

# On the Watershed, Looking Back—The Combing of the Characteristics and Achievement of Hong Kong Dance Prior to Its Professionalisation

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The time frame covered in the “Research Project—Oral History of Hong Kong Dance Development” stretches from the 1950s to right before the professionalisation of dance in Hong Kong. Among the ten interviewees visited, who were active in the local dance field at certain points in time from the 1950s to 1980s, more than one person stated that “dance did not exist in Hong Kong” before the 1950s. I am curious about that statement. Given that dance is a means of expression utilising the body, “dance” must have been in existence as far back as the human need for expression arose. It would have taken tremendous effort to ensure the absolute non-existence of dance. Can it possibly be the case that those who made that statement deny, from the perspective of how dance is imagined today, the presence of dance before they became practitioners? After the establishment of professional dance companies and The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts in the 1980s, the way dance had been practised in the 1950s and 1960s gradually moved off the centre and towards the margin. At this stage, the Hong Kong dance circle in general accepts professionalisation as the monumental turn in dance development in our city. By professionalisation, I am referring to the establishment of three professional companies between 1979 and 1984 (the Hong Kong

Ballet, the Hong Kong Dance Company, and the City Contemporary Dance Company), as well as The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. However, there has been rather limited analysis of the impact the pre-professionalisation dance ecology had on the post-professionalisation one. “Watershed” is a symbolic image of the professionalisation of dance, and my research interest is whether there has been an organic flow from one side of the watershed to the other, an investigation I undertake by looking into the venues of dance practice, societal background and identity-building, objectification of the body, and intentional and formal considerations.<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of the ease of reading, in this essay, “professionalisation” refers to the Hong Kong dance ecology after the establishment of the three professional companies and The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

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1. My involvement in dance includes being a learner, amateur performer, professional producer and critic. Dance forms I practise include Western folk dance as a student, and modern dance in my adult life. I do not possess experience in creating dance; therefore I am not capable of analysing the form and its aesthetic from the first-person perspective of a dance maker. This essay and my reading of phenomena are limited to my areas of expertise and perspective. I look forward to hearing comments from readers, and conducting further research, by myself or with fellow researchers.

“Practitioners” encompasses individuals taking up various positions in the dance ecology, including choreographers, full-time dancers and teachers.

### **The where of dance practice**

Interviewees including Stephen Kwok, Ng Sai-fun and Cheng Wai-yung recalled that, in the 1950s, most dance activities in Hong Kong took place in living spaces such as schools, rooftops, and the countryside. Ballet, being an exception, took place in dance studios. Kwok said that young people in those days liked to dance during picnics, and Liang Lun and Ni Lu of the Zhongyuan Drama Club rehearsed with students of Hon Wah Middle School (now Hon Wah College) on the rooftop adjacent to residential buildings. When the Hok Yau Club was first established, its rehearsals took place on rooftops and in warehouses; dance classes were given in the staff lounge by Cheng Wai-yung, and on the rooftop of the *Ta Kung Pao* office by Yeung Wai-kui. By referencing the difference between location, locale and place<sup>2</sup> suggested by contemporary humanistic

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2. See writings by Auge M., Seamon D., and Casey E.

geographers, one sees that even though there existed a passive relationship between dance practice and venues—by this I mean that practitioners did not choose to practice dance in living space because of artistic reasons, but they had to conform to options available to them as a result of the economic situation—the venues that ended up being used were not necessarily neutral, but charged with identities. They were places in which societal relationships could be established. A close tie with the public inevitably resulted when dance was practised in living space. Users of such spaces, choosing to participate in, view or reject the activities, had to actively make a decision as to how to relate themselves to dance. They could not exclude dance entirely from their lives. At those times, dance, despite itself, became one form of “public art” which took place in public settings (such as streets, squares, parks, and commercial establishments). While not suggesting that one should consider such dance from the contemporary framework of community art, it was something visible to the public. When the interviewees stressed the collective nature of dance, it became clear to us that they felt themselves responsible for what the public should see, even though they did not necessarily consider dance a manifestation of ideology. This sense of responsibility influenced their

views on the nature and content of dance. That was particularly true for practitioners coming to Hong Kong from Mainland China. A number of them had been influenced by Mao Zedong’s *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*. They believed that arts and culture (including dance) should “serve the masses”, and that dance should fulfil the missions of publicity, education, and solidification, among other purposes.

Dance was widely practiced in schools. Schools as disciplined spaces draw one’s attention to dance and its application in collective life. The emphasis on rationalism in modern thinking sees the regulation of the body-in-action as a way to re-educate the mind—an acceptable component of education. The first and second Hong Kong School Dance Festivals took place at the Clementi Secondary School and the Hong Kong Sze Yap Commercial and Industrial Association Wong Tai Shan Memorial College respectively. This choice of venue could be read as a recognition of schools as proper venues for dance by the government. Dance in school was dance in the collective sense, and in a disciplined space: The group came before the individual, orders were given and obeyed, and dance adhered to the academic timetable. Cheng Wai-yung explicitly expressed

that when it comes to dance, the group overrides the individual. Body and space connect in a reciprocal relationship of the perception of the other. A body indoctrinated with ideology and a space purposefully deployed topple the neutrality of the body-space relationship. Continuous repetition of (mis)guided perceptions handed down from one generation to the next eventually leaves its mark on one's value judgment. Even now, dance is more likely to take place in controlled spaces (such as schools, dance studios, and theatres); practitioners may negatively evaluate, a priori, dance happening in living space. My experience as a producer has shown me that professionally trained or professionally affiliated choreographers generally prefer to perform in theatres. When they agree to perform outdoors, they may be motivated by reasons other than artistic pursuits—"audience development" for example. The same goes for the audience who allow the evaluation of the dance aesthetics<sup>3</sup> to be led by the purpose of the space itself, for example, all performances taking place inside "proper theatres" are "artistic creations", whereas performances

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3. "Aesthetics" in this essay does not refer to the contemplation of beauty in the discipline of philosophy. It loosely refers to the concept and operation of movement language, the form of the presentation/representation, the design of the performer-audience relationship, and the use of the body.

given in outdoor piazzas should be "elderly- and children-friendly". In the era of pre-professionalisation, dances performed in outdoor venues and festive parades were pretty much replicas of what they would have been in controlled spaces. The role of the space itself in dance creation was unobvious. Post-professionalisation, Hong Kong dance makers showed greater sensitivity towards the placement and accumulation of bodies, and the politicisation of movements and their relation to space. "Environmental dance" was popular at one point after the millennium. However, there has not been rigorous resistance to or subversion of the existing social order. Hong Kong performance artists, whose bodies are their art medium, have been comparatively more aggressive in this aspect.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the public encountered theatricalised dance in theatre (*The Luminous Pearl* choreographed by Cheng Wai-yung was staged at the King's Theatre), and in restaurants (performances in the Guangzhou Restaurant and the Kam Ling Restaurant before and after National Day), among others. The architectural concept of Hong Kong City Hall inaugurated in 1962 was to foster a closer connection with the public compared to the old City Hall built in the 1930s. However, the

facility's behavioural etiquette and ticket price structure, which had taken its cue from Western theatres, demanded time and monetary capital of the public for their admission to this space where they could encounter dance. The building itself delineated social classes. Matthew Turner wrote that "this sort of sentimental colonialism may have appealed to a small elite of patrician families, society notables and university-educated civil servants, but to the majority of Hong Kong's refugee-swollen population, City Hall was as irrelevant as the British themselves".<sup>4</sup> An official publication from the City Hall reported that "the first performance art programmes presented by the Urban Council were a series of lunch concerts. Ticket price was 50 cents. Later on lunch concerts also took place on Sundays and the ticket price was merely \$1. Response was heated".<sup>5</sup> The population was three million in 1962, 20% of which was under the age of 20. An average worker made HK\$150 to HK\$300 per month, skilled workers between HK\$400 and HK\$1000.<sup>6</sup> It was rather unlikely that an average

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4. Matthew Turner. "60s/90s: Dissolving the People" in *Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003): 24-50.

5. John Thompson. *A Celebration of Hong Kong Artists — City Hall Silver Jubilee. 16th October to 4th November, 1987* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1987): 16.

6. See the *Master Insight* website: <http://www.master-insight.com/香港戰後工業百花齊放> Accessed 14 August 2017.

worker would be able to attend lunch concerts not only because of schedule conflicts, but because a significant percent of his month's wages would be consumed should he bring a spouse and a couple of children along. What was more important: unfamiliar forms of spiritual gratification or savings for food and shelter? Access to theatre had been deployed for the rationalisation of governance, rendering some people excluded from the space in which dance happened. Theatre-centric standards established dance within theatres as more artistic and more suited to identity building. Dance outside of theatres was therefore comparatively "communal", "amateurish", "of lower artistic standard".

The discreetness of ballet spaces contributed to the dance's image of unattainability. Both Stephen Kwok and Joan Campbell mentioned that, in the 1950s and 1960s, it took money and personal relationships for Chinese to gain access to the Royal Academy of Dance curriculum. Practised in dance studios and performed in theatres, ballet was unattainable for the general public. The colonial government did not hurry to narrow the gap between ballet and the public. On the contrary, it might have tried to imply the superiority of sovereign culture by

solidifying ballet's strangeness to the public. Undoubtedly it was a successful tactic. More ballet schools were opened in Hong Kong by the 1970s when overseas-trained Chinese dancers returned to Hong Kong, and the general income level rose. Whether the children (mostly girls) took ballet classes or not was read as an indicator of family income and cultural standards. Such a notion carried through to after the millennium and only changed as ballet was more and more widely practised in the community.

Julie Ng and Hong Kong Ballet For All performed in a plethora of living spaces during the 1970s. None of the interviewees mentioned that venue selection had been considered a means to connect with the public. Admittedly they might not have had the financial resources required for performing in larger theatres, yet they did not choose free public space. Was that a deliberate attempt to distance themselves from the public in order to highlight the difference between modern dance and mainstream dance? In a small venue with low audience capacity and a limited amount of information about the performance circulating among peers, admittance was limited to a small audience who possessed a certain

cultural and networking capital. A decade later, the City Contemporary Dance Company involving itself in modern dance practice, attempted to connect dance with the public by performing in public spaces. Body placement on locations has the potential to convert locations into places, resisting the existing social order and inquiring into the rationale of the spatial power structure.

Professional dance companies set up between 1979 and 1981 were supported by the colonial government. Their criteria for the arts was tinted with a touch of colonial social classification. These companies devoted more creative effort to theatre performances than those in outdoor venues. Then came capitalist thinking which values rational bodies and applies restrictions to how and where the body could be displayed. Outdoor dance events in recent years have been labelled as “going into the community”, suggesting the superiority of professional practitioners educating the public from the top down—the professional practitioners are the privileged ones going out into the public, instead of being members of the public themselves. Comparing this to how the public had initiated the display of their bodies in the 1950s, one sees the difference

in body-society relationship between then and now. While seemingly a mode of dance practice, outdoor performance illuminated the power structure—the emphasis on the ownership of “fine arts” by the sovereign and capitalists, appreciation of which required intelligence and knowledge not possessed by manual labourers. The public therefore needed education in aesthetics and value judgments by those with access to the fine arts. Today, practitioners no longer openly claim to support, or they do not see themselves as supporting the enlightenment and solidarity purposes of dance. Yet will the space in which dance is practised and the mode in which it is conducted continue to solidify notions that are decades old?

### **The society and identity-building**

Loie Fuller<sup>7</sup> and Isadora Duncan<sup>8</sup> had advocated dance as an expression of identity and individuality as early as the 1910s and 1920s. That notion of dance, however, did not influence Hong Kong dance in the 1950s and 1960s. Collective identity remained dominant in dance expression.

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7. Loie Fuller (1862-1928), American dance artist and actress.

8. Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), American dance artist.

Take ballet as an example. In classical repertoire, dancers played certain characters, re-telling familiar stories as a means of heritage preservation. After World War II, devastated Europeans lost faith in national identity. They looked to artistic creation for individual identity building. Meanwhile, immigrants took up the lion's share of the Hong Kong population. Their sense of identity was not linked to the geography. They created dance to express their nostalgia, or they created group dance for a sense of belonging, to ease the desolation of being alone in a strange place (Hong Kong). They might even have created dance in order to protect their home culture in a city under Western sovereignty.

The 1960s was the baby boom era after the wall between Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China (CPC). Population soared, resulting in congested living conditions. How to peacefully get along with one's cohabitants was a daily trial. As much as food and shelter had been secured, if a person wanted to move up the social ladder she/he had to demonstrate her or his value for the group. The value of the self was pretty much measured by how well one fit into the larger picture. While a student at Hon Wah Middle School, Yeung Wai-kui created *yundongchang shang*

(*On the Playing Field*) a dance piece about how to help those classmates, “some of whom only concerned themselves with studying, some only with playing soccer”, and Cheng Wai-yung created *xiang canglong* (*Winning Over the Dark Blue Dragon*) a piece on managing the flood, and *Long Live the Motherland* to praise China. We may look at the latter today through a political lens, yet from our interview with Cheng, it seemed to us that her motivation to create dance was to deal with problems common to the society, wishes common to people as a whole, and the immigrants’ nostalgia for their hometowns. The 1967 Riots impacted the entire population. Citizens coming from the Mainland with a post-CPC mentality were suppressed openly by the colonial government. From the photos provided by the interviewees, one can see that dance creation in this period was geared towards group dance. There were far fewer solos and duets. One also sees stereotypical identity personification between groups of dancers and between individuals: male versus female, righteous versus evil, the leader versus the follower, the exploiter versus the exploited, and societal identity versus familial identity, among others.<sup>9</sup> Stephen Kwok described after-work dance as mostly a group dance of unified movements. One anchored her or his self-identity in the sea of group activities.

How had the colonial government responded to the community’s pursuit of identity? In the 1970s, Stephen Kwok led a delegation to the World Expo ’70 in Japan, while Lau So-kam led another one to England in the 1980s, both to perform “Chinese dance”. Those expeditions could have been regarded as a colonialist endeavour to outline the colonial identity. To demonstrate their respect to colonialist culture, Hong Kong people were invited to perform “Chinese dance” within boundaries of acceptance drawn up by the sovereign, while ballet was promoted among the British residents and the upper class in Hong Kong, and Western folk dance was promoted in schools. The practice of Chinese folk/ethnic dance as a force of resistance to colonial identity continued its way into post-professionalisation. However, the city’s Westernised lifestyle, British-style education system and export-led economic development led to the growing stylisation of Chinese folk/ethnic dance in Hong Kong. Its cultural essence eventually became detached from the actualities of daily life. A telling

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9. These dualistic relationships remind me of the “16-word mnemonic phrase” aesthetic requirement during the Cultural Revolution: “The enemy in the background, me in the foreground; the enemy dimmed, me lit; the enemy small, me big; the enemy below eye-level, me above.” See Liu Qingfeng ed. *The Cultural Revolution: Facts and Analysis* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1996): 408.



example is that, as a welcome gesture (date unknown) on behalf of Hong Kong to the crew of one French battleship, Cheng Wai-yung arranged for the students of the Po Nga Club to perform *Tibetan Dance*. What referential relationship existed between Tibet, colonised Hong Kong, and “Chinese”? The varied forms of Chinese folk/ethnic dance were gradually reduced to “Chinese dance” after professionalisation, in stark contrast to the fact that “Chinese dance” does not exist in the glossary of dance practice in China. It is but a term created by a Western-centric worldview.

Dancers in solos and duets in the 1950s were representations of genre stereotypes. The young sisters in *The Little Sisters on the Prairie*<sup>10</sup> were representation of the proletariat female. The male and female duet dancers in *Sunset Glow* were representation of the male craving for the female sex. Exploration of individual identity was limited even in solos. In those days, dance was not the means for self-actualisation—self-actualisation

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10. One could attribute Cheng’s source of inspiration to the sisters who suffered frostbite in February 1964 in Inner Mongolia, while trying to protect the herd of the production team. The two of them were later lionised as “the young heroic sisters of the grassland”. In 1975, *caoyuan ernu* (*Children of the Grassland*) was added to the list of model drama.

back then meant to establish one’s value in the community. In the 1960s, inspired by *The Butterfly Lovers*, Yeung Wai-kui created *Butterflies in the Blossoms*, shifting his exploration from communal identity to individual identity. His effort could be regarded as a critical awakening of dance as a manifestation of individual existence. His creation responded to his inner calling. He did not concern himself with following the convention; instead, he focused on the integration of dance vocabularies by “deploying both Chinese dance gestures and balletic lifting”.

Western popular dance in the 1960s and modern dance in the 1970s were direct transplants of Western forms. As Julie Ng herself stated, she did not proactively embrace Western dance because she supported its aesthetics. Rather, “Western” was equated with “progressiveness” at the time. There was not much choice left for her—Chinese cultural exports were completely lacking during the Cultural Revolution.

In the 1970s, modern dance landed in Hong Kong. Henry Man, Helen Lai and their peers started to create and perform solo dance. Imagining dance as a self-portrait became a possibility. Dance makers from this

generation onward shed the traditional and political baggage that had been present in the 1950s and 1960s and embarked on the path of rootlessness. Alongside was the rise of utilitarianism and consumerism as mainstream values. The society busied itself with profit-making and did not expect much from the exploration of identity in the arts. In 1984, the signing of the *Joint Declaration* triggered people's contemplation of identity as 1997 approached. After the millennium localism grew, and conversations about dance and identity building occurred more frequently. Dance works explored the placement of the self in identity systems but did not always challenge the legality of existing categorisations, power structures and associated cultural factors, for example, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, age, and social class.

In 1999, Stephen Kwok initiated the *hong kong dance* project. His intention was to “create dance that belongs to Hong Kong”, a conscious endeavour to search for cultural identity. This project can be regarded as self-reflection by Kwok and his fellow project participants on the topic of identity in Hong Kong dance since the 1950s.

## **Objectivisation of the body**

By “objectivisation of the body”, I propose the notion of regarding the physical body as the tool of expression (the object) commanded by the mind (the subject). Such an approach to the handling of the mind-body relationship takes its cue from the hierarchical implication of “mind-body/soul-body dualism”, which is in contrast to “bodily knowledge” in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's terms, or attention to the messages collected by our sensory organs as raw materials for making sense of the world we live in; and the differentiation between the “lived body” and the “phenomenal body” in European performance studies.

In the Hong Kong of the 1950s and 1960s, the primary requirement of a dance body was its mastering of technique. Ng Sai-fun described someone's “suitability” for dancing as being dependent on “whether they [in the feminine pronoun in Chinese] have agile joints and limbs”. As a semiotic body, coupled with the ideal “super-human body” in Russian Realism, the dance body should be healthy, energetic, adaptable to the group, slim, upright, and dynamic. American dance historian Sally Banes

wrote, “The classical body is smooth, finished, closed, and complete. In contrast to the grotesque body which is rough, unfinished, open, and full of apertures.”<sup>11</sup> The dance body was foremost the tool for technique demonstration. It enacted movement instructions from outside of itself. It was the object to which the standard was applied, the agent of the foreign will.

The path to abstraction opened up after modern dance had landed in Hong Kong, promising alternative possibilities besides the semiotic value of the body. As Lau Siu-ming pointed out, “[Dancers] can be tall or short, fat or slim, not limited by family and economic background or age. It does not require many years of training before they are qualified to perform. It is fine to be chubby.” However, beyond the form, discourse of the ontological body in Hong Kong is homogenous compared to that in Europe and Taiwan: The body is deployed as the semiotic body in most circumstances. Such discourse stability has rarely been challenged.

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11. Baner S., Harris A., Acocella J. R., & Garafola L. *Before, Between, and Beyond: Three Decades of Dance Writing* (US: Wisconsin University Press, 2007): 309.

Exploration of the body’s individuality and physicality, or deploying the body as the method, is infrequent and subdued. I propose that there exist layers of exploration yet to be embarked on in Hong Kong, including but not limited to the idea that the body is a physical composite of muscles and cells, that it is the vessel of metaphysical existence, and the agent of cultural conflicts and political ideology.

Ballet and Chinese dance have been taught to Hong Kong people since the 1950s. After professionalisation, they increased in status and gained government recognition. However, has their respective form and content allowed for the transformation of the Hong Kong body from representation to phenomenon? Does the outward-projecting, human-centric aggressiveness of ballet match the personality and lifestyle of Chinese as a race? Cheng Wai-yung, Lau So-kam, Lorita Leung and Julie Ng have been dedicated to dance education, focusing on Chinese folk and ethnic dance. They believed that one must understand the ethnic group’s culture in order to properly dance its dance. Cheng Wai-yung lamented that today’s Chinese dance learners are interested only in going up the curriculum grades but not keeping up with the cultural context. It is only

by transgressing the imitation of form and connecting it to how one lives, that movements can synchronise with consciousness and dance can evolve from craft to art.

Objectivisation of the body implies the imagination of individuality and the acceptance of gender stereotypes. It is worth mentioning that as times changed, gender politics made its mark on how the body was observed. While a few of the interviewees confirmed that there was not a wide gap between the number of male and female dance learners in Hong Kong in the 1950s, from the 1960s onwards, the growth of the female learner population drastically changed the ratio between the sexes. One could mostly see women in the class photos provided by the interviewees. The notion of “dance being a girly activity” strengthened as time went by. In the 1980s, the limited number of male learners—Ringo Chan being one of them—even sensed discrimination. One interviewee attributed the phenomenon to gender roles in society and family. The female was the object of gaze. Her movements served instructions foreign to her body. She played the role of the server and her will receded to a secondary position. In the 1960s when body contact between the sexes was regarded as

indecent, well-known female film actresses learnt from Ng Sai-fun. Could that be attributed to an internalised acceptance of male authority? Julie Ng found her dance costumes too revealing, but she did not think of asserting authority over her own body. Consumer electronics was popularised in the 1970s, liberating females from their domestic chores and turning them into a new source of labour. Readymade garments provided women with more options in terms of presenting their bodies. When Josephine Siao rose to pop idol status and her solo dances in films were highly appreciated by the public, it became possible for a woman to declare her individuality with her body placement (in a dance party, for example).

### **Creative intention**

Our project interviewees have been skill-based practitioners. They have not theorised their creative perspectives, nor have they explicitly described how they interacted with practitioners from other art genres back then. The interviews therefore did not reveal to us to what extent, if any, dance making has been influenced by other art genres. Reference to the creative background of other art genres (especially that of painting in the 1950s),

however, may provide insights into factors impacting dance making and how people imagined “truth”, “beauty”, the arts and the society.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Cai Yuanpei<sup>12</sup> proposed “replacing religion with aesthetic education”, advocating that the arts should shoulder the social mission of ethics education. In 1942, Mao Zedong’s *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art* emphasised the revolutionary responsibility of the arts. Influenced by the general atmosphere of the society and Russian Socialist Realism, the arts in the 1950s was geared towards the representation of real life. Western painting in those years in Hong Kong suggested content popularisation, namely to paint what was familiar to the public, while not completely resisting stylised presentation. We saw a similar trend in dance making: Rhythmical movements that matched the music, and standardised narratives of realistic and worldly themes made the content easy to comprehend and disseminate for educational and recreational purposes. The creative intention was to develop a sense of community.

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12. Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), modern Chinese revolutionist, educator, and politician. He was the Chief Councilor of Beijing University between 1916 and 1927.

The Human Art Club, established 1946, was an important painters’ club in the early days of Hong Kong. Member Tan Xuesheng explained that the reason for naming the club the “Human Art Club” was that “Hong Kong is a foreigner and rich men’s paradise. We from the new art movement represent the masses. There is a difference between ‘heaven’ and a ‘man’s world’” (my translation).<sup>13</sup> Referencing Tan’s description when looking at Chinese dance practice in the community, one sees how refugees from China in Hong Kong, while enduring dire living conditions, built a class of the mass with ethnic/folk dance to which they could belong, in “the foreigner and rich men’s paradise”.

Likely because of the emphasis on the social function of dance and the unavailability of an academic curriculum related to it back then, the interviewees had certain expectations on technical expertise but insisted less on the classification of genres and those respective standards. Their exploration of the dance language itself was also limited. Today’s

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13. Tan Xuesheng. “*yi zhandou zai nanfang de geming meishu tuanti—renjian huahui*” (“Remembering the revolutionary art groups who battled in the South—‘Human Art Club’”) in *Art*, Issue 2 (February 1984).

practitioners may find dance in those days lacking in rigour, yet this situation could be partially attributed, it seems, to the interviewees' dance philosophy. Lorita Leung said that there was not a precise definition of "dance" in the military song and dance troupe she was a part of. The dance spanned different genres. Leung regarded dance as "basic human rights... Everybody has the right to learn to dance... If dance is not popularised and the audience block is empty, it will not move ahead no matter how good the performance is." Yeung Wai-kui stated that "[one] cannot only take the subsidies and present arts and cultural events; she/he has to do real work to gain recognition from the community. Artists should always reflect on how to refine their work. Where lies the artist's conscience and sense of responsibility?"

*hong kong dance*, the pedagogy project initiated by Stephen Kwok, included dances titled *hejia gongji Chickabiddy* (*The Cock of the Ho's Family Chickabiddy*), *kala OK qiqiwu* (*Dance Together to the Karaoke*), *caishen dao* (*Here Comes the God of Fortune*), and *328*. The titles alone are telling regarding the influence of popular culture on the dance makers.

Dance creators entering the scene in the 1970s seemed to have transgressed the traditional and political baggage of the 1950s and 1960s. The identity of the self sprouted out of a sense of rootlessness. New works were centred on the self. An encounter with Western art was possible in the border city and port of Hong Kong, and there was a high degree of openness towards it. It could be taken as is instead of being regarded from the perspective of traditional Chinese art. Having said that, it was not obvious how Western art movements (such as Dadaism, neo-plasticism, and conceptual art) had influenced dance creation in Hong Kong. The way in which Lucinda Childs<sup>14</sup> applied a minimalistic aesthetic to dance in the US did not find its counterpart in the dance made around the same time in Hong Kong. Later on, the government crafted "East vs West" as Hong Kong's cultural discourse, which has been interpreted as referring to popular culture or pastiche for a sense of newness. The straightforward duality provided a tangible framework for public comprehension, and gradually took on the mainstream position. Knowledge compartmentalisation at institutions

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14. Lucinda Childs (1940- ), postmodern American dance artist, choreographer and actress.

blurred the role of Chinese ethnic and folk dance in contemporary dance creation in Hong Kong. The contemporarisation of Chinese dance in Hong Kong has also been progressing slowly.

The “East vs West” discourse framework probably explains why Hong Kong was represented as “Chinese dance” to foreigners and in festive events presented by the colonial government. In November 1976, the Urban Council presented the Festival of Asian Arts. Coming under the umbrella of “Performances by Hong Kong Dance Groups” at City Hall Theatre, the dance works performed included *chuan xixun* (*Spreading the Good News*) (Tibetan dance); *Rain*, and *shisan miluojiang pan* (*By the River Shisan Miluojiang*) (Chinese folk dance); *caicha* (*Picking Tea Leaves*), and *banche haozi* (*Trolley Shanty*) (Han ethnic group dance); *mutong yu kongque* (*Shepherd Boy and Peacock*) (Dai ethnic group dance); and *qing fengshou* (*Celebrating the Bumper Harvest*) (Xinjiang dance). In January 1979, Lau So-kam, Hui Sik-kam, Cheng Shu-ching created a new work titled *baojian danxin* (*Precious Sword and Sincerity*) which was staged at City Hall Recital Hall. Works performed in the same concert included *jinai wu* (*Milking dance*) (Mongolian dance), and *xi zhai pingguo* (*Happily Picking Apples*)

(Korean dance). I have previously mentioned that the category of “Chinese dance” was a notion created in order to differentiate itself from Western dance. It is theatricised folk and ethnic dance. Therefore, Chinese dance from this point onward became a formal pursuit and gradually distanced itself from daily life in Hong Kong. Its realistic content ironically alienated it from the public. The introduction of modern dance to Hong Kong should have provided an alternative perspective, inviting awareness to the heterogeneous identity of the other (Chinese dance) in the eyes of Western spectators. However, the category of modern dance developed into a separate language paradigm instead of being deployed as the methodology of bridging the formal gap between “Chinese” dance and “Western” dance.

## Conclusion

This essay has explored dance in Hong Kong since the 1950s and has set out to identify, in the last seven decades, the process of transition, if any, of the characteristics and aesthetics of Hong Kong dance from pre- to post-professionalisation.

Dance aesthetics in the 1950s drew upon its public function. It emphasised public participation as a means of communication. It was a non-linguistic symbol of politics and race, and did not make a clear distinction between its art and its craft. The practice of rhythmic collective movements activated the perception and appreciation of dance as participants placed their bodies in the same space and engaged themselves in common movement processes. Dance sought its content reference in common life experience.

Since the 1970s, capitalism has backed the economic development of Hong Kong. Socialist ideologies began to ebb while the awareness of individuality rose. Hong Kong embraced a Westernised lifestyle as an indicator of modernisation. Modern dance substantially extended the dance spectrum in Hong Kong. Performing arts groups from overseas as well as local students trained overseas introduced Western dance styles to Hong Kong. Dance was also promoted by the colonial government. Dance practitioners became alert to the artistic quality required in dance making, alongside movement organisation and instruction. However, even though artistic quality gained more and more attention, the slow

progress of Chinese dance contemporarisation, the implanting of modern dance as the Western expression/performance form, the language of which was not rooted in local cultural philosophy, and the public's attention being drawn by TV and popular culture, led to dance and the public being pulled further and further away from each other compared to the days of the 1950s and 1960s.

Professional dance companies supported by public funding were inaugurated in the 1980s. As consumers of tax money, dance companies incessantly conducted outreach events to demonstrate their accessibility to the public. However, the individualisation and theatricisation of dance making failed to convince the public of its relevance to their daily life. Outreach events have often been handled as top-down educational programmes. A new connection between dance and society has yet to be identified. At this point in time Hong Kong has completed its evolution into a modern capitalist city. The majority of the population has found comfortable positions in the dominant social order. They followed rationalism, preferring rational, controlled body actions. Sensation-led movements are rare in everyday life. The imagination of dance has



therefore not been violently challenged, and it has remained conservatively in a realm in which one finds music, technically-demanding/unified/coordinated movements, expression of emotions, formal beauty, drama, entertainment, one that is of and for the youth.

Professionalisation goes hand in hand with institutionalisation and systemisation. In the process of establishing its own authority, institution and system excludes others by reducing the “standard” to dichotomised discourse. The polemics of dance dichotomies in Hong Kong include Chinese and Western, traditional and contemporary, professional and amateurish, dance and non-dance, organisational and individual, and institutional and non-institutional, among others. Practitioners excluded from institution and system can be loosely categorised into two kinds: One lingers towards the “public” end, inheriting the dance philosophy of her/his ancestors and building her/his power base on the extent of society infiltration and number of followers. The other kind, made up of out-office professionals, is institutionally trained and supports the notion of artist privilege. Theoretically, the subversion of art language and the construction of art discourse relies heavily on out-office professionals and

the “exception” they create: the discovery of poetry, breakthrough, and criticism that result from the utilisation of their new media proficiency. In Hong Kong, the administrative design of resources allocation lures the out-institutional group to set a goal of becoming one of the institutions, which it regards as recognition of its artistic achievement. Such a goal renders its “exception” within expectations. The expectation enables its incorporation into the institution. “Exceptions” solidify institutional discourse.

Looking back on the watershed, one finds that new narratives have been successfully developed out of traditional language after professionalisation. New techniques and new materials have also been explored and deployed. However, have we injected new meaning into the raw materials of dance, namely the body? “Professionalisation” implies a linear, synchronic relationship between moving forward in time and quality. It bears the aura of monumental turn. It contributes positively to technique specificity and delicacy while reducing the potential multiplicity of aesthetics. I propose that pre-professionalisation dance in Hong Kong has not smoothly and orderly transitioned to the post-professionalisation one which

was initiated by governance needs. Rather, due to the status difference between pre-professionalisation and post-professionalisation practitioners, experience and knowledge once gained could only circulate outside of the professional system.

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