

Beating with Tradition: KU Lion Dance Team Brings Culture to Life



The KU Lion Dance Team begins its performance outside the Kansas Union on Sept. 19, 2025, during the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, an annual event held by the KU Center for East Asian Studies.

Outside the Kansas Union, a crowd gathers as three pairs of performers in vibrant lion costumes spring to life, their movements rippling to the thunder of drums and the clash of cymbals. At the heart of the performance, sophomore Jocelyn Chu, president of the KU Lion Dance Team, sets the rhythm, her steady pulse guiding the dancers through synchronized routines.

The spectacle is part of the annual Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, a celebration with roots stretching back more than 3,000 years across East Asia. Traditionally, the holiday is a time for families and communities to honor the moon and give thanks for the upcoming harvest.

Though this ancient tradition spans millennia, the KU Lion Dance Team has been active on campus for just six years, yet it has already established its own deep roots. Through their performances, the team brings both the artistry and the cultural significance of lion dancing to life, creating a spirited presence that resonates across campus.

“The dance is supposed to bring good luck and happiness to anything that needs a lift in spirit,” Chu said. “It also brings a lot of fun to people watching and to people performing as well.”

The KU Lion Dance Team was founded in 2019 by graduate student Kim Pham, who sought to share a meaningful part of her culture with the campus community. To bring her vision to life, Pham launched a Kickstarter campaign that successfully raised the funds needed to start the team.

With the proceeds, she purchased a drum, which is one of the three essential instruments in a lion dance performance. Alongside the drum, the resounding clash of cymbals and the deep ring of a gong combine to produce the bold heartbeat no lion dance can do without.

“Every lion dance has the instruments and the lions,” junior Luan Nguyen said. “One cannot perform without the other, and it’s very important that both work together.”

The team performed without full costumes until 2022, when the Asian American Student Union donated the team’s first lion costume — a gift that helped the club truly come to life.



Members of the KU Lion Dance Team rehearse the music for their performance, a combination of drums, cymbals and gongs, inside the Kansas Union on Sept. 19, 2025.

Over the past three years, the team has grown in both size and spirit, performing more frequently across Lawrence and sharing not just the skill and dedication behind the art, but the deeper meaning of lion dancing itself.

Lion dancing originated in China during the Han Dynasty, when lions were brought to Northern China from Central Asia as gifts for the emperor. Representations of the animal began to be incorporated into existing traditional dances, and the dance evolved through centuries of dynastic change.

By the eighth century, lion dancing had spread across Asia and evolved into a variety of regional styles. Today, it remains a cherished tradition and is performed to ward off evil spirits and invite good fortune, making it a centerpiece of festivals and celebrations around the world.

For the KU Lion Dance Team, each routine carries that same spirit of celebration and renewal as a centuries-old art form at the heart of KU's campus.

“Once you’re under the lion, it’s very rejuvenating,” junior Van Nguyen said. “When we do performances, it makes everything worthwhile.”

A lion dance performance relies on many elements, but none is more essential than the lion costumes themselves. As the focal point of each performance, the costumes allow performers to embody the cultural values of strength and courage, two themes that lie at the center of the dance.

Each costume is made up of a head, body and tail, which not only conceal the performers but also bring the lion to life, as dancers wriggle and weave to mimic the animal’s movements.

Lion heads are built from bamboo, aluminum or PVC pipe for structure, then covered in papier-mâché, fur and feathers to give them texture and life.



One of three KU Lion Dance heads sits at a table in front of the Kansas Union on Sept. 19, 2025, allowing onlookers an up-close look at its detail and intricacy.

Each head weighs around 10 lbs., and is fitted with levers and pull-strings that let the lead dancer animate the lion’s mouth, eyes and ears, allowing the costume to blink, roar and wag its ears.

The body and tail of the costume are crafted from durable, multicolored cloth, attached to the underside of the head and draped over the second dancer to complete the illusion of a single, flowing lion.

As a final touch, both dancers wear pants that match the costume's colors and patterns, representing the lion's feet. Made from cotton or polyester blends, the pants provide breathability and flexibility, allowing performers to move with agility and precision.

Crafting a lion dance costume can take anywhere from several hours to multiple days, depending on the level of detail and intricacy. The KU Lion Dance Team features three vibrant costumes in red, blue and yellow, each adding energy and visual impact to every performance.

While the costumes are essential, the performers who bring them to life are just as crucial to the dance.

"For people who aren't familiar with lion dance, it's always fun to have a performer walk up to you, shake his head and do some cool tricks," junior Jason Meschke said. "What makes it great is different for everybody, and that's what makes it special."

Dancers memorize complex routines, work seamlessly as a team and maintain impressive endurance and strength during long performances, but they must do all of this while performing inside a lion costume, which can be heavy, restrictive and exhausting.

Lion dances are performed by two dancers sharing a single costume. One controls the head, the other the tail, much like a pantomime horse.



Two members of the lion dance team duck underneath the lion costume, moments away from performing at the Kansas Union on Sept. 19, 2025.

The tail dancer, or “bottom,” is essential to creating the illusion of a living lion and is often larger in size and stature. Their role demands strength and endurance, as they form the body and hind legs of the lion, reinforcing the head dancer and driving the performance’s movement.

The tail dancer stays low and hunched over throughout the performance, as if trying to walk while reaching for their toes. From this position, they hold onto a belt secured around the lead dancer, who controls the lion’s head and guides the costume’s movements.

The tail dancer supports the head dancer through a series of tricks and stunts, using the belt to lift, guide and carry them in precise motions. At times, they even raise the head dancer onto their own heads, holding them aloft for several seconds in a display of strength and balance.

The head and tail dancers are inseparable, each relying on the other. The head dancer, or “top,” is just as vital, serving as the most expressive and commanding presence of the lion costume.

The head dancers are often of lighter and lithe stature, as their role requires agility and flexibility. They bring the lion’s head to life, animating its eyes, mouth and ears, helping convey emotion, energy and personality.



Sophomore John Walck hoists sophomore Monique Robles in the middle of the KU Lion Dance Team's performance outside of the Kansas Union on Sept. 19, 2025.

Both dancers must maintain strong communication with each other when attempting tricks or stunts, as one wrong move could lead to someone getting hurt.

“The most difficult part is communication,” Van Nguyen said. “Since it involves two people, if you aren’t in sync with your partner, you’re susceptible to injuries.”

The continuous movement and intricate maneuvers can wear down performers, so reserve dancers step in for those who tire, keeping the performance’s energy and enthusiasm seamless throughout.

During a performance, the remaining members of the lion dance team play percussion, which includes the drum, gong and cymbals that provide the music guiding the lion dance.

Most performances last between five and 15 minutes, blending choreographed routines, freestyle movements and crowd interaction. The final member of the lion dance team is a character known as Daai Tau Fat, which translates to “Buddha with a Big Head.”

The Daai Tau Fat is a comedic dancer who wears a yellow robe and a papier-mâché mask, often carrying a prop or fan. They accompany the lions during the performance, entertaining the audience with humorous dance moves, playful interactions with the lions and lighthearted teasing of spectators.



The Daai Tau Fat, junior Tan Nguyen, raises his hands at the center of the KU Lion Dance performance outside the Kansas Union on Sept. 19, 2025, signaling the finale to the dance.

The percussionists, lion dancers and Daai Tau Fat come together to create an energetic performance that the team hopes will leave a lasting impression on everyone who watches.

“I hope people take away appreciation for the culture that lion dance brings and the history behind it,” fifth-year senior Thanh Nguyen said. “Having a more open mind of the uniqueness of different cultures is important, because I feel like Lawrence is a predominantly white community, so being able to see that diversity within this environment is really amazing.”

A great deal of time and dedication goes into perfecting a lion dance performance, and the KU Lion Dance Team practices twice a week in various locations across campus. Among the many regional variations of lion dance, the two primary styles are the Southern Lion Dance and the Northern Lion Dance.

Northern Lion Dance is characterized by more colorful costumes and acrobatic movements, often incorporating elaborate stunts and dramatic expressions.

Southern Lion Dance is known for its smaller, more subdued costumes, graceful, fluid movements and is often associated with stronger storytelling and symbolic acts.

The KU Lion Dance Team performs in the Hok San style, a distinct form within the Southern Lion Dance tradition. This style emphasizes elegance and playfulness, bringing personality and spirit to the performance.



Audience members interact with two lion dance performers during the KU Lion Dance Team's performance on the Kansas Union lawn on Sept. 19, 2025.

Hok San highlights rhythm, character and a closer connection between the lion's movements and the beat of the drum. The performances bring joy and excitement to onlookers but also foster a sense of happiness and fulfillment among the dancers themselves.

“My favorite part is the impact we have from the performances and hanging out as a team,” senior Faith Haugh said. “It’s enjoyable and very rewarding.”

For the KU Lion Dance Team, each performance is a living expression of culture and community.

What began as a small student group has grown into a spirited symbol of cultural pride on campus. With every beat of the drum and every synchronized step, the dancers advance a tradition that bridges past and present.

As the final notes fade outside the Kansas Union, the KU Lion Dance Team gives its final bow, greeted by a standing ovation from the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival crowd. The performance may be over, but more will come, carrying forward the team’s passion, pride and rhythm into the future.



The KU Lion Dance Team poses for a group photo after their performance at the Kansas Union on Sept. 19, 2025.