

**TURNING HONG KONG
INTO A DANCE WORLD**

Lau Siu-ming



Lau Siu-ming is a familiar name to Hong Kong people. However, his role as a pioneer in Hong Kong dance before he became an active figure in the city's pop culture is unknown to most. He studied in France, and co-choreographed and performed in *La Robe de plumes* (*Rebirth of the Phoenix*) with renowned American ballet dancer Rosella Hightower. Later he joined Maurice Béjart's Ballet du XXe siècle, where he encountered brilliant dancers from around the world. After returning to Hong Kong, he created his first ballet theatre *Love for the Sea*, and founded the Hong Kong Experimental Ballet Theatre. Besides his work on the stage, he worked as a choreographer at Rediffusion Television. He is also a co-founder of the Hong Kong Ballet Group and the Hong Kong Dance Federation. Now in his 80s, he is still active in the performing arts scene, and he is Artistic Advisor to the Hong Kong Dance Company. In 2016, he took part in the Hong Kong Arts Festival commission *Danz Up*. He received the Distinguished Achievement Award at the Hong Kong Dance Awards 2017. Lau was the first Hong Kong dancer to perform a lead role in an international production. In this interview, he talked about the remarkable experiences he had during his study in France in detail for the first time, and the different facets of dance development in Hong Kong that he witnessed after his return.

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Recorded and noted by: Lam Heyee

My real start in dance goes back to an opportunity I came across when I was working as a seaman. At that time, I had founded the Hong Kong Ballet Group with some peers. I was the chairperson, and our members included Jean M. Wong, Pearl Chan, Raymond Liao and Joan Campbell. I was working for a shipping company when Rosella Hightower¹ and a group of renowned French dance artists stopped in Hong Kong en route to China. Hightower's dance school was offering one scholarship award for a Hong Kong person, and I applied for it once I heard the news. It was a work-study scholarship and a precious opportunity. Hightower was a

1. Rosella Hightower (1920-2008) was the first ballet dancer who rose to fame in Europe in the 20th century, and the first female director of the Paris Opera Ballet. In 1961, she founded the Centre de Danse Classique. See *The Independent* website: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/rosella-hightower-ballerina-who-danced-with-nureyev-and-became-the-first-female-director-of-the-1019540.html>. Accessed 18 June 2018.

hugely popular dance artist in France then. She had opened the prominent dance school Centre de Danse Classique in Cannes.

Studying with the masters in France

After arriving at the dance school, I was assigned to a kitchen job. Ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev,² who had fled the Soviet Union, had also landed at the dance school. We worked together in the kitchen. Later he left and I took up his duties, which led some people to think I was also a refugee. There was gossip circulating throughout the school about some bad-tempered person who behaved rudely. It was me who was being talked about, the Chinese person on campus. It was probably because I was in charge of the kitchen, and I always assumed a stern attitude. People asked me if I, being Chinese, was skilled in martial arts; they often tried to goad me into a fight. There were all sorts of funny things that happened there. I also taught martial arts and took up all kinds of work gigs. Later I stirred up some trouble in the kitchen, and people saw me as a rogue.

2. Rudolf Nureyev (1938-1993), renowned Russian Tatar ballet dance artist during the Soviet Union era.

Hightower's husband Jean Robier, a renowned stage designer for Opéra de Paris, was the school principal. He said I had been disruptive and I must be reprimanded for that. I was sent to live in the storeroom, which was actually very spacious and well furnished.

Every year, there were famous artists visiting the dance school from around the world. It looked a little like they were taking a vacation. I had wondered why all the students were not so young. When I realised they were veteran choreographers, it was as if a new world had been revealed to me. My duty was to take care of the international visiting artists. Their research revolved around topics such as whether it was possible to make changes to a particular classic, and, if so, how the work might be refined by those changes. All that was beyond my grasp. It was eye-opening for me to sit in on the artists' discussions, which were spirited and fierce. There were also many foreign dance companies which visited the school to rehearse. I saw many dance works that were completely foreign to me—I had not seen any productions like them in Hong Kong. As I watched the artists rehearse every day, I thought their practice was similar to martial arts training. Before the war, my family had been well-off, and I had had

a martial arts instructor. Although I often tried to skip the practice when I was little, I gained a bit of knowledge of martial arts. During my time in France, I saw there were strong similarities between the demands of dance and those of martial arts.

As my job was to take care of the visiting artists, I had a lot of interaction with them from up close. Fascinated by the artists' dance movements, I wanted to imitate them. I also spent a lot of time with the composers when they were at work. When they were rehearsing inside the studio, I got to watch the rehearsal. The visitors thought I was the butler and asked me about all sorts of things. I talked to them about martial arts and Chinese calligraphy. I said that while Chinese calligraphy has many sets of rules, it also lends itself to whimsical expression. I wrote some Chinese characters and explained the different script styles. They were intrigued, when I barely knew what I was talking about—I only pretended to be a know-it-all because of the circumstances. But they thought I seemed knowledgeable and they were curious about me. We got along very well. From my arrival in Cannes to my bonding with everyone, my days were filled with funny anecdotes. They treated me well and put a lot of trust in me.

It was a series of coincidences that shaped my life. A former seaman who was not skilled in anything else, I attended classes along with different choreographers at Opéra de Paris thanks to Hightower. My interaction with the artists had a profound impact on me. These masters mentored me selflessly, as they were keen to pass on their knowledge to those who loved to learn. In my childhood, I experienced the dark age of Hong Kong during the three years and eight months of Japanese occupation. At age 11, I fled to the Mainland, and spent the days roaming the streets. I tried my hand at a dozen trades, working as an apprentice, street food vendor, mover, and construction painter, among other things. The most unforgettable moment was when I crawled under a car to get the oil off its underside. Through these experiences, I learnt to be bold about asking questions because everything was new to me.

The sounds of the sea and unexpected success

After I had spent one year at the dance school, Hightower suggested I try my hand at creating a work, and that I should start with a musical composition as the basis. The first violinist of Orchestre de l'Opéra de

Paris had written a piece of music with an oriental flavour, and it had been performed in Japan. In fact, Westerners could hardly distinguish between Japan and China. The score had been kept in the archive at the opera house for years, but the work had not been performed in public. At first I said I had no clue about the music and that I disliked it. She asked me why I disliked it, and I came up with some story on the spot. To my surprise, she thought my story was marvellous, and adapted it into a work called *La Robe de plumes (Rebirth of the Phoenix)*. The creative process was akin to a child learning new vocabulary. I had only described a few things, but Hightower visualised them as concrete images right away as if I had described a picture. Drawing on the things I was familiar with, like martial arts and lion dance movement, I designed this strange bird named Phoenix, which was covered by a huge gong. I explained that it was not a gong, but the head of a mythical lion. They found these oriental creations extremely bizarre. I instilled small elements of the martial arts that I had been exposed to back in my hometown during the war—its momentum and the rhythm of its movements—into the work, without paying attention to the music. I let the others work on merging the concept, the movement and the music.

Our costume designer was the costume designer for Opéra de Paris. He envisaged me as a fisherman with a large fishing net in his hand. I did not know the meaning behind this character design—as it turned out, the net was a symbol of my life. He said I understood him; it was him who understood me. In my earlier years, I had been a seaman, and a child who roamed the streets. The rhythm and the fishing net recalled my relationship with the sea. Back when I left Hong Kong on a merchant vessel, I carried plates of food from the kitchen to the captain's room. I held the rail with one hand, and carried the plates with the other hand; I got injured stumbling back and forth. I was a member of the lower deck crew, and my cabin was in the hold. As it was located close to the rear of the vessel, I heard the moving propellers whenever I entered the cabin. I heard it every day, and it resounded in my mind. In some moments I wondered why I had not settled for an office job. As time went by, whenever I heard the sound of moving propellers, I remembered life was a precious thing. It reminded me of the sound of bombing during the war. I had carried a fear of it from the time I fled the war to my time as a seaman. Yet whenever I heard that sound, the question of life and death lost its weight, and I lost the fear of death. My child had been born a few months before I left Hong

Kong, and I missed my family. It was a complicated feeling: I did not know what I was going to do, what I was going to encounter. Amidst the waves of life, I was enveloped by the sound of moving propellers. Was it the intricacy of emotions, pessimism, or sentimentality that I was feeling? The relationship between dance and the propellers was encapsulated in that sound, momentum and rhythm. The feeling hit me when I saw the fishing net and the sea. I did not know how to explain it when people asked me about it then. It is only now that I am able to articulate it.

They thought the work was excellent. I had no idea Hightower was already a huge star at the time. Thanks to everyone's help, my vague concept was turned into a concrete and romantic work. She was touched by it; she said she had not heard that sound in a long time. It had to do with the unconventional expression I envisaged for my work. When I was out fishing, I saw this phoenix in the middle of the sea. I caught her and covered her with a gong to stop her from escaping. As the story unfolded, I fell in love with the phoenix and I did not want her to get away. She wanted to fly away once the gong was removed. In one moment she seemed incredibly frightened; in another moment she moved like a beast,

and she also looked like a bird. It was very dramatic. It was somewhat similar to the story of a fairy falling in love with a farmer, and Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'après-midi d'un faune* (*The Afternoon of a Fawn*). These kinds of works are transformed into romantic tales in France. The music and setting featured in our production were completely unfamiliar for the French. I heard there was coverage of our show in many media outlets in Paris the day after the premiere. The composer even invited me to meet him at his house; he thought I had understood the true intention behind his music, while I had only created something out of thin air. Somehow they had idolised me, thinking I had reached a higher level of artistry on the stage.

Performance of first choreographic work in France

Hightower had put her performance career on hold to run the dance school. Our work marked her return to the stage. All the publicity materials for the premiere were written in French; they spotlighted Hightower's return to the stage with a Chinese partner. I had no clue what was going on. At the start of the performance, the violinist walked to the middle of the stage

and played a solo. Everyone was waiting for Hightower's appearance and for her partner's—me, choreographer and dancer. All the other dancers were experienced enough to be my mentors. They thought I was a genius, although they were much more knowledgeable than me. In my mind, the world of dance was akin to that of martial arts—I did not know the language or the profession, so I did not worry about anything. After the premiere at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, I met many people backstage. They asked me which school of dance I was trained in. I did not grasp what they were saying. Nor did they follow what I was saying. Yet they found my answer interesting.

I only felt fright washing over me after the last scene had ended. It was quiet in the auditorium, and the silence lasted for a long moment. Suddenly I heard footsteps. Hightower walked to the stage, and invited me to stand up and take a bow. I saw many people in the audience standing up too. They had never seen such an unfamiliar scene. Nor had I ever dreamed of it my whole life. I had no idea if the applause was for the violinist or the costume designer. Everyone was deeply moved. Our collaboration had been born of serendipity. After the premiere, our production toured

many cities in France, with Léon being the last stop. Our performance venue was a seaside theatre. There was a large raft in the sea and many dinghies along the shore. I had created the work with this setting in mind, and it evoked a stronger feeling of the sea when our production was staged at a seaside theatre. Later, Hightower was invited to take part in the Festival de Sintra. The performance venue was an ancient theatre. Rudolf Nureyev and Maurice Béjart,³ who were friends of Hightower, attended the performance. At the last show, Hightower forgot to make her entrance. I was by myself and I did not know what to do, so I looked for her everywhere. Later she said it had happened because she did not hear the music; she was watching me from the side and, thinking that I was to leave soon, did not come on stage. She rarely made this kind of mistakes in her life. Of course, she knew exactly what to do the moment she came on stage. As for me, I was feeling emotional over my imminent departure, and I pulled the fishing net really hard when the curtains were closing. This was a point of intrigue for many, and it was analysed in a newspaper article. We did not have any documentation of these incidents. Some time later, they

3. Maurice Béjart (1927-2007), French choreographer and dance theatre director. In 1960, he founded Ballet du XXe siècle in Belgium.

asked me to bring the work to another company, but I did not know how to teach it to others. Finally, the work was not passed on, and all that was left was a few photographs. This is the first time I have talked about these experiences. They were a string of coincidences that unfolded like the plot of a Jing Yong novel. It may sound like boasting to some people.

Thanks to this turn of events, Hightower suggested I join Maurice's Ballet du XXe siècle. She said her ballet world was small, and Maurice's ballet company held the key to a colossal world. Maurice was the most outstanding dancer in the history of classical to modern ballet and a genius, but even he had experienced failure. In the early years of his career, he experimented with using atonal music for his work. At the performance, there were 12 performers on stage, and only 19 in the audience. That is why a new work must be refined through revisions. After joining Ballet du XXe siècle, I met some truly brilliant dance artists. The company was home to the world's most elegant and brilliant male dancers who had reached the zenith of the art. When I was still at the foot of the mountain, they were getting ready to make their way down from the peak. They were all amiable and gave me a lot of guidance. At Maurice's

company, I came into contact with many outstanding dancers. There was a Polish dancer who could do a sextuple tour en l'air. I had never seen such dazzling techniques. They had many other amazing techniques that made them truly exceptional. As I watched their performance, I saw how much I trailed behind them. They had started studying ballet 20 years before I did, and they were 20 years ahead of me in what they had accomplished. I could not even come close.

My life moved along from my days of roaming the streets, training as an apprentice to working as a seaman. Later I suffered injuries to my legs, once on stage, and once during a shoot. Over the past decades I have never left film and TV, and I have been following the development of Hong Kong dance closely. I have witnessed the introduction of Chinese dance art and Western arts into Hong Kong, and how young people have inherited the legacy of classical Chinese dance and folk dance. Both the strengths and weaknesses of these art forms are preserved. Yet young people do not know how to filter these different elements as new nutrients for their art. I have borne witness to the changes of our era. I think Hong Kong is like a library: Hong Kong dance practitioners have learnt from modern dance,

classical dance and folk dance from the West, as well as classical dance, folk dance, opera, martial arts and revolutionary opera from China, as these art forms have been introduced to Hong Kong over the past decades.

The impact of overseas Chinese artists

In China, there were many Chinese artists who went abroad for further studies because of political reasons or to follow their own artistic pursuits. When they visited Hong Kong, some of them felt they could develop their careers in the city and chose to stay, while others opted to continue their studies overseas. I witnessed many such comings and goings. Before the Cultural Revolution, there was a group of overseas Chinese art lovers who wished to return to the motherland to learn about traditional culture and see the country's beautiful landscapes. Folk dances were a particular interest of theirs, since they had never seen such eclectic dances before. During the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country welcomed the return of these young people who studied traditional arts including music, chess, literature, painting and Chinese opera. The master artists of the Mainland endeavoured to pass on their knowledge and skills

to these overseas Chinese, and they established an art school for overseas Chinese. As time passed, these overseas Chinese found it hard to adjust to life in the Mainland and they missed home. When misunderstandings and conflicts surfaced, these young people chose to leave the country. Yet they could not go back to Southeast Asia, since there was strong resistance in these societies against the revolutionary knowledge they had learnt. Some of them chose to stay in Hong Kong. For some time, this group of overseas Chinese had a strong influence on Hong Kong society, and they propagated their knowledge in the Hong Kong community.

Dance in Hong Kong developed quickly from amateur groups and school activities to an inter-school dance competition. It was unprecedented for any art form in the community. For instance, the Schools Dance

4. 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 organisation. 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 Festival.’” Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference. *Hong Kong Dance History* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2000): 11. [English translation by Nicolette Wong]

Competition⁴ was akin to a music activity at school just a decade before, since it was difficult to get hold of dance materials. The judges for the competition were members of the Hong Kong Ballet Group headed by me and including Pearl Chan, Joan Campbell, Jean M. Wong, Raymond Liao and Stephen Kwok. At the time, physical education teachers would double as dance instructors, while most students who entered the competition performed Taiwanese aboriginal dance or Western folk dance works. The standard of dance in Hong Kong was significantly enhanced after the arrival of this group of overseas Chinese. With the presence of 56 ethnic groups in China, there is an eclectic array of dances in the country. Student dance activities were extremely vibrant: Since there were 40 performing units at each show, the shows were always sold out. As time went by, school principals were willing to hire professional dance teachers to teach dance classes, which gave the dance teachers the opportunity to share their art with the community. It was a group of amateur dancers who fostered the professionalisation of dance in Hong Kong. I brought together a group of overseas Chinese and Mainland-born-and-raised dancers to establish the Hong Kong Experimental Ballet Theatre, of which I was founder and artistic director. Darwin Chen was working as an arts administrator in the

government at the time. The Hong Kong Dance Company had not been established yet. The Hong Kong Experimental Ballet Theatre performed at the opening of the Academic Community Hall of the Hong Kong Baptist University⁵ (Plate 1).⁶ We were the first song and dance theatre formed by professional dancers, yet we were not a professional arts troupe. It was a very challenging experience for us.

My first work *Love for the Sea* depicts the life of Hong Kong fishermen, who miss home after they have moved to the UK. I told Zhang Zhenni, an overseas Chinese from Indonesia, about my idea. Her husband Lee Fai was the composer for the work. I played the role of fisherman and performed barefoot (Plate 2).

5. According to research findings, the Hong Kong Baptist College became the Hong Kong Baptist University in 1994. See the Hong Kong Baptist University website: <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/tch/about/abouthkbu.jsp>. Accessed 17 November 2018.

6. In 1978, the Hong Kong Experimental Ballet Theatre performed the dance theatre *Stone Girl* at the Academic Community Hall of Hong Kong Baptist College. Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference. Hong Kong Dance History (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2000): 20.

Plate 1: Lau Siu-ming (first right in the middle row). A group photo of *Stone Girl* at the Academic Community Hall of Hong Kong Baptist College in 1978. Photo credit: *Hong Kong Dance History*, p. 136.



Plate 2: Lau Siu-ming in *Love for the Sea*, staged at the Hong Kong City Hall in 1963. Photo courtesy of the Hong Kong Dance Alliance.

The Red Detachment of Women was having its run in the Mainland during the same period. It had its premiere at Shenzhen Theatre in Shenzhen. It was a rather ill-equipped theatre, and we had to walk a long way to reach it. *The Red Detachment of Women* is also a story about fishermen, and it portrays the oppression suffered by the fishermen on Hainan Island at the hands of bullies. The dance troupe had learnt from Russian choreography and elevated their production to a work of art. I spoke with their choreographers, who were astonished at how we had gathered a group of amateur dancers from Hong Kong to perform a show. In fact, Choo Chiat Goh, a first-generation ballet dancer in Singapore, had introduced ballet to China long before that. His daughter is the principal dancer with the National Ballet of Canada.⁷

A politicised dance scene

One year, there was a Mainland Chinese arts troupe visiting Hong Kong

7. Chan Hon Goh joined the National Ballet of Canada in 1998, and was promoted to principal dancer in 1994. She retired in 2009. She was the first-ever principal dancer of Chinese heritage in the company's history. See Chan Hon Goh's website: <http://www.chanhongoh.com/ch/about-artist/>. Accessed 28 August 2018.

to perform at City Hall. I remember Darwin Chen was the manager there at the time. It was the first time I had seen Ordos dance, and I was stunned. The movement resembles martial arts, and the dance originated from the lives of Mongolian people. I was also captivated by Yunnan folk dance. It was the first time I had been exposed to these dances; I was fascinated to see the form of Mongolian dance, and how the female dancers of Tibetan dance danced while carrying a drum on their back. As these dances are religious rituals, the dancers must perform them with utmost effort. The performances are intended to pay respect to the deities and express gratitude to the earth and the sky, as a form of prayer for good weather. These dances have been passed down through the centuries and have become religious customs. It was eye-opening for me. I was deeply affected by the incredible charm of Chinese folk dance and the exceptional techniques of martial arts. I wished to perform folk dance one day, though I had no idea how long it would take for me to learn these vibrant movement arts.

I also saw Cheng Wai-yung's *Picking Tea Leaves and Catching Butterflies*. Cheng and her peers had studied Chinese folk arts at left-wing schools.

There were some works that could not be performed in government schools, or even on some occasions in public. *Red Ribbon Dance*, which originated in Northeast China, celebrates the soldiers' return from military victory, and it carries a certain political flavour. The story of *Picking Tea Leaves and Catching Butterflies* is not too politicised. It is about some girls in Chaozhou who, while picking tea leaves, talk about how they used to do the work for someone else but are now doing it for themselves. It did provoke a bit of a reaction from the British Hong Kong government then. The colonial culture sought to elicit submission from the Hong Kong people, while these productions hinted at opposition of the suppression of the people. The shows were not permitted then. During that era, every song that was to be performed at City Hall had to be submitted to the police for censorship approval. If there was any mention of "loving my country", the police would ask which country was being referred to. Many colonies were seeking independence then. The people believed in the value of their traditional cultures and sought to preserve them. The colonisers did not want us to preserve what was uniquely ours—if I had been an official of the colonial government, I would not have granted permission for those events either.

When I served as a judge for the dance competition, all I saw was Taiwanese aboriginal dance every year. One year there was a Yunnan folk dance entry; I recognised its artistic merit and picked it as the top prize winner. The other judges called me a "leftist".⁸ In that case, did I have to award the top prize to a Taiwanese aboriginal dance entry the following year? Would that make me a "rightist"?⁹ Today I still delight in my recollections of Ordos dance. Does that make me a "leftist"? What did it make me that I taught Chinese calligraphy to people of African ethnicity, sharing with them glimpses of Chinese ideology? How would you see me from that perspective? In the political climate of the time, how could anyone act from a purely artistic vantage point? If you took one step leftward, you were left-wing; if you took one step rightward, you were right-wing. There was nothing you could do about what people said. Did it mean you could only see one side, if you were on the left? Many people had narrow-minded views of those who did not take any side. If the leftists had given a precious piece of jade to the grandchild of Chiang Kai-shek as a gift, should he sell it? Or should he get a craftsman to craft it, and turn it into a memento of

8. It refers to the pro-Communist Party of China stance.

9. It refers to the pro-Kuomintang stance.

our era? Who was it that received this piece of jade? What was his identity? Were there some misconceptions about the situation among those who were involved? How many people could truly see what was going on?

The rapid development of modern dance in Hong Kong

Dance in Hong Kong developed at an accelerated pace from the inauguration of an inter-school dance competition, to the establishment of amateur dance groups and professional dance companies, to the introduction of modern dance to Hong Kong. As for dance artists, there were Wu Xiaobang and Dai Ailian at the beginning, followed by others. No other art form has ever developed at such a speed, or demonstrated such extensive scope and creativity as modern dance in this city. The development of dance in Hong Kong has been mainly propelled by The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. They invite overseas experts to teach modern dance, musical and Chinese dance at the academy, where students are exposed to many different cultures. Despite the relatively short history of modern dance in Hong Kong, the City Contemporary Dance Company has created more than 100 works over the past few decades. I

believe the rapid development of modern dance in Hong Kong has to do with the absence of established dance genres in the city. A genre develops on the foundation of existing elements, which are already well defined. For instance, the dances from the countless ethnic groups in Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan originated from the deep relationships between the people and their lands as well as folk music. These dances matured over time, being shaped by the characteristics of the regions and propagated beyond their places of origin.

As a comparison, modern dance is something anybody can learn regardless of their body type, family background, financial status or age; it is different from ballet, in which a dancer can only perform on stage after many years of training, and must stay extremely slim. Modern dance allows for free expression, and its creation is driven by music. The young generation who study modern dance have a great deal of creative freedom and room for expression, which echoes the character of Hong Kong. There is also great diversity in the music for modern dance productions, which may feature no music, or atonal music, or even speech. The audience has also grown receptive to modern dance over time. In the past, they could not figure out

what it was. Nowadays, they appreciate the ambiguity of it, even if they do not understand it. It also seems as though everyone gets to perform these days, and it is easy to enter the world of modern dance. With the use of different musical elements and dance effects in modern dance, there is a lot of room for dance practitioners to experiment and discover new experiences. The doors are not closed for them even if their work turns out to be a failure, since there are not many mature works in the genre. Nowadays, many young Hong Kong dancers have the opportunity to develop their skills overseas. I only got to study dance after I went abroad.

It is relatively easy for modern dance to establish its presence in the community. There are many people engaging in it, and a large number of shows have been produced. That is why modern dance has developed at a faster pace than other art forms, and it has grown continuously in Hong Kong. Professional ballet was developed from classical arts. Chinese dance has its prototypes in folk arts and it represents an accumulation of experience. Like martial arts, it has a history of over a century. It is not easy to create a new martial arts style. In modern dance, every work can be an attempt at innovation. New characters and subjects are constantly

emerging in modern arts. If one wants to showcase the characteristics of Hong Kong modern dance, she/he should create works that encapsulate local culture and traditional customs.

Chinese dance and martial arts

The rhythms of all movements have one thing in common: They embody human emotions and impact. It was only after I had practised dance for a few decades that I truly grasped that all great choreographers and composers take inspirations from nature—the stillness and the movement across the landscapes, like the snow, the foliage and the animals, the changes that take place in the ecology—and transform these presences and movements into melodies. Dance artists imitate these movements in their dance. This is particularly true of folk dance. All folk dances portray and draw from the lives of ordinary farmers. There are even many figures in ballet that had their genesis in the lives of people, and were elevated to an artistic language.

Many Chinese arts are centred around physical expression and are

extremely vibrant. I do not know too much about this subject, but I feel that Chinese martial arts, folk dance and calligraphy are key elements of dance creation. Martial arts masters are true dance artists. As a kind of physical training, the practice of martial arts helps one develop the strength of the body and the beauty of its movement. It is refinement of one's temperament, as it is a philosophy. At one point I taught dance to someone of African ethnicity. I taught him four new figures on the spot, and he could not get the hang of it. That was because I had not only created those variations based on the 100 plus figures of the dance genre, but instilled elements of martial arts into them. Chinese movement arts are also being passed on (Plates 3 and 4).

Speaking of calligraphy, if I say the two Chinese characters for the word “sorrow” can be transformed into a movement, is there any basis to that? I can use any word as the basis for movement creation, but I can only do that if I have an understanding of the creation of calligraphy. The stillness and movements of nature, the movements of objects, and the shapes of animals are encapsulated in one character. The cursive script is the calligraphic dance, and it resounds with human creativity. Calligraphers seek the art



(From top to bottom)
Plates 3 and 4: Lau
Siu-ming's character
stills. Years unknown.
Photos courtesy of
the Hong Kong
Dance Alliance.



of movement. How we can borrow from and transform this knowledge into art is a profound question. That is why Chinese calligraphy and martial arts are treasures; they are cultures that Chinese children used to be exposed to from a young age. Lin Hwai-min¹⁰ and I have discussed this for a long time. His modern dance choreography takes its starting point in literature, and it is inseparable from his people.

It is somewhat challenging to pass on the legacy of folk dance in Hong Kong. The art form has already been perfected, and it is difficult to discover new elements in it. The only possibility is to create a new dance style. In many cases, the choreographer breaks down the dance into parts and focuses on certain parts. A new work is created from routines and ideas. There is value in that. However, it would be destroying the value of the dance if its original style were lost after it had been revamped. How many people can master this? We see plenty of new works out there, but

10. Lin Hwai-min (1947-), Taiwanese novelist and dance artist. He founded the Cloud Gate Theater in 1973 and served as its Artistic Director. In 1983, he founded the Department of Dance of the National Institute of the Arts (now Taipei National University of the Arts).

nothing truly refined. I remember one year when it was the Queen's silver wedding anniversary, the Information Services Department invited me to lead a team of Hong Kong students to take part in a dance competition in the UK. Ringo Chan was also involved in it. Our team was not only a prize winner, but our performance was a hit. The locals had never seen the kind of dance we performed. In fact, we were only disciples; the true masters were in the Mainland.

As these art forms had not been popularised, there was not a market for them. It is like an excess of plastic in the market while porcelain is overlooked. There are many treasures from China that have not been introduced to other places in the world because of the lack of time and proper channels. Other countries share their resources and cultures to solicit followers, and their efforts are driven by economic goals. That was the case with colonies, and it was not necessarily a bad thing. For example, it was a positive thing that colonised subjects learnt English. Other countries have been waiting for us to propagate our culture, while we see it as old-fashioned. For instance, there are very few people learning Pingtan opera in the Mainland. Once I visited the Tokyo Imperial Palace

as a choreographer from France, and I saw a display of *guqins* in the hall. There are many Chinese arts that became national art treasures when they were transposed to Japan.

The ever-changing dances

As for ballet, every country followed the same path. They set out to nurture talents in ballet and hired professional choreographers to create works, with the aim of developing ballet as a national culture. The Soviet Union and Italy were known for their world-class ballet dancers and works. The UK followed their lead and invited many masters to the country, which led to the emergence of British ballet. That said, these masters were all top dance artists from the Soviet Union, Italy and France. As for the Hong Kong Ballet, it is challenging for them to go beyond the various outstanding ballet works that have been created over the years. How can a company perform the same work, and surpass their predecessors in technique? It takes time and audience. If a dance company has excellent soloists but a shaky corps-de-ballet, it means the company is not artistically accomplished. The Hong Kong Dance Company recruited the artistic

directors of some major companies in the Mainland in the early years. The first ones included veteran classical dance teachers Li Zhengyi¹¹ and Tang Mancheng.¹² Tang's student taught at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. They turned the movements in classical Chinese dance and Beijing opera into dance figures, which became course materials at the Beijing Dance Academy. In the Mainland, it is not possible to stage productions adapted from Jing Yong's novels or from comics. Here in Hong Kong, we enjoy full creative freedom.

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11. Li Zhengyi (1929-), renowned Chinese dance educator and the founder of the teaching system of classical Chinese dance. In 1949, she joined the Department of Dance at the Central Academy of Drama, where she worked as classical Chinese dance instructor and the Director of Ethnic Dance. She was the President of the Beijing Dance Academy between 1983 and 1987. In 1995, she was awarded an honorary fellowship by The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. Her works include *zhongguo gudianwu shenyun* (*The Essence of Classical Chinese Dance*) and *zhongguo gudianwu jiaoxue tixi chuangjian fazhan shi* (*The Founding and Development of the Teaching System of Classical Chinese Dance*).
 12. Tang Mancheng (1932-2004) joined the dance troupe of the Central Academy of Drama Dance Troupe in 1950. He successively worked as a dancer with the China National Opera & Dance Drama Theater, classical dance instructor and Director of Ethnic Dance at the Central Academy of Drama, and Professor in Education at the Beijing Dance Academy. His works include *zhongguo gudianwu jiaoxue tixi chuangjian fazhan shi* (*The Founding and Development of the Teaching System of Classical Chinese Dance*), *zhongguo gudianwu shenyun* (*The Essence of Classical Chinese Dance*), and *zhongguo gudianwu shenyun jiaoxuefa* (*Teaching the Essence of Classical Chinese Dance*).

As China is changing, we need to discuss how to develop stage performances of folk dance in order to elevate this art form to the kind of status that ballet enjoys. Also, how can we promote and establish folk dance as a communal activity? Unlike ballet and film, folk dance does not thrive on the buzz around star artists. Where is the development of folk dance heading? Amidst a myriad of national affairs, infrastructure construction and complicated political activities, China has gone through a great deal of transformation in the past few decades. It has not been able to devote much capacity or time to the development of the arts. There are also too many new things that are easy to learn nowadays. There is not any TV programme or film about folk dance; there is no one promoting it. In the future, we need people of foresight to work on refining the art form, to open people's eyes to how art can make life beautiful.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)