

Dance, Times, Politics

—The Dance that Evolved through the Political Vortex of the 1950s and 1960s

Lam Heyee

Introduction

As a method of historical enquiry, the distinctive characteristic of “oral history” is that it starts from the individuals and retraces history through in-depth interviews. While there may be limitations to oral history, such as the interviewees' subjective points of view and unclear recollections, it can be a useful supplement to written historical records. On the one hand, this project sets out to fill in the gaps in the early development of Hong Kong dance; on the other, it reorganises these first-hand accounts which may be used as the basis for related research in the future. This essay is an attempt to sum up the personal experiences of ten pioneers in the dance field, and an attempt to relate these experiences to social history. As the project takes its starting point in the stories of these ten pioneers, there may be inadequacies in some aspects. Rather than offering an in-depth examination of the era, it illuminates the context of development and raises certain questions for reflection. We look forward to seeing further research on this subject in the future.

In the late 1940s, Stephen Kwok and Ng Sai-fun moved to Hong Kong from the Mainland. They met at the Hong Kong Chinese Reform Association (HKCRA), and they practised folk dance and group dance. Later, they

both studied ballet at the Carol Bateman School of Dancing located at The Helena May in Central. In 1954, Joan Campbell relocated from the UK to Hong Kong, and worked as a teacher at the Carol Bateman School of Dancing. Not far away, on the Hill Road in Sai Wan, Cheng Wai-yung and Yeung Wai-kui began their dance journeys in the dance team of Hon Wah Middle School (now Hon Wah College). Yeung later joined the dance unit of the Hok Yau Club (HYC), where he was responsible for teaching and choreographing Chinese dance. At the time, Heung To Middle School graduate Florence Mo-han Aw was the chairperson of the club, where she oversaw the organisation of different activities.

In 1963, Lorita Leung moved to Hong Kong from Shanghai. Upon joining the Southern Drama Group, she became the dance teacher for the actor training programme. Julie Ng was one of her students. Later, Leung also became a choreographer for the films of Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Limited (Shaws). Ng Sai-fun joined the Great Wall Movie Enterprise in 1955, and oversaw the choreography for the company's films. Moving on from the age of film to the age of TV, Stephen Kwok joined Rediffusion Television (RTV) in 1968, while Lorita Leung also joined the company

as a dance instructor. Julie Ng left Shaws for the dance unit of Television Broadcasts Limited. Lau So-kam, who moved to Hong Kong in 1973, also joined RTV at a later time. In 1978, she performed in *Stone Girl* by the Hong Kong Experimental Ballet Theatre established by Lau Siu-ming. Before the founding of the Hong Kong Experimental Ballet Theatre, Lau Siu-ming, who studied abroad in the 1960s, had co-founded the Hong Kong Ballet Group with Stephen Kwok, Joan Campbell, and others, in 1964.

In the 1960s, Joan Campbell began teaching Western folk dance at the University of Hong Kong and at other tertiary institutions. In 1965, the inaugural Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival was held. Joan Campbell, Lau Siu-ming and Stephen Kwok were invited to be advisors and judges. Cheng Wai-yung has been involved in the competition since its second year. That is how the story began and unfolded along intertwining paths. This essay attempts to delineate the state of Hong Kong dance from the 1950s to the 1970s, based on the experiences of these ten pioneers in the dance field. The years, organisations, and professional organisations are all key to the research on the development of Hong Kong dance, as they were closely related to the changes in Hong Kong's political climate, as well as

its social and cultural development.

Southbound intellectuals and Hong Kong's cultural affairs

Due to political volatilities, there were significant fluctuations in Hong Kong's population from the end of the 1930s to the 1950s. In 1937, Japan invaded China, which led to the occupation of Shanghai and Guangzhou. A large number of refugees fled to Hong Kong, and the city's population soared from 800,000 to 1.8 million. During the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, a sizeable portion of the population escaped to the Mainland. By the end of World War II, Hong Kong's population had dropped to between 500,000 and 600,000. When political mayhem erupted in the Mainland in 1946, many fled and returned to Hong Kong, and the city's population rose to 1.86 million. With the change of regime in 1949, some people moved to Hong Kong in order to evade the Communist Party of China (CPC). As of the early 1950s, the population had reached 2.3 million according to official estimates.¹ Population movements had a direct impact on the development of Hong Kong society, including its arts

1. Wang Gengwu ed. *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives (Vol.1)* (Expanded Edition) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing [Hong Kong] Ltd., 2017): 211.

and culture. In the words of historian Liu Shuyong:

The early phase of the war was also the golden age of the development of Hong Kong's cultural affairs. Along with the large-scale southward migration of Mainland cultural organisations, there was an influx of renowned cultural practitioners. It shaped the characteristic of [the city's] cultural development as being spearheaded by foreigners.²

The “large-scale southward migration” is a historical fact supported by actual figures. Over the years, there has been ongoing discourse regarding the “southbound intellectuals” in the research on Hong Kong literature. For example, Lo Wai-luen, a former professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (now retired) and a researcher on the history of Hong Kong literature, has published several books on the influence of southbound intellectuals on Hong Kong's literary circle. Apart from their influence on literature, these southbound intellectuals played an important role in the development of Hong Kong film. Research findings on this topic

2. Liu Shuyong ed. *A Brief History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing [Hong Kong] Ltd., 1988): 190.

are included in *Monographs of Hong Kong Film Veterans 1: Hong Kong Here I Come and Monographs of Hong Kong Film Veterans 2: An Age of Idealism: Great Wall & Feng Huang Days*, both published by the Hong Kong Film Archive. The development of drama was also influenced by the southbound intellectuals.³ Based on various discussions on the subject, the group of “southbound intellectuals” refers to cultural practitioners from China who moved to Hong Kong; specifically, it refers to the relocation of cultural practitioners to Hong Kong from the 1930s to the 1950s, after the Japanese invasion of China, the Chinese Civil War, and the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Meanwhile, some right-leaning intellectuals arrived in Hong Kong after 1949. This resulted in a “literary circle marked by the left-right divide” between the left-wing intellectuals and the right-leaning intellectuals in Hong Kong in the 1950s.⁴

3. Cheung Ping-kuen. “Preface” in Cheung Ping-kuen, Hoyan Hang-fung eds. *A Narrative History of Hong Kong Drama from the Thirties to the Sixties* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Theatre Works, Shaw Run Run Hall of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2001): V-XV.

4. Wong Yin-ping. “‘*nanlai nanguo qi wei qian?*’—*cong wushi niandaichu xianggang de nanminchao tando nanlai wenren zai xianggang wentan de shengcun xingtai*” (“Would we have migrated southward just for money?”—From the refugee waves to Hong Kong in the early 1950s to the lives of southbound intellectuals in Hong Kong’s literary circle”) in *Literary Century*, vol.4, issue 4, no.37 (April 2004): 51-54.

Stephen Kwok, Ng Sai-fun and Yeung Wai-kui moved to Hong Kong during that period. As they had left the Mainland at a young age, they had not received any dance training before their move. Ng Sai-fun had some exposure to Beijing opera in the Mainland. Although it was not proper training or study, it instilled in him an interest in the arts. In the 1960s there was another influx of immigrants from the Mainland into Hong Kong because of the Cultural Revolution—such as Lorita Leung who arrived in Hong Kong in 1963. Leung studied ballet in her primary school years; she later joined the song and dance troupe of the Chinese volunteer army posted to North Korea, and subsequently the Lanzhou Military Region Song and Dance Troupe. She brought these experiences with her to Hong Kong, and worked as a choreographer for Shaws and RTV. An overseas Chinese from Burma, Lau So-kam came to Hong Kong in 1973, carrying with her the professional knowledge and experience she had gained in the Committee of Overseas Chinese Affairs Arts Troupe and the Department of Arts, *huaqiao daxue* (the Overseas Chinese University). After arriving in the city, she taught Chinese dance at local schools and community organisations. Leung and Lau were among those southbound intellectuals who arrived in Hong Kong at a later stage. By then, a certain foundation

for the development of Hong Kong dance had been laid. Both Leung and Lau spoke about the state of dance in Hong Kong at the time during their interviews.

These southbound intellectuals were not necessarily left-leaning in their political inclinations. However, inferring from the experiences of these ten pioneers in the dance field and the important years and organisations, it appears that these southbound organisations, in particular the left-wing ones, had a significant impact on dance development in the 1950s and 1960s in Hong Kong.

The dance units of left-wing organisations

According to *xionghuai zuguo: xianggang “aiguo zuopai” yundong (Aspiring to the Motherland: “Patriotic Political Left-wing” Movement in Hong Kong)*: “In the early post-World War II years, those who were pro-Communist Party of China and opposed to the pro-Kuomintang camp were called the ‘left-wing’. Those who were pro-Kuomintang or pro-Nationalist government were called the ‘right-wing’.”⁵ In the book, it is mentioned that in the early phase of the founding of the People’s Republic of China,

CPC members and their supporters were already engaged in conflicts with the Kuomintang (KMT) in Hong Kong. The political struggle between the KMT and the CPC escalated when the CPC took power in 1949. Left-wing organisations in Hong Kong included newspapers, schools, societies and labour unions. The schools and societies in particular made use of arts and culture as a means of membership development for the party. This is illustrated by Szeto Wah’s views on the Hok Yau Club in *dajiang dongqu: situ hua huiyi lu (To the East the River Flows: The Memoir of Szeto Wah)*:

... The British Hong Kong government was concerned about the permeation of political forces into Hong Kong, and it launched a series of deployments to tighten control. In 1949, the government announced the implementation of the Immigrants Control Ordinance, Deportation of Aliens Ordinance, Societies Registration Ordinance, Registration of Persons Ordinance and Emergency Ordinance. Among them, the Societies Registration

5. Chiu Wing-kai, Lui Tai-lok. “*daoyan: ‘zuopai’ yundong zai xianggang*” (“Preface: the ‘left-wing’ movement in Hong Kong”) in Chiu Wing-kai, Lui Tai-lok, Yung Sai-shing eds. *xionghuai zuguo: xianggang “aiguo zuopai” yundong (Aspiring to the Motherland: “Patriotic Political Left-wing” Movement in Hong Kong)* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press Ltd., 2011): 2.

Ordinance was intended to control the expansion of organisations, whereby all organisations were required to re-register. Any meeting of ten or more persons held without a permit might be considered unlawful and subject to prosecution.

... Starting in late 1949, dozens of labour movements of different scales broke out in Hong Kong. Among them, the “Russell Street incident” around the tram workers’ strike had the biggest impact... The 38 organisations that showed their support at the site were cracked down on. All of these organisations were established around 1949 and led by the underground Communist Party of China; they included the *hong hong geyong tuan* (the Hong Hong Choir), *haiyan geyong tuan* (the Haiyan Choir), *lianqing geyong tuan* (the Lian Qing Choir), *fengfeng geyong tuan* (the Fengfeng Choir), *qingnian guoyue she* (the Youth Chinese Music Club), *xinqing juyi she* (the New Youth Drama Club), and the readers club of *Hong Kong Students*. After this incident, all of them were forced to put their activities on hold.

... After the series of incidents that took place from late 1949 to

early 1950, the underground party’s communal activities in Hong Kong almost ceased entirely. Many organisations had to rethink their strategy... This wave of restructuring did not affect the Hok Yau Club. Like another student organisation, the Amateur Music Association of Hong Kong, the majority of Hok Yau Club’s members were students from the “grey line” English-language schools. It evaded the monitoring by the British Hong Kong government. As its existence was preserved, it remained one of the few legal student organisations controlled by the underground Communist Party of China.⁶

In the 1950s, school life in Hong Kong was monotonous and students were keen to join extra-curricular activities. The HYC positioned itself along the “grey line” in organising activities and became an active presence in the youth’s circle. Szeto Wah also pinpoints that “dance classes were the main ‘business’ of Hok Yau Club”,⁷ and elaborates on the reason for the

6. Szeto Wah. “*chuangjian xueyoushe he mimi rutuan*” (“The founding of the Hok Yau Club and joining the club in secrecy”) in *dajiang dongqu: situ hua huiyi lu* (*To the East the River Flows: The Memoir of Szeto Wah*) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press [China] Ltd., 2011): 58-89.

7. Ibid., “*rube kuoda xuesheng zhendi*” (“How to expand the students’ base”): 62.

HYC's development under the cover of a "dancing club":

In the first half of 1949, some of the underground organisations of the Communist Party of China in Guangdong were uncovered by the Kuomintang government. A group of underground party members whose identities had been exposed fled southward to Hong Kong, and set up organisations centred around cultural and leisure activities in Hong Kong. Among these underground party members who relocated southward, there were three dance teachers, Zhou Qing, Huang Jian and Feng Gui (the former two being female). The club was named the "Hok Yau Dancing Club" in order to protect the identities of these three persons. They became founding members of the club and taught folk dance there. These three members of the Communist Party of China were all dedicated and serious at work. It was only in 1951 that they returned to the Mainland.⁸

8. Ibid., "*chuangjian xueyoushe he mimi rutuan*" ("The founding of the Hok Yau Club and joining the group in secrecy"): 56.

That marked the beginning of dance at the HYC. It evolved from a weekly leisure activity of singing and dancing organised by the dance leader unit, to the establishment of a dance unit with Kenneth Ore as unit leader, Walter Chan as deputy unit leader, and Yu Dongsheng as one of the members. Hon Wah Middle School graduate Yeung Wai-kui joined the unit later and was in charge of Chinese dance. Between 1959 and 1966, the HYC presented more than a dozen performances and nurtured many dance talents. Florence Mo-han Aw, who became the chairperson of the HYC in 1962, concurred that the club made considerable achievements in dance.⁹ Also, the HYC's dance classes were offered free of charge and they appealed to the youth. As Aw described in her interview, the HYC succeeded in popularising dance. In addition, since the HYC was a "grey line" organisation, it was able to collaborate with external parties even in the politically sensitive era of the left-right divide. For instance, Ore worked with Zhang Zhenni and Lee Fai, and performed in *chunlian* (*Spring Love*). Aw believed the production was a united front work mission assigned to Ore by the CPC.

9. The HYC's dance activities are also covered in the feature interview of Florence Mo-han Aw in this publication.

Another key organisation was the HKCRA, which was founded in 1949. Unlike the HYC which was a “grey line” student organisation, according to its official website the HKCRA was “founded in 1949 by a group of scholars, lawyers and businessmen who had ideals and aspirations, with the mission of rallying for a limited democratic election mechanism under the colonial rule.” In 1953, the HKCRA set up its performing arts team, and the art forms they practised spanned choral music, dance, Chinese music, drama and folk music.¹⁰ Stephen Kwok mentioned in his interview that during the early years of the association, one of the dance teachers was Huang Cihuai, who taught Chinese dance. Most of the HKCRA’s dance activities were social gatherings, where a group of young people came together to dance group dance in the countryside. During his interview, Ng Sai-fun also spoke of practising group dance at local societies in those days, as he studied and taught dance at the same time.

The dance that sowed its seeds in the south

In the 1950s and 1960s, left-wing schools were also key to the southward

10. See *xianggang huaren gexin hui jinxi jinian tekan (The Hong Kong Chinese Reform Association Golden Jubilee Special Edition)*.

sowing of the seeds of dance. The HYC and the HKCRA often invited students of left-wing schools to perform in their dance performances. For instance, Stephen Kwok mentioned that for the HKCRA’s *zhongguo yinyue wudao (Chinese Music and Dance)*, which was staged at the Emperor Theatre in North Point in 1956, students from Pui Kiu Middle School, Heung To Middle School, Fukien Secondary School, Yuk Kwan Middle School, and Hon Wah Middle School were invited to take part in the show. Florence Mo-han Aw also noted that Hon Wah students participated in the HYC’s tenth anniversary performance. Hon Wah graduate Yeung Wai-kui was in charge of Chinese dance at the HYC. Among the left-wing schools, Hon Wah Middle School’s dance team was the most outstanding. Hon Wah graduates Cheng Wai-yung and Yeung Wai-kui both remarked that the flourishing of Hon Wah’s dance team had much to do with the campus being located in the same building as the Zhongyuan Drama Club. As Liang Lun notes:

The Zhongyuan Drama Club was founded in March 1946 in Hong Kong. It was initially established as a drama troupe, and it developed into an arts organisation that encompassed music and

dance. The dance unit was founded in July 1946 with Liang Lun as unit leader and You Huihai as deputy unit leader. Unit members included Chen Yuenyi, Zhang Fang, Ni Lu, Wu Jun (who led the music unit, which included dance music, along with Guo Jie). These members were originally key members of the Chinese Dance Research Association in Kunming.¹¹

Liang Lun discusses the development of the Zhongyuan Drama Club in Hong Kong in the article “*huiyi zhongyuan juyishe de wudao huodong*” (“Recollections of the dance activities of the Zhongyuan Drama Club”). After Wen Yiduo was assassinated by the KMT’s secret agents in Kunming in July 1946, Liang Lun contacted the persons in charge of the Zhongyuan Drama Club and expressed his desire to work in Hong Kong. His request was granted, and he went to Hong Kong to set up the dance unit. The drama club staged its first large-scale evening dance performance at the Confucius

Hall. The programme included Guangdong folk dance, folk dance of the Axi people, folk dance of the Yi people, Russian dance and Polish dance. After the performance, the Zhongyuan Drama Club was invited by school societies to organise dance activities. They visited schools such as Pui Kiu, Hon Wah and Heung To in order to choreograph dance routines for the students. In 1948, the Zhongyuan Drama Club even hosted a three-month arts training programme at the Hon Wah Middle School. Later, Liang Lun and Chen Yuenyi were transferred from the Zhongyuan Drama Club to the Chinese Song-Dance Drama Society, and travelled with the drama society to Nanyang. Zhang Fang, Ni Lu and Wu Jun were the only ones who remained at the Zhongyuan Drama Club’s dance unit.

According to the article “*ji xianggang zhongyuan juyishe*” (“On the Zhongyuan Drama Club in Hong Kong”), in late 1948, some members of the Zhongyuan Drama Club returned to the Mainland, and teamed up with the Chinese Song-Dance Drama Society to form the South China Cultural Work Troupe. The historical mission of the Zhongyuan Drama Club in Hong Kong officially came to an end when Ma Mengping, who was in charge of film production, led the members in the film and drama

11. Liang Lun. “*huiyi zhongyuan juyishe de wudao huodong*” (“Recollections of the dance activities of the Zhongyuan Drama Club”) in Guangdong Drama Research Society’s editorial committee for *Lihen* ed. *Lihen—zhongyuan juyishe de zhandou licheng* (*Lihen—the Battles Fought by the Zhongyuan Drama Club*) (Guangdong: Guangdong Drama Research Society, 1993): 173.

units to return to the Mainland.¹²

The Zhongyuan Drama Club carried out dance-related work in Hong Kong for three years. Apart from official performances, the club placed particular emphasis on the popularisation of dance. Besides organising dance activities, the club visited factory sites to teach dance to seamen and bus workers. In only three years, the Zhongyuan Drama Club planted the seeds of arts and culture in Hong Kong. From Zhongyuan to Heung To and Hon Wah, and subsequently to the HYC, knowledge of dance was quickly disseminated in the left-wing circle. In their interviews, both Cheng Wai-yung and Yeung Wai-kui said they taught dance classes at the office of *Ta Kung Pao* during their Hon Wah years. Cheng also mentioned that apart from the school's students and alumni, actors from the South China Film Workers Union performed in *hanhua zhongxue xiaoyouhui wei muxiao choumu jianxiao jijin gongyan* (*Hon Wah Middle School Alumni Association's Fund-raising Performance for New School Building for its Alma Mater*). As Chiu Wing-kai and Lui Tai-lok write:

12. Ibid., Li Men. "ji xianggang zhongyuan juyishe" ("On the Zhongyuan Drama Club in Hong Kong"): 43.

In the past (roughly referring to 1950 to 1978), the "left-wing" was an almost entirely autonomous and self-sufficient social system. This system had its own schools, enterprises that were active in different fields, newspapers, cultural institutions and organisations, neighbourhood organisations, labour unions, business associations, and sports organisations. Basically, it had the capability to operate independently from the mainstream system established by the colonial government.¹³

From the late 1940s to the 1950s, the HYC, the HKCRA, the Zhongyuan Drama Club and the Hon Wah Middle School introduced dance activities from the Mainland to Hong Kong. The propagation of dance in left-wing organisations, particularly that of Chinese folk dance and ethnic dance, was testimony to the advantages of such autonomy. It allowed Chinese culture, which was suppressed during the colonial era, to be diffused widely and to develop in the left-wing circle.

13. Chiu Wing-kai, Lui Tai-lok. Above n 5, 6.

Beyond the left-wing Influences from right-wing forces?

Apart from left-wing organisations, were there other organisations that held dance activities in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s? As Hong Kong's literary circle was marked by the "left-right divide" at the time, what about dance? Was it influenced by the "Dollar culture/the greenback culture"? Liu Denhan writes:

With the "anti-China" policy in place after the outbreak of the Korean War, the "greenback culture" was a cultural initiative adopted by the US, as the country included Hong Kong in its overall strategic objective of "preventing the southward migration of the forces of Communism". The goal was to attack Communism and promote American culture. The main mode of operation was the founding of presses and publications sponsored by the Asia Foundation, which was backed by the US.¹⁴

14. Liu Danhen ed. "*dangdai xianggang wenxue fazhan de lishi jin Cheng he wenhua beijing*" ("The history and cultural background of the development of contemporary Hong Kong literature") in *xianggang wenxueshi (The History of Hong Kong Literature)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Writers Publishing House): 168.

In his discussion of the development of Hong Kong literature, Wong Wai-leung writes:

... *Everyman's Literature* and *The Chinese Student Weekly* were founded in 1952. The two publications were backed by "the Dollar"... *The Chinese Student Weekly* was an inter-disciplinary publication, with literary writing, translation and critique taking up a substantial portion of the content.... *The Chinese Student Weekly* is a significant publication in the history of Hong Kong literature. Many of the writers who were born or grew up in Hong Kong in the 1940s and 1950s were directly or indirectly nurtured by it.¹⁵

The Chinese Student Weekly was an important publication in the 1950s and 1960s. The weekly set up interest groups for its readers, including the folk dance unit, drama unit and the choir. The teacher of the folk dance

15. Wong Wai-leung. "*xianggang wenxue de fazhan*" ("*The development of Hong Kong literature*") in Wang Gengwu ed. *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives (Vol.2)* (Expanded Edition) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing [Hong Kong] Ltd., 2017): 611, 614.

unit was Zhen Muzhen. In 1964, Kong Chun-wah published the book *zenyang tiao tufengwu?* (*How to Dance Folk Dance?*) under the penname of “Lok Bat-pei”, and had seven articles about folk dance published in *The Chinese Student Weekly*.¹⁶ The weekly’s folk dance unit was among the earliest folk dance groups. Yeung Wai-kui mentioned that he studied Taiwanese aboriginal dance with a Taiwanese teacher there. As a product of “the Dollar culture”, the dances practised [at the weekly’s folk dance unit] were not supposed to be dances from China. Were they intended to counter the dance activities of left-wing organisations? After *The Chinese Student Weekly* ceased publication in 1967, the members of the dance unit formed the Budlet Folk Dance Club.

However, according to Leung Shing-on, the earliest folk dance activities in Hong Kong were the ones held by the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong:

On 6 November 1918, the YMCA’s “Youth Division” (age 19 or below) organised a fun day that included dance activities. The

16. Leung Shing-on. *History of Folk Dancing in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co., 2002): 39.

YMCA’s Kowloon Centre was built in the 1930s, and it was later renovated. The Fong Yuen Club, the first folk dance group in Hong Kong, originated there at a later time. The venue was also one of cradles of folk dance in Hong Kong.¹⁷

... In 1958, YMCA held a folk dance workshop taught by American educator Ricky Holden. It was the first time a folk dance activity and a folk dance educator were introduced at an open event in Hong Kong. The dances taught included: the rain dance, Shibolet Basadeh, David Melech, Karobushka, double clap polka, and others.¹⁸

... In 1958, [the YMCA] planned to set up the Fong Yuen Club, the first Chinese-run folk dance club in Hong Kong. In 1959, the YMCA Fong Yuen Club was officially established. The club was named “Fong Yuen” [“square” and “circle” in Cantonese] as most of the dances taught at the club were from the US and the UK,

17. Ibid., 20.

18. Ibid., 21.

and they were arranged in square and circle forms. In terms of combination, most of them were duets.¹⁹

As the services of the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong were targeted at the general public and folk dance was a relatively accessible dance genre, the dance activities of the organisation held a certain appeal to the youth. In the meantime, there were also folk dance activities in high society. After arriving in Hong Kong in 1954, Joan Campbell and her husband attended the Monday Night Social Dancing at the Hong Kong Highlanders. The event drew 40 to 50 participants each time, including the Brits, Scots, Germans, other Europeans and Chinese. As Joan Campbell described, the event was more of a social gathering than a dance activity, and it did not require any dance technique. In May 1960, the Hong Kong University Students' Union Folk Dance Club was established, and Joan Campbell was invited to be an advisor for the society.

As for ballet, Florence Mo-han Aw mentioned in her interview that Kenneth Ore, Walter Chan and Yu Dongsheng (all of whom were in the

19. Ibid., 22.

HYC's choreography unit) studied at Azalea Reynolds's ballet school. Stephen Kwok and Ng Sai-fun studied at the Carol Bateman School of Dancing. They were both early ballet schools, and the girls who studied ballet all came from affluent families. Due to the lack of male ballet students, Stephen Kwok and Ng Sai-fun had the opportunity to attend classes for free, and they were among the first male ballet dancers in the city. In the 1960s, there were only five ballet studios in Hong Kong, all of which were run by expatriates. Stephen Kwok and Jean M. Wong founded the first Chinese-run ballet studio in Hong Kong in which Hong Kong students were enrolled. While tuition fee at the studio were lower than that at the expatriate-run ones, it was not affordable for the general public, and the students all came from the upper class.

The above is an overview of the dance activities of non-left-wing organisations in the 1950s and 1960s. Apart from *The Chinese Student Weekly's* associations with "the Dollar culture", it is not possible for us to conclude if there was any political agenda behind the dance activities of other organisations like the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong, since the project team was not able to contact

the persons in charge or have in-depth conversations with the participants. Furthermore, one cannot simply define the “non-left-wing” as the “right-wing”, and it is not possible to discern whether there were two opposing forces at work. However, it is evident that dance lovers of the time were free to study dance at different organisations. The aforementioned “left-right divide” did not seem pronounced in the dance scene. Speaking of divide, it manifested in the dimension of social class, where expatriate-founded ballet schools were extremely expensive and unaffordable for the general public. The only exceptions were, as Stephen Kwok and Ng Sai-fun mentioned in their interviews, male learners who had acquired a certain foundation in dance and who were willing to study ballet and who had the opportunity to do it for free, since there were few male learners of ballet at the time. For members of the public who wished to learn folk dance or ballet, community organisations that were “left-wing” or “non-left-wing” were the few available options in those days.

Dance in the eyes of the colonial government

As previously mentioned, the conflicts between the CPC and the KMT forces in Hong Kong intensified after 1949. The colonial government

did not ease its surveillance of the left-wing, and even stepped up its suppression of the camp.

Stephen Kwok mentioned in his interview that “[to] avoid getting anyone into trouble, the names of the performers and staff were not printed in the house programme ... and most of the staff names listed were fake names.” He also noted that when the HKCRA invited the Chinese Folk Artists to perform in Hong Kong in 1957, the government attempted to impede the troupe’s visit to Hong Kong. In *xianggang zuopai douzheng shi* (*The History of the Left-wing Struggle in Hong Kong*), Zhou Yi writes: “In June 1956, the Chinese Manufacturers’ Association invited the Chinese Folk Artists headed by Ouyang Shang to perform in Hong Kong. The troupe presented a diverse programme with dance performances including *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*, *The Lotus Dance*, *The Lion Dance*, and *The Fan Dance*, etc....”²⁰ The Chinese Manufacturers’ Association and the HKCRA were founded by the same group of people. Percy Chan

20. 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): 186-187.

was the HKCRA's Chairman from the fourth term through the 28th term (around 1953 to 1977) of the chairmanship; as a lawyer, he took up the role of mediator with the government. Stephen Kwok said the troupe's visit to Hong Kong for performance was only made possible by Percy Chan's conciliation.

It is also mentioned in *xianggang zuopai douzheng shi* (*The History of the Left-Wing Conflicts in Hong Kong*) that:

[In] November 1936, the China Arts Troupe visited Hong Kong for performance. Tibetan dance artist Oumijiacan was to perform a solo. The note on the work was as follows: (In summary), this dance depicts a liberated farm slave who takes care of his newborn lambs, and it is an ode to his new life. That was the synopsis of the work when the troupe performed it in Japan. As it turned out, the Tibetan "liberated farm slave" was a sensitive term. The programme was banned, "as a matter of course".²¹

The colonial government kept a close watch on the ideologies being

21. Ibid., 187.

diffused through Chinese dance. Yeung Wai-kui said: "The Hong Kong government was extremely sensitive, and 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." Cheng Wai-yung noted that in around 1953 or 1954, the Hon Wah Middle School was to present a teacher-parent meeting performance, and it had to file a recording with the police prior to the event. The Ten-school Sports Day organised by several schools with a patriotic stance was later cancelled, because the event permit was not granted by the authorities. Zhou Yi also notes that:

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 Chau, 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” ... As the Great Leap Forward campaign for the development of industry and agriculture was launched in the Mainland in 1958, there were certain programmes in the performance that alluded to the achievements of the Great Leap Forward.... The *Dragon Dance* was a mix of sports and dance. Besides the dragon, it featured the waist drums, big flags and the lantern dance. Amidst the thunderous drumming and the sea of flags, a 20-*zhang* long giant dragon came flying. It leapt over the two-*zhang* high leap door and flew ferociously. There were 146 performers.²²

Apart from suppressing the left-wing organisations, the colonial government also took notice of the popularity of their dance activities. The HKCRA’s *zhongguo yinyue wudao* (*Chinese Music and Dance*), which was held at the Emperor Theatre in North Point in 1956, was attended by a 1,000-strong audience. The HYC’s dance performances were often sold out. The Chinese Folk Artists and the China Arts Troupe visited

22. *Ibid.*, 181-182.

Hong Kong for performance in 1956 and 1963 respectively. Even Lau Siu-ming, who was not from the left-wing camp, said the performances were eye-opening for him, and he had never seen such a dazzling showcase of Chinese dance.

As the colonial government realised the influence of dance activities, the inauguration of the Schools Dance Festival in 1965, which was supported by the government, could be considered as a response to that. According to *Hong Kong Dance History*:

[It] was initiated by Angus Campbell, Senior Education Officer of Education Department, with Education Officer Betty Mair and Physical Education Inspector Lee Chan Po-chi being in charge of its planning. Ballet teachers including Joan Campbell, Stephen Kwok, Jean M. Wong and Lau Siu-ming were invited to serve as advisors and judges. It saw the launch of the inaugural competition-based “Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival”, commonly known as the “Schools Dance Competition”.²³

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

At the beginning, the competition was only open to government schools, and competition entries were all Western folk dance. It was only in 1966 that the “Oriental Dance” category was introduced. Stephen Kwok debated the name “Oriental Dance” with the government. It turned out that the government had to avoid the name “Chinese Dance”—both “China” and “Chinese” were sensitive words.

Dance in the political vortex

As a political tool, the dance activities of left-wing organisations were extremely vibrant in the 1950s and 1960s. The dance styles being practised were mainly Chinese folk dance and ethnic dance. From community dance to stage productions, there were elements of united front work to some of the works. However, there was not any notable interference on the artistic level. For instance, as Florence Mo-han Aw recalled, the early dance works of the HYC enjoyed a great deal of creative freedom.

However, the HYC went through major changes after Lu Shouxiang joined the club in 1962 and advocated the study of Mao Zedong’s *Talk at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*. The notion that “the arts must be

integrated with industry, farming and the military, and the arts must serve the proletariat” became the core ideology of left-wing arts and cultural practitioners, and their works embodied a distinct class perspective. For instance, *Wind and Rain at Dawn* by Yeung Wai-kui, and the ballet work by Kenneth Ore that was set to the music *Red Lilies Crimson and Bright*, both symbolised “the return to [our] ethnicity”. During the 1967 Riots, the HYC ceased all its activities.²⁴ Ng Sai-fun, who worked for a left-wing film company, mentioned in his interview that both the audiences for the company’s film and its output declined. There was even a period when united front work was the sole agenda for film production, and audience appreciation ceased to be a consideration.

The Cultural Revolution broke out in the Mainland in the 1960s. It indirectly sparked off the 1967 Riots, and led to a gradual change in what Hong Kong people thought of the left-wing and China. In her early days in Hong Kong, Lorita Leung felt that some locals were scornful of those who came from the Mainland. In the course of her choreography for

24. The situation of the HYC after the 1967 Riots is also covered in the feature interview of Florence Mo-han Aw in this publication.

film and TV, she received comments such as “Go easy on the Chinese-ness” and that there should be more of a modern feel to the dance. This demonstrated the negative perceptions that existed of “Chinese dance” in the mainstream media of the time: Chinese dance came from China, and it simply felt a little out-dated. In his interview, Lau Siu-ming also spoke of his serving as a judge for the Schools Dance Festival. One year, he awarded the first prize to a school that performed a work of Yunnan dance; he was called a “leftist” by the other judges. Although these were only scattered incidents and impressions, they reflected how dance was easily labelled in certain moments in that era. Dance and politics were intertwined, and the artistic value of dance was overlooked.

Like other art forms, dance is inevitably used to serve politics. However, dance differs from other art forms like literature, drama and film in that it embodies a certain degree of ambiguity, as it is not confined by language. That makes it easier for dance to navigate politics. Looking back on this period of history, one sees that ballet and folk dance featured in the events of different camps. It was only “Chinese dance”, which refers to Chinese folk dance and Chinese ethnic dance in this context, that came

to represent a distinct stance. It featured almost exclusively at “left-wing” organisations.

Of course, the dancers of that era might simply have loved dance. After all, there were few places offering opportunities to study dance at the time, and [the dancers] would not pay too much attention to whether they were left-wing or right-wing. It would also be unfair to take a simplistic view on this matter and attach political labels to these dancers.

According to the accounts by our pioneers in dance, there were no dance or dance materials in Hong Kong in the 1950s. Due to the close connections between left-wing organisations and the Mainland, however, the seeds of dance travelled southwards, while some people from Hong Kong travelled north for learning. These exchanges between the south and the north brought “Chinese dance” to Hong Kong. Left-wing organisations made significant contributions to the development of “Chinese dance” in the city. A retrospective look at this period of history, however, reveals that dance was inevitably caught up in the vortex of politics. The development of the HYC in the 1950s and 1960s is a prime example. As for dance organisations from the “non-left-wing” camp, one may infer from

historical sources that they were active in promoting Western folk dance. It is a pity that our project team was not able to contact the important figures involved, and therefore did not have sufficient information to make analysis. Was there ever a “left-right divide” in dance, as was the case in literature or film? Is it possible to discuss the dance unit of *The Chinese Student Weekly*, which was a product of the “Dollar culture”, and the HYC, another student organisation, in the same context? Was the inauguration of the Schools Dance Festival entirely driven by political considerations? It will require further research to find the answers to these questions.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

Bibliography

Cheung, Ping-kuen, Hoyan, Hang-fung eds. *A Narrative History of Hong Kong Drama from the Thirties to the Sixties* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Theatre Works, Shaw Run Run Hall of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2001).

Guangdong Drama Research Society's editorial committee for *Lihen* ed. *Lihen—zhongyuan juyishe de zhandou lichen (Lihen—the Battles Fought by the Zhongyuan Drama Club)* (Guangdong: Guangdong Drama Research Society).

Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference. *Hong Kong Dance History* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2000).

Leung, Shing-on. *History of Folk Dancing in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co., 2002).

Liu, Danhen ed. *xianggang wenxueshi (The History of Hong Kong Literature)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Writers Publishing House): 168.

Liu, Shuyong ed. *A Brief History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing [Hong Kong] Ltd., 1988).

Szeto, Wah. *dajiang dongqu: situ hua huiyi lu (To the East the River Flows: The Memoir of Szeto Wah)* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press [China] Ltd., 2011).

Wang, Gengwu ed. *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives (Vol.1)* (Expanded Edition) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing [Hong Kong] Ltd., 2017).

—. *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives (Vol.2)* (Expanded Edition) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing [Hong Kong] Ltd., 2017).

Wong, Yin-ping. “‘nanlai nanguo kaiwei qian?’—cong wushi niandaichu xianggang de nanminchao tando zai xianggang wentan de shengcun xingtai” (“‘Would we have migrated southward just for money?’—From the refugee waves to Hong Kong in the early 1950s to the lives of southbound intellectuals in Hong Kong’s literary circle”) in *Literary Century*, vol.4, issue 4, no.37 (April 2004): 51-54.

Zhou, Yi. *xianggang zuopai douzheng shi (The History of the Left-wing Struggle in Hong Kong)* (Fourth Edition) (Hong Kong: Lee Shun Publishing House, 2009).