

**PASSING ON CHINESE DANCE
TO FUTURE GENERATIONS**

Lorita Leung



From her early life in Shanghai and North Korea in the 1950s, through her years in Hong Kong in the 1960s, to her time in Canada where she emigrated to in the 1970s and still resides today, Lorita Leung has embraced a lifelong career in dance. She received ballet training at a young age and later performed Chinese dance in the army song and dance troupe, and brought her knowledge and skills to Hong Kong's film and TV industries when she moved to the city. During her seven years in Hong Kong, Leung's career straddled film and TV; she participated in the choreography of more than a dozen musical films, and she worked as the choreographer for Rediffusion Television's popular variety show. She was also a dance teacher to many actors and film stars. While Hong Kong's film and TV industries did not afford her the opportunity to live out her ideal life, Leung fulfilled her dreams of promoting Chinese dance in Canada. In the 1970s she established the Lorita Leung Dance Academy in Vancouver, and subsequently launched classes for the Beijing Dance Academy Graded Chinese Dance Examination. Today, Leung runs the school together with her daughter, as she believes that dance as a part of general education is key to dance being passed down to future generations.

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Location: Lorita Leung Dance Academy in Vancouver

Recorded and noted by: Lam Heyee

I was about six years old when I developed an interest in dance. My maternal aunt took me to see the film *The Red Shoes*,¹ and I fell in love with dance in that moment. When I was in Primary 5 and Primary 6, I studied ballet for a couple years with a renowned ballet teacher from Russia who resided in Shanghai. In 1956, when I was 15, I applied to join the song and dance troupe of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army which was heading for North Korea. I was accepted into the troupe thanks to my ballet training. Meanwhile, I had applied to join a few other dance troupes. The Shanghai Opera and Dance Drama Theatre also offered me a place, but I had already received the offer from the army, so I decided to join them to go to North Korea. Studying dance was not a popular activity in Shanghai at the time. Since my parents passed away when I was very

1. *The Red Shoes*, a British film released in 1948.

young, I was raised by their younger sisters. My paternal grandfather had six wives. Looking at the marriages of her sisters, which were also less than happy, my paternal aunt lied about being 18 when she was 16, and took a job at a phone company in Shanghai. I had four siblings; my eldest sister married at 17, so I had always longed to become independent rather than rely on my paternal aunt. A strong-willed girl who loved dance, I believed it would be difficult for me to join a dance troupe when I was older, so I was determined to seize the chance. My paternal grandfather was one of the richest men in Shanghai at some point, while my father had worked in the central bank. My family background did not stand me in good stead in China at the time.

My time in the army song and dance troupe

I lived in North Korea for two years, during which time I trained and performed every day. I also performed along with the troops and gave them culture lessons. It was the 23rd army and the troops came from Southern China; we had similar daily life habits and got along well. There were more than 60 people in the troupe; I was the youngest, so I

was nicknamed Xiao Liang (“Little Leung” in Mandarin). Over the past decades I have stayed in touch with my fellow troupe members, who still call me Xiao Liang. As I had come from the city and lived in a household with maids, it was hard for me to adapt to life in North Korea at first. We had to get water in a bucket from the river for washing our hands and faces. At night we had to carry a lamp with us to go to the bathroom, which was one street away from our residence. I also had problems with my joints in the extremely cold weather. We lived the communal life every day, and we did everything together: We woke up at just past six or seven in the morning, had our breakfast and did our training, rehearsed in the afternoon, did our political learning, gave singing and reading lessons to the troops, and performed in the evening. We had three months to curate and rehearse a show. When we were on tour, many of the troops would walk a few miles just to come and see the performance. Sometimes the show was staged in a hall; other times it was performed on a makeshift outdoor stage. The programmes mainly consisted of North Korean dance and mini-dance dramas. We also performed popular programmes from the Mainland and our own works, as well as drama and singing. It was a tough yet joyful life, and it was excellent training for young people to

develop their resilience, independence and problem-solving skills. There were times when I thought it would be a good idea to send my children to the army for the training. During my time in North Korea, I did not have any contact with the locals or visit many places. On the occasional weekend I would go for a swim in the river in the summer, and I would go ice-skating or picking maple leaves in the mountains in the winter. People lived their lives with a simple mind-set in those days. I learnt the meaning of perseverance; I came to understand perseverance is triumph, and one must never give up.

After the withdrawal of the troops in 1958 (Plate 1), I was transferred to Harbin where I lived for more than a year. In 1959 I was transferred to the Lanzhou Military Region Song and Dance Troupe, a song and dance troupe of a larger scale. My time in Lanzhou was a change from the previous experiences I had. We talk about racial discrimination in the West, but people in China also hold prejudices against those who come from other regions. I was a southerner who found herself alone in the northwest, and I was seen as a young lady from Shanghai and an outsider. The three years I spent there were very challenging for me. It was a different environment

where the locals had different mind-sets than mine; they thought I was not competent in a lot of things and that I was not intellectually sophisticated. The days were rough, but I learnt to endure them and focus on doing my best, thinking I would one day leave this place. During my time there, I discovered I had a flair for teaching. There were many local organisations like schools and workers' clubs which invited us to curate performances for them. I was assigned to teach the would-be performers, and through that experience I realised I was a gifted teacher. My students performed well, and I felt a strong sense of achievement at seeing them progress from being complete amateurs to falling in love with dance. It made me realise that being an actor was not the only path for someone who loved dance.

My years in Hong Kong film and TV

In 1961 and 1962, tension on the Sino-Soviet border began to heighten. The volunteer army was incorporated into the official army; there was a selection process by which members who were deemed politically loyal were chosen to stay in the army. I was fortunate to be selected and transferred to the Lanzhou University College of Art, where I took up the post of

Plate 1: A China Central Television news photo of a North Korean girl putting a red scarf on an 18-year-old Lorita Leung (left), when the Chinese People's Volunteer Army arts troupe received a warm farewell from the North Korean people when they withdrew from North Korea in 1958. From Lorita Leung's personal collection.



dance teacher and taught Chinese dance. There were subsequent changes to our placements; I was assigned to another post in Shanghai, and I accepted it as I was willing to return to the city. After my return to Shanghai, I taught dance at the China Welfare Institute Children's Palace. Meanwhile, the then newly formed Shanghai Dance School also made me a job offer. However, I had decided to leave China and move to Hong Kong, since my eldest sister and my then boyfriend were living in Hong Kong. At the time, it was extremely difficult to get a residence permit to stay in Hong Kong. I think one must believe in fate, because it is hard to predict how some things will unfold. I was among the last to leave the Mainland for Hong Kong. I left in 1963, and the Cultural Revolution began in 1964. I still remember my arrival in Hong Kong on 4 February 1963. For my new start in life, I had one leather suitcase and HK\$8 on me. I crossed the border from Shenzhen, bought my train ticket in Lo Wu to go into town, and took a cab to my eldest sister's place. She had arrived in Hong Kong around 1961.

A newcomer in town, I was eager to find a job, but I had no expertise in anything except dance. I stumbled upon this privately run school in Happy Valley, which I think was called The Hong Kong Art Academy. I met the

director of the academy Mr Yuen, and I taught some dance classes there. Some time later, Cathay-Keris Films announced auditions for new actors. I was about to apply when someone from the company told me the auditions were rigged. He knew about my background in dance, and introduced me to the Southern Drama Group² (the Southern) of Shaws (Shaw Brothers [Hong Kong] Limited). They were hiring teachers, and Ku Wen-chung was the person-in-charge of the department. I was in charge of the actor training programme. Elliot Ngok and Cheng Pei-pei were in the first class I taught, which I think was in the second cohort of the programme. After teaching my first class, I continued to deliver the programme for some time. The Southern nurtured many stars: Adam Cheng and Law Kar-ying were in the programme for a time, so were Ho Gwai-lam and Ha Yu. My job was to conduct the training programme and choreograph dance routines for films. *The Warlord and the Actress*³ was one of my earliest works (Plates 2, 3 and 4).

2. 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.

3. A Hong Kong film directed by Ho Meng-hua, released in 1964.

Plate 2: A film still of Connie Chan, which Lorita Leung received as a gift when the two worked together on a Cantonese-language film production. Year unknown. From Lorita Leung's personal collection.



Plate 3: Lorita Leung (left) and Shirley Huang, a Southern Drama Group actor training programme alumna and an emerging star at Shaws. From 1967 to the early 1970s, Leung choreographed the dance scenes in Cantonese-language films for many star actors. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.



Plate 4: Lorita Leung (right) and Cheng Pei-pei at the Southern Drama Group. Leung had recently joined the Southern as a dance instructor. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.

Rediffusion Television⁴ (RTV) launched a programme called *Hong Kong Night* around 1968. I was introduced to the director, Cheung Yuen-yung, and I took up the role of choreographer. *Hong Kong Night* was a variety show which aired once a week. I brought a few actors from the Southern with me to join the show, as my work straddled film and TV at the time. During my days at RTV, Chung Chi-wen showed a lot of trust in me and was very supportive of what I did, giving me plenty of room for creative exploration (Plates 5, 6, 7 and 8). As for the programmes, I always focused on the song as the basis for choreographing the singer's dance routine. If we were to feature Chinese dance, RTV would request more modern choreography and Westernised costumes to make it fresh for the audience. Later, Stephen Kwok came on board and oversaw administration. I also worked with Walter Chan for more than a year at one point. Some time later, Chung Chi-wen made me an official job offer with very attractive terms, so I quit my job at Shaws. Meanwhile, there were filmmakers inviting me to take part in their Cantonese-language film productions.

4. 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.

The company gave me permission to take up these jobs, so I started juggling work gigs in film and TV. It was a hectic time: I slept only four hours a day, though I also witnessed many young talents in film and TV growing up (Plate 9).

In my early days in Hong Kong, I did feel the scorn that was directed at Mainland Chinese from some people. When I just started out at the Southern, I was living on a shoestring budget; even attending company gatherings was a source of stress for me, since I would have to dress up for the occasion. At the time I rarely spoke about my background because it was somewhat politically sensitive. I had received foundational training in Chinese opera, and I also studied many dance genres in the army. There was no clear distinction between the dance genres we studied. Our learning was expansive in scope, and it was eye-opening for me. The army song and dance troupe produced some song-and-dance acts featuring Chinese dance, Chinese folk dance or even ballet techniques, since we would use different elements in the choreography as long as they were a good fit. After I moved to Hong Kong, I choreographed some works by drawing on the fundamental elements of the dance works I had performed in the past.

Plate 5: After joining RTV in 1967, Lorita Leung created choreographies for various programmes and mini-dance dramas for the TV station. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.



Plate 6: Lorita Leung (third right in the back row) with an ensemble of dancers at the backstage of Hong Kong City Hall. After joining RTV in 1967, Leung created choreographies for various programmes and mini-dance dramas for the TV station. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.

Plate 7: Lorita Leung (third left in the back row). In 1969, the RTV delegation representing Hong Kong travelled to Bangkok, Thailand to participate in a large-scale travel fair, where they performed a dance work by Leung. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.



Plate 8: Lorita Leung (standing at the centre) at the RTV's rehearsal studio before her departure to Canada. Year unknown. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.

However, the works of the song and dance troupe had a political flavour to them, and they would not be well received in Hong Kong. I had to come up with new ideas and do my research, such as watching a lot of ballet videos. Mostly I created the choreography around my own ideas. Some actors would say to me, “Master Leung, let’s go easy on the Chinese-ness”, suggesting that I give the work more of a modern touch. Actually they did not really understand what Chinese dance or ballet was. Back in those days, people had little knowledge of Chinese dance, and the development of Chinese dance was not as fast or oriented around stage performance as it is now. In the past, Chinese dance performances were very much standardised as most classical dances were. That was exactly the reason I always wished to showcase the true facets of Chinese dance to the world.

My last work was *A Purple Stormy Night*,⁵ which I consider my best work because I got to work with an excellent actor. Fong Fong (Josephine Siao) was looking for something unique, and she asked me, “Master Leung, could we have a mix of different things in here?” Most film stars had

5. A Hong Kong drama film directed by Chor Yuen, released in 1968.

Plate 9: The graduation ceremony of the second cohort of RTV’s actor training programme. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.



particular requests because they wanted to stand out. Fong Fong was very talented, and she was able to add new elements to the original choreography. I thought that was fair enough, since there would be no progress without pressure. However, there was very little information available back in those days, and I had to come up with all the new ideas on my own. I had to consult other people and watch a lot of performances, and I tried to learn about all kinds of dances. I also bought a lot of ballet-related materials. Through this experience I developed a good habit that I practise to this day: I scout for information wherever I go. Those who study dance nowadays are very lucky, as they can watch any kind of dance on the internet.

I worked in film and TV for seven years, starting with the Southern Drama Group, followed by RTV's actor training programme. The world of film and TV was intensely competitive: Every day was a contest, and we had to make the directors and actors happy. The directors gave me creative freedom, and I delivered what they were looking for. The song always came first, and I created choreography that resonated with the feelings of the music. Musical films were very trendy at the time, probably because

the audience had seen too many films of other genres. Also, film stars like Josephine Siao, Connie Chan and Nancy Sit were wonderful singers and dancers, and their performances made musical films a popular trend. I do not have the nerve to watch these old works of mine, because I feel they are not very good. There were many constraints on the job: The concept was subject to the script, the skills of the actors, and what was happening on-site. It was not artistic creation, nor was it pure dance. It was just décor and accessories for the film. Sometimes the camerawork was designed to cater to the actors' movement, but some actors did not know how to dance, so the director would film only their upper body movement. The moment they said, "Master Leung, the camera is rolling!", I had to fix the actors' poses. The poses were improvised and they had to fit the camerawork, so I had to think on my feet. During my seven years in Hong Kong, dance was my job, my livelihood. There were a few actor in RTV's actor training programme who were able to deliver what I asked for, and that gave me a brief sense of satisfaction. Dance was the only thing I knew; I had to give it my all if I wanted to survive.

Fulfilling my dreams in Vancouver

It was not possible for me to live out my dreams in those circumstances, and I wished I could open my own dance school one day. Through my time in the army song and dance troupe and the different phases of life I lived through in Hong Kong, I learnt how to position myself in the world and relate to others. In China there were people who thought of my family background as problematic, but I was determined to show them I could do better. In Hong Kong there were not many opportunities to perform Chinese dance. I set out to make people see Chinese dance for the vibrant dance art that it was, and that Chinese people should support it and cherish their own culture. I carried these aspirations with me when I moved to Vancouver; I never gave up on Chinese dance. It was another strenuous journey to engage in dance-related work in this city. For starters, they did not know what Chinese dance was; they did not even know where Hong Kong and Beijing were. I arrived in Vancouver in April 1970. That was a time when one could not even buy Chinese mushrooms in the city, and I had my sister sending me newspapers from Hong Kong in the mail every month. I had met my husband in Hong Kong. In 1967 he visited Hong

Kong while travelling around the world as a poor student who worked odd jobs on his trip. We met when he was working at the YMCA (Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong), where I was teaching some dance classes. After we married, we lived in the student dorm of Simon Fraser University.⁶ My husband was in his final year of university, and I took modern dance classes at the Department of Dance at the university. They invited me to teach Chinese dance there. I remember it was an excerpt from the Beijing opera *Pick Up the Jade Bracelet*. That was how I became linked to the dance at the Simon Fraser University. Some time later, the Vancouver Opera Association had a couple of opera performances planned for the summer, which I think were *The King and I* and *The Land of Smiles* (Plate 10). The works featured references to China in their historical settings as well as song-and-dance scenes, so they invited me to join the cast. At the time I taught dance at the church in Chinatown and ran dance classes in the basement of my house on the weekends. At first, most of my students were children of Chinese people living in Vancouver. There were five or

6. Simon Fraser University is a public university in Canada founded in 1965. It was named after Simon Fraser, an explorer who charted a majority of the territory that is now known as the Canadian province of British Columbia.

six people in each class, which included adults and children. Sometimes I danced along with them. Gradually the number of my students grew, and we took part in arts festivals, and Christmas and New Year's performances. Over time my classes expanded in size, so I rented a warehouse and founded the Lorita Leung Dance Company and the Lorita Leung Dance Academy (Plate 11).

Teaching Chinese dance was not something I insisted on when I came to Vancouver, although I had set my mind on teaching ethnic dance from the start. My school was the first dance school established for promoting Chinese dance in Vancouver, and we have persisted in our endeavour for many years. I have always preferred more standardised training, and we signed an agreement with the Beijing Dance Academy in 1993.⁷ More than 20 years have passed. I think one must receive proper training to find their way to creative freedom as the two are inseparable. In particular, it is important not to mix things up too much when teaching traditional dance in a foreign country. It should highlight both the essence of tradition and

7. The Lorita Leung Dance Academy launched classes for the Beijing Dance Academy Graded Chinese Dance Examination (Grade 1-13).



Plate 10: In 1971, Lorita Leung performed in *The Land of Smiles* at the Vancouver Opera Association. Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.

the possibilities of modern interpretation. That is my goal. We must not disregard tradition: Each Chinese ethnic group has its own unique style, which I believe makes Chinese dance the richest of all dances. That is why we must not abandon the legacy from our ancestors but strive to preserve it. We are not only performing for Chinese people, but we should bring our dance into mainstream Western society. Multiculturalism is celebrated in Canada; from my understanding, the word “multi” refers to different ethnic groups in the Chinese context, whereas it refers to the coming together of different countries here.

I have lived in Vancouver for 46 years. Back in my earlier days there was little room for development for me in Hong Kong. Many people looked down on Chinese dance, and they snubbed those who came from Mainland China. Here, people do not see ethnic dance or Chinese dance as old-fashioned; they just do not have a lot of knowledge of the dances. Of course, eight out of ten dance students are doing ballet, jazz dance or hip-hop, with only the odd one studying Chinese dance. However, in the past decade plus, there have been many new schools on the scene. They all have different approaches to the teaching of dance. Our school

Plate 11: Lorita Leung Dance Academy. Photo by Lam Heyee.



practises a more conservatoire-style approach, and we offer classes for the Beijing Dance Academy Graded Chinese Dance Examination (Grade 1-13). We have two dance troupes: The first is “The Little Pandas”, a children’s performing group for students age nine to 13; the second is the semi-professional Lorita Leung Dance Company featuring students age 14 or above. There is a rigorous process for selecting members of both troupes, as only strong performers are invited to join. There are Chinese parents who take their children to our school to study dance, because they want to learn more about Chinese culture. Once we had a Chinese student who was adopted by a Western couple. His parents gave him a Chinese name, and they hoped to learn about the culture their child came from through Chinese dance. I think Westerners have different mind-sets, and the Canadians are very open-minded. The Chinese focus on the family; they always put themselves first, and do not feel a sense of duty towards caring for others. In education, the Chinese lean towards cramming, and Westerners tend to respect their children’s preferences. We have some students who were studying Chinese dance back in Mainland China, and they continue to take the examination here. Some students prefer to enrol in a school run by Chinese so that there is no language barrier.

You can make a living taking students here, but you are never going to get rich working in the arts. It is just a job, and it does not pay a lot. Our students have joined us because of word of mouth and their trust in us. I believe students gravitate towards schools that they are in line with in terms of attitude. Some students do not like to train, but our school is rigorous and demands our students to do training. Some schools focus on the glamour of getting their students on stage for performances or beauty contests. We include in our shows a brief introduction of different dances, like Xinjiang dance and Mongolian dance, in which we talk about the geographical conditions and daily life habits of the peoples from those regions. I think this is very important, and in Canada in particular, every time we talk about the origins of these dances, the Western audience listens with rapt attention. We cover dance genres from classical folk dance to modern genres in our talks. On one occasion, the audience kept asking questions and was unwilling to leave. We should devote more effort to such endeavours overseas to open up exchange through the art of dance (Plate 12).

For me, teaching Chinese dance here is not just a matter of making a living. It is about cultivating knowledge of Chinese arts and culture in the

next generation, as well as knowledge of Chinese dance among Canadians. All this translates into audience development. That is something I realised only after I came to Canada—popularising dance as a part of general education is key. It is the case anywhere in the world, even in Hong Kong. In Canada, if you do not introduce yourself to people, no one is going to understand what you are doing. Who is going to see your shows in that case? It is not about tooting your own horn, but telling others about what you do so that they will understand it. The targets for our general education are not limited to students but also include the audience, since nothing can be accomplished even with the best content if there is no audience. That is why sometimes I get involved in shows of very small scale as a labour of love. Offering dance classes for adults is also general education. In short, you cannot just sit there and wait for people to come to you. There are some dance troupes here that work to promote dance in local schools. In these schools there is a one-day dance programme each semester, where dance teachers are invited to conduct classes for students. There is a school that runs a 45-minute screening of ballet videos, while other schools organise activities that feature an introduction to dance, such as performance workshops.

Plate 12: Lorita Leung (third right) and the entire teaching staff of her dance academy after the academy's annual performance in 2018.
Photo courtesy of Lorita Leung.



All my students have been excellent students. There is one who earned a place in Stanford University, and the students who take part in competitions all manage to stay focused on their studies. I have witnessed many students change through their encounters with dance. We have a six or seven-year-old child who used to be very shy; at the start she had to get her grandmother to stay in the classroom during the lesson. Now she is an outgoing person who speaks with a great deal of confidence. There is another child who has autism. At the beginning she was too nervous to come to class, and she would sit on the stairs and refuse to go into the classroom. I told her to take a look and that she could leave anytime if she did not like it. Slowly, she eased into it and started dancing along. Dance is a form of education for these children, who are disconnected from Chinese traditions as they live in a foreign country. Apart from dance, teachers should emphasise virtues in their teaching. We devote a lot of attention to this aspect, as we hope our students will not fall into strained relationships with their parents. Some schools are selective about the students they accept. I believe that is not the right thing to do. We are not a professional dance troupe: You can dance even if you have only one leg. It is basic human rights, and it is general education. Even if

you cannot dance, you can become a good audience member. Everybody has the right to learn to dance, as we are all equals. I value every person who learns dance. There should be a bridge between the general and the professional. There should also be different phases in this development, such as the way dance classes should be designed around a grade-by-grade curriculum in schools. Dance is no different than other art forms in this regard: We hope everyone will acquire some knowledge of dance, or at least the ability to appreciate dance. How will people learn about dance if there is no general dance education? If dance is not popularised and the audience block empty, it will not move ahead no matter how good the performance is. I may sound a little preachy here, but this endeavour cannot be accomplished by one person. My students are the torchbearers, who will carry our endeavour into the future.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)