

**THE ZEITGEIST  
OF DANCE**

## Yeung Wai-kui



Dance came into Yeung's life when he was a primary school student. He started choreographing in his high school days, and taught dance for adults in a newspaper office by the arrangement of his teacher. Yeung's solid foundation in dance explained his achievement at the Hok Yau Club (HYC). Yeung was responsible for Chinese dance in the dance unit of the HYC. In an era when dance resources were scarce, Yeung was a self-taught dancer who took cues from different art forms. He created a variety of works including *The Golden Feather*, a programme which was part of the celebration of the inauguration of Hong Kong City Hall in 1962. He has been devoted to dance creation in the past decades, even during turbulent times, and his goal has been to reflect reality in dance. Currently an advisor for the Hong Kong Dance Federation, Yeung remains concerned with the development of dance in Hong Kong, as he stresses the importance of dance as a mirror to the spirit of the times.

Date of interview: 14 June 2016

Location: CCDC Dance Centre

Recorded and noted by: Lam Heyee

### My dancing days at school

While my ancestors came from Haifeng in Guangdong, I was born in Hong Kong. I lived in Haifeng during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, and returned to Hong Kong around 1950 after the war had ended. My first encounter with dance took place when I was a Primary 4 or Primary 5 student at Pui Ying Primary School. My teacher took us to the YMCA (Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong)<sup>1</sup> in Sheung Wan. I remember the red brick walls of the building. Someone taught us *yangge* dance. It was an extra-curricular activity. At the time, I was chubby and ignorant, and I was

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1. In 1918, the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong built its headquarters and central club building at 51 Bridges Street, Sheung Wan. In 1966, the headquarters was moved to Kowloon. See the Antiquities and Monuments Office website: [http://www.amo.gov.hk/b5/trails\\_sheungwan1.php?tid=19](http://www.amo.gov.hk/b5/trails_sheungwan1.php?tid=19). Accessed 18 June 2018.

not serious about dancing. Later on I studied at Hon Wah Middle School (now Hon Wah College) (Hon Wah). I joined the drama team, but I had a coarse voice that was deemed unfit for drama. So I switched to dance. We did not always practise Chinese dance; in fact, we did not differentiate between Chinese dance and Western dance. I practised Hungarian dance, and pretty much any dance that I came across. Probably because of my height, I stood out and my teacher put me in the dance team. From there I never stopped dancing. I won an award with my Tibetan dance performance in the World Youth Day when I was in Secondary 1 or Secondary 2.

The dance team of Hon Wah was flourishing then. I attributed that to the teacher Liang Lun. He belonged to the Zhongyuan Drama Club. The school and the drama club were located in the same building. The drama club was located on 2/F, while Hon Wah took up 3/F, 4/F and 5/F as well as the rooftop.<sup>2</sup> The drama club frequently recruited students as performers, and they taught us basic dance techniques and creative

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2. According to the recollections of another interviewee Cheng Wai-yung, Hon Wah Middle School was located on 3/F and 4/F of the same building, with access to the rooftop.

concepts. I started choreographing when I was in Secondary 3. It was a short dance theatre piece titled *yuanzi guniang* (*The Maiden Yuanzi*). I did not have any foundational training, but I had the desire to create. There was another piece titled *yundongchang shang* (*On the Playing Field*). It was a story about students, some of whom only concerned themselves with studying, some only with playing football. The creative message was about how we should help those students. I did not know what making art meant exactly, but I was bold enough to try choreography. The dance works back then depicted real people. That was why I paid a lot of attention to people from all walks of life. I observed how the hawkers sold laundry sticks, how they mended shoes. Everyday life was a source of inspiration. I believe my days of enlightenment fell in that period of time.

We did not have to pay tuition for the dance class. Our music teacher Xu Xiaohui asked us to join. It was one of the school activities, which were free of charge. We all came from poor families. I had wanted to join many of the activities, to learn to play harmonica, to dance, and to somersault. One day, I was practising the handstand after school and fell off the parallel bars. I was terrified, but I dared not tell my parents about

it. All that children cared about was having fun. My first impression of Hon Wah was that there were many activities taking place. I mastered swimming and cycling during my first term at the school. Once I bumped my head against the hillside while cycling, and I ended up getting a few dozen stitches. My memory deteriorated after that. When others could grasp what they were learning after one try, I had to try three or four times. It was as though I had become dumb. My classmates and I chose extra-curricular activities according to our interests; we got along well and took care of one another. The majority of Hon Wah students were from the lower classes and we were used to helping one another, doing such things as lending money to a classmate who did not have the tuition fee. When a classmate had to return to Guangzhou but did not have the money for the train ticket, we would buy it for her/him. We talked about those incidents even a few decades later. Those of us in the dance team were not particularly close friends, but we were a tight community. When I was a child, my favourite times were when the typhoon hit town, because I would get to visit the “Public Garden” (the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens) with my classmates, or stroll around Aberdeen. Those outings made me very happy.

Besides my dance practice at school, my dance teacher arranged for me to teach a dance class at a newspaper office during my junior high school years. I was not much of a teacher, just someone who taught something he knew to those who did not. It was voluntary work, and it was done as some kind of promotion of dance. The class took place on the rooftop of the office of *Ta Kung Pao*. Many people joined the class; I had no idea who they were. In the evening, we had a single light bulb, and danced to a simple melody like So Mi Fa, Mi Do Re. We danced Hungarian dance, which was the popular group dance in those years. My teaching lasted for one year. It was a learning experience for me as well. I learnt how to organise an evening party, manage crowd and atmospheric control, and organise community events. I was thrilled to be selected by my teacher for the work. In the 1950s, the social ethos and everyday life was simple, and living standards were low. There were limited forms of entertainment in Hong Kong, and many people had nothing to do after work. My parents allowed me to join the dance activities without hesitation.

The most successful performance I took part in during my student days was an Ordos dance. It was a work by Pui Kiu Middle School. We learnt

the dance from them and studied every movement, while coming to a new understanding of the music. We performed on National Day. The backdrop was a boundless grassland. We had the rapt attention of the audience from our first movement, because we had a deep understanding of the work. We gave over 40 performances during the week of National Day. The school picked ten students in my grade for the performance, and we practised together. Back then there was not any formal performing venue. We performed in restaurants and on the rooftops of labour union sites. Our spirit was high even if we had to perform seven to eight times a day. Another programme was the dragon dance. Nobody in Hong Kong knew how to do the dragon dance then. Our teacher made the dragon head and passed it to seven male students, including myself, to finish the dragon together. At the time, there was a film called *Chasing the Fish*<sup>3</sup> in which there was a scene about the Spring Lantern Festival. The film crew needed a dragon as a prop and borrowed it from us. We were also going to perform at the Ten-school Sports Day. The ten schools included Heung To Middle School, Pui Kiu Middle School, Hon Wah Middle School,

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3. A Chinese Yue opera film released in 1959.

and other schools that had a patriotic stance.<sup>4</sup> The sports day was later terminated by the government for reasons unknown to me.

These two dance works left a particularly deep impression on me. They were created between 1956 and 1959, during which time patriotism in China ran high. The people's will was rising, and their spirits elevated. At that point, there had not been any error with the country's policies. The "Great Leap Forward" and "Three-anti and Five-anti Campaigns" took place later. They were irrelevant to Hong Kong, and the country was thriving. The programmes we performed were passionate ones. I remember there was a speech segment before the dragon dance, and

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4. "In the autumn of 1958, the left-wing schools in Hong Kong planned to organise a joint-school sports performance to foster cooperation and connection among the schools... It was initiated by ten schools: Pui Kiu, Hon Wah, Chung Wah, Sun Kiu, Shun Shau, Fukien, Yuk Kwan, Nam Chung, and Wai Man. There were more than 20 schools joining later on in what was set to be a major event for united front work by left-wing schools. The event was scheduled to take place at the South China Athletic Association Stadium on the evening of 9 December, and it was called the 'Ten-school Sports Performance.'" Zhou Yi. "*gangying dui zuopai wenhua yishu de jinzhi*" ("The suppression of left-wing arts and culture by the British Hong Kong government") in *xianggang zuopai douzheng shi (The History of the Left-wing Struggle in Hong Kong)* (Fourth Edition) (Hong Kong: Lee Shun Publishing House, 2009): 181-182.

we recited something like "There is a dragon king in the heaven, and what have we got on earth? I am the dragon king, here I come..." I have forgotten the rest of the sentence. It was something like that. At that time, the development of dance had just begun and we had not had any foundational training. In the Mainland, Chinese dance technique training was only introduced in around 1958 or 1959 with the assistance from the Soviet Union. There was a great deal of creative freedom in Hong Kong then.

### **Chinese dance at the Hok Yau Club**

When I was about to graduate, a student of Pui Ying Middle School brought me to the HYC and asked me to join the club. I had no idea what it was about. The HYC was called the Hok Yau Dancing Club then, and dance was flourishing at the time. At first, a dance leader unit threw a party, during which people sang and told stories. They led us to dance in a group dance. It was not a stage performance. As far as I can remember, the person in charge was a woman who had a slightly deformed hand. Later we prepared for the tenth anniversary performance (in 1959). When they learnt that I could dance, they asked me to take charge of the

choreography and rehearsals. The facilities were crude, as we rehearsed on the rooftop and in a warehouse. At first, the HYC was located on Un Chau Street. Some time later, it moved to 719 Nathan Road. I was not serious about dance at the time; I was only trying to help. The performance venue was the Hong Kong Grand Theatre, where the Hopewell Centre is currently located. After the performance, we felt we had done well. The performers were then brought together to form the dance unit, headed by Kenneth Ore. He was already a veteran at that point. I was responsible for Chinese dance and Walter Chan was responsible for Western dance. Yu Dongsheng, Pearl Chan, and Liang Yinxue were also in the dance unit. Later on, Henry Man joined the HYC too.

After a few rounds of changes, another performance was given in October<sup>5</sup> following the tenth anniversary performance in April. It was the first public performance by the dance unit. The venue was the Astor Theatre. Li Yuan also joined us and performed the solo dance *The Cripple on the Dumb*. Our

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5. Research findings indicate that the first public performance of the dance unit took place in November. Hok Yau Club. “*xueyoushe lishi wenwu*” (“*Mementos of the Hok Yau Club*”) in *xueyoushe sishi zhounian jinian tekan (The Hok Yau Club 40th Anniversary Special Edition)* (Hong Kong: Hok Yau Club, 1989): 49.

training was not rigorous, but our passion shone through. It was mostly students who took part in our dance activities. Kenneth Ore, Walter Chan and Yu Dongsheng had day jobs. I was a teacher. We volunteered to teach dance classes after work and participated in performances. Resources remained limited when the HYC staged its second performance. The work *In the Garden* was a portrayal of student life. Some students played the role of doctors, some danced. It sought to encourage students to study hard and strive for progress. It was a bit like a party, and we thought of it as a fun pastime. Tickets for the public were sold out, which was remarkable in those times. No other local school had the capability to present evening performances of such scale. A performance featuring two or three dance programmes would have been regarded as impressive. We took up half of the performance! The HYC was responsible for the production cost, which had been procured through fund-raising. The HYC dance unit organised activities on a frequent basis. There were usually 30 to 40 participants.<sup>6</sup>

The Hong Kong government was extremely sensitive at the time, and

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6. Details about the HYC’s activities and its source of funding are also covered in the interview of Florence Mo-han Aw in this publication.

it scrutinised our events to see whether they publicised leftist thinking. Some officers from the Special Branch came to monitor us when we were rehearsing the silk dance. They asked us what colour of silk we would be using. We were careful not to use red. I did not feel strongly about it then. I was just a junior person on the scene. My seniors dealt with everything; I was merely responsible for technical tasks and programme planning. Once approved by the standing committee of leaders, I organised the programmes according to the objectives of the club. There were many Chinese dance works available, but we could not use programmes and materials from the Mainland in our productions. Those works were filled with messages about revolution and production; they were deemed inappropriate for Hong Kong, and especially for students like us who came from English-language schools and government-subsidised schools. We created new choreographies.

### **Pioneers of Chinese dance**

Why did I get involved in dance? At the beginning, it was because I had a bit of knowledge of dance. The people at the club wanted me to make it

famous. It took effort and time, and it was a difficult path to tread. There was no such thing as Chinese dance then. What was Chinese dance? The concept did not exist. My only option was to study with the male actors of *huadan* (female lead) roles in Chinese opera. I studied with Yuan Shixiang; we had our lessons at a venue on Nathan Road. I studied the body postures and gestures of male characters in Cantonese opera. I was open to learning anything. For example, on the invitation of *The Chinese Student Weekly*, a Taiwanese teacher came to teach aboriginal dance in Hong Kong. I attended the class. After that, I found books and music, and created a new choreography. I learnt balletic lifting from Raymond Liao. At those times, there were no dance materials, no performance venues, and no qualified teachers in Hong Kong. I had no idea which master I could study with even if I had wanted to learn. Those were the kinds of conditions under which I produced dance works.

My first serious creation was *Butterflies in the Blossoms* (Plate 1). It was danced to *The Butterfly Lovers* performed by Yu Lina, which had been recently released. The music was beautiful. I integrated Chinese dance gestures and balletic lifting into the dance, and used dry ice to create



the atmospherics. It was performed at the King's Theatre in 1960. The audience was astonished by the work. It showcased both solid technique and the beauty of classical oriental dance. It had several reruns. Actually, the audience was not particularly fond of that kind of programme. There were simply no dance materials. How many ballet or Chinese programmes were available in those days? Not so many at all. There was also a lack of dance music. Bear in mind that it was 1960. We choreographed to Guangdong music such as *Han Palace Autumn Moon*, *Colourful Clouds Chasing the Moon*, and the like. In general, there were limited music and dance materials. You could show anything to the audience, since there were no similar performances that people could compare it to (Plate 2).

Probably because of the positive feedback the two productions of ours had garnered, in 1962 when the Hong Kong City Hall was inaugurated, we had the opportunity to present a large-scale production. It was *The Golden Feather*, a Chinese mythological tale. Looking back, I see that the conditions for our production were less than ideal. We did not have any group training; we were simply bold enough to experiment. We did not even know what “*kaida*” was,<sup>7</sup> so we approached Li Shunting, a martial



Plate 1: A performance of *Butterflies in the Blossom* at the King's Theatre in 1960. Photo courtesy of Yeung Wai-kui.

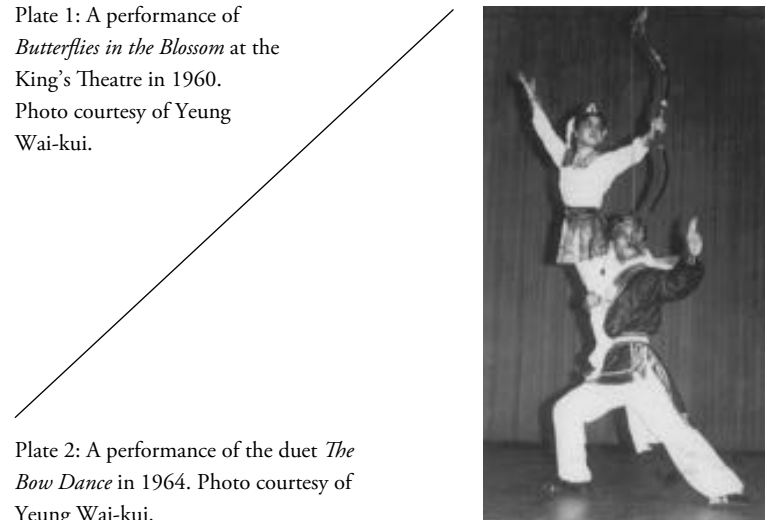


Plate 2: A performance of the duet *The Bow Dance* in 1964. Photo courtesy of Yeung Wai-kui.

arts master and the founder of the Hong Kong Wushu Union Limited. He was trained in the Huage school of martial arts, and extremely skilled in climbing. He taught us how to use swords and javelins, how to fence, how to “*kaida*” and how to pose. Jiang Chengtao was the composer. He was a classmate of mine at Hon Wah. Wong Kwong-ching, Principal of the United Academy of Music, arranged the music and was the conductor. He put together a 30-people band. We had limited materials on hand, but we gave it our best effort. The rehearsals were tough, and we were under tremendous pressure. I did not even know what else was showing at City Hall. I was occupied, and I did not have the energy to look into that. Despite the challenges, we brought our show to fruition. A cast of over 60 performed in three acts, four scenes.<sup>8</sup> All three showings were sold out. It was a spectacle at City Hall. There was an anecdote. The dance music was supposed to be in 24 beats in four phrases, but the composer could not come up with the fourth phrase. Finally we had three phrases only. That was a narrow escape. After that, I started studying music. Later on Wong Kwong-ching taught music at the HYC, and I studied composition too. I

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7. Chinese opera jargon that refers to martial arts performances by actors.

8. According to the recollections of another interviewee Florence Mo-han Aw, *The Golden Feather* was a large-scale dance theatre in three acts and five scenes.

regarded that as part of my continuing education.

There was a story behind *Wind and Rain at Dawn*,<sup>9</sup> another work of mine. In 1965, Hong Kong suffered flooding. The routes from Hong Kong Island to Aberdeen and from Kowloon to the New Territories were interrupted. School was suspended for a week. It was chaos in Aberdeen. Boats had been toppled in the storm. The HYC called on us to assist with disaster relief. My classmates and I brought food and visited the flood victims. The conditions were dire. People lived on boats that resembled boxes or coffins, and they made openings at the head and tail of the boat in order to cook. Some children were suffering from nyctalopia, and some others from pneumonia. I took them to the doctor. The students volunteered to tutor the children. Our relief effort lasted for about nine months. The government’s provision of disaster relief was insufficient, as it did not offer any other support besides food supplies. The relief effort touched my

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9. Staged at the Hong Kong City Hall theatre in 1966, the performance was a part of the celebration of the inauguration of the HYC’s permanent site, located at 395 King’s Road, North Point. Hok Yau Club. “*wushinian dashiji*” (“*A Chronology of Major Events of 50 Years*”) in *xueyoushe wushi zhounian jinxi sheqing tekan (The Hok Yau Club 50th Anniversary Golden Jubilee Special Edition)* (Hong Kong: Hok Yau Club, 1999): 57.

classmates and me deeply, and I turned it into a stage production. *Wind and Rain at Dawn* was about my personal experience, and the performers were deeply engaged in the work. The audience was also moved. The work garnered much acclaim. It was adapted into the film *Storm Petrel* starring Kong Hon.<sup>10</sup> Ng Sai-fun performed in the film too. This work marked a new direction in my art making. Apart from being artistic, my work should encourage students to care about social realities and to sympathise with labour. The new direction impacted all of us.

During those times, it was popular in the Mainland to visit the poor. The idea was to remember both the bitter days and the happy ones, and not to forget the past. We should bear in mind others' suffering even if we were living a nice life. One should not only focus on the immediate future. That was a fine approach to art making. It would have been a different matter if there had been another agenda. At around that time, we performed *The Eight-year War* which was about the War of Resistance against Japan. Through our arts performance, we wished to inspire others

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10. A musical film written by Zhu Feng, and co-directed by Zhu and Tang Lung. It was released in 1970.

to pay attention to their surroundings and learn about history. And then there was a speech recital about rising prices. It was an interesting work for all of us, since prices were going up at the time. Art should not be detached from reality or only reflect the bright side of things. Everything is relative, and there is sadness behind happiness. Such is life, and one has to understand that. We wished to remind others how to navigate life. Every organisation has its good side, and another side that invites criticism. About my days at the HYC, let me say that the one who is untainted is indifferent to praise and criticism.

### **Hok Yau Club after 1967**

In 1967, the HYC was searched. A helicopter landed on Kiu Koon Mansion.<sup>11</sup> The HYC was located on the rooftop. They said they were searching for weapons. What kind of weapons? Big swords. Those were our props. Later on, the police ambushed us during a HYC event. I had my knees on the floor, when a police officer kicked and injured me. A young woman was jabbed with a shield and suffered rib fractures. They found some newspapers at the club. The incident took place at 9:05pm

on 1 September 1967. There were about 40 to 50 people present. I was staying at Kiu Koon Mansion at the time. They searched the flats one by one. The HYC was rather active back then. Kiu Koon Mansion was the most-searched venue because it was a site of leftist actions. They might have been looking for the leftists. All HYC activities were suspended for about nine months, although I did not know the exact details. I was aggravated over the turn of events. After the 1967 Riots, the Hong Kong City Hall rejected our applications for performance venues. We tried different means to fight for performing opportunities. Then we applied under a different name and performed at Loke Yew Hall at the University of Hong Kong.

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11. “Kiu Koon Mansion at 395 King’s Road, North Point, was built on a piece of land purchased by a Chinese-funded corporation. It was completed by the mid-1960s. There were many offices and staff hostels of Chinese-funded organisations located in the building. At that time, the British Hong Kong government set out to demolish the base [of the Communist Party of China]. It borrowed helicopters from the British army stationed in Hong Kong. It enclosed Kiu Koon Mansion starting from its rooftop to the ground floor, searching for leftists inside the building. On 4 August 1967, helicopters took off from aircraft carrier HMS Hermes and landed on the rooftop of Kiu Koon Mansion.” “*jiezhi xiangwen: beijiao cengjing liuqi baodong yaosai*” (“It’s no secret: North Point was once a fortress of the 67 Riots”) in *Ming Pao*, 30 November 2014.

Fewer people participated in HYC activities after those tumultuous times. Some were afraid to show up. My attitude had not changed, and I joined the activities once they were resumed. I was focused on dance, so I rarely involved myself in other things. I had a lot of ideas about dance, but it took certain conditions for things to materialise. Upon the resumption of dance activities, Pun Siu-fai joined us. Ten male dancers practised *The Dagger Dance* (Plates 3, 4 and 5). We learnt from Master Shao Hansheng. He and Shih Kien followed the same master. Shao’s younger brother, Shao Zhenxiong, was the dance teacher of SKH Bishop Mok Sau Tseng Secondary School, which won accolades in the Schools Dance Festival every year. Later this dance piece became a frequent prize winner at dance competitions. Teacher Cai Jihuai of Kowloon Technical School thought it was a strong work and invited me to teach it to his students. As a result, they won the gold prize in the Schools Dance Festival. There was another version choreographed by Pun Siu-fai. The work was well-conceived, as it showcased both solid technique and thoughtful arrangement. The audience understood it right away. It was in the 1970s. There were still students coming to dance at the HYC because they wanted to improve their skills (Plate 6).

(From top to bottom) Plates 3, 4 and 5: A performance of the classical dance *The Dagger Dance* in 1972. Photos courtesy of Yeung Wai-kui.



Plate 6: A performance of the Mongolian dance *mobei feiqi* (*The Flying Horse in the Northern Desert*) in 1972. Photo courtesy of Yeung Wai-kui.



## **Arts has to reflect reality**

The development of dance has been vibrant in Hong Kong in the past few decades. It started out as a desert, but it is now blossoming. There is community dance and professional dance, for example the Hong Kong Dance Company, the Hong Kong Ballet, and the City Contemporary Dance Company. This is a good sign. While community dance and professional dance seem to represent two different paths, I believe it comes down to whether the producers draw on different elements of the two, so that they can complement each other and converge. I believe we can accomplish that. Further development will depend on the availability of resources. Under the current situation, Chinese dance is in a less advantageous position when it comes to resource allocation. Chinese dance practitioners are characterised by their diligence and lack of awareness of what is happening in society. Moreover, they have a low proficiency in English, and they lack sufficient knowledge about government regulations. Modern dance practitioners are more professional in this respect. We should pay attention to the unbalanced allocation of resources. Another issue is that the themes of most dance works are not proactive. Many

dance artists are somewhat narcissistic and distance themselves from the masses. One cannot only take the subsidies and present arts and cultural events; she/he has to do real work to gain recognition from the community. Artists should always reflect on how to refine their work. Where lies the artist's conscience and sense of responsibility? Sometimes I walk out of a performance and feel that the talent has been wasted. How to bring out the best in good performers? It takes more than just performing onstage. What is the message of the work? Is it encouraging, or is it pessimistic?

It has always been the responsibility of dance practitioners to guide students to improve themselves. In the meantime, they should convey to the audience how to embrace the future with a positive mind-set. They should not create art that is whimsical but vacant, which only instils a sense of pessimism in the audience. What purpose does narcissism serve? Art practitioners have to understand the society, be knowledgeable about historical figures, and refrain from narcissistic daydreaming behind closed doors. I do not agree with people being self-centred. One should carve out a path that reflects the history and reality of the society. Then one can move others with her/his work, and that is what defines success. For example,

why is *Xiaodaohui* popular? Apart from technique, the work illustrates a distinct historical background. Why is *The Red Detachment of Women* popular? It is a symbol of the times. Why are some programmes popular? It is because they reflect the times. *Wind and Rain at Dawn* sought to illuminate society for the audience. In my view, both professional and amateur practitioners, but particularly professional ones, should find a way to represent Hong Kong and to reflect the reality of Hong Kong in their work. There are many stories around us. It comes down to you to select your materials. That is the only way one can create strong dance works. That is my two cents' worth.

(Translated by Joanna Lee Hoi-yin)