

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DANCE

Julie Ng



Julie Ng is one of the youngest interviewees for the “Research Project—Oral History of Hong Kong Dance Development”. However, as she started her professional career at a young age, the period of her activities in the dance sector overlapped with that of the other interviewees. Ng choreographed numerous dance performances for the film and TV industries; her work introduced dance to the Hong Kong public through mass media and made an important contribution to the dance sector. She was also a key member of the pioneering modern dance organisation Hong Kong Ballet For All (Ballet For All). The performances of Ballet For All opened the door for subsequent development of modern dance in Hong Kong. Ng’s study of and career in dance from the late 1960s to the 1970s also coincided with the shift in Hong Kong dance from revolving around Chinese dance to embracing Western modern dance. She is now retired, and spends her days taking care of her grandchildren. Her laughter rang out throughout the interview. It is easy to imagine the tremendous positive energy she radiated as a dancer in her youth.

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Location: Julie Ng's house in New Jersey, US

Recorded and noted by: Joanna Lee Hoi-yin

My childhood encounter with dance

I was introduced to dance at age nine: My father had a friend whose daughter was studying Cantonese opera, and he urged me to join her in studying Cantonese opera movements. As my father was in his senior years when I was born, he worried he might not be able to support me until I graduated from university. For some reason he thought it was easy to learn to dance, and he hoped I would pick it up as a means of livelihood. I remember in the movement classes we had a master who was trained in the Northern School (a school of Chinese opera training which is modelled after the foundational training in Beijing opera) teaching us to dance the *Red Ribbon Dance*. My study went on for a few years, and I took part in some performances. At age 13, I applied for the actor training programme

of the Southern Drama Group¹ (the Southern), and I was the youngest person accepted into the programme. From then on, I spent the mornings studying Chinese, English, and Maths at a tutorial school in Tsim Sha Tsui, and the afternoons studying line reading, acting and dance at the Southern. At the time, Lorita Leung had moved to Hong Kong from the Mainland. She had also joined the Southern, where I began my proper study of Chinese dance under her tutelage.

Although I only received training in basic performance skills at the Southern, I was often invited to perform as a group along with actors like Cheng Pei-pei and Jiang Qing, and I had no qualms about it despite my tender age. Later I joined Shaws (Shaw Brothers [Hong Kong] Limited), and I was enthralled to study with professional dance instructors hired by the company. I was devoted to it, and my dedication was probably

1. The Southern Drama Group was founded in 1961 with Ku Wen-chung as its leader, and provided acting training for the actors of the Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Limited. See the Hong Kong Film Archive, Leisure and Cultural Services Department website: http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/ce/CulturalService/HKFA/en_US/web/hkfa/publications_souvenirs/pub/englishbooks/englishbooks_detail06/englishbooks_shawstory.html. Accessed 30 April 2017.

why my teachers were very fond of me (Plate 1). In those days I was not able to distinguish different dance genres, and I would ask my teachers to teach me what I had seen in films and which I found enticing. (Author's note: Ringo Chan, who also provided information for this project and was slightly younger than Julie Ng, also noted that their dance study revolved around "dance numbers" rather than dance genres at the time).

Among the instructors at Shaws, there was a Japanese instructor from Tokyo. In Hong Kong in the 1960s, when the popular imagination of new-style Western dance was still limited to ballet, the song-and-dance scenes choreographed by this instructor were beloved by film audiences. It should have been a welcome change. The management at Shaws, however, focused on the business side of things: They believed the company should recruit and train its own talents from Hong Kong, rather than keep on hiring instructors. In addition, Shaws had an office in Japan, where its Hong Kong staff would be taken care of. In around 1965 and 1966, the company sent Cheng Pei-pei and me to Japan for one year of training in dance, including jazz dance and modern dance. It was only when I arrived in Japan that I realised there was such a thing as dance art.

Plate 1: Julie Ng in her youth, leaping into the air.
Photo courtesy of Julie Ng.



After I returned to Hong Kong from the training, I was in charge of choreographing song-and-dance scenes for Shaws films in which I also performed as a dancer. In two years I created various choreographies and performed in many films, and I felt the year-long training I had had was not adequate. It just so happened that Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) had commenced broadcasting and the company also had a dance department. I figured there must be instructors in the dance department, so I applied for the post. However, my contract with Shaws was not to end for one year, and it was not possible for me to leave the company early. Fortunately, the then head of TVB's dance department, Michelle Berrie, was willing to keep the job offer open for me. Therefore, I joined TVB's dance department a year later, where I studied jazz dance and contemporary dance. (Author's note: Regarding the contemporary dance Ng studied at the time, I believe she was referring to dances that were contemporary in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than "contemporary dance" as a dance genre that emerged out of the desire to transcend the confines of modern dance in the Western dance world) (Plates 2 and 3). From there I realised I needed to improve my fundamental techniques; I studied ballet for a few years with Jean M. Wong, but I could not grasp the proper



(From top to bottom) Plates 2 and 3: Julie Ng (centre of the front row in Plate 2). Julie Ng with an ensemble of dancers. Photos courtesy of Julie Ng.

ballet technique as I had not taken it up at a young age. In the following few years, I performed Chinese dance in TV programmes, though I did not continue studying it. In those days I did not truly understand Chinese dance, and I found it boring.

My dance career in the 1970s

Why was I named one of the “12 Golden Hairpins of Shaws” by a friend of Hong Kong film critic Michael Lam? I have no idea! It was probably a publicity gimmick. There were a number of women at Shaws at the time. Of the 12 women, the other ones included Jenny Wu, Lily Ho, Betty Ting, Chien Ting, and Liu Yu.² I remember Liu Yu came from Beijing and she was a great ballet dancer, while the others probably were not skilled in dance. In those days, the public had a more positive perception of ballet and little exposure to other dance genres. The Japanese choreographer at Shaws would request the dancers wear revealing costumes at times, and I would

2. Research findings indicate that “Liu Yu” should be “Lin Yu”. See Lian Mianan, Wu Guilong. *Avenue of Stars: Hong Kong Cinema of the Fifties & Sixties* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company [Hong Kong] Ltd., 2016): 225.

comply despite my reluctance to do so. Once I voiced my grievances to a director named Sit Kwan. He said to me, “You’re like a piece of wood that gets carved by the choreographer in whatever ways she/he likes. You only get to call the shots if you become a choreographer yourself.” His words made me realise that dance was not about mimicking someone else’s steps and figures, and I should have my own ideas about it. That said, Shaws was a company with deep pockets, and we had an extensive wardrobe of costumes. Although I wore the costumes reluctantly, they were well-liked by the audience. By the time I was working with TVB, both dancers and the public were more receptive to dance and different costumes, and there were fewer issues arising from performance dance costumes.

I was only around 17 or 18 when I came back from the training in Japan. Yet I had already taken up the role of choreographer, and I created choreography for films such as *A New Lucky Home*,³ *The Heart-Stealer*,⁴ and *A Girl at 18 is Like a Flower*.⁵ Since most of the cast and crew were

3. A Hong Kong film directed by Lau Tat, released in 1969.

4. A Hong Kong film directed by Lui Kei, released in 1970.

5. A Hong Kong film directed by Wong Yiu, released in 1969.

older than me, they nicknamed me “Little Master”. Well-known actors who were my seniors, such as Kenneth Tsang, were respectful of me; those who were around my age, for example Connie Chan and Josephine Siao, were keen to learn dance, so we got along well. It was the students in the training programme who were harder for me to manage. I was young and inexperienced, so I put up a stern face and lectured my students to project a commanding presence.

As a Hong Kong person, I know that Hong Kong people are curious about and receptive to new things. Musical films were a new trend in pop culture in the 1970s; someone had produced one that was a box office hit, and others followed suit. Not long after, martial arts films became the prominent trend and the musical film craze subsided. At the time, Western culture was considered fashionable, and it had particular appeal to the public. There were no cultural exports from Mainland China that could compete with it. Once I heard the news of Paul Taylor⁶ coming to Hong Kong, I bought my ticket to his show right away. I knew nothing about his dance work; I only knew he was a Westerner.

6. Paul Taylor (1930-), renowned American modern dance choreographer.

I had a great time working as a choreographer for musical films. The film directors of the time had no knowledge of dance and did not expect much; they would simply ask me to dance while they did the filming. After joining TVB’s dance department as I had wished to, I did choreography for *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*, and the band Lotus. I had much higher expectations about dance than before and I felt I was falling short. It just so happened that my friends Henry Man and Tania Tang had returned to Hong Kong from the UK; they had founded Ballet For All, and they invited me to join. Then in around 1970, Henry was going back to the UK, so I quit my job at the TV station and left Hong Kong along with him. My friends and family thought it was a waste that I gave up my job at the TV station, but I wanted to see the world. Also, to my mind, Henry was a great choreographer and teacher. During my career in film I had choreographed for star actors like Josephine Siao and Nancy Sit, and I had saved up some money which was enough to sustain a simple life in the UK. In the UK, I studied jazz dance and contemporary dance. One year later, Michelle Berrie returned to Australia for family reasons. Robert Chua visited me in the UK and invited me to go back to Hong Kong to head the dance department. I was only 21 when I accepted his offer. I was

in charge of choreography and administration, and the work was hectic and stressful. I worked on choreography four days a week: The routine consisted of rehearsal in the morning, final rehearsal in the afternoon, and performance in the evening. Not every dancer at the TV station loved to dance, as some of them only saw it as a job. Maybe I was too young then, and I did not know how to keep my passion and my work separate. In less than two years, I quit my job at the TV station again and returned to the UK, where I stayed for one year. Upon returning to Hong Kong, I founded my own dance school.

Ballet For All

Of my days at Ballet For All in the 1970s, our frequent performances left the deepest impression on me: We performed three to four nights per week for about three years. It was unpaid work. Fortunately, all the troupe members had day jobs and did not need to rely on performance fees for their livelihood. As I was focused on dance, I did not know how Tania, who was in charge of public relations, negotiated performance opportunities for the troupe. The only thing I knew was that she had some friends who

frequently went to our shows and helped her with the search for venues. I remember the performance venues varied a lot in size. We did not always have a proper venue like City Hall: Sometimes we performed in a hall which was a restaurant; at other times in tiny venues. Our performance style was very free, like a bunch of maniacs dancing together. Henry had learnt a lot of new things in the UK, and he created excellent choreography from his newfound inspirations. I only danced modern dance, while the other troupe members practised classical Western dance genres other than modern dance.

In those days, the people in Hong Kong knew almost nothing about modern dance. At Ballet For All, we sought to introduce it to the wider public. The regular performances we presented over the course of three years made a substantial contribution to the Hong Kong people's knowledge of modern dance. We showed them something they had never seen before, even though not everyone was receptive to it. Some people criticised our tight costumes for being too sexy. Those criticisms were probably not born of malice, but of the gap between our work and the audience's understanding of dance. Our scenographers were always on a

quest for innovation. I remember one of our shows featured an underwater backdrop where the dancers imitated sea animals. Lighting designer James Mak had images of oil dripping into water that he projected onto the stage in a visually stunning display. It was a pity that Ballet For All gradually disbanded after Henry returned to the UK.

While my dance experience gravitated towards Western dance genres, I learnt more about Chinese dance during my days at Ballet For All. Through her network, Tania invited Sun Guangyan⁷ and Ma Lixue⁸ to come to Hong Kong from the Mainland to teach summer courses in ethnic dance, folk dance and classical dance. I truly saw the beauty of

7. Sun Guangyan was a key figure in the founding of the Beijing Dance Academy, a member of the Chinese Dancers Association, and the founder of the Graded Chinese Dance Examination system. He was the editor-in-chief of *Syllabus for Graded Examination on Chinese Dance*, and director of the Beijing Dance Academy Examination Centre from 1991 to 2001. See the *Read01* website: <http://read01.com/z0DA6J.html>. Accessed 27 April 2017.

8. Ma Lixue was the first head of the Department of Performance at the Beijing Dance School. He is the author of *tan minjianwu jiaoxue (On Teaching Folk Dance)* and *tansuo minjianwu jiaoxue guilu tedian (An Examination of the Rules and Characteristics of Teaching Folk Dance)*. See the Tianlong Wenchuang Tushu website: <http://t.zxhsd.com/kgsm/tsbig5/2016/11/02/3667045.shtml>. Accessed 27 April 2017.

Chinese dance for the first time in their classes. In particular, I was in awe of the exceptionally rich substance and expression of ethnic dance, which was far beyond my knowledge of dance. In that moment I fell in love with Chinese dance. Sun and Ma expanded the horizons of many dance students in Hong Kong. After running two sessions of summer courses in Hong Kong, they stayed in Beijing permanently. There were few good teachers of ethnic folk dance in Hong Kong at the time, and my study of Chinese dance was put on hold again.

Becoming a dance teacher

I returned to Hong Kong for the second time in around 1980. By then, the number of dance learners in Hong Kong had risen significantly. I felt the job at the TV station was too stressful, so I switched to teaching. I taught jazz dance and Chinese dance classes for adults. When I started out as a teacher, I lacked experience and I had no idea what teaching dance was about. I danced vigorously and asked my students to imitate my movements. What I felt was easy was actually very difficult for the students. Once, Lau Siu-ming visited my class. He was adept at teaching dance; while I, the teacher, had no clue about it.

In 1985, my elder brother who lived in San Francisco applied for family visas for my family to migrate to the US. My daughters were then school aged. I saw that my brother's daughters loved learning, and they had been exposed to new things that were not available in Hong Kong. I wanted my daughters to benefit from the US education system, and I also wanted to see the world. Therefore, I followed my brother in moving to the US. Before I left Hong Kong, I considered getting someone else to manage my dance school. Yet I am a carefree character and I do not like getting tied down. Therefore, I closed down the school. I am Christian, and I believe God has His plans for me. Life in Hong Kong was hectic, and I did not get to spend much time with my two daughters. In the US, I was able to stay close to my daughters, which I was deeply grateful for.

Before I emigrated, my friends thought I would not be able to teach dance in the US, and I had no expectations about that myself. In my early days in the US, I had not built up my own network, and I only had the chance to teach Chinese dance in schools in the Chinese community in New Jersey. In the mid-1980s there were few Chinese in New Jersey, and all of them had been settled in the US for a long time. Despite their Chinese ethnicity,

they were Americans in their mind-set, and they had no expectations about Chinese dance. They let their children attend Chinese-language schools, yet in their hearts they did not value Chinese culture and they only wanted their children to be able to speak Chinese. Ironically, the teachers were the only ones who spoke Chinese at school. The students learnt Chinese using phonetics and they had limited command of written Chinese, which made it difficult for them to acquire in-depth knowledge. Yet Chinese-language films and martial arts left a deep impression on them; for instance, they knew the story of *The Legend of the White Snake* by heart. When I started teaching dance in New Jersey, the parents had little respect for dance. When I talked about performance costumes, they said, "Can't we just buy some Chinese-style pyjamas in Chinatown for that?" I was not happy teaching there. Later I taught dance in a Taiwanese community. Taiwanese parents put great value on culture, and that shaped their children's attitudes. It was a source of encouragement for me, and I taught in that community for a few years despite the lack of resources. I loved the group of students I had; I hoped to teach them more dance techniques outside of our classes, so I was always on the lookout for suitable teaching venues. Over time, my students and I became well known in the community, and we were often

invited to perform at festive occasions like the Chinese New Year. I would drive four hours across New Jersey for a 20-minute performance, and drive from one venue to the next for classes on the weekend. Seeing how tiring this schedule was for me, my elder daughter volunteered to do the driving.

After a few years, the number of my students had increased to such an extent where we could have 100 students performing on stage at the same time. Although I wished to be involved in all aspects of production, I had limited capacity; I asked the parents to help out with some tasks, like adding accessories to ready-made clothes to turn them into classical dance performance costumes. The parents were reluctant to do it, but they agreed to help, as they wanted their children to look good on stage. Fortunately, they found pleasure in helping out and became more engaged with it over time. We lived simple lives in New Jersey where there were few entertainment options, so some of the parents were willing to perform on stage as well. For instance, there are many characters in *West Side Story*. A female student performed as a dancer, while her father and brothers played the male characters in the show. It was a truly communal activity. The parents spent two hours rehearsing every week for a two-minute

appearance, which reflected their dedication to our shows.

Starting in 1995, my dance troupe produced many large-scale performances over the course of 15 to 16 years. They included Chinese dance productions like *The Legend of White Snake*, *Journey to the Silk Road* (Plate 4), and modern musicals such as *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*, *New York, New York*, and *April in Paris* (Plate 5). For our staging of *April in Paris*, I took a trip to Paris to check out the sidewalk cafes, in order to create realistic sets for the show. The equipment we had in New Jersey could not compare to what was available in Hong Kong. Once we were rehearsing a show at a school. The sound equipment was reserved for the official performance, so we had no music for the rehearsal. The teacher on duty handed me a bundle of electrical cables and said, “I can’t take care of this. Please use your own equipment. I can give you some microphones.” We only had a few people managing the troupe, but we persisted for more than a decade. My younger daughter was a dancer. Back then she would go to work during the day, and manage the troupe’s administration in the evening and on the weekend. After becoming a mother, she had no spare time, so I retired after my grandchildren was born. I taught occasionally,

and took care of my grandchildren the rest of the time. When I left Hong Kong, I did not feel sentimental about closing down my dance school. Yet I found it hard to let go of my dance troupe and my students when I was about to retire.

Cultivating a stronger sense of Chinese identity in the US

This is what I think: The history of Chinese immigration to the US began with the poor. The majority of them started in working class jobs, which created the impression among Americans that the Chinese were culturally unsophisticated. The second- and third-generation US-born Chinese were completely Americanised. Therefore, I had to be mindful of my words and actions in the US, since I did not want to leave a bad impression about the Chinese on others. I believe one must start with refining her/himself if she/he wants to gain the respect of others. I took my students to perform in the library and aged care homes, in order to show Americans that Chinese people were keen to contribute and they were not only there to collect social security benefits. Chinese culture is profound; it goes far beyond what one sees in Chinatown, and Americans should not have a



Plate 4: The publicity flyer of *Journey to the Silk Road*. From Julie Ng's personal collection.



Plate 5: The cover of *April in Paris* house programme. From Julie Ng's personal collection.

narrow-minded view of our culture. In New Jersey in the 1980s, some local children would cast curious glances at Chinese people at the restaurants. Through our dance performances, I hoped to show Americans the friendliness, culture and beauty of Chinese people, as dance changed from a hobby of mine to a means to create cultural understanding. Driven by a sense of mission, I took up studying the social background of ethnic folk dance, as I sought to understand the relationship between everyday life, costumes and movement. I hoped to improve the American perception of Chinese people; my pursuit led me to a deeper understanding of Chinese dance, as I looked beyond its form and grasped its cultural essence.

Today, there are numerous Chinese living in the US, and many have emigrated from the Mainland to South New Jersey. To further enhance my Chinese dance skills, I studied at the Lorita Leung Dance Academy in Vancouver for almost seven years, and I took the Graded Chinese Dance Examination. After passing the exam, I taught Chinese dance exclusively. I also offered exam classes and encouraged my students to take the exam. Yet my students did not aspire to become professional dancers; they only studied dance out of interest and a desire to perform. I dedicated my effort

to maintaining the rigorous standards of the exam classes, and I did not have the time to produce dance performances. The exam classes did not garner support from my students, so they were discontinued. Looking back on the 1970s, I lived in the Westernised city of Hong Kong; I had only vague ideas about Chinese culture, and I put all my passion into learning all things foreign. When I danced Chinese dance, I only pursued the beauty of its form, and I neither cared about nor understood its ethnic character. I did not dance from the heart. Looking back on it now, I see how shallow it was. I had hoped to guide my students to internalise the cultural significance of dance through the classes in the Graded Chinese Dance Examination, and it was a pity that my endeavour was halted.

I had a mixed background in dance techniques: It encompassed foundational training in Cantonese opera, folk dance, jazz dance, modern dance and ballet, and it came full circle when I returned to ethnic folk dance. This kind of experience differs greatly from the conservatoire-style training today. Yet I believe there is one similarity between all dance genres: It must come from the heart. In my youth, my love of dance stemmed from a desire to imitate, and I did not care about exploring the essence of

dance. The only benefit of the training I had was that it was not limited to any genre or school, and I could develop my own style. As I see it, there has been an overemphasis on the technical distinctions between different genres in subsequent dance training in Hong Kong. If you look at the popular American TV show *So You Think You Can Dance*, the participants must give strong performance in different dance styles throughout the over a dozen-week-long contest, where dancers are required to demonstrate cross-genre competence. Today, many dance learners achieve a high level of competence, and there are more opportunities for those who wish to become professional dancers. Yet dance remains a difficult profession: It requires a serious time commitment, and it does not bring high returns. However, girls who have learnt dance are more mindful of their posture, and they are used to being in a group. They know how to release their feelings through dance; they have found a channel for self-expression. It is also a meaningful mission to pass on one's knowledge to others.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)