours of Taiwan and plan to return next year.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DADA ARTS AND BELLYDANCE SUPERSTARS

