

**WHEN HARD WORK AND
OPPORTUNITY MEET**

Ringo Chan



Ringo Chan (1960–2016) was not among the ten interviewees of the “Research Project—Oral History of Hong Kong Dance Development” as he only became a member of the dance sector at a later stage. The content of this section has been transcribed from a conversation the project team had with Chan in 2016, when he was consulted on the possible line-up of interviewees. Chan passed away a few months afterwards. As our tribute to Chan’s three decades of contribution to Hong Kong dance, this conversation is featured in this publication.

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Location: CCDC Dance Centre

Recorded and noted by: Joanna Lee Hoi-yin

The start of Chan's dance journey dated back to his days as a Secondary 1 student at the Bishop Hall Jubilee School (Jubilee). In the early 1970s, the Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival¹ was one of the most participated-in events among local schools. The actively participating schools were divided into two camps. One was traditional left-wing schools such as Pui Kiu Middle School and Hon Wah Middle School (now Hon Wah College).

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

The other was a much smaller camp of several “centre” schools that were neither left-wing nor right-wing, like Jubilee, which Chan attended, and Mansfield College. In the Western dance categories, Kowloon Technical School was a top performer.

From soccer player to dancer

While Chan won many accolades in dance competitions, it was pure coincidence that he took up dance: “When I was in Secondary 1, I joined the track team and soccer team. It just so happened that there was a ‘Thousand People Performance’ in the Festival of Hong Kong 1973 organised by the government, and Ms Lau Shuk-ming from Jubilee (who was my first dance teacher) was in charge of the choreography. As it involved a large number of performers, Ms Lau did not have time to train every one of them. She figured the more efficient way would be to train up a group of elites, who would then train the others. The absence of male members in the dance team, however, posed another challenge. She believed the boys in the soccer team were agile in their movement, so she got us to learn dance. The ‘Thousand People Performance’ was

actually a Taiwanese aboriginal dance routine, and the dance style was chosen probably because Ms Lau was married to a Taiwanese. The British Hong Kong government had closer ties to Taiwan at the time, so it did not bother them that we were learning Taiwanese dance. I thought the Festival of Hong Kong was a stint in dance for me, but it turned out to be a beginning.”

The outstanding achievement of left-wing schools in dance had much to do with the high calibre of their teachers. After the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, contact between Hong Kong and the Mainland broke down almost entirely. At the time, Chinese dance training was not yet established in Hong Kong; there were only a few proper Chinese dance teachers from Beijing who were alumni of the then *Beijing huaqiao daxue* (the Beijing Overseas Chinese University),² such as Hui Sik-kam, Cheng Shu-ching and Lau So-kam, all of whom taught at left-wing schools after they moved to Hong Kong. Intensive training was another reason. At the

2. The activities of the Department of Arts, *huaqiao daxue* (the Overseas Chinese University) are also covered in the feature interview of Lau So-kam in this publication.

left-wing schools, students who had been selected for dance training might be exempted from classes and they could focus on dancing. This level of time commitment far exceeded what was possible for students like Chan, who were only able to study dance in after-school hours. After graduation, students of left-wing schools could accept job postings assigned by the Communist Party of China, so they faced much less pressure in terms of handling public examinations.

In the 1970s, left-wing schools in Hong Kong formed their own clique and had little contact with other schools. They were also considered old-fashioned by non-left-wing schools. In addition, the left-wing had become marginalised after the social movement in 1967, and students from centre schools rarely had any contact with left-wing schools. Yet nothing in the world is too difficult for the one who sets his mind on it. When Chan took part in the Schools Dance Festival later, he saw the excellent techniques of students from left-wing schools, and he wished to learn from them. The students from left-wing schools were happy to expand their network, so they invited Chan to join their dance class. Therefore, Chan took dance lessons at Hon Wah Middle School on Saturdays and Sundays without his

parents' knowledge, where he met Hui Sik-kam and others. He also met Mui Cheuk-yin at the Fukien Athletic Club later.

Chatting during breaks in dance classes, Chan and the students from left-wing schools at times talked about China. In an era when China remained closed to the world, his impression of the country was woven from fragments of these conversations. His classmates from the dance class gave him free tickets to Sunday morning screenings at Sunbeam Theatre, and there he watched many films such as *The Red Detachment of Women*, *Shajiabang*,³ and the *Legend of Tianyun Mountain*.⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong society was highly stratified. According to Chan's observations, families who sent their daughters to ballet classes then were not only affluent, but renowned families of intellectuals. Their family lineages hailed from the UK or Shanghai, and

3. According to research findings, the film *Shajiabang* which Ringo Chan referred to may be the Cantonese opera film *Shajiabang* from China, which was released in 1974.

4. According to research findings, the film *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* directed by Xie Jin was released in 1980.

they were completely different from the early residents of Hong Kong who had come from Guangdong. In those days, Chinese dance was bolstered by a solid and extensive network, and it had no contact with the ballet circle. While ballet practitioners had the resources to introduce ballet to a wider public, there was an emphasis on exclusivity, or even a tendency to narrow down the ballet circle to maintain the purity of the dance form. The Chinese dance circle was not divided among different dance styles, and the development of Chinese dance was mainly supported by left-wing organisations. However, Chan believed those dance teachers who moved from the Mainland to Hong Kong, and especially those who had been Chinese living overseas, did not come with any political mission when they entered the city's dance circle in the early 1970s. They rarely spoke of what was happening in the Mainland. When tension in China had eased, the Beijing Dance Academy, the China Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble and the National Ballet of China started touring overseas. They also visited Hong Kong and brought higher quality dance shows to the city. The right-wing camp had a weaker presence in Hong Kong at the time, and the Kuomintang did not invest a lot of resources in arts and culture. What left a deeper mark on Chan was that under the lead of his

Taiwanese aboriginal dance teacher Ms Lau, he and his classmates took part in the *Piu Sik* (Floating Colour) parade in Yuen Long a few years in a row. He recalled there were “Blue Sky, White Sun, and a Wholly Red Earth” flags flying across the venue. His teacher reminded him not to speak of the performance with anyone at school.

Dance was highly valued during the Cultural Revolution, which had much to do with the preferences of the country’s leaders. Dancers enjoyed high social status, and some even attained positions of power. In light of this, left-wing organisations in Hong Kong sought to use dance as a tool of united front work, and their expertise was Chinese dance. However, Hong Kong was not under the sway of the Cultural Revolution, and Western pop music (like The Beatles, and associated dance styles like the twist and go-go dancing) was the craze among local youths. As film stars like Connie Chan and Josephine Siao performed these dance styles in films, popular Western dance styles further took hold in Hong Kong society.

Opportunities to become a professional dancer

Chan’s achievements in various dance competitions paved the way for his career as a professional dancer. After one win in a competition, Jean M. Wong asked him if he wanted to learn ballet. Chan was eager to fulfil the dream which had been unattainable because of financial constraints. He believed “[he] only got to truly know ballet under the guidance of Jean M. Wong”. As a student at the Jean M. Wong School of Ballet, he became a member of the Hong Kong Ballet Group (HKBG). As he described, he had received “dance training at the ‘left-wing, centre and right-wing’ schools”.

Chan was one of the few male students of Jean M. Wong. As the ratio of male students was too low, Jean M. Wong set up a special scholarship for male students. There were more than a dozen other students in Chan’s class. In those days, only affluent families were able to afford ballet tuition, and scholarship students were “poor students” in the eyes of their classmates. Chan lived in Kowloon and attended the Kowloon branch of the ballet school, where all his female classmates were students of famous

schools in Kowloon Tong. To avoid being looked down upon, Chan would take the long bus ride to go to the Hong Kong branch on Leighton Road for his lessons. While he had a tuition waiver and travel allowance for taking part in the school's performances, he had to pay for his ballet shoes and costumes. To cover the expenses, he worked as a part-time home tutor. He recalled the tights and shoes were expensive; a pair of ballet shoes were priced at HK\$30, when a meal cost only HK\$1 at the time. Chan's father was displeased with him learning dance, while his mother doted on him and let him pursue his passion (Plates 1 and 2). A rebellious spirit, Chan continued his dance study despite his father's objection. Apart from financial considerations, his father's attitude was probably shaped by the fact that ballet was out of reach for the working class in those days. Chan said he only realised there was another social class than the one he came from when he attended the ballet school. He grew up in a public housing estate and went to a regular secondary school. Even if some of his classmates might have come from wealthier families, there was no one who came from a distinguished background. From Jean M. Wong's students, he saw that the divide between social classes was marked by taste as well as money.

Plate 1: Ringo Chan (left) in his school days.
Photo courtesy of Peony Wong.



To a large extent, such opportunities for individual development as that afforded by the Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival stemmed from the enthusiasm for the competition among local schools. For most government and private schools that were not traditional famous schools, success in the Schools Dance Festival and the Schools Music Festival was a shortcut to enhancing their reputation. Winning accolades in the competitions meant favourable attention from the Education Department (now the Education Bureau). After Jubilee's win in the Schools Dance Festival, representatives from the Education Department visited the school for talent scouting, which gave Chan the opportunity to join the Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team (the Schools Dance Team). At the time there was no professional dance company in Hong Kong, and the Schools Dance Team represented Hong Kong in a number of overseas performances, such as expos. In 1976, the Schools Dance Team represented Hong Kong and performed in the International Festival of Youth Orchestras and Performing Arts in London and Aberdeen in the UK (Plates 3 and 4). As the delegation was about to set off, the then Hong Kong Governor MacLehose bid them farewell and shook hands with each troupe member. Cheung Man-ye from Radio Television Hong Kong led a

Plate 2: Ringo Chan (top) in his school days.
Photo courtesy of Peony Wong.



production crew to stay in the UK for one month to cover the delegation's visit. Chan lamented that while the City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC) tours overseas frequently, the government puts little value on this government-funded dance company, which pales in comparison to how things were back in the days.

As a member of the Schools Dance Team in 1976, Chan believed one of the reasons for the team's popularity in the UK might have been the sense of curiosity about "China" among foreigners. As he watched other troupes' performances and training, he could see the foreign troupes were technically more proficient than the Hong Kong students (Plates 5, 6 and 7). Although Chan had already studied ballet with Jean M. Wong for over a year and was versed in the fundamentals, he was in awe of the skills of the foreign troupes. They opened his eyes to vast possibilities of dance techniques that he had never envisaged. Upon returning to Hong Kong from the UK, he committed himself to dance and took classes in the evening. In 1976, no one in Hong Kong considered dance as a possible profession, and Chan was no exception. He had a day job as a designer and devoted almost all his spare time to dance. Looking back, he felt that

Plate 3: The front and back covers of the Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team booklet for the International Festival of Youth Orchestras and Performing Arts.



Plate 4: Ringo Chan (fourth left in the top row). Photo credit: The Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team booklet for the International Festival of Youth Orchestras and Performing Arts, p. 10.



was indeed a challenging experience. As a student of Jean M. Wong, who was a founding member of the HKBG, Chan became a member of that group and had the opportunity to take part in its large-scale performances at City Hall. As he described, the months-long training he went through in preparation for the performances was “an attempt that was closer to being a professional dancer”. While he took great pleasure in the group rehearsals, he still could not imagine becoming a professional dancer.

In the late 1970s, some government officials consulted Chan and other dance practitioners on the establishment of a professional dance company. Their questions covered various aspects, from overall direction to salary. After the outbreak of the social movement that persisted for some time in 1967, the Hong Kong government considered possible ways of using culture and leisure (mainly leisure) as a governance strategy to manage the emotional needs of the public. Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s economy was thriving; as with other prosperous cities, the people were in need of spiritual symbols. The provision of regular activities by government-funded arts and cultural organisations was one feasible option. Compared to civil servants from earlier times, the local university graduates who

Plate 5: Ringo Chan (first left in the front row) in the Mongolian folk dance *Gallop in the Steppes*, one of the performance programmes of the Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team. Photo credit: The Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team booklet for the International Festival of Youth Orchestras and Performing Arts, p. 8.



Plate 6: Ringo Chan (centre of the front row) in the classical dance *Dance of the Mythical Lance*, one of the performance programmes of the Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team. Photo credit: The Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team booklet for the International Festival of Youth Orchestras and Performing Arts, p. 14.

joined the government as administrative officers in the 1970s had more knowledge of the arts, and a greater understanding of the role of the arts in governance. The government planned to set up professional performing arts groups, including a theatre company and a classical Chinese music orchestra. In the dance circle, the group headed by Cheng Shu-ching, Hui Sik-kam and Lam Ling-ying endeavoured to become a professional performing arts organisation. To showcase its strengths to the Urban Council, the group presented the large-scale dance theatre the *Stone Girl*,⁵ which brought together Chinese dance practitioners in Hong Kong.

Even though it was beyond his wildest dreams, Ringo Chan finally became a full-time dancer. He met Helen Lai at a HKBG event, and went on to perform in a modern dance work choreographed by Lai. Later, Lai recommended Chan to Willy Tsao. Before joining the CCDC in 1980, Chan had never heard of this dance company which had only been founded one year before. The first generation of CCDC dancers included

5. The production should be the *Stone Girl* choreographed by Lau Siu-ming and presented by the Hong Kong Experimental Ballet Theatre in June 1978 (exact date unknown).



Plate 7: Ringo Chan (first right in the middle row) in the folk dance *Dance of the Red Silk*, one of the performance programmes of the Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team. Photo credit: The Hong Kong Schools Chinese Dance Team booklet for the International Festival of Youth Orchestras and Performing Arts, p. 16.

Willy Tsao, Florence Lui, Terry Chan, Wong Oi-ling, Louisa Chik and a few expatriate dancers. There were around 11 of them. After 1980, the CCDC had plans to expand the company, and Chan invited Sunny Pang to join them.

Being an early male dancer of modern dance

It was not easy to carry the identity of “an early male dancer of modern dance in Hong Kong”. Although Western folk dance had become a recognised dance form in the Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival circle, the recognition was not extended to dance genres other than folk dance. In the late 1960s, the Education Department sent a few officials to the UK to enrol in a course in “expression of feelings through movement”. After the officials returned to Hong Kong, the category “Modern Educational Dance” was incorporated into the Schools Dance Festival. In those days, most dance teachers in Hong Kong were physical education teachers. Taking into account the available resources at local schools, modern educational dance was initially part of the physical education curriculum. The teachers had no idea what modern dance was, and they enrolled in

the competition because the schools had made it their goal to win as many awards as possible. Kowloon Technical School was one of the earliest participating schools in the competition. The emergence of “modern dance” in Hong Kong revolved around these activities.

Ringo Chan believed Daryl Ries was the one who introduced modern dance as a dance form into Hong Kong. When the Hong Kong Arts Centre was founded in 1977, it endeavoured to promote the development of the contemporary arts and nurture talent in the field. In 1979, Ries came to Hong Kong from New York; she taught modern dance at the rehearsal room in the 16/F office of the building, and served as Director of the Modern Dance Center of the Hong Kong Arts Centre until 2001.⁶ Chan would go to the Hong Kong Arts Centre for rehearsals for the HKBG’s large-scale performances; as he passed by 16/F and saw Ries’s dance work, he had no clue what it was. Chan thought “modern dance”

6. In some research findings, it is stated that Ries was the Director of The Modern Dance Theatre. See the Arts Promotion Asia blog: <http://www.blogger.com/profile/11803012992849403971>. Accessed 17 November 2018. According to a few former employees of the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Ries was no longer active in the Arts Centre in the 1990s.

was something akin to “jazz dance”, as he knew nothing about authentic modern dance. Ries’s classes covered proper technique training such as the Graham Technique, which guided students to grasp the unique language and expression of modern dance.

Ries brought modern dance to Hong Kong in the early 1980s, but the public had a negative perception of male dancers. Their idea of male dancers was limited to two images: the delinquents of the 1960s, and the Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) dancers of the 1970s. Before the rise of disco, there were few platforms for dance in Hong Kong. One platform was Chinese-style nightclubs such as the Highball Nightclub in Tsim Sha Tsui; they presented Chinese-style dance performances like the fan dance or ribbon dance every evening, which the public could attend. The other was dance programmes on TV, which became a part of the public’s everyday life despite not being directly accessible to them. The then head of TVB’s dance department, Michelle Berrie, worked to bring dance to the forefront, as she choreographed a dance piece for the nightly programme *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*. The high-rating show introduced her new-style dance choreography to a mass audience; however, it also defined

the public’s imagination of dancers. One of the impressions they had was created by the Evolution Dance Company from the Philippines, which Berrie invited to Hong Kong. Hong Kong people described Evolution as a group of dancers who “wore tights, and went barefoot and topless”. This image and the comments the troupe garnered were then applied to male dancers of all dance styles other than traditional Chinese dance.

Chan quipped that since he started dancing in high school, he was used to getting “pointed remarks from people”. All his dance partners from his school days gave up dancing after graduation. After he became a professional dancer, he was not perturbed by critical views of dance from society. In the early 1980s, the CCDC presented outdoor performances every Saturday afternoon, in an attempt to bring modern dance closer to the public and break down their biases towards the art form. They continued with the endeavour for five to six years, and the Hong Kong people’s perception of modern dance began to change. Chan stayed with the company through many ups and downs until his passing.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)