Shen Wei Dance Arts
Thursday, May 6
Grades 7–12
11 a.m.–12 p.m.

Curriculum Connections: History, World Cultures
National Standards for Dance: 1, 2, 3, 5, 7

About the Program
Choreographer and Kennedy Center artist-in-residence Shen Wei and his dancers take students on a journey in Re- (I, II, III), a triptych inspired by his travels throughout Asia. Filled with dramatic imagery, movement, and traditional as well as recorded music, students experience Asia through the eyes of this visionary artist known for blending modern dance with elements from theater, visual arts, and opera. In this multimedia presentation moderated by Executive Director France Pepper, students experience the history and culture of Tibet, Angkor Wat, and Beijing through the choreography of Shen Wei.

About Shen Wei
Shen Wei is a choreographer, dancer, painter, and designer who was born in Hunan Province in the south central part of China. From a young age, he studied Chinese opera (a form of theater performed with music, singing, and acrobatics), calligraphy, and painting. This early focus on visual arts shaped his future artistry on the dance stage.

In the early 1990s, he was a founding member, dancer, and choreographer of the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, China’s first modern dance company. In 1995, he received a scholarship to study modern dance in New York City where he still lives today. From there, this rising star garnered international attention for his imaginative choreography. He founded Shen Wei Dance Arts in 2000—and true to his visual artist roots—he also designs all the sets, make-up, and costumes for his choreographic works. Shen Wei also served as the principal choreographer and lead creative consultant for the 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremonies in Beijing.

About Shen Wei Dance Arts
Shen Wei Dance Arts fuses dance, theater, Chinese opera, painting, and sculpture. This contemporary dance form sometimes tells a story but oftentimes is more abstract, simply exploring an idea, emotion, or theme through movements that can borrow styles from acrobatics, everyday movements, and different dance genres.

About the Re– Trilogy
Using the prefix “Re-” to invoke concepts such as “renew”, “rediscover”, and “repair”, the series—inspired by journeys to Tibet, Angkor Wat, and The Silk Road—is at once a reconciliation of life split between two hemispheres, a generous spiritual offering, and a hopeful plea for intercultural understanding. In Shen Wei’s utterly original style—blending dance, theater, visual art, and Chinese opera—we partake on the artist’s journey through three of the world’s most fascinating and ancient cultures. A deeply moving, transcendent story of spiritual and geographic “coming home” told through breathtaking movement, sound, photography, and other materials ‘found’ by Shen Wei in the jungles, deserts, and mega-cities of Asia.
Part I, based on Shen Wei’s extensive travels among the Tibetan people, is a deeply personal—even spiritual—dance, incorporating traditional Tibetan chants and a stunning, full-stage Tibetan mandala made of colorful paper chards. A mandala is a geometric design enclosed in a circle. It represents the universe and is traditionally used in Buddhism and Hinduism during meditation. The movements of Part I are based on Shen Wei’s experience of oxygen deficiency and lowered center of gravity on the Tibetan Plateau where the elevation is more than 14,000 feet above sea level. The dance is set to the chanting of Kathmandu-based Tibetan Buddhist nun Ani Choying Drolma.

Part II is a large-scale work combining two of Shen Wei’s trademark choreographic styles—tableau vivant and transference. Inspired by Shen Wei’s study of traditional Khmer art forms from Cambodia, the tangle of Banyan trees covering the ruins of stone temples from Angkor Wat, and Buddhist and Hindu carvings of deities. The piece features environmental sound collected on-site from the forgotten temples scattered throughout the jungle, and music played by a local band of artists disabled by the Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Part III is the largest and most dynamic of all three works, utilizing imagery, sound, and artifacts from both the old Silk Road and hyper-modern, present-day China. As such, Part III’s unique movement vocabulary is inspired by this central dialogue between past and future, the individual and the collective, drawing at once on traditional imagery and impressions captured by Shen Wei on the old Silk Road, and on his experience in a radically transformed Beijing while choreographing the 2008 Summer Olympic Opening Ceremony. The music is a combination from Pulitzer Prize-winning David Lang and experimental violinist Todd Reynolds (of ETHEL fame) to create an original soundscape integrating a score for violin, laptop, and Shen Wei’s ‘found material’ (recorded voices, folk music, environmental sound, etc.) from the Silk Road.
**Instructional Activities**

**BEFORE THE PROGRAM: ACTIVITIES**

- The inspiration for the Re– trilogy came from Shen Wei’s travels to Tibet, Angkor Wat, and the Silk Road. Make a list of all the places mentioned in this study guide. On a map, identify the locations of the places on your list.

- Two of the choreographic techniques Shen Wei uses in Re– (Part II) are tableau vivant and transference. Research and define these terms so you can identify when they are used as you watch the program.

**OBSERVE/DISCUSS**

- Shen Wei is known for his interdisciplinary style. Identify elements in the program that come from other art forms, such as theater and the visual arts. How does the program differ from other dance performances you have seen?

- Re– (Part III) uses images, movements, and artifacts from both the old Silk Road and Modern Day China. Observe how Shen Wei compares and contrasts these two cultures. How does this view of Chinese culture compare or contrast with your own ideas?

**RESEARCH/REPORT**

- Many of the movements in Re– (Part I) are based on Shen Wei’s experience of oxygen deficiency and a lowered center of gravity in high-altitudes of Tibet. Research the effects of oxygen deficiency and high altitudes. How does Shen Wei translate these effects into dance movements?

- Choose one of the following inspirations for Re– (Part II) to research: (1) traditional Khmer art forms from Cambodia, (2) the tangle of Banyan trees covering the ruins of stone temples from Angkor Wat or (3) Buddhist and Hindu carvings of deities. Present your findings to the class and explain how these inspirations appear in the program.

- Shen Wei explores the past, present, and future of China in Re– (Part III). Choose an aspect of either the old Silk Road or modern China that was present in the program to research. Share your findings with the class. How did your understanding of the piece change after researching your aspect and after hearing the research of your classmates?

**EXPLORE/CREATE**

- All three parts of the Re– Trilogy feature “found” sounds, images, and movements. In small groups choose a geographic area (for example your city, your neighborhood, or a place you’ve visited). Find sounds, images, and movements that represent your area. How might you translate your findings into a dance art piece? Create a presentation to share your findings.

**Resources**

- Shen Wei Dance Arts: shenweidancearts.org/site.html
- The Silk Road Project: silkroadproject.org
- Traveling the Silk Road (Exhibit): amnh.org/exhibitions/silkroad/
- The Mandala Project: mandalaproject.org/
- Cambodia (Dept. of State profile): state.gov/t/ea/bgn/2732.htm
- Beijing: ebeijing.gov.cn/