

**DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN
THE MISSIONS OF “DANCE
PRACTITIONER” AND
“DANCE ARTIST”**

Stephen Kwok

Born in 1928, Stephen Kwok was one of the first Chinese males to receive ballet training in Hong Kong, and he is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Hong Kong Dance Federation. Kwok opened his ballet school in the 1960s, which changed the situation of ballet being mainly taught by foreign teachers after its introduction into Hong Kong.



In 1964, Kwok and Raymond Liao, Joan Campbell, Jean M. Wong and Pearl Chan co-founded the Hong Kong Ballet Group, providing more opportunities for the study of ballet for the Hong Kong public. While Kwok has a deep history with ballet, which is the epitome of fine arts from the West, he believes dance is more than an art form that is only appreciated by arts lovers, and that it could have a positive impact on the life of the public. Through his teaching and participation in various activities in the dance sector, he has always worked to promote the idea of dance as a part of general education to his industry peers and students, fostering its development as a part of the everyday life of Hong Kong people. As Kwok recalls, the colonial government changed its stance from suppression of dance activities to utilising dance as a tool of cultural diplomacy. While Hong Kong was under the sovereignty of the British Empire, the city's cultural delegation showcased the aesthetics of Chinese dance on its overseas mission. From the 1950s to the 1970s, dance developed along a circuitous and paradoxical path of "rectification of name" in Hong Kong.

Date of interview: 29 April 2016

Location: Vivian Kwok School of Ballet (Taikoo Shing Centre)

Recorded and noted by: Joanna Lee Hoi-yin

I arrived in Hong Kong in 1947, and my recollections of Hong Kong dance start from around the year 1956. Prior to the 1950s, the public's imagination of dance was limited to traditional folk dance acts like *The Mute Carrying His Paralysed Wife on His Back*, while other dance genres were mostly absent in Hong Kong. Ballet was known only in high society; social dances, which might be more familiar to the public, were generally seen as activities with erotic connotations. As for those who had experience in arts and culture in the Mainland and fled from the havoc of war to Hong Kong, they fell into penury upon moving to the city. Who would have the heart or energy to dance?

By the mid-1950s, Hong Kong was gradually recovering from the scars of war. Like other young people of the time, I started looking for leisure

activities to enjoy in my spare time, and I liked going on a picnic with my colleagues on Sundays. Most of the time we went to Braemar Hill on Hong Kong Island or Butterfly Valley in Kowloon. Our favourite picnic activity was dancing social dance. When we needed music to accompany the dance, we would sing the melody, or someone would play it on the harmonica or accordion. We always danced to a simple rhythm, like “Re Re So, Mi Mi So” or other brief and repetitive phrases. There were not many options for social activities back in those days, so our picnic drew a big crowd every time. After doing our impromptu dances for a while, we came to have a bit of knowledge about dance.

The early years of the Hong Kong Chinese Reform Association

In the 1950s, we did not have any original dance materials. The dances we did were all “youth dances” with simple structures that were imported from the Mainland. Shortly after, a group of young people who loved dance founded the Chinese Reform Association (Hong Kong Chinese Reform Association, HKCRA).¹ The association had a well-developed structure which included the activity unit, drama unit and dance unit, with the

dance unit being smaller in scale. In the early years, the dance teachers at the association included Huang Cihuai, the elder sister of Huang Yiyin, who came from the Mainland and taught Chinese folk dance. I also joined the association as a member.

There were ten district committees under the HKCRA who organised community activities, and the activities were popular and well attended. The majority of participants were working youth, including many intellectuals and members of the petite bourgeoisie. At the time, the National Day celebrations were a significant occasion on which many large-scale events were held. Once the HKCRA rented the three-storey Guangzhou Restaurant where they set up three stages for performances. The HKCRA was akin to a leisure organisation offering dance classes for its members, and it also resembled a labour union which organised activities promoting social concern, like fund-raising campaigns for flood

1. According to the information on the HKCRA website, the association was “founded in 1949 by a group of scholars, lawyers and businessmen who had ideals and aspirations, with the mission of rallying for a limited democratic election mechanism under the colonial rule”. See the HKCRA website: <http://www.hkcra.com/web/subpage.php?mid=15>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

victims. In addition, many of its members were from famous left-wing schools of the time, while the association had a distinctly patriotic stance and positive image. The HKCRA’s reputation built through its district activities fostered greater recognition for dance activities among the public, as well as a more positive perception of dance over time.

With its strong community presence, the HKCRA had a great capability to mobilise community resources and it held frequent activities which were well received. Despite the public support it garnered, the association became a target of suspicion and suppression by the colonial government. It was thanks to Percy Chan,² the then Chairman of the HKCRA who spent much effort negotiating with the government, that the association’s activities were given the green light. In 1956, the association organised a major performance;³ the dance unit was not yet mature at the time and was not able to present a large-scale performance. Consequently, the

2. Percy Chan was the Chairman of the HKCRA from the fourth term (around 1953) through the 28th term of the chairmanship. See the HKCRA website: <http://www.hkcra.com/web/subpage.php?mid=19>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

3. *Zhongguo yinyue wudao (Chinese Music and Dance)* organised by the HKCRA, held at 9:30am, 15 April 1956 at the Empire Theatre, North Point.

ensemble of performers was not formed by members of the dance unit, but by students from seven schools including Pui Kiu Middle School, Heung To Middle School, Fukien Secondary School, Yuk Kwan Secondary School and Hon Wah Middle School (now Hon Wah College). To avoid getting anyone into trouble, the names of the performers and staff were not printed in the house programme (Plate 1). Over 1,000 tickets for the performance were sold, which attested to its popularity among the public.

I remember that in 1957, the HKCRA invited the Chinese Folk Artists to perform in Hong Kong,⁴ which marked the first-ever overseas performance by a state-level arts group since the founding of the People's Republic of China. The government had attempted to impede the arts group's visit to Hong Kong; fortunately, the visit was resolved through conciliation by Percy Chan. The arts group's performance at the Empire Theatre was a sold-out sensation! After the popularity of the event, the government realised that dance was a powerful and constant force in bringing young people together.

4. According to research findings, the Chinese Folk Artists visited Hong Kong in 1956. Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference. *Hong Kong Dance History* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, Ltd., 2000): 13.



Plate 1: The cover of the *Zhongguo yinyue wudao* (*Chinese Music and Dance*) house programme. From Stephen Kwok's personal collection.

On the reasons for that, I believe that firstly, dance activities fulfilled the leisure and social needs of Hong Kong people who had modest financial means at the time. Secondly, the HKCRA organised on more than one occasion dance performances for the purpose of fundraising for victims of natural disasters. Through participating in these events, we young people developed a sense of recognition of and belonging to our society, which elevated dance from a leisure activity to one that had an emotional dimension for our lives. However, the more our identification with the HKCRA grew, the more the government's surveillance of us intensified. On 8 and 9 August 1966, we held *gewu juyi dabuiyan* (*Song and Dance Gala*) in order to raise medical funds for the community. While all the performers were members of the association, titles such as "Dance Unit of the Association" and "Choir of the Association" were printed in the house programme instead of individual names (Plates 2, 3 and 4), and most of the staff names listed were fake names.

Developing the social role of dance

The Chinese Folk Artists's visit had a profound impact on the

Plates 2: The cover of the house programme of *gewu juyi dabuiyan* (*Song and Dance Gala*) held in August 1966.



Plates 3 and 4: The programme list and personnel list of *gewu juyi dabuiyan* (*Song and Dance Gala*) held in August 1966.

節目表

(一) 民族音樂演奏	演奏者: 本會民族樂隊
1. 獅子舞樂歌	指揮: 黃 頌 武
2. 金蛇狂舞	
(二) 民族民間舞「阿哥, 追!」	表演者: 本會舞蹈組
(三) 男聲小組唱	演唱者: 本會歌詠組
1. 我們的歌歌新	手風琴伴奏: 陳 毅
2. 我們是壯美的年青人	
(四) 民族兒童舞「紅領巾」	表演者: 本會舞蹈組
(五) 女高音獨唱	演唱者: 葉 雲 梅
1. 如今唱起用海嶺	鋼琴伴奏: 梁 明
2. 滿腔情	
3. 大河流水沙流沙	
(六) 中國古典舞「弓舞」	表演者: 本會舞蹈組
(七) 大合唱	演唱者: 本會歌詠組
1. 好久沒到過方家	指揮: 李 謙
2. 人民公社就是好	鋼琴伴奏: 梁 明
3. 一代一代往下傳	
休 息	
(八) 民族民間舞「向葵花」	表演者: 本會舞蹈組
(九) 粵劇「刑場就義」(紅燈記的一場)	演出者: 本會粵劇組
(十) 日本民間舞「八木小調」	表演者: 本會舞蹈組
(十一) 男高音獨唱	演唱者: 楊 成 傑
1. 我們現在大路上	鋼琴伴奏: 梁 明
2. 大海航行靠舵手	
3. 毛主席永遠和我們在一起	
(十二) 女聲小組唱	演唱者: 本會歌詠組
1. 在一起	手風琴伴奏: 陳 毅
2. 紅梅譜	
(十三) 舞劇「喜兒逢春」(白毛女片段)	表演者: 本會舞蹈組

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 副主任委員: 陳君亮
 秘書: 蔡清街

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 黃碧琪 彭銘基 郭 斌
 曹淑娥 楊秋誠 張炳忠
 陳樹標 陶慶英 鄭 宏
 羅曉中

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 白耀中

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 曹秋斌 許有治
 策 劃: 洪慶祥 陳 曾 羅玉清
 地點佈置: 鄧 宏 吳天儀 羅廣強 曾耀輝 王振雄
 音樂效果: 吳國勝
 編 舞: 梁海樓 林少雲 林 輝 王佩蓮 吳心博
 黃文德 盧兆英 潘樹明 黃麗娟
 監 製: 蔡清街
 字 幕: 潘 惠
 後 勤: 馮 英



← 粵劇「刑場就義」中的玉和與龜梅



↓ 舞劇「向葵花」

development of dance in Hong Kong. The event propelled the Hong Kong government to consider and utilise dance as a means to shape the recreational dimension of community life. In 1967, as the 1967 Riots shook the city, the British government believed it was crucial to snub out such riotous tendencies by keeping the collective energy of young people in check. Upon assuming office, Hong Kong Governor Sir David Clive Crosbie Trench put plans in place to establish the Recreation and Sports Services Department. Further, the government launched the Hong Kong Schools Dance Competition in 1970.⁵ However, there were only four government officials overseeing the competition; they lacked knowledge of dance, and they had no idea how to organise a dance competition.

5. The Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival, which is commonly referred to as the Schools Dance Competition or the Schools Dance Festival. According to *Hong Kong Dance History*, the Schools Dance Festival was founded in 1956: “[It] was initiated by Angus Campbell, Senior Education Officer of Education Department, with Education Officer Betty Mair and Physical Education Inspector Lee Chan Po-chi being in charge of its planning. Ballet teachers including Joan Campbell, Stephen Kwok, Jean M. Wong and Lau Siu-ming were invited to serve as advisors and judges. It saw the launch of the inaugural competition-based ‘Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival’, commonly known as the ‘Schools Dance Competition’.” Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference. *Hong Kong Dance History* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2000): 11. [English translation by Nicolette Wong]

While the department set out to promote Western folk dance and it had a set of teaching materials comprising 40 to 50 music albums released by the RCA, there were no qualified teachers to conduct the classes. The government sought help from the community, and I was invited to teach at different teacher-training colleges. Most of the students were physical education teachers, whose main objective was to acquire the skills to coach their students to enter in the Schools Dance Competition. Many of the early Western folk dance teachers were my students at some point!

During the early phase of the organisation of the Schools Dance Competition, Education Department (now the Education Bureau) officials often consulted me. Yet consultation and authority were two separate matters; I could offer my opinions, but the plan must be devised by the government. Once I debated with the government officials the names of the competition categories “Western Folk Dance” and “Oriental Dance”—the dance genre was in fact Chinese dance, so why should it be named “Oriental Dance”? As it turned out, the colonial government would not permit the name “Chinese Dance”, and “Chinese Dance” could only be a genre of “Oriental Dance”.

Starting in the 1960s, I developed a deep history with ballet. I was the second male person who studied ballet in Hong Kong!⁶ Raymond Liao was my sole predecessor. In fact, there were only five ballet studios in Hong Kong in the 1960s and almost all the students were Westerners. Ballet was a fashionable and expensive hobby then. It was rare for the working class to have exposure to ballet, if it was not a completely foreign term to their ears. I started working at Carol Bateman's ballet studio⁷ from around 1960; as a staff member I was able to take classes there for free and have access to the teaching materials. Later I worked as an interpreter for the examiners of the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD), where I gained an understanding of the specifications of the RAD examinations. Ng Sai-fun and Lau Siu-ming took up ballet because I introduced them to the dance.

Some time later, Jean M. Wong and I co-founded the first-ever ballet

6. According to the recollections of another interviewee Ng Sai-fun, the first male learner of ballet in Hong Kong was Raymond Liao, the second Ng Sai-fun, and the third Stephen Kwok.

7. Carol Bateman School of Dancing. Founded in 1948, it was the first registered ballet school in Hong Kong. Since its founding, its main branch has been located at The Helena May, 35 Garden Road, Central.

studio run by the Chinese in Hong Kong. I remember the tuition fee was HK\$25 per month. Although we charged a lower tuition than the British-run studios, our students hailed from the upper classes and all of them were female. They came from affluent families, and their fathers' occupations included doctor, businessman and even the Commander-in-Chief of Hong Kong. Helen Lai was one of our first students. Our ballet studio thrived, and we soon had branches on both Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon. However, Jean M. Wong left for the US after the 1967 Riots, and it was challenging for me to keep both schools running on my own. That was why when Chung Chi-wen invited me to join Rediffusion Television⁸ (RTV) in 1968, I did not hesitate to accept his offer.

When I just started out at RTV, the dance department was not yet officially established. There were only four or five dancers who had come from Shaw Brothers Studio (Shaw Brothers [Hong Kong] Limited); they only knew Chinese dance, and their teacher was Lorita Leung. Therefore,

8. From 1957 to 1973, Rediffusion Television was named *lide yingsheng* (Rediffusion Picture and Sound). It was named Rediffusion Television from 1973 to 1982. See Wikipedia: <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/亞洲電視>. Accessed 18 June 2018.

I brought four of my students with me to join RTV, including Helen Lai and Fanny Cheung. I still remember my starting salary was HK\$500! My first major performance was not a TV show but participating in the Thai International Travel Fair. There was no official dance company in Hong Kong at the time. James Tak Wu⁹ thought the RTV dance department was capable of taking up this important mission, so he invited us to join the performance of *The Fishermen's Dance* representing Hong Kong in Thailand. We had an impressive delegation of close to 100 members, which is incredibly memorable for me. Lisa Wang was also one of the members.

In 1970, the government made plans to participate in the dance expo in Osaka, Japan.¹⁰ As I had experience in overseas performance and I was acquainted with the officials at the Education Department, they discussed

9. James Tak Wu (1922-), Hong Kong businessman, founder of the food and beverages corporation Maxim's Group.

10. According to research findings, the "dance expo" Stephen Kwok mentioned was the World Expo'70 held in Osaka, Japan in 1970, which Hong Kong participated in. During the Expo, visitors to the Hong Kong Pavilion were entertained with dancing parades. See Hong Kong at World Expo 2010 website: http://www.hkexpo2010.gov.hk/eng/expo/hkpast_osaka.html. Accessed 20 November 2018.

with RTV about inviting me to lead the dance troupe representing Hong Kong at the expo. I selected over a dozen students who gave outstanding performances in the Schools Dance Competition, and put them through intensive training during the summer holiday. They formed the first-ever student delegation from Hong Kong, which was simply named "The Hong Kong Delegation". The delegation stayed in Japan for three days, and they performed every day. That was before the opening of China, when the country was still a mystery and the rest of the world was curious about all things Chinese. While Hong Kong was under the British colonial rule, it was the best window into "Chinese culture" for foreigners.

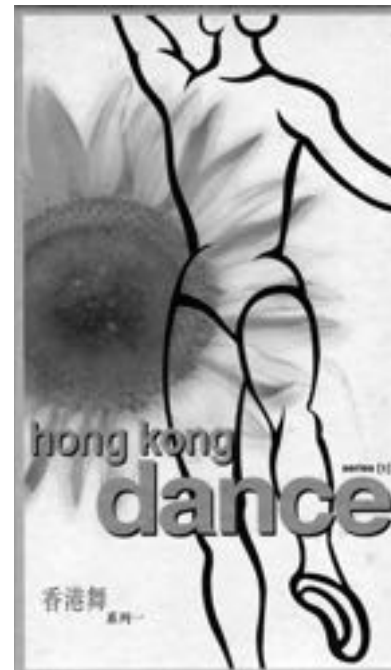
I think TV dance programmes were instrumental to the development of Hong Kong dance, since they introduced the general public to ballet and ethnic dance. I worked for RTV for five years. At the time, the variety show was broadcast three to four times per week, and three to four dance performances were needed for each showing. To meet the technical demand, RTV hired ballet and ethnic dance instructors including some from the Mainland. Besides coaching a large number of dancers, these instructors were also in charge of the choreography, and they left behind

many important dance materials during the process. Yet the TV station was, in the end, all about business. Dance programmes were not cost-effective since they involved high production costs and generated limited revenue. As the programmes barely broke even, RTV's management stopped producing independent dance programmes and reduced dance to a performance element in other kinds of programmes. I opposed it vehemently to no avail, so I left the TV industry.

The impact of dance could be more far-reaching

From my moments in group dance from the picnicking days at Braemar Hill, and my involvement in introducing the RAD examinations into Hong Kong, I saw the lack of native dances from Hong Kong. At one point I intended to publish the *hong kong dance* series, but the project was stopped short (Plates 5 and 6). The goal was to accumulate a certain number of original works and, through comparing the differences and similarities between them, create dances with distinctly Hong Kong characteristics and establish the forms of Hong Kong dance through this process of innovation. I invited Hong Kong dance teachers and composers

(From left to right) Plates 5 and 6: *hong kong dance* series [1]. From Stephen Kwok's personal collection.



to take part in creating the works; for instance, Lau Ting-kwok created the *Dragon Boat Race*. I focused on the aspect of physical training, and created dance works that centred around simple yet intensive core training. Dance notations and music CD-ROMs were compiled and published in the first series of *hong kong dance*. Upon its publication, however, there were industry peers who commented that “the dances are not technically demanding enough”. The project was later shelved for various reasons.

It is now 2016. Since 1956, I have navigated the Hong Kong dance scene for 60 years. As I experienced the emergence of Hong Kong dance from a blank slate, I have witnessed its development along two parallel directions: dance performance and general education. Nowadays we call the former professional and the latter amateur, and I believe it is unfair to make such a distinction. At present, the three major dance companies are focused on “professional performance”, but does that have greater value than other kinds of dance activities? In comparison to the purpose-driven and ephemeral nature of performance, general education is a long-term endeavour to bring dance into the community. The two serve different purposes, and it is unrealistic to judge which one of them has greater

importance. For instance, the Bolshoi Ballet from Moscow, Russia, is an exemplary professional dance company in the field of performance, yet the popularisation of dance education in Russia pales in comparison to that in the UK. Dance performance and general education each has its place and contributions. There should be room for both to co-exist in our society.

In Hong Kong, dance has been polarised into the professional camp and the amateur camp, and mainstream thought gravitates towards the notion that “dance is for performance”. Since the “professionalisation” of dance began 30 years ago, our society has increasingly leant towards performance. Mainland Chinese dance teachers who moved to Hong Kong contributed to the development of this trend, as dance materials from the Mainland were performance-based. The colonial government also made intentional and unintentional efforts to gear dance towards a performance-oriented direction, where dance ceased to be a communal activity. I hope those who work in dance in Hong Kong can distinguish between “dance practitioner” and “dance artist” in their missions and values. For those who study dance, they can certainly take part in performance if they become competent dancers. Yet even when performance is not part of

the picture, dance still plays a crucial role in society. Dance can increase a person's intelligence, and an intelligent person can carve out different paths of development. If we only focus on elitist performance and stay away from the crowd, we will only fuel the issue which we are already facing: the lack of a dance audience. How can we build an audience if dance education is not popularised? Dance practitioners and dance artists can create new meaning for dance in the context of everyday life, and they must reflect on future directions for Hong Kong dance. If dance could become a form of exercise for muscle relaxation for people who spend long hours working in front of the computer, what kind of connections would it open up between dance and society?

As for the aesthetics of dance, I believe it is a subjective standard which changes with the times. Dance does not have to be aesthetically pleasing. At my dance school, there are often parents who ask me why children should learn to dance. My answer has nothing to do with performance: Dance is important to the development of the brain. Children who learn dance are more flexible; for instance, they can command their left hand and right hand to perform different actions at the same time. Compared to other

sports or art forms, dance requires a higher degree of physical coordination. I spent a great deal of effort advocating the introduction of dance into the regular school curriculum, but it was not possible to find teachers who met the qualification requirements of the Hong Kong education system. The Hong Kong Institute of Education (now the Education University of Hong Kong) did not have a dance specialty, while troupe-trained teachers did not meet the qualification requirements set out by the then Education Department. I thought, if there were no teachers, we could train some! I teamed up with the Hong Kong Dance Federation and HKU SPACE Community College in organising a professional diploma programme in dance education, but the programme was closed not long after its launch due to issues of administration and revenue.

I have never had any hope that the government would support the development of dance, since the government has little knowledge of dance. In recent years, the organisation of Schools Dance Competition has been outsourced to the Hong Kong Schools Dance Association, which reflects the decreasing level of commitment on the part of the government. From its genesis through its continuous development, Hong Kong dance

has been shaped by foreign and Mainland Chinese dances which were imported into the city. If we could free dance from the confines of “art”, it would open up tremendous prospects for its future development.

I believe it is a mass project for the people that I have been working on, and dance is the means I employ to bring it to fruition.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)