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# **Ballroom Dance in Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Appearance**

**By**

**Leung Ming Fai**

**Student ID 1250199**

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the degree of  
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I dedicate this thesis to my late grandmother, Ms. Wong Bo Kwan 黃寶群 (1917-2018) — a glamorous woman and a free spirit who has taught me about grace and given me all the freedom I needed to become myself.

### **Declaration**

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

## Abstract

*Ballroom Dance in Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Appearance* analyses how ballroom dancers in Hong Kong transform themselves and the city with their bodies in motion. Ballroom dance is both the subject of study and a method in this research. The changing dance tradition and practices encapsulate the collective subjectivity of the city dwellers, their creative agency and everyday life as a transformative process. The analytic approach in the thesis acts, in part, as a counter-argument to cultural theorist Akbar Abbas' claim that Hong Kong culture appears in the form of dis-appearance. Formerly a British colony and currently under Chinese rule, Hong Kong's existence is often imagined and narrated in terms of and in relation to the two powers. The persisting colonial structure of this reality, he argues, also prevents the everyday life and practices of the local dwellers to accumulate and be consolidated into social infrastructures and systems. By showing how local dancers transform the city through transforming themselves by participating in and creating a dance tradition, this research calls for a progressive understanding of Hong Kong that sees the city as built by its ordinary dwellers in their everyday life.

The research employs archival materials from newspapers, journals, literary works, films and interviews to construct a cultural history of ballroom dance. Critical cultural theories are used to shed light on the contradictions and possibilities. Chapters of this research are chronologically aligned but periodized by the change internal to the dance tradition. Each chapter portrays a specific form of development in ballroom dance and interrogates particular political issues in its cultural production. This process of transition is, this research argues, propelled by the aesthetics of ballroom dance which constantly evolve in dancers' active embodiment and seeps out of its original social and cultural contexts and physical spaces, thus transgressing the predefined demarcations.

### **Chinese characters and Romanization**

Chinese characters, in traditional form, for names and terms are provided if they facilitate the discussion. They appear in the first occurrence of the names and terms.

Romanization of Chinese names and terms follows Cantonese pronunciation.

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### Hong Kong ballroom dance history: key phases and phenomena

Time	Ballroom dance subjects, culture & practice
Early 20 <sup>th</sup> century to post-Second World War era	The Hong Kong Western community's regular social dance practices persisted until the 1960s. After Second World War, the cultural, economic and political influence of the United Kingdom on Hong Kong declined; local inhabitants actively developed their own way of life and dancing.
Early 20 <sup>th</sup> century to 1934	The introduction of the Shanghainese nightclub ballroom dance to Hong Kong; the government's regulation of the Chinese dancing academies in 1934, in which dance hostesses were treated like prostitutes.
1939	The founding of the first dance organization; the rising popularity of dance competitions.
1945-1960s	The boom of dance academies, dance halls and everyday dance venues. The dance hostess remained a significant subject of the dance. Ballroom dance was normalized as an ordinary pastime.
1960s-1990s	Nightclubs eventually evolved into an adult nightlife venue without social dancing of any kind.
1970s-1980s	Professionalization of ballroom dance; decline in popularity among young adults.
1980s-1990s	Rapid institutionalization through introducing international ballroom dance events, practices and systems. The beginning of the boom of dance organizations.
1990s-2000s	The dance industry flourished. The local dance public fragmented.
1998-2010s	The emergence of DanceSport redefines ballroom dance in terms of athleticism and virtuosity. The emphasis on visibility and competitiveness

## **Preface**

### **Writing and Dancing in a Forbidden City**

To receive the president of the Chinese government Xi Jinping for the ceremony of the twentieth anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China on 1 July 2017, the Hong Kong government set up a series of security measures that made the city forbidden to its ordinary dwellers. Major roads that Xi's army of men would pass through were cleared of public traffic. Countless enormous water barricades, each weighing over 1.5 tonnes (Ng & Lai), were lined up along footpaths to prevent the public from getting close to the president. Flyovers necessary for workers to commute were blocked, forcing people to divert from their everyday routine. And the government called this event a 'celebration'.

In the light of this event, then, the Hong Kong government's secret decision to build a replica of the Beijing Palace Museum takes on another level of meaning: it is part of the construction of a physical and ideological Forbidden City. The architecture that houses the Beijing Palace Museum in China was formerly the Forbidden City, the royal palace built in fifteenth century that housed the last two dynasties in imperial China. The Hong Kong government announced this decision in late 2016 bypassing all the public, legal and administrative procedures. All efforts from the Hong Kong people to challenge this decision went in vain. This is how the symbolic meaning of the Forbidden City is actively enacted in Hong Kong: much as politics took place within the imperial court in imperial China, the Hong Kong local public has no access to the locus of politics. The symbol of the imperial power of China will be placed in Hong Kong, while local dwellers' lives and time do not constitute the social reality or the physical landscape of the city.

Living in a forbidden city that denies its own dwellers' right to the city, which David Harvey defines as 'a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts' desire' (4), many Hong Kongers including myself have been seeking sites, methods and practices to exercise and experiment with this right. For me, ballroom dancing serves as a site of hope and empowerment, although the realization came completely accidental. I was forced into ballroom dance in 2010 by an acquaintance who signed me up for the class without my knowing. But since the embodied realization of the joy of self-reinvention and the possibilities of the new body struck me in the dance, there was no going back. Ballroom dance has never been taken as a high art in Hong Kong, therefore every moment of inspiration and freedom I experience in the dance always comes with a slight shock out of unexpectedness. The same emotions extend into my social experiences of the dance. Dancing leads me into communities that I have never been part of before, with members from social backgrounds I do not usually encounter. Being in the same dance class and uniformed movements with mid-age and older men and women from all walks of life, I always find such immediate spatial and tactile connection with strangers both amazing and jittery. This mixed feeling of anxiety and excitement intensify when finding myself in places previously unknown, and not knowing how to behave in them, such as Chinese restaurants with dance floor and live music. As all my dancing is learned in the studio in routines and figures, improvisation with random partners on the social dance floor is both intimidating and exciting to me to this day.

The ballroom dance landscape in Hong Kong is a self-contained underworld beyond non-dancers' knowledge and imagination and the only entrance is the dance that begins with the rhythm, the melodies and the movements. The participation in the aesthetic tradition and everyday practices of ballroom dance

naturally situates a dancer in these myriads of places. The landscape is multifaceted consisting places and spaces of entirely different social practices, unified by the standardized rhythms and beats of the ten forms of ballroom dance. The dimly-lit places with many male dance partner for hire waiting at the door targeting single female patrons; the Chinese restaurants with the floor open for dancing and singing, accompanied by the loud clattering of diners; the birthday parties of dance teachers as a social ritual in the dance circle; no-nonsense DanceSport competitions in stadiums, stripped of all the leisure elements of the social ballroom dance tradition, with vigorous, exaggerated and aggressive dance performances. Being thrown into these always alien, and most of the time pleasant, places and events of ballroom dance, at some point I came to understand the problematics of spatial politics: to delimit a space for culture separated from the rest of the city, such as the building of a Hong Kong Palace Museum, is a colonial and anti-enlightenment exercise that marks the alienation of local people from the city they have built with their entire existence in everyday life. The ballroom dance landscape *is* a space of culture that covers the entirety of Hong Kong, with the size and shape of its territory changes according to the evolution of the dance tradition and practices. This process of participation in and constructing a cultural landscape is one of the rare experiences of democracy in Hong Kong.

Ballroom dancing in Hong Kong, therefore, by making me a practitioner, presents to me a site of hope. Its landscape and evolving tradition suggest to me a perspective to the agency of local dwellers and the ordinary in making their city and an appearance in continuity, and remind me that democracy is still possible. But most importantly, when I have forgotten what I have been fighting for in this city, I dance, and I can remember the tantalizing feeling of freedom again.

## Introduction

### A redistribution of the colonial sensible

On 12 December 1984, a week before the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration 中英聯合聲明 that later confirmed the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain to China, Club Bboss 大富豪夜總會 was opened. Situated in the then glamorous Tsim Sha Tsui East, it was the most extravagant nightclub to-date though it has closed in 2012. Li Chuwen, the then deputy director of the New China News Agency 新華社 which was then the quasi-Chinese embassy in colonial Hong Kong, and Wang Guang-ying, the chairman of the first private company of communist China, were present to officiate the opening ceremony. Li regarded the opening of the nightclub an evidence of Hong Kong people's confidence for the future and prosperity for the transition of sovereignty. Wang took the opportunity to state Beijing's promise that 'capitalism can exist in Hongkong[sic] for fifty years after 1997...That means horse racing and dancing can continue' (Cheng & Cheung). This promise of a fifty-year status-quo, now commonly considered to be China's former statesman Deng Xiaoping's brainchild, was later written into the Basic Law, the constitutional document for Hong Kong.

Revisiting the event today, thirty years later, when the fifty-year status quo is proved to be a lie and the dance has transformed, the absurdity of the event becomes perceivable. How did (nightclub) dancing, as one practice among many in the ever-changing ballroom dance tradition, become a convincing symbol of status quo to the mass, regardless of the blatant paradox? And it is also a curious issue whether Wang knew what kind of nightclub Club Bboss was, and the 'dancing' taking place inside: Japanese-style nightclubs such as Club Bboss were no venues for participatory

dancing but a space of sexually-charged night-life entertainments. Hostesses were hired to entertain their male patrons by offering partnership for drinking, chatting, singing karaoke etc. Nightclubs in 1950s to 1980s Hong Kong did serve as social dancing venues, but Club Bboss and its kind redefined ‘dancing’ 跳舞 to a figure of speech meaning the social foreplay that might lead to purchases of sex services that is still being used today in the sex business. The statement was a misrecognition of the city’s historical reality (of the dance), and somehow this statement and the event were misrecognized by the mass of Hong Kong as politics proper. If this event does not make sense on all levels, how, or in what ‘distribution of the sensible’ to borrow Jacques Rancière’s term, could this event and the saying ‘the dance can continue’ become meaningful in colonial Hong Kong?

### **The culture of disappearance: a colonial distribution of the sensible**

The ‘distribution of the sensible’ has been central to French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s philosophical enquiries across an array of contexts: from the distribution that confined, though as well glorified, the nineteenth-century French workers to the position of proletariat as illustrated in *Proletariat Nights*; the ‘explicative order’ (*Schoolmaster* 4) of the education system that kept the master and students in place with the impassable and hierarchical distance between them; the social division in *The Philosopher and His Poor* that assigns the former the task of thinking, often about the latter who is assumed to be readily occupied by his trade and has no time to think; to the spatial configuration of the theatre that simultaneously joins and separates the performers and the spectators (*Spectator*). The distribution is both an order of knowledge and a social order. It first describes a sensible structure that decides who can appear in the reality and in what form, and what can be perceived and are relevant and what not. Within the distribution, facts are ‘self-evident’,

including ‘the delimitations that define the respective parts and position’ (Rancière *Politics* 12). Secondly, as a social order it creates a collective subject in the sharing of common-sense and sentiments.

Based on the idea of the distribution of the sensible, Rancière identifies two types of politics: the *police*, which situates subjects accordingly in their respective positions and maintains the order of the distribution, and the *politics* proper that challenge the existing order. The *police* is ‘a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions’. At the same time, it subtly separates legitimate members from excluded ones, and thus ‘presupposes a prior aesthetic division between the visible and the invisible’ (Rancière *Politics* 3). Central to *politics*, therefore, is the appearance and the inscription of the excluded elements into the distribution, consequently rupturing the order. The concern for appearance binds politics with art, as aesthetic practices are ‘forms of visibility’ that indicate ‘the place they occupy, what they “do” or “make” from the standpoint of what is common to the community’, consequently ‘intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility’ (Rancière *Politics* 13).

In the light of Rancière’s philosophy the absurdity perceived in the nightclub event today takes up a political implication: the existing distribution of the sensible can no longer produce the sensory harmony necessary to maintain the status-quo — of the sensory order, as well as the future ‘status-quo’ that Hong Kong people desired in the 1980s. On the surface, this status-quo referred to the economic prosperity and the relative political stability under British colonial rule. Beneath the surface was a political apathy that sustained the colonial distribution of power that kept Hong Kong people in the seats of the spectator, to watch politics as if it is someone else’s business,

their collective life and fate being decided by others that were not them. This distribution and the sensible it sustained have their historical root. The peculiar colonial experience of Hong Kong caused a colonialism in permanence that, eventually and ironically, fosters a unique ‘culture of disappearance’, as cultural theorist Ackbar Abbas coins it, which features eternal ephemerality and destined vanishing in cultural productions and phenomena, that rationalized and justified the norms, knowledge and feelings within the distribution. The colonial sensible and sensibilities embedded in the culture of disappearance as a distribution excluded Hong Kong local dwellers from the production of new sensibilities and the intervention of distribution until after the transition of sovereignty. It is within this colonial distribution that politics, in the broadest sense, does not happen locally; the ‘dancing will continue’ became a ‘self-evident’ political metaphor, and the destiny of a city could be promised by an external power.

Even the colonial experience of Hong Kong is stained by this culture of disappearance: the colonial reality does not feel colonial at all. Hong Kong was colonized by Britain in 1841 as an island of a scattered agricultural population of around 7,450 (Bridgman 280), then ‘decolonized’ with its sovereignty handed over to China in 1997, a decision made without the consent of local inhabitants. The never-ending social and political turmoil in China that overlapped a large part of the duration of Hong Kong history, from the mid-nineteenth century to 1980s, has made this former British colony a haven and a life-saving abode for the Chinese refugees. (British) colonialism, against the backdrop of China in incessant chaos, represented civilization, peace and freedom to the Chinese refugees. In one of the first petitions in Hong Kong in 1844, the Chinese proprietors whose land lots were auctioned by the Hong Kong government without being informed, begged the government for protection, stating

that they came to Hong Kong for their 'reliance upon the great English Nation' (Sixty-Four Proprietors). While the Chinese refugees in deprivation found Hong Kong a safe haven, the rich Chinese took the advantage of the British colony to further accumulate their wealth. The status of Hong Kong as a free port since 1842 provided Chinese businessmen an unprecedented, lucrative opportunity for overseas trade. The wealthiest businessmen translated their economic power to social capital through active collaboration with the colonial government by acting as the middlemen between the ruler and the ruled, through charity and the provision of public infrastructure (Carroll; Law).

(British) colonialism, therefore, provided the ideal situation of relative social and political harmony and stability for many Chinese inhabitants to survive and thrive. In the early 1990s, the average income of Hong Kong people even surpassed that of Britain's (Carroll 228). The economic prosperity and material abundance of colonial Hong Kong made its inhabitant fail to recognize the colonality in its nature. The British colonial distribution of the sensible was, therefore, marked by the harmony of the colonial order which was not felt and assumed to be the very nature of Hong Kong. Until today, a small fraction among the political dissensus, for example the civic organization Alliance to Resume British Sovereignty over Hong Kong and Independence, advocates the returning of Hong Kong to British rule (Ng). On top of the lack of colonial experience in the local people's everyday life under the British rule, the post-colonial era feels uncannily and devastatingly colonial with China's coarse interference in the existing form of life of Hong Kong and the sensible distribution. In other words, before getting a sense and an experience of colonization during the British colonial era, Hong Kong was 'decolonized' by China and regarded as part of the territory of this country.

The colonial distribution of the sensible collaborated by Hong Kong subjects whose identity is also defined by transience — refugees, immigrants, expats, exiles, sojourners etc. -- constituted a ‘space of disappearance’, coined by Akbar Abbas. Abbas claims that in this space of cultural production, ‘appearance is posted on the imminence of its disappearance’ (7), or in other words, the reality of Hong Kong only becomes recognizable when it starts to disappear; events always happen in the form of effacement; what has been existing is not considered to be permanent, the recurring disappearance of reality is eternal. This distribution began to consolidate between the late 1970s and early 1980s, at the time when a distinctive local culture and collective consciousness started to emerge and the later decision between Britain and China of the eventual transition of power in 1997 which set a deadline for this new cultural consciousness. This event catalyses and symbolizes the culture of disappearance that normalizes the emotional disturbances for a *de facto* unchanged situation: the fear for an unknown future in the hands of the communist China in the same colonial structure. The failure to recognize the old coloniality inherent in the seemingly new situation forbids Hong Kong people from more proactive intervention in this process. Artefacts of culture of disappearance, from films and literature to the city landscape, flourish to allow the spectators of their own fate to make sense out of the situation and keep them in their position in the distribution.

For Abbas and many Hong Kongers until early 2000s, the culture of disappearance was *not* a problem, as much as the colonial situation and the political saga in the 1980s which look farcical today. Indeed, Abbas celebrates this unique distribution of the sensible and sensibility, saturated with contradictions and discontinuities, for its distinctive artistic imprints on cultural productions of Hong Kong. The aesthetics of disappearance can only be understood when it is taken as a

form of appearance. As Rancière defines, aesthetics is ‘the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.’ (*Spectator* 13). To understand the ‘system of *a priori* forms’ in which the nightclub event in 1984 became a meaningful incident, it is necessary to read it as an aesthetic expression.

Abbas identifies four aesthetic qualities in the expressions of disappearance, which can explain the dis-appearance of the nightclub event as a meaningful incident to its contemporary and its dis-appearing effect. The first being a floating identity that inhibits the contradiction of a fluid form of existence and a stable subjectivity. Apart from Hong Kong’s history of being a refuge and an entrepôt, Abbas uses the building of the new airport in Hong Kong before 1997 as the example: the grandeur, state-of-the-art landmark was taken as a symbol of Hong Kong as a prosperous metropolis, but essentially it is a non-place, a space of transit (4). In the nightclub event, the Hong-Kong identity was accentuated by the forthcoming transition, and therefore became sensible to the mass. The second feature Abbas identifies, decadence, is the effect of ‘a very efficient colonial administration’ that ‘provides almost no outlet for political idealism’ which directed most of the energy toward the economic sphere. As the only agency people possess and the freedom accessible locates in economic speculation, the peculiar cultural phenomenon of ‘doom and boom’, contrary to the usual doom and gloom, is formed: ‘the more frustrated or blocked the aspirations to “democracy” are, the more the market booms’ (5). Decadence as a form of appearance, is therefore ‘not in the sense of decline...but in the sense of a one-dimensional development in a closed field’ (*ibid*). In 1980s Hong Kong when the city experienced an unprecedented economic prosperity, nothing symbolized decadence better than the most extravagant

nightclub in town. As its extravagance also symbolized the absolute lack of political freedom and autonomy, Club Bboss became a reasonable site for the announcement of the political destiny of the city by the future ruler. The third aesthetic feature of disappearance is the dialectic between autonomy and dependency. As much as the fact that Hong Kong as a geo-political concept did not exist before British colonization that demarcated and endowed the region with both an identity and the status of a colony, the 'decolonization' of Hong Kong makes it a city of another country. Abbas further underlines the 'historical twist' in the 'quasi-colonial' situation of Hong Kong after 1997: 'the colonized state, while politically subordinate, is in many other crucial respects not in a dependent subaltern position but is in fact more advanced — in terms of education, technology, access to international networks, and so forth — than the colonizing state'. Colonialism thus is not just a 'chronic condition' for Hong Kong but one 'accompanied by displaced chronologies or achronicities' (5-6). This explains why the decolonized future of Hong Kong was promised for an unchanged reality instead of a radical transformation that was supposed to make decolonization a revolutionary project. The last characteristic of dis-appearance implies a reverse hallucination caused by '[t]he import mentality [that] saw culture...as that which came from elsewhere' while refusing to see 'what *is* there' (6). It is the 'imminence of its disappearance', when the reality is in a crisis of demise, that 'an intense and unprecedented interest in Hong Kong culture' and 'a profound concern with its historical and cultural specificity' are triggered (7). The reverse-hallucination, in fact, comes together with a hallucination: by not seeing their own political agency in the colonial distribution, politics was always the business of a foreign authority, thus making Hong Kong people see the night club as a space for official presence and political statements.

Writing in 1997 in Hong Kong at the pinnacle of the culture of dis-appearance in an apocalyptic atmosphere around the 'reunification' with China, Abbas ponders upon the meaning of postcoloniality and decolonization, if they are not achieved merely by the departure of the colonizer: 'Postcoloniality begins...when subjects find themselves thinking and acting in a certain way...It means finding ways of operating under a set of difficult conditions that threatens to appropriate us as subjects, an appropriation that can work just as well by way of acceptance as it can by rejection' (10). The predicament that caught Abbas and his contemporary intellectuals was that, while they have acquired the critical distance to perceive the colonial distribution of the sensible, the majority of the Hong Kong population in 1980s did not find the 'conditions' 'appropriating' them as subjects of the colony, 'difficult'. According to the poll conducted in 1982 right before the beginning of the Sino-British Negotiation by the concern group, Hong Kong Observers, which comprised of young local Chinese professionals advocating for active local participation in the decision of the future of Hong Kong, more than 87% of the respondents chose 'status-quo' for the future of Hong Kong ('Talk to us about 1997'). The name of this now dormant civic organization takes up a metaphorical meaning in the light of Rancière's philosophy: proactive and political as they were, the Hong Kong Observers and the individuals sharing the same aspirations were literally only, observers, however eager they were to participate in their collective political reality. In the colonial distribution, they were spectators that were assumed to be 'passive', 'immobile in their seats' and 'the opposite of knowing', 'in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance' in front of them (Rancière *Spectator* 2).

The 'displaced anachronicity' Abbas points out in the experience of the culture of dis-appearance lingers: the postcolonial awareness, defined by Abbas first and

foremost by an awareness of the self and the way the subjects live, did not immediately emerge at the moment of decolonization but six years after, in 2003. The Hong Kong government's attempt to enact an anti-subversion law outraged the mass for the violation of the freedom of expression. Five-hundred thousand people took to the street on 1 July 2003, which was the sixth anniversary of the handover. The choice of the date marks the emancipatory potential of this event: while the Hong Kong public was expected to be jolly and to celebrate on that day, they rejected the assigned sentiments and redefined the feeling by embodying the discontent in public. According to Abbas, this is the beginning of decolonization when the subjects become aware of the way they think and act and how is that determined, and resist the system that appropriate them as subjects of it. In Rancière's words, this is the beginning of emancipation, when the spectators 'challenge the opposition between viewing and acting'; 'when [the spectator] understand[s] that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection' (*Spectator* 13). In this case, Hong Kong people as spectators of their politics, instead of understanding 'that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms', sought other practices to express their dissent, though not directly to the colonial distribution and the position *per se* at that moment.

But ultimately, emancipation does not target the existing distribution but intends to re-appropriate 'a relationship to the self lost in a process of separation' (Rancière *Spectator* 15). In the case of Hong Kong, the separation, with the cultural expression of dis-appearance, incurred by the colonial distribution that lies in the relationship between the local dwellers and the city they live in. No matter how long they have lived in this place, how many generations have thrived and however unique their form of life is, in the space of dis-appearance the local dwellers' experiences and

traces of life are not considered constructive to the making of the city. The decolonization of Hong Kong, therefore, is a project of reclaiming the right to the city. It requires a shift in perspective, particularly in the space of dis-appearance haunted by a reverse-hallucination, to identify a site of egalitarian nature that shows the colonial distribution's contradictions and problematics. In his discussion of how modern education systems 'stultify' students (the *ignoramus*) by teaching them their 'own inability' instead of inviting students to confront what they don't know (*Spectator 9*), Rancière discerns that '[i]ntellectual emancipation is the verification of the equality of intelligence' (*Spectator 10*). In the nightclub event and the saying 'the dance will continue', the site of equality that makes the contradictions of the colonial distribution perceivable today is the dance, as an ongoing tradition of cultural, social and aesthetic practices. The equality of sensibility promises democratic participation beyond the definition and allocation of the colonial distribution, resulting in a realm of reality indifferent to yet uncompromising on external definitions. Everyday participatory dancing, therefore, provides a perspective to recognize how people exercise their right to and create their city, actively though unconsciously.

### **The right to a colonial city**

Since the initial success of the demonstration in 2003, Hong Kong citizens did try to claim the right of the city actively and consciously through public and collective appearance in social movements. These campaigns emerged from a variety of concerns, from the conservation of living heritage, workers' right to democratic city planning, all ended with failures in achieving the original goals. The Umbrella Movement 雨傘運動 in 2014, sparked off by the Chinese government's further control over universal suffrage in Hong Kong, marked the heightened accumulated grievances and the loudest cry for change. The furious public, mainly students and young adults

but ultimately people from all walks of life, occupied three major motorways in the busiest districts of the city. Tens of thousands of occupants set up tents and camps in the sites, eventually turning spaces of protest to everyday living spaces in the seventy-eight-day occupation. This unprecedented large-scale movement, at the end, was terminated by the government's forceful clearance of the occupation sites without any change in its decision.

The ostensible failure of all these large-scale social movements in immediately overturning the Chinese and Hong Kong governments' decision left many Hong Kongers in despair and with a sense of futility. But if these efforts are considered as 'aesthetic acts' that configure experiences which 'create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity' (Rancière *Spectator* 9), the political and historical significance of these events become perceivable: The new sensible and sensibility produced are not only the realization of the coloniality of Hong Kong's current political reality, but the realization of the necessity and desire to reclaim the right to the city to its inhabitants. The new feelings and knowledge, spontaneous and ephemeral as they are, gradually if recurrently, will be precipitated as the substance for a new distribution, in a way similar to the gradual formation of a dance landscape in the city. Ballroom dancing, as a method, recontextualizes the phenomenon of collective bodily movements in an aesthetic tradition that is participatory and egalitarian in which individuals take part in collective practices of unified sets of bodily and musical codes and rhythms, and transform themselves into subjects and acquire agency. The changing ballroom dance landscape in the city, the aesthetic tradition, social convention and culture of the dance together constitute a distribution of the sensible that accommodates and represents the dancers and their lives. In order to understand critically the social and cultural milieu of the colonial

distribution that Hong Kongers today strive to alter, and to make the life of the local inhabitants and their agency in the making of Hong Kong visible, this project uses ballroom dance — the social and aesthetic tradition to which nightclub dancing belongs — as a method to capture the formation and moments of change of the colonial distribution, and interrogate the underlying culture and politics of appearance.

The notion ‘the right to the city’ was first coined by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (2004). Today the notion circulates globally in many cries for democracy in political participation and the building of and access to the city, against the worldwide trend of neoliberal urban development coupled with increasingly conservative politics. In his 2012 work *Rebel City*, David Harvey sets the scene for his analysis of the neoliberal political economy of cities by revisiting the term and its implication for an emancipatory politics today. Harvey’s understanding of the making of the city is particularly apt for Hong Kong, considering its colonial nature and colonization as an operation of global capitalism:

From their very inception, cities have arisen through the geographical and social concentration of a surplus product...Capitalism rests, as Marx tells us, upon the perpetual search for surplus value (profit). But to produce surplus value capitalists have to produce a surplus product. This means that capitalism is perpetually producing the surplus product that urbanization requires. The reverse also holds. Capitalism needs urbanization to absorb the surplus products it perpetually produces (5).

The nightclub, and in particular one that accentuates its consumerist essence like Club Bboss, was explicitly a materialization of surplus value, and simultaneously the space in the city that consumes and absorbs the surplus values. But the dance associated with

this space, as well as its political potential in unveiling the colonial distribution today, suggests the location of the collective agency and their exercise of the right to the city. Shelving his Marxist terminology for a moment, Harvey poetically regards the right to the city as ‘far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies’ but the right ‘to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desire’ (4). Harvey’s switch of tone subtly hints that the exercise of the right to the city has an entirely different logic of operation to the capitalist way of making a city: the city is always the incarnation of a distribution of the sensible. Harvey advocates a political project for the ordinary city dwellers to ‘claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way’ (5). This echoes Rancière’s definition of politics and points out to the fact that to disrupt one distribution, it is necessary to invent another.

In other words, the distribution always exists and does not become a problem until it contradicts the subjects’ desire, or the previously excluded/ non-existent subjects arise. The collective subject that can topple the capitalist distribution of the sensible, for Harvey, is the common. A common, produced by ‘the metropolis as a factory’ (Hardt & Negri quoted by Harvey 67) is ‘an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood’ (Harvey 73). It is ‘dynamic, involving both the product of labor[sic] and the means of future production,’ including ‘the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships and so forth’ (Hardt & Negri quoted by Harvey 72). A common is formed through social practices that ‘produce or establish a social relation with a common whose uses are either

exclusive to a social group or partially or fully open to all and sundry'. In this process, the 'environment', or the distribution, is inseparable from the collective subject that produces it and is conditioned by it and is 'both collective and non-commodified –off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations' (Harvey 73).

The ideas of the right to the city and the common redirect the search for the possibilities of rupturing the colonial distribution to a different realm: it is in the everyday and ongoing processes which people voluntarily and consistently participate and invent a common form of life following their desire, that the potential for an emancipatory politics lie. This explains why dancing in the nightclub implies a form of radical politics in a colonial city as the space fosters a collective local subject in the form of a dance common. This collective subject sustains the ballroom dance tradition and landscape in the city, beneath but at the same time beyond the colonial distribution of sensible.

### **The politics of ballroom dance aesthetics**

In *Society Dancing: Fashionable Bodies in England, 1870-1920*, dance scholar Theresa Buckland regards the transformation of ballroom dance at the end of the nineteenth century as a change from a social ritual to 'a democratized leisure activity, an activity of personal choice rather than social duty' (200). The global history of ballroom dance, with its root in the social life of the nineteenth century European upper-class and eventually a participatory form of art, is in fact a history of the exercise of the right to the city, in which the dance, and dancers and the societies were made more democratic. Evolved out of the European court dance volta in the sixteenth-century, the waltz — the oldest dance in the ballroom family — migrated to, and was quickly popularized in, other European countries from the early eighteenth century.

Buckland describes the function of the dance, before the turn of the twentieth century, as ‘to signal social distinction and were integral to many social rituals of aristocracy, and the upper-middle class’ (3). Dancers were not only kept socially in places according to their status, but spatially different classes danced in different locations, events and at different times. The aesthetic ideal of dancing demanded dancers not to stand out from the moving unity revolving around the floor. In Rancière’s terms, ballroom dance at that time was an ethical regime, a form-giving exercise for the maintenance of the existing distribution.

When ballroom dancing migrated across class divisions with visceral enjoyment, urbanization and the rise of the middle class as its vehicle in England in the late nineteenth century, it detached itself from the monopoly of a specific social class and developed into a legitimate practice on its own. The new subject of the practice — the dancer, regardless of his/her class background — appeared in the process of urbanization. These dancers consisted of the newly-rich middle class including wealthy business men and professionals, small business owners and, at the bottom, white-collar workers (Buckland 9). Eventually, the prevalence of the dance practices and constituted a corporal common sense among the dancers in terms of dance forms, rhythms and figures, making the centralization of knowledge later possible.

The standardization and institutionalisation of ballroom dance through the establishment of the Ballroom Branch of the Royal Society of Teachers of Dancing in London, 1921 — though unavoidably political and undeniably problematic (with exercises to ‘whitewash’ the brown elements in Latin American dances, for instance, among other accusations), demonstrated the centralising capacity of the modern city, accumulating capitals of different from monetary to knowledge. At this point, to

borrow Rancière's term, the representative regime of the dance was formulated, which sets up its own 'classification of ways of doing and making, and it consequently defines proper ways of making and doing as well as means of assessing imitations' (Rancière *Politics* 22). The institutionalization of ballroom dance as a dance genre proper resulted in the standardization of lists of figures for each dance with precise steps and footwork, facilitating the verbal and bodily communication between dancers, in a dance class or on the side of the dance floor and enabling easier participation. However, the formation of the representative regime also means that the dance has acquired its self-contained and systematic distribution that is subject to participation and new challenges.

Contemporary ballroom dance practices around the world utilize the rationalized and legitimized artistic resources accumulated in history and create novel renditions of the dance locally that appropriate but are indifferent to the codified rules and elements of the dance, and thus unconsciously question the canonized distribution of sensible by engendering new knowledge and feelings. 'Ballroom dance' today is widely known as the umbrella term for the International Standard and the Latin American dances, with each style consisting of five dances. The International Standard — as commonly called 'ballroom' for convenience in Hong Kong, consists of dances of European origins including waltz, tango, quickstep, and foxtrot and Viennese waltz. In the 'Latin' dances — the short form for 'Latin American' — there are cha-cha, samba, rumba, *paso doble* and jive.

This set of dance knowledge, united in the name of one dance but in an immense diversity of local and stylistic expressions, constitute a participatory democracy and the 'aesthetic regime' (Rancière) of ballroom dance. For example, in the United States, the equivalents to the two types of dance are Smooth (for Standard)

and Rhythm (for Latin American), sharing many dance forms but also retain forms such as the swing and bolero that define their regional particularity. In DanceSport — the competitive and athletic version of ballroom dance — competitions, though the dance is delivered to the music and rhythm universal to the global ballroom dance common, but the aggressiveness, craftsmanship and refines are unsuitable and thus rarely seen on social dance floor. From the virtuosic outward projection of DanceSport, the violation of the heterosexual setting in same-sex ballroom dance, to the new dancing body in wheelchair DanceSport that interrogates each figure it embodies, new dance representations and practices produce a ‘heterogenous power...of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself’ (Rancière *Politics* 23). The politics of the aesthetics of ballroom dance lies in the never-ending derivation of new dance practices and culture in the course of active embodiment, in which people reinvent themselves in movements, the ballroom dance tradition and the city landscape.

The politics embedded in the aesthetics of ballroom dance harbours three research questions guiding this thesis: How do ordinary people create Hong Kong in everyday ballroom dancing? What does the dance public look like at different times, how is it organised and by what forces? How do cultural politics that arise in the making of the local ballroom dance tradition enable an alternative understanding of Hong Kong? Ballroom dance in this research is not only the subject of study but a method for unearthing and understanding a hidden aspect of Hong Kong. To say ballroom dance can serve as a method to exercise the right to the city does not imply that it aims to or will effectively decolonise Hong Kong. In fact, the operation is apolitical and it can only exert its emancipatory power when it is apolitical. According to Rancière, the innate relationship between politics and aesthetics lies in the new sensibilities in aesthetic experiences that may upset the sensory status quo of the

existing distribution, which defines ‘what is seen and what can be said about it’, ‘who has the ability to see and the talent to speak’, and ‘the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time’ (*Politics* 13). The tension between aesthetics and politics thus occurs on the level ‘of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization’ (Rancière *Politics* 18). The misrecognition of the dance reality in 1984, thus, symbolizes the local life and the reality that was excluded from the colonial imagination.

Artistic intervention in politics is a paradoxical concept because artistic practices that could unveil the operation of existing politics and its problematics only when they are totally neglecting its existence. The legitimacy of the original foundation of the existing partition of spaces, practices and social roles is destroyed. Buckland identifies one such minute but critical moment in the history of ballroom dancing that symbolizes an irrecoverable transition of the dance form: young dancers in England in late nineteenth century, many of whom the new middle class economically benefited by the prosperity brought by the urbanization and industrialization, created a stir in ball rooms. The aristocrats, originally the subject of both the ballroom dance tradition and the ball rooms, were irritated by the new dancers’ presence for they danced too fast, too vigorous and lacked decorum. However, for the new dancers, old-time dancing was not even their concern: ‘they did not want to be civilized’ but ‘wanted to have fun’ (Buckland 72). Such indifference is radically political as the existing sensibilities are not even addressed and are excluded from the new distribution entirely. If the aristocratic dancing was a simulacrum of gentility, the young dancers’ dancing was driven by corporeal pleasure. The two dance experiences had entirely different social and sensory foundations and operations.

The negligence of the status quo in the nature of aesthetic practices is also expressed in the formulation of transient communities of random members. The political potential of aesthetics resides in its lack of the desire for permanence, a homogenous unity and an impermeable circumference. Aesthetic arts consequently denounce not the existing distribution itself but its legitimacy as a rigid, uniformed and enclosed structure. Rancière regards the transient community formed in the aesthetic regime '[a] sensible politicity...that is immediately attributed to the major forms of aesthetic distribution such as the theatre, the page, of the chorus. These "politics" obey their own proper logic, and they offer their services in very different contexts and time periods' (*Politics* 15). In the case of the new middle-class dancers mentioned above, the 'proper logic' was the particular way to dance and the knowledge of the dancing body that would lead to the aspired sensations and other bodily experiences. The new dance knowledge governing the formation of the communities was objective to all, ensuring equal participation though not promising the acquisition of subjectivity. The members of the communities are thus defined by their choice and agency in taking part of the network of sensibility; no one is born a dancer, but a person can always immerse him or herself in the dance practices, embodying the set of dance knowledge, to become a dancer. And the new dancers at the turn of the nineteenth century England could well follow the aristocratic way of dancing but they did not. They chose to follow their 'hearts' desire' (Harvey 4). The ephemerality of the aesthetic communities and the randomness of participants prevents the distribution from organizing from the external, which will result in a solidified boundary that hinders voluntary participation.

The regime of aesthetics, Rancière suggests, is 'strictly identical with the regime of democracy, the regime based on the assembly of artisans, inviolable written

laws, and the theatre as institution' (*Politics*14). In ballroom dance, the aesthetic regime is located in the unique formal characteristics that separate it from other dance genres: dancers dance in couples; having several couples simultaneously on the dance floor; with each dance lasting for around one minute and thirty seconds, dance music alternates between the ten dance forms; the standardized rhythm and the strict tempo of the dance music, and a levelled stage of no absolute demarcation between dancers and audience. The participatory nature of the dance demands one to exercise his/her agency to be part of a situation of rhythm and bodily movement. The spatial structure of the dance floor is a metaphor for this process of transformation: there is no external threshold between the dance floor and the audience. The co-existence of these features is the result, as well as the upholder of the unique aesthetics of the encounter, that makes ballroom dance fascinating to dance. This aesthetics of the encounter is experienced in two situations: the dynamics in maintaining a connection and its innate ephemerality. On the dance floor, the sense of encounter is mediated when two dancers get into a hold — open or close, and the connection is established more often through sense than touch — of the couple, and the dance couples' mutual encounter in motion on the dance floor.

While dancers rarely dance with complete strangers — in social occasion in which participants dance with their friends and partners, and in competition where stable partnership is required, every dance, with the music and dance form changes one after another, is a re-enactment of the encounter, even if the dance couple know each other and their routine by heart. The moving constellation of dancers on the floor puts dance couples in a new situation in every dance, and the unexpected encounter of dance couples force them into creative improvisational responses at these moments. The spatial setting of ballroom dance, therefore, encourages the emergence of new

moments that await seizing and being made visible through the event of encounter. Unlike stage/ theatrical dance genres such as ballet which produce individual self-contained works with their own narratives, themes, characters and defining features available for restaging and reinterpretation, a performance of ballroom dance is always called 'a samba' or 'a waltz' depending on the music of the dance, without a name-proper. Every performance of the dance is an ephemeral reoccurrence, always begins unprecedentedly, ends without a completion, and cannot be identical to another performance even if they share the same music.

Indeed, the experience of ballroom dance may not always be aesthetic, and aesthetic experiences may not always be in defiance to the distribution. Nevertheless, in the context of Hong Kong, the deliberate, continuous and collective aesthetic practice of the dance is charged with emancipatory potential by embodying the relationship between the local inhabitants and their city, which the colonial distribution denies. The process of everyday collective dancing etches the dance common's life and passion in the texture of the city, projecting a dance landscape in the city and, indirectly, ruptures the colonial alienation between local inhabitants and the social and political reality through developing sensory and emotional bonds in aesthetic experiences. As much as the nightclub 'dance' in 1984 can suggest an entry to the alternative reality of Hong Kong, ballroom dance allows the perception of the city as a site for the 'central labor[sic] process' for the 'production and reproduction of urban life'. For Harvey, this is the location for a revolutionary politics, in which 'those who build and sustain urban life have a primary claim to that which they have produced, and that one of their claims is to the unalienated right to make a city more after their own heart's desire' (Harvey xvi).

In Hong Kong, the ballroom dance common also harbours a variety of forms of practices: it is commonplace to find individuals from entirely different background and age groups all claiming to be dancing ballroom, with sometimes entirely disparate, other times overlapping experiences. By ‘dancing’, local dancers can mean dancing in the park as evening exercise, at night in restaurants with friends or for dance classes, in competition, or in the clique of the wealthiest women who hire western male dancers for dance and social partnership. In a city like Hong Kong where there has never been any form of democratic government, aesthetic democracy in cultural experiences, such as ballroom dancing, becomes one of the few sources of the experience of democracy. The embodied feelings, emotions and sensations of democracy that dancers in Hong Kong have experienced can endow them with the eyes and, more importantly, the returning memories and temptations of the thrill one experiences in the freedom of self-reinvention and living according to the ‘heart’s desire’ (Harvey 4), to search for the location and possibilities for democracy in the society beyond the dance.

This research does not attempt to provide an encompassing historical account of the ballroom dance in Hong Kong. Rather, it focuses on instances of re-/distribution, and the social and cultural transformation of the society the events have exposed. Sometimes the new forms of sense and sensibility are indirect protests to the colonial distribution, other times they are reproductions of the normalised ideology in the form of ballroom dance. Ballroom dance, in this project, is both the subject of study as well as a critical and lyrical method.

### **Criticality of the dancing body: research method and literature review**

To call ballroom dance a method is to take the dance as an affective reference point conditioned by the ephemeral moments of bodily movements, and the aesthetics and culture of this condition for the perception of wider reality. The

dancing body is the site that engages both the personal and social, empirical and historical, possibilities and limitations. In retrospect, there are several defining moments that help me conceive the idea of '(ballroom) dance as a method'.

The first instance of awareness of the criticality of the body emerged when I was re-reading Abbas' writing on the architecture in Hong Kong. I was then doing research on a street market in Hong Kong that is older than the city itself. Abbas' neglect of this street market in the historic landscape of Hong Kong then became curious to me: in his discussion of the symptom of the culture of disappearance in architecture, Abbas comments on the landscape of the historic area in which the street market is located, that 'there are almost no vestiges of this history' in the area, 'except for the old colonial-style supreme Court building' (80). Here, Abbas is also a victim of reverse-hallucination, failing to recognize the non-(British-)colonial historical reality of Hong Kong, or the realm of the everyday life that is below and beyond the colonial reality. My immediate thought was not so much a critique towards the colonial discourse but a bodily response from the experience of walking: that was a space I had spent so much time in as a researcher, shopper and wanderer; wiping off the place from the landscape felt like a denial to my lived existence accommodated in that space. The perspective of a living body captures not just different aspects and details of reality excluded by other means of perception but establishes an embodied relationship that constantly resists the binary subject-object distribution through affects.

This awareness of the criticality of the body was accentuated when I began dancing, and it finds organization and expressions in the dance to become a method — a way of seeing *and* doing. The body in dancing is the material to be acted upon, the vehicle of agency and the site of transformation simultaneously; it signifies a

perspective, or a point of view, that is constantly in movement, driven from within, through responsively and performatively embodying the rhythmical and lyrical aspect of reality. As a coded dance practice, with standardised corporal vocabularies and form of duo-partnership, the predefined leader or follower role for each dancer and rhythmic patterns for movements, ballroom dance provides the aesthetic experience of a traditional art form, one that is of conformity and transcendence: succumbing to the rules of the dance does not promise enlightenment, but it is necessary to comply with the convention, to be choreographed by the dance. The process obliges a dancer to confront his or her own limits and possibilities of the body and use the codes of the dance as an artistic resource to enable expressions of thoughts and emotions not expressible through other means. In other words, learning the dance is a peculiar experience of discipline and freedom, resistance and exploration, tension and empowerment.

The dance experience is not only corporeal but social. The dance takes me to places and spaces in the city I have never been to, to mingle with people from completely different backgrounds in the same rhythms and movements. The encounters are brief and contingent but not random, centralising around the dance. These spatial and social experiences are organized in the ballroom dance landscape structured by the aesthetic, social and cultural tradition of the dance. The criticality of the body in ballroom dancing in the incessant embodied reflections — in the form of delights, embarrassment, shock, thrill etc. — is situated in the capacity of the body to act and be-acted upon. The corporeal sense of freedom in the reinvention of the new body triggers the thought (as both contemplation and desire) of this freedom in other social experiences and the realization of the problematics of the external infrastructure when it impedes this freedom. Thus, the criticality of the body also

manifests in the form of vision of what the city should be like, following 'what people's hearts desire' (Harvey 4).

The expression 'as (a) method' comes from the decades-long discussion of Asian modernity. The formula 'x as method' gains currency in academia as it proposes using the object of critical reflection to expose the thinking subject's own position for better self-understanding. It pluralizes the one-directional assumption of the progress of development by breaking the hierarchical binary opposition of the self and other. Take, for example, the idea of modernity: the West should not be considered the destined/desired result of Asian modernity. The uniqueness of development and expressions of modern consciousness in non-western regions should be taken as sites of insight enriching the global picture of modernity.

The 'x as method' expression was first coined by Japanese sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi who proposed 'Asia as method' in 1960s Japan for the reflection of the condition for local knowledge production in a global context. By 'method', Yoshimi meant 'the process for the subject's self-transformation'. But the transformation of the self impacts not only on the self. Yoshimi's polemical argument states that, for values such as freedom and equality that were spread from the West but negated by global colonialism, Asia 'must change the West itself in order to realize the latter's outstanding cultural values on a greater scale' (quoted in Lo 35).

In 1989, another Japanese sinologist Yūzō Mizoguchi suggested using China as method. Through understanding the knowledge produced about China in Japanese sinology, he advocated rethinking about the subjectivity of Japan and a logic of Chinese history intrinsic to its own development instead of forcing into the western

model. When China is understood as China with its own particularity, Mizoguchi argues, the world is then taken ‘as a goal’ and it ensures ‘that people recognize other worlds pluralistically’, and so consequently ‘create a higher-level vision of the world’ (Mizoguchi 517). Summarizing these discussions, ‘as method’/as a method involves two operations: understanding the other as a subject with its own intrinsic logic and history of becoming and reflecting on the world through the particularity of this other-subject to seek for alternatives, possibilities and chances of more profound freedom and quality. To take ballroom dance as a method (to understand Hong Kong), then, is to grasp the (social and bodily) movements of the continuous formative process of the aesthetic tradition, and to scrutinize Hong Kong as inscribed in this process. The criticality of the dancing bodies locates in the continuum of the process that sustains, diversifies and enriches the global dance tradition, and the embodied realization of the relationship between dancers and the dance landscape they produce and inhabit. This criticality is particularly polemic to the Hong Kong context, whose existence has long been denied a historical understanding, a bottom-up perspective of the place-making process, and a connection between the city dwellers and their city due to the permanence of colonialism.

## **Research Methodologies**

### **Criticality of the body: research method and literature review**

This thesis employs historical research, open interviews and participatory observation to realise the critical potential of ballroom dance as a method. They respectively make visible the continuous historical process of the local formation of the ballroom dance tradition, the personal but also public aesthetic experience of the dancers who sustain this process as both agents and witnesses, and the social phenomenon of ballroom dance as an everyday collective practice. Together, these three methodologies make visible the ongoing process of the mutual construction and transformation of the dance landscape, the tradition and culture and dancers in Hong Kong. ‘Criticality’ in the dancing body thus has a double meaning: being reflective and decisively important to the reality it engages. The features of ballroom dance — as an everyday participatory aesthetic practice — determine the operations of its criticality: it takes past experiences as lived, and the living moment as constituting elements of a dance tradition; it illustrates the democratic picture of the scene by accommodating idiosyncrasies and contradictions, organized in the same set of codes of a corporal language rendered in different accents and sensibilities. With the conceptual assistance of critical cultural theories, this approach also enables an embodied critique that throws light on the possibility for changes through envisioning, practicing and creating a different corpor(e)ality.

### **Historical research: rethinking time in continuum**

This thesis deploys a historical perspective to identify and construct periods of the ongoing development of the local ballroom dance tradition in Hong Kong, with the aim to illustrate the continuity of the process and the agency of dancers in it.

As Abbas aptly puts it, the most striking reverse-hallucination in Hong Kong is the belief that the city is a cultural desert (7). This mentality results in the lack of record and organization of local cultural activities and practices, as well as the institution to undertake these indispensable tasks. Sources of this history rely heavily on newspaper archives, past publications and personal accounts. The everydayness of these sources makes the exhaustion of material extremely challenging, but at the same time allows for past experiences and events being read as they were once lived.

This research and writing strategy is partly a response to the only attempt to-date to understand the evolution of ballroom dance in Hong Kong. In *Hong Kong Dance History*, an anthology of historical accounts of different dance genres compiled by the Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference in 2000, there is one chapter on ballroom dance. In line with the dis-appearance discourse, this official history is a loosely chronological account that covers up the local history of the dance more than uncovering it. The chapter is titled ‘THE SOCIAL DANCE’ and bracketed ‘Ballroom & LatinAmerican [sic] Dance’ (fig. 0.1). The double name reveals an embarrassing situation of the dance: it cannot even be properly named. This indecisiveness in the subject matter puts this history’s credibility in question. The dance couple pictured — professional competitive ballroom dancers Lawrence Chan and Gertrude Ko, in action of full intensity, projecting energy outward inviting gaze and attention — makes the light-hearted title ‘THE SOCIAL DANCE’ not very convincing; the missing space between ‘Latin’ and ‘American’, which is most probably a typo but nonetheless attributed to the neat alignment of the two parallel lines, takes up the symbolism of a representation that sacrifices meaning for the sake of immediate visual effect.

Local ballroom dancing and dancers are dis-appeared in this history as dancing — the social and cultural processes and the aesthetic experiences —

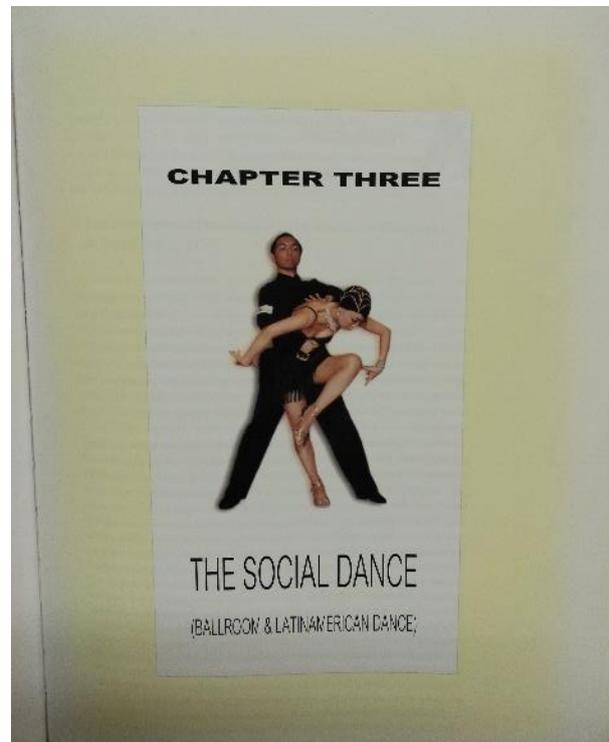


Fig. 0.1 The title page of ‘THE SOCIAL DANCE (BALLROOM & LATINAMERICAN DANCE)’ in *Hong Kong Dance History*.

is taken away from the narrative. The dis-appearing effect is produced through the exclusion of the cultural and aesthetic practices of the dance, the affects and emotions of the individual bodies, and transformation of the social reality of the dance public. The two sections of this history, ‘The Origins and Development of Ballroom Dancing in Hong Kong’ and ‘Key Figures and Schools Associated with Ballroom Dancing’, literally separates the development of the local dance tradition from the agents (‘key figures’) and the places taken in the course.

This ‘history’ is, nevertheless, a collection of numerous though sporadic details that are important traces of the past, despite the lack of a consciousness of the continuity and change that devalues all the facts gathered to an irrelevant, distant

past that does not even incite nostalgia. The account takes 1918 as the beginning of the history when the office of YMCA Hong Kong was built, as it arbitrarily assumes ‘social activities including dancing’ would take place in the auditorium and social affairs room. It is not until 1935 that the first dancers emerge — Xu Chen and Lu Hui, who ‘quite actively engaged themselves in studying social dance from books’ as retold by one informant (247). The remaining chronicle of events from 1937 to 1998 is written with the same brevity without a concern for the accumulation of experience, and the changing formation of conventions and communities. In such a chronicle there is no subject, individual or collective. This thesis, therefore, aims to break this colonial alienation of the social and the individual, history and everyday life, by understanding and illustrating the continuous forming of the ballroom dance landscape with the sensitivity to habits and mutations, conventions and events, continuation and ruptures.

This research sources past newspapers from several online and material archives. Online archives include of *Hong Kong Public Library Multi-Media Information System* (MMIS) for the incomplete record of seven Chinese and five English newspapers in the twentieth century, *South China Morning Post* (1903-1998) for local news in English of the stated period, the *Republican China Publication Archive* (1911-1949) for dance magazines in Shanghai and Hong Kong of the stated period, and *Wiseneews* for local newspaper articles published after 1998. The convenience of the online archive allows effective finding but the immediate accessibility, to a certain extent, hinders re-searching that concerns the changing process of the social reality and possibilities and imaginations not realized. On top of this need to understand records of past dance events in their own trajectory and context, as many past newspapers are not digitalized, reading through the material

collection of old publications is still necessary. The collection of *Technicolor Weekly* (1953) from the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library and *Metropolitan Weekly* (1993-1997) from the University of Hong Kong Library, in both of which there is a dance section, are indispensable resources. The ongoing process of dance practices and culture, exhibited in the collections in the form of weekly routine and everyday habits, shows in their content and representation the unconscious transformation, regression misrecognized as progress, historical significance of seemingly random events and changing and diversifying dance convention. Apart from attaining significant facts and information from these records, this experience is also an important exercise to regain the awareness of and the faith in the historical significance of everyday life and the agency of ordinary people.

Similarly, the reading of the collections of British dance publications *Dancing Times* (1933-2000) and *Modern Dance and Dancers* (1935-1975) in the British Library is also a significant experience though not much of the materials retrieved are utilized in this thesis. However, knowing about the early development of the dance in Europe situates my understanding of the Hong Kong dance scene in a global context that reveals the particularity of the local development and the defining and changing qualities and features of the dance that sustain this tradition. It also helps me acquire a sense of history for the comprehension of contemporary dance phenomenon and events as moments in a forming tradition; their appearance is contingent but has their own trajectories of becoming. Witnessing the making of the nowadays world-renowned Blackpool Dance Festival from its humble early stage as a British regional competition (called North of England Amateur Ballroom Dancing Championship in 1936), for example, demands a historical consciousness in the understanding of the seemingly sporadic dance events and temporary phenomena

today. Contesting opinions on dance and practices have always existed and been expressed in an emotionally charged manner just as they are today; it is essential to recognize the potential historical changes beyond the immediacy of emotions, as well as emotions as affective responses to a transitioning structure of feelings.

The publication of *The Modern Dance* (also *The Modern Dance and the Dancers*) in 1934 was almost hostile to its contemporary ballroom dance practices and culture. But beyond the grievances is the emergence of a new collective dance subject: the amateur dancers who were primarily the new young middle-class that saw the dance as an aesthetic-athletic practice, instead of a social ritual, and wished for a new social organization of ballroom dance practices. Similar disputes are also taking place today in Hong Kong since 1990s (see Chapter Two and Five). The awareness of historical changes helps identify the forces beneath all the ephemeral emotions constituting a new reality. From a historical perspective, the qualities, features and problematics of local ballroom dance practices do not seem so bizarre, as the social and cultural processes of their formulation become comprehensible, though no less peculiar. Such awareness is crucial for yielding critical analysis of the dance culture and practice that sheds light on possible changes.

### **Open interview: a history of the present**

The history concerned in this research is a history of the present, instead of an account of a distant past unrelated to the here and now. Personal narratives of past experiences are, apart from a great source of information, vehicles that transport finished and fixed events, and practices as once lived and felt, to the present. Forty-one conversations were carried out with thirty-six recorded for this research. The first batch of interviewees were sourced from my immediate circle of friends from

the dance class and surrounding environment. All these interviewees were non-professional dancers with dance experiences ranging from four to twenty-five years. They come from a variety of backgrounds, mostly working class for the more senior interviewees (above fifty years-old) with one exception of being a professional accountant. Younger interviewees (below fifty years-old) consisted of professionals, white-collars workers, small business owners and students. Each interviewee was asked to recommend interviewees for my research at the end of the interview. Their suggestions often converge on particular public figures, usually the interviewees' teachers. But sometimes the recommendations are totally unexpected, from dancers the interviewees admire but do not know personally to those that are known for their non-dance-art related qualities. For example, professional ballroom dance teacher and local champion Carol Kwong recommended her former student, Yuen Kam Ming, a mediocre amateur dancer in his seventies who began dancing in his fifties. Yuen was nicknamed 'Yuen "nine groups"' in the dance circle as he once participated in nine dance competition events in one day, which was an irrational decision for any dancer that strives for excellent performance as it would be physically too demanding. The nickname is a mild teasing of, as well as an admiring tribute to, Yuen's obsession with ballroom dancing. This recommendation process allows me to reach beyond the extended social circle around my own. More importantly it maps out small dance networks and reveals the qualities and values shared and sustained in the dance public. As Yuen's case has testified, apart from the aesthetic qualities in dance performances, dance-related professional reputation, status, expertise and experience, perseverance and passion are also highly valued by the dance public, which constitute the social reality of the dance landscape as much as other qualities.

The interviews were open-structured to allow interviewees room for creating their own narratives. My first question to the interviewees was always 'how did you begin dancing?' and I directed their narratives along their aesthetic experience. My concern for the aesthetic quality of the experience often brought about an unexpected embarrassment to the dancers interviewed. Most of the interviewees, being veteran dancers from the time when popular social ballroom dancing was common, were over forty years old. They began dancing at a time when ballroom dancing was not taken as an artistic practice, but their extended devotion to the dance has been reduced — even by themselves — to a habit done unconsciously out of the inertia of everyday life, instead of a passionate perseverance. On top of the lack of self and social recognition of subjectivity was the fact that many of the interviewees did not have education beyond secondary school. Not being used to explore and articulate their intimate feelings and thoughts in words, many interviewees were delighted to be considered as dancers but at the same time felt shy about expressing a part of themselves that was more intimate than they realized. Even the more articulate ones, such as Fiona Wat who was a professional woman in her late thirties, were amazed by their own narratives. Our conversation took place in a hotel café on a weekday afternoon. Her eyes radiated joy when she recalled the sensational dizziness and mental clarity in the spinning and swirling on the dance floor. 'That's amazing,' she said, 'and talking about how the world can be experienced differently here and now is also amazing, in an afternoon amid the hustle and bustle'. Many interviewees' similar delight shows that they have never seen themselves engaging in an artistic practice, but they were in fact driven by a pure passion for the dance that was never given the chance to express. It was inspiring for me to see how these interviewees' emotions changed as they empowered themselves by recognizing their own agency.

The transformative effect of interviews was totally unintended, and it was surprisingly even more obvious in the realm of the dance professionals. I was thrilled to see, after I had done all interviews, some professional dancers originally not in touch came together in public events. Despite the fact that the Hong Kong ballroom dance circle is very fragmented due to the unhealthy competition between different organizations and the lack of an effective platform of exchange (see Chapter Two), many professional dancers in fact do have in mind personalities that define the dance culture. Professional ten-dance champions, Ocean Vanderlely 李軒龍 and Zhao Shanshan 趙珊珊, both trained in China and in their thirties, and the top Latin American dance couple in Hong Kong, Cedric Chan 陳慶璋 and Jennifer Tin 田麗淇, both in their twenties, all expressed their respect to a veteran professional dance teacher and former competitive dancer Alan Li 李偉倫, when I asked them which dancers were significant to the scene in their opinion. Since they all belong to different dance organizations and are from different generations and had never worked with each other, I was amazed by their answers. Vanderlely explained that in several occasions when he and his partner took private lessons from foreign dance experts, Li was also taking dance class from another dance expert on the other side of the studio. He admired Li for his dedication and passion for the dance: in his late fifties and being one of the most successful dancer and dance teacher in the Hong Kong ballroom dance scene, Li did not need to compete with anyone for attention. Li and his partner took regular classes for the sheer obsession for the dance. And most importantly, in that situation, Vanderlely saw Li dancing, and ultimately that was what impressed him. Similarly, being the incomparable Latin American dancers who have achieved the best competition result in international events in Hong Kong to-date, Chan and Tin expressed their curiosity for Li's dancing, saying that they have

heard since they were little that Li was a dance legend. When I invited Li for an interview, I mentioned that he was considered to be a defining figure in the field. And not long later, when Li's dance school organized its annual competition, these two young dance couples were invited to be the adjudicators. As a dance lover myself, there was nothing more interesting and delightful than to see the best dancers in town, all from different backgrounds, coming together in one event.

The interviewing process was, therefore, strangely therapeutic for me. Apart from the abundant information and stories collected, the biggest reward came from the realization that good dancing actually mattered, though it was not yet recognized and reflected in the social organization of the dance scene. Seeing good dancers appearing and making a public event happen makes me understand better Harvey's proposal of building the city following people's hearts' desire and how it can actually be put into practice: create conditions and situations that allow people to recognize and articulate their 'hearts' desire', and make these desires be heard, and a collective subject would eventually gather around the echoing desires.

### **Participant observation: objectivity and collectivity**

The ballroom dance landscape in Hong Kong is sustained by and accommodates many social events and practices occurring on different temporal orders: dance classes and practice sections take place weekly; numerous competitions take place every Saturday and Sunday in Chinese restaurants with dance floor, hotel ballrooms or sport stadiums; elaborate dinner parties take place annually for the celebrations of dance teachers' birthdays, dance studios' anniversaries or festivals such as Christmas; tea and dinner dances in restaurants occur occasionally for dancers as a pastime. I observe the social behaviour and dance

practices of others as a participant, with the focus on the form and ritual of social practices, individuals' affective actions and reactions — resistance, compliance, negotiation etc. — and interaction between individuals. The social reality of the ballroom dance landscape as experienced in these observations reveals two distinct insights. On one hand, the temporal and spatial pattern of an individual's dance life, as well as the regular routine of events, enable dancers to anticipate and participate the dance practices and rituals, allowing networks and friendships to grow. On the other hand, these events are also sites of revelation, disparity and exposures of inconvenient truths that demand me to confront my own bias, wishful thinking and be more aware of the human condition the dancers are in.

My participation-observation of a party, to which I was invited by dancewear business owner Fiana Cheng, was both eye and mind-opening. I shopped in Fiana Cheng's shop quite often, so I thought of interviewing her, and was instead invited by her to that annual party organized by one of the biggest dance associations in which she would give a performance. Cheng was in her late fifties and given her status as an entrepreneur, I assumed she was either one of the wealthy mature female dancers who basically walk on the dance floor in sparkling gowns, or dance with young western professional male dancers who do all the dancing for their female patrons (see Chapter Four). However, to my surprise, Cheng danced with her long-time Chinese partner Johnson Chan who was an experienced dance teacher in his seventies. Their Tango began with the man standing in the middle of the dance floor, and Cheng *ran* from one corner and threw herself towards him. Chan caught her, half-squatting, before they proceeded to their vigorous Tango. Chan and Cheng's dancing was so forceful that at some moments they appeared quivery, but the intensity of power they craved, regardless of age but uncommon for their age, was

deeply felt among the audience. In her interview that took place on another day, Cheng revealed that she began dancing when she was in her forties (she was then a property agent, and one day in a nightclub Chan, then a complete stranger to her, invited her to dance), and from the beginning she was attracted to the heightened sensitivity to speed and strength in movements. The 'norm' and 'phenomenon' often present themselves as homogenous wholes, but in fact they are composite structures that always consist of elements of differences, seeking reviews for the organizing forces that constitute the entity. As a participant of the event and in the dance tradition, I witness simultaneously both the aesthetic and cultural convention of ballroom dance formed in time and the individuality of dancers in this convention as unique human beings. The observation, therefore, creates an empathetic distance that at the same time separates me from the immediacy of sensations and emotions for the necessary reflective objectivity and connects me to the bigger reality and other participants beyond my grasp without reducing it to a cultural object for analysis.

It was in the same party that I got the chance, by accident, to observe an interviewee's behaviour from a distance. Between rounds of competition and ceremonies, the dance floor was open to the guests to dance. The social dance floor is always the space to see and to be seen, but the socializing nature of the dance and the actual crowdedness of the dance floor did not encourage very elaborate and eye-catching movements. About half of the dance couples on the floor were in the western professional men-Chinese amateur women partnership. The professional male dance partners, despite their crafted artistry and technical excellence, restrained their power to provide their dance accompanying service (see Chapter Four). In this moving picture of social dancing where no one stood out, suddenly one Chinese male dancer caught my eyes with his energetic movements. With obvious

professional strength and precision, this dancer, though also accompanying his client in the dance, was not shy to perform his elaborate actions. The crispness of his movements in rhythm pierced through the harmony of tepid movements. However, he did not look as if he was deliberately breaking the unanimity; rather he was by accident enjoying himself too much. Later he left the event early with his client, carrying many paper bags from shops, following his client out of the hall. On the following day I interviewed this professional dance teacher I had never met, Michael Gao, who served in the most prominent dance school providing partnering services. Gao was among the first generation of professional dancers from mainland China to come to Hong Kong for competitions and training and went to international competitions in the 1990s. When I told him that I saw him dancing the night before, with the emphasis on the fascinating quality of his performance that made him outstanding in both an odd and pleasant way, he showed a sign of embarrassment — to my surprise — and whispered ‘well, even the world champion would provide accompany service’ (Gao). Participant observation is therefore indispensable for both the understanding of the social situations in the dance landscape, as well as the human situations that are inescapable for dancers to negotiate, resist, compromise or conform as social human beings through/ with their dancing.

### **Let the body think: a literature review of ballroom dance scholarship**

Current studies of ballroom dance across disciplines have presented a curious phenomenon of (un)confessional dancer-scholars who find the dance both fascinating and wrong. On the one hand, they brave the dance whole-heartedly and emphasize how much ballroom dancing has transformed them; on the other hand, ballroom dance is intolerable to their acute intellectual sensitivity. The western prejudices and gender stereotypes saturated in ballroom dance practices and

representations, and the problematic history of the dance inseparable from the global history of imperialism, should make the dance an object for intellectual criticism instead of an aesthetic situation for them to dance in.

This scholarly phenomenon of guilty-pleasure in ballroom dance has its root in taking the dance as a social and cultural existence with its aesthetic quality and experiences displaced. Many of these studies in fact point out significant problematics in the global ballroom dance culture and phenomenon that need to be addressed, but the overlooking of the criticality of the body has blurred the focus of the insight. The fundamental question is not 'how and why is ballroom dancing problematic' but 'why we dance'. As dancer-scholars we are compelled to confront our own desires, happiness, trance in dance and the blindness it has resulted in us and question what kind of culture and social organization are needed to support more open and meaningful ballroom dance institutions and traditions. The dancing bodies are the site of contesting sensitivities which should be taken as a source of criticality instead of self-contradictory interferences.

The guilty-pleasure dilemma has in fact generated much intellectual energy for critical self-reflections in the academia. Sociologist Julia Ericksen finds the sexist and racist tendency in the American ballroom dance culture contradicting her feminist belief and upbringing. Yet, in her work *Dance With Me: Ballroom Dancing and the Promise of Instant Intimacy* (2011), she says 'I make no apology for the way I have been ensnared. Rather, I am grateful for having discovered a passion late in life, especially one which brings me such joy' (Kindle Location 875-884). Dance scholar and former American professional Latin dancer Juliet McMains opens her controversial and influential work *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry* (2006) with a prologue titled 'Confessions of a Glamour

Addict'. Celebrating the gifts of 'the exhilaration of movement and the experience of freedom, release, presence, connection, and euphoria' (9), McMains finds herself deeply engulfed by the realities and situations she totally despises, such as the dance studio system 'built on duping and manipulating clients' (XV), and the American pro-am dance industry that exploits male dance talents from economically less-developed countries and the ageism in popular culture that sees mature women as 'grotesque' (McMains). English scholar Sally Peters (1992) recalls the jubilation of her first competition, with full-page photographs of her posing with her dance partner looking straight into the readers' eyes with a piercing gaze of confidence, but ends her reflection saying '[n]evertheless, however stylized, however beautiful, ballroom dance glorifies men vanquishing women' (171).

There are also some dancer-scholars who are less conflicted within themselves about the ideological conflict between ballroom dancing and their intellectual pursuits. Confessional without being apologetic, retelling how he started dancing ballroom to impress a woman, anthropologist Jonathan S. Marion recounts in his work, *Ballroom: Culture and Costume in Competitive Dance* (2008), how ballroom dance rerouted his life and academic career to an entirely different direction and realm. Multidisciplinary scholar Caroline J. Picart (2006) grants herself the insider-outsider position in all the identities she has in and outside of the dance, and consequently does not (need to) feel guilty for participation in the dark side of ballroom. Nevertheless, she does include an extended 'Memoir of a dancer' (10-25) narrating herself dancing through all the social and cultural milieus -- sometimes pleasant and other times disturbing, across various geographical locations and institutional spaces as dance student, teacher and researcher.

The ambivalence in the writing of dancer-scholars in the ballroom dance study literature represents the contradiction between the injustice inherent in contemporary social, cultural and economic institutions of ballroom dance and the sense of happiness to which dancers aspire. In Rancière's words, the external distributions/social and cultural landscape of the dance do not support and channel the sensible and sensibility that define a dancer's experience. But such ambivalence also suggests that it is not the dance *per se* that is problematic; the aesthetics in the dance, once manifested, mirror the inequalities in power in different aspects when they are exposed to the inherent and potential democracy. This is not only about finding a resolution for the paradoxical feelings in these dancer-scholars, but to figure out how ballroom dance empowers them and what possibilities are there to create new social forms/distributions that can sustain the dance tradition.

In order to acknowledge the agency of the suppressed in the global history of ballroom dance, to challenge the rigid gender stereotypes and oppressive power relations in the dance culture, economy and social infrastructure, what needs to be done is to reflect critically on the aesthetics of the dance that brings about transformation and empowerment. The possibilities for alternative social organizations reside in the desire to make the aesthetic aspect of the dance more accessible, as well as practices that allow the collective agency of the dancers to exert their power to make social changes. Reasserting the dance in ballroom dancing is the redirection of focus to the corporeal agency and creative possibilities of the dancers which might rescue the dance from its 'original sins'.

In the light of the criticality of the body, Ericksen's self-empowerment in ballroom dancing against the discrimination against the sexuality of elderly females is not a guilty pleasure. It should be taken as the beginning of the creation of a dance

form and aesthetics unique to these marginal and suppressed subjects that are not presentable within the current distribution of the sensible of the society, and develop concomitant social practices for its utmost expression. Ballroom dance should not be taken, in this case, an embarrassing escape from the oppressing mainstream culture that confines beauty in youthful bodies. The challenge to her feminist beliefs brought about by ballroom dance can also serve as a critical re-examination, and more importantly, a reinvention of the aesthetics of the dance in contemporary society. Similarly, McMains criticizes the stereotypes of overtly sexualized gender roles in ballroom dance, but today there are actually same-sex ballroom competitions and even same-sex couples taking part in mainstream events. Instead of dismissing minority behaviours as too trivial to cast an impact, it is essential to embark on a process of change, focusing on the artistic significance of the non-heterosexual practices and institutionalizing representation opportunities that manifest, explore and enrich the aesthetics of ballroom dance as whole. For example, a waltz danced by a man-man partnership often manifests an explosive power in their turns and swirls, forcing a renewed sensibility in the understanding of both the dance as well as masculinity in this originally heterosexual practice. The shortcoming of ballroom dance cultures precisely comes from the suppression of the agency of practitioners in dancing, and social institutions that built for the commodification of the dance form instead of the fostering empowering, creative practices.

The critical study of ballroom dance, as an everyday, mass dance practice, in fact enables us to see the social, cultural and political manipulation of bodies and, more importantly, the creative corporeal reaction and the resistance of dancers. The human body as the medium to, and part of, the material existence of reality, is reinvented in dancing. To consider bodily movements as dance is to

understand the creative agency of a body. This approach to dance, taking dance as a critical method, is well exemplified by Vivian Sobchack in her critical interrogation of her own experience of her 'new body' (2005): a body with the left leg amputated above the knee, which makes her experience new rhythm and space through using crutches, prosthesis and cane. With probably unintended humour, Sobchack describes her success and failure in working with her new body: when in perfect mobility after acquiring certain skills, she approaches the space through phenomenology; when she fails to inhabit the space around her it becomes hermeneutics. For her the body in existential phenomenology is 'not as an objective and immanent "thing" but as the materialized locus of subjective intentionality, motility, and a transcendent ensemble of "capacities" that allows us access to the world and the realization of our projects' (57). When she loses grip of her body, it then becomes an object external to her.

Mirroring her somatic experience with that of many dancers, Sobchack empowers herself and her body with dance vocabularies and concepts that allow her creativity and corporeal agency to be articulated. For instance, she finds improvisation 'a very liberating intentional activity, though sometimes it is required out of desperation' (59); the frequent travelling required by her profession often puts her in new hotel rooms, in which she will need to design routes from bed to bathroom and align available furniture to accompany her choreographed movements and new trajectory, based on the aesthetic of parsimony (60), to avoid the hassle in changing her tools and falling down. As a non-dancer, Sobchack's consciousness in her new body allows her to experience the two modalities of dance: the effortful virtuosity and how it overcomes 'its own and the world's resistances' with determination; and the effortless grace and how it 'becomes the

very condition of possibility itself' through self-transcendence (61). The possibilities of the body are certainly not confined within itself but extends into the greater corporeality. Sobchack quotes social philosopher Iris Marion Young who says 'for the body to exist as a transcendent presence to the world and the immediate action of intentions, it cannot exist as an object. As a subject, the body is referred not onto itself, but onto the world's possibilities' (quoted in Sobchack 57). Ballroom dance as a method, in the end, should be a perspective to identify and articulate the subjectivity and (potential) creativity in the moving body, and the corporeal agency of people engaged in certain practices.

### **Structure of thesis**

The following chapters (except the 'Conclusion') move loosely along a chronological order. While each chapter addresses a particular phase of development of the local ballroom dance culture and tradition, it is hope that together they present a continuous appearance. Each chapter illustrates the particular features of a specific period of the development of dance with reference to historical materials, and analyses how the dance and its dancers appear (or not) in this process and the cultural politics involved. Chapter One 'One Country, Two Systems' according to ballroom dance, 1920-1930s' concerns the period when the global interwar dance craze hit Hong Kong, with its zeal and movements arresting both the British and the Chinese and upsetting the colonial segregation of the two cultures. This chapter also argues that the 'One Country, Two System' administrative framework formulated in the 1980s, which was said to safeguard a high-degree of autonomy for Hong Kong after the transition of power, is in fact a colonial design.

Chapter Two ‘The rise and fall of the Hong Kong ballroom dance public (and) organizations, 1930s to 1990s’ charts the rise and fall of the dance public through the establishment of public dance organizations. Some of these public ‘bodies’ brought the public together, others broke up the public as well as the dance culture and tradition. This chapter borrows Butler’s idea of assembly with the focus on the agency of the mass in constructing the social reality. Butler suggests that assemblies in political events in recent years are formed around precarity. This chapter looks at how people assemble in ballroom dancing and transformed both themselves from ordinary people to dancers and the dance tradition. Each time when ‘bodies assembles’ (Butler) — as Chapter Three argues — no matter if the assembly is for fighting against precarity or to dance, these events have to be understood as moments in the process of the making of a condition that empowers each participant.

Chapter Three ‘Dancing in everyday life: from nightclubs and the silver screen to community centres, 1930s-1960s’ focuses on the pre- and post-Second World War period which witnessed the localization of ballroom dance from a Shanghainese nightclub entertainment to an everyday popular mass dance practice in Hong Kong. In this process, the subject of the dance tradition changed from dance hostesses to ordinary people and the site of the dance changed from the Shanghainese mirror-image nightclub to everyday spaces. In the light of British historian Joe Moran’s concepts of the dialectics of the everyday and history, this chapter uses the model to explain how ordinary life and people are fundamental for the creation of extraordinary cultural expressions and productions; ephemeral everyday dance practices are not random but constitutive to the formation of a tradition.

Chapter Four ‘The glamour of the ballroom dance industry and its shadow, 1990s to the present’ scrutinizes the emergence of the dance industry since 1990s, which capitalizes on the global ballroom dance profession and dance form, through exploiting and reinforcing social gender prejudices and stereotypes, to make profit. This chapter uses Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno’s critique of the culture industry to elucidate the problem of this lucrative business: the service this industry produces, that is professional dance partnership, is anti-enlightenment in nature and takes away dancers’ chance to explore their subjectivity.

Chapter Five ‘DanceSport: the unfinished project of modern consciousness’ seeks hope and possibilities in ballroom dance development by reconsidering the recent emergence of DanceSport in Hong Kong since 2000 in a global-historical context. The chapter suggests that appearance of DanceSport marks the continuous unfinished project of modernity in ballroom dance history: the incessant quest for the possibility for the new form and order for freedom, with the urge to break from the past and from the anxiety of possible constraint.

In the Conclusion of this thesis, through recollecting moments of thrill and sorrow in dance movements and social movements, I reflect on my very initial instinct of taking ballroom dance as a method to understand Hong Kong and its predicaments and hopes. I come to the realization that ballroom dance is not only a method of research but intervention: we can reinvent the city as our collective body as much as we can reinvent ourselves in dancing.

## Chapter One

### **‘One Country, Two Systems’ according to ballroom dancing, 1920s-1930s**

And I do hereby declare and proclaim, that, pending Her Majesty’s further pleasure, the natives of the island of Hongkong, and all natives of China thereto resorting, shall be governed according to the laws and customs of China, every description of torture excepted.

Charles Elliot, in the proclamation on the possession of Hong Kong, 1841

The socialist system and policies shall not be practised in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years.

Article 5, Basic Law

During the Sino-British Negotiation for the future of Hong Kong during 1982-1984, the contentious issue of the sovereignty of Hong Kong after 1997 was settled on the decision that it would be handed over to China, on the condition that the ‘One Country Two Systems’ framework being adopted. The framework promised, as stated in Article 5 of the Basic Law quoted above, a status quo for Hong Kong fifty years after the handover as a capitalist city within socialist China. The framework was praised by Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, for having no precedent and being ‘an imaginative response to the special historical circumstances of Hongkong’ (Thatcher). However, contrasting Article 5 with the

British proclamation of the procession of Hong Kong made on 2 February 1841, suggests otherwise. After landing on the island of Hong Kong, Captain Charles Elliot made the proclamation to the local residents stating that the Chinese local lifestyle, including 'law and custom, would not be affected.

In other words, the 'One Country, Two Systems' framework is a colonial design. Since its conception until today, the phrase, often followed by 'high-degree autonomy' in actual saying, has been taken as the protective incantation for the way of life in Hong Kong. The increasing infiltration of the Chinese government in Hong Kong politics, however, only marks the demise of the two systems overpowered by the one country. The failure of the spell, or the impossibility of realizing this framework, is often considered to be the moral shortcoming of the government of China for not keeping its promise. The colonial disposition embedded in the framework and the irony that the defence for it, in fact, affirms a political structure that denies the local dwellers' right to rule themselves are rarely considered reflectively. Hong Kong Studies scholar Stephen Chu rightly points out, in his critical analysis of the diminishing vitality, uniqueness and productivity of Hong Kong culture ten years after the hand-over against the backdrop of China, that "'One Country, Two Systems" spawned a myth of the status quo both before and after Hong Kong's reversion to China, which has significantly limited its political, social and cultural imaginaries' (17). Busting the myth becomes an essential task for the awakening of an awareness of decolonization.

This chapter attempts to bust this myth of the status quo that the 'One Country, Two Systems' framework promises by illustrating the 'one dance, two systems' scenario in the 1920s-1932 era that shows that the concept, being a symptom of colonial legacy, ensures a top-down social distribution that does not

correspond to the way of life of the local dwellers and led to the eventual breakdown of the structure. In the period concerned, the ballroom dance landscape followed the racial segregation as encouraged in the 1841 proclamation, and the colonizers and the colonized were more than happy to disregard each other's life. The British and other westerners in Hong Kong waltzed around the annual celebrations and everyday dance events in hotel ballrooms to embody and localize their transforming cultural heritage miles away. In a separate sphere, Chinese businessmen seized the opportunity to open dance academies to cater to the existing clientele, who were mostly immigrants from Shanghai. The Chinese dance landscape of that era in Hong Kong was a mirror image of Shanghai (see Chapter Three for the continuation of the phenomenon in the 1950s).

The status quo of the parallel universes of ballroom dancing, however, was disrupted when the dance evolved from a representational social ritual to an aesthetic practice and transgressed the colonial definition of space and racial demarcation. The Chinese and Western dancers' love for the dance brought them into an ambivalent encounter in 1932, which resulted in heated debates on the Chinese dance academies' impact on the society and the government regulation of the establishment. Nevertheless, the racial boundary between the two dance communities loosened, though not without conflicts, and gave rise to a growing public around the dance as a participatory practice. From the breakdown of the two dance systems and the forming of a public around the aesthetics of ballroom dance, this chapter argues that a distribution of the sensible imposed from without is doomed to be corrupted by the new structure of feelings arising from the collective life; an organic distribution organized from within, though not without hierarchy and demarcation, always alters its shape and boundary to accommodate new subjects and

sensibilities. In the following, this chapter looks at the early dance landscapes and culture of the Westerners and the Chinese respectively, then moves on to the ambivalent encounter in 1932 that exposed the Chinese dance world to the Westerners and led to the breakdown of the two dance systems, which was marked by the arguably most democratic event to its day in the colony: a dance contest judged by popular voting.

### **The early Western ballroom dance landscape: dancing to the musical and national time**

The coexistence of the European and the Chinese in inter-war Hong Kong (i.e. 1920-1939) was regarded by historians as ‘separate world, separate lives’ (105): ‘[T]he British created an extensive social world that revolved around clubs, music, parties, formal dinners, and the annual St. George’s and St. Andrew’s balls’ (Lethbridge, quoted in Carroll 105). This western social world — primarily defined by nationality prioritizing the English — and its deliberate isolation from the Chinese were maintained by a series of imaginations and rituals for embodiment, in which dancing played a crucial role.

Ballroom dance was present in the western circle in Hong Kong as leisure and social activity. The colonial context endowed ballroom dance practices with an implication of national identity, making them performances of national ritual: tea dance and dinner dance might be everyday practices in Britain; once displaced to Hong Kong they became *British* everyday practices. A *South China Morning Post* reader would be informed about the following dance events in a random week (3-9 February) in 1930: listed as ‘Social Functions’ on the event calendar, Tea Dance took place at 4.30pm and Dinner Dance at 8.30pm in Hong Kong Hotel and

Peninsular Hotel every day except Sunday; Dinner Dance took place in Repulse Bay Hotel at 8.30pm on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. On Sunday, tea dance took place at the Repulse Bay Hotel at 4.30pm ('Coming Events'). On top of the regular dances was Berwick Social Club's farewell dance on 3 February at Messrs. Lane Crawford Restaurant for the naval officers ('Garrison News').

The frequency of dance events naturally created needs for accessories such as clothing (see fig. 1.1). In the autumn of 1928, a tailored lace suit was in fashion for a tea dance: the article suggested a navy blue lace suit with a 'pink georgette blouse'; 'a fluffy, printed frock' with a 'hat painted in the same pattern, particularly if the hat is broad-brimmed' was also desirable. Each dance event was a social and self-performance, that is, to see and to be seen, among the fellow country men and women.



Fig. 1.1 'For the tea dance'

Source: *South China Morning Post*, 28 July 1927, p.9.

But the practices in dance events were not only about self-decoration; the bodily experience of dancing was also crucial and was taken seriously by the leisure dancers. In April 1932, a debate over the dance music tempo in King's Restaurant took place in the 'Correspondence' on the *South China Morning Post*. A 'regular patron' under the pseudonym For Better Timing comments that the timing of the music at the restaurant was 'exasperating', and there were requests for slower music. He/she also asks for 'more waltzes' ('Tea Dance Music'). For Better Timing's letter sparked off a series of different responses, all voicing for their ideal dancing. PAVLOVA was very angry about the criticism on the band's music and defends that '[t]he timing is quite good and the music generally excellent. Were it otherwise these tea dances would not be patronised to the extent which they are'. He/she ends by suggesting For Better Timing to 'take a few more dancing lessons' ('Tea Dance Music' [a]). PAVLOVA's letter indirectly portrays a vivid dance culture, with tea dances packed with dancers and dance lessons a common phenomenon. Another reader, SAG, shows his/her support for the band's music tempo by stating that it 'compares very favourably with the official "speeds" set out by the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing' for dance competition. SAG lists all the tempo recommendations by the Board and concludes that the band's tempo was correct in tango and waltz, and two bars faster in other dances. He/she, however, agrees that there should be more waltzes; one waltz to five to six dances is out of proportion ('Tea Dance Music'[b]). SAG's provision of the latest international standard of the dance shows that the dance community in 1930s Hong Kong was aware of being part of the global dance landscape and followed the trend closely.

Among the many voices that demanded more waltzes, Pauline's stood out as a dissensus, with a very personal and pragmatic reason: 'My boy friend [sic] is such

a rotten waltzer and I'm not much better myself and we get treading on one another's toes, and knocking each other's knees, and he gets so angry, and I'm sure it puts our courting back at least two or three weeks' ('Tea Dance Music' [c]). In this discussion, the simple request for slower dance music turns into an introduction of international dance information and sharing of personal sentiments and moments of life. The 'Correspondence', serving as the platform for random individual rational and emotional opinions not meant to be treated as news or facts to its contemporary readers, provides for today a lively picture of ballroom dancing in its days with rhythms and sensations distantly felt.

However, the dominant discourse of ballroom dance remained largely part of a social ritual for the public, judging from the frequency and size of coverage in the newspaper. City-wide celebrations of national festivals were covered often in long passages, with the most minute visible detail reported but without the knocking knees, treading toes, anger, pleasure and dance movements. A meticulous coverage of the St. George's Day Ball in *The Hong Kong Daily Press*, 5 January 1924, which took up a good half of the page, demonstrated how the event was being performed as a national ritual by inducing a collective sense of belonging, with the press serving as not just a public platform but a mirror to let an enclosed community to see themselves and their fellows. The article gives meticulous details about the space of the City Hall, the venue of the event: the entrance gates were 'skilfully fashioned to resemble an entrance to an old English castle in the Tudor period'; going through the gate, the guests would be led by the beefeaters to the two cloakrooms; rooms on the first floor were given over for dancing while the Theatre Royal was made the room for supper; the passageway 'was transformed...into a pergola of roses suggesting the entrance to an old English garden'. Even the decorative painting for the refreshment

bar portraying the saint is given detailed description. Compared to the painstaking description of the environment's decoration, the coverage of dancing in the article is decorative: 'Dance music was played by the Band of Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels Ltd., whilst the Band of the East Surrey Regiment was also in attendance. The floors were perfect for dancing, the only fault being that they were not spacious enough for the dancers' ('ST. GEORGE'). The space for the event — coincidentally a place with theatres for performances, was decorated with abundant and immediately recognizable English images like a stage for performance, in a self-exoticising manner. And the narrative of the article leads readers through the space from one room to the other, and then to the dance floor to induce a spatial sense of localness, to the event and to the distant homeland miles away.

Highlights of the night included the ceremony of conveying the boar's head, emphasizing 'without accident this year' to invoke the sense of continuity of a forming tradition, as well as the toast from The Royal Society of St. George's President, D. G. M. Bernard. The speech began with stating the Society's aim, which was 'to encourage and strengthen the spirit of patriotism amongst all classes of Englishmen'. To achieve this end, the president recalled the myth of St. George the patron soldier saint of England. The story of tedious length went from the saint's early life of when 'little is known' in year 303 in Rome, to his contribution to the victory of the First World War, representing an imperial symbol of fighting spirit. The accentuated Englishness here, however, became a bit embarrassing as it confronted a compact European community with different nationalities. Bernard affirmed to the crowd that during the war, the British army 'included Scottish and Irish, and although the history and traditions of the countries are different, it is the same spirit which animates us all' ('ST. GEORGE').

What unified all the differences at the event, apart from the assumed spirit of St. George, was the extended dance programme that mobilized the bodies to the same rhythms for the believers to express and the sceptics to conform, at least in the bodily movements. However, in the newspaper coverage, the dominance of the nationalistic narrative of the event overwhelmed the embodied experience of the dance, regardless of the fact that dancing had taken up a considerable amount of time and space of the event, with the dance floor ‘fully occupied throughout the whole evening’, sometimes ‘uncomfortably crowded’. The dance programme of the night consisted of twenty-four dances, including the two ‘extra’ fox trot before the lancers that actually began the night, followed by a mix of two one step, twelve fox trot and five waltz. The lancers, a square dance performed by four couples, functioned more as a gesture of commencement of the event than a dance to enjoy. It started ‘immediately after His Excellency’s [the Governor and Lady Stubbs] arrival’, and two sets of eight couples, many with military titles, opened the night (‘ST. GEORGE FOR’). The listing of the names veiled the mood and movements of dancing beneath such representation. Together with Bernard’s ending of the speech that restated the definition and practices of patriotism, the event was one mass hypnotising operation to make participants believe they were in Britain.

The newspaper representation of the St. George’s Dance in 1924 — in a format and narrative shared by the coverage of similar events such as St. Andrew’s Ball and Government House Ball — demonstrates Benedict Anderson’s theory of the operation of the press in fostering a collective identity but also challenges the theory with an empirical insight: the embodiment of imagination, in the desire to conform, risks transformation as the corporal understanding of an idea may alter the original imagination or interrupt the operation of homogenization. In this coverage, the

English press functions as a book in an ‘extreme form’, a ‘one-day best-seller’ (Anderson 35) and intensifies the process of re-imagining. On top of this impact from its ‘ephemeral popularity’ (Anderson 34), the narrative of the English press in Hong Kong, as shown above, let readers see their own image projected on a British stage. Participants in the St. George’s Dance did their dancing together and together read of themselves dancing together the day after.

Anderson suggests that the large-scale circulation of print materials, from novels to newspapers organises a fictive nation in two ways: the sharing of common language and temporality — the ‘homogenous, empty time’ (24) immortalised in the (national) calendar. In the newspaper in particular, events and happenings are juxtaposed arbitrarily according to the ‘calendrical coincidence’ and the preference of the reader market (33). The everyday ritual — tea dance and dinner dance, and the annual ceremonies of the European community in Hong Kong in the inter-war era illustrate the homogenisation of a national time to its highest degree in a place of completely different time zone to the original location of the nation. However, at the same time, the colony’s existence and the materiality of the body becomes an inconvenient truth to the impossibility of this operation: President Bernard, on the one hand, stressed the importance of St. George’s Day and how the event should ‘revive the recognition and celebration in every part of the world in our English national festival on the St. George’s Day — April the 23<sup>rd</sup>’; but, on the other hand ‘in Hong Kong, owing to climate conditions, it has been more fitting to celebrate it early in January’ (‘ST. GEORGE’). The tropical climate of Hong Kong forced a strategic practice that made the emphasis of importance and particularity of the festival a farce. The nationalistic mind wanted to celebrate but bodily discomfort refused to comply.

If the climatic and natural reality of Hong Kong exposed the limitation of the operation of localizing bodily the colonial empire, the emerging aesthetic regime of ballroom dance loosened the boundary of the ‘two systems’ inscribed in the representative regime of the dance, by letting the dance subjects from different national, cultural, and social backgrounds encounter each other through their sensibility to the dance. Reprinted extended discussions on the art and science of ballroom dance in Britain and other parts of Europe (very often Paris, which was still a dance capital in 1920s) were not infrequent in that period in Hong Kong newspapers.

The circulation of dance information actually helped set ballroom dance free from its social function as a nationalizing device. One physician studied the mileage covered by women in a night’s dance programme and suggested that ballroom dance was a more active exercise than golf (‘The Mileage of the Ballroom’); an article entitled ‘DANCING “DON’TS”’ in 1923 warned that dancers should not dance from ‘the feet upward’ but ‘the shoulder downward’, that a man ‘must not crush his partner against him, nor hold “her too gingerly”’, and the lady ‘must not tip or press her partner’s right arm with her left elbow’. Minute, meticulous descriptions such as these can instantly conjure lucid, animated images in a reading dancer’s mind, pressing for realization in the body. Merial Wilson, amateur ballroom dance champion of Ireland, gave his opinion on dancing and deportment in terms of ‘the lissom line and modern clothes’ in the article ‘EVERY DANCE THE DRESS IT DESERVES’, in 1928, singing praises to the dance as a somatic form of ‘strength combined with suppleness’. Reading the words from fellow countrymen in the newspaper about their fellow countrymen miles away certainly makes one feel at home. Nonetheless, the identity of a ballroom dancer cannot be confined to one

nationality and eventually redirects one's gaze to his or her own dancing body and the bodies around.

In fact, apart from the light-hearted tea-dance music discussion mentioned earlier, a vibrant ballroom dance culture was already budding in the 1920s. Many dance events were advertised as dance attractions rather than social rituals. In *The China Mail* on 28 October 1927, a small notice of the event stated that the 'exhibition of the latest ballroom dances' would be part of the programme of the Saturday dinner dance. The dances to be included were the 'Fox Trot, Tango and Charleston' as well as 'One Step, Waltz, Boston and Slow Fox Trot' ('BALLROOM DANCE'). Advertisements as such also show that ballroom dancing was already a performance art in its own right for both embodiment and seeing. Eventually, a reflective gaze was directed toward the self. Unlike the newspaper coverage of national balls which provide a collective national mirror image for the dancers, the discussion of the views and experiences of dancing in the newspaper exhibits a spirited, heterogenic public space of many voices. On 25 May 1927 in *The Hong Kong Telegraph* an article opens with the statement that

[t]he fairly recent correspondence in the local press on the subject of modern dancing led principally to a controversy as to whether or not Hongkong was up-to-date in the matter.

The concern for dancing compellingly opened up a space for the articulation of a local identity. The main concern of this article was to introduce a (globally) trendy new dance, the Heebie Geebies. The dance steps are explained in detail, providing a textual invitation of embodiment: 'It is the Flat Charleston par excellence, with new steps in the gliding movement, during which the feet are kept on the floor, and with

other movements recalling the Black Bottom'. The article closes with a confident statement in the local fast-learning dance scene: 'Hongkong[sic], with its accustomed quickness to adopt the latest in ballroom fashions, ought soon to be Heebie Geebieing with the best of them' ('Modern Dancing'). These discussions on the local dance scene witness a collective identity with its own characters and fame, which is formed through participatory everyday dancing instead of indoctrinating social ritual.

### **The early Chinese ballroom dance landscape: a mirror image of Shanghai**

The Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong in the 1920s were channels of information, opinions and news about mainland China, taking advantage of the relative freedom of press in Hong Kong. The major Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Canton, and Hunan were the sites of events for news coverage, while there was only scarce coverage of news in Hong Kong as it was not considered a site of happenings. Indeed, the Chinese dance landscape in Hong Kong was the inferior mirror image of that in Shanghai.

The Chinese press representation of dance in Hong Kong in the inter-war period paralleled its English counterpart in an uncanny manner: although rarely did they focus on the same event before 1932, both took a distant location as the centre for reference. The dance news in Hong Kong in this period allowed one to have a glimpse of the notorious side of the dance scene in Shanghai, mostly sensational stories about public incidents in dance venues or about the private lives of dance hostesses, that is, paid female dance partners. The coverage of the news of the Shanghai dance scene contributed to the understanding of the dance as a luxurious Shanghainese nightlife and promiscuous entertainment. Sporadic representations of

European dance events and incidents in the Chinese newspaper attributed to ‘western’ quality of the dance. The prevalence of ballroom dance representations in Chinese advertisements for personal care and health products suggests the dance as the symbol of western, middle-class, inter-sex, and physically intimate encounters. Nevertheless, this culture and image of ballroom dance was largely a Shanghainese heritage brought about by the Shanghainese refugees, many of whom were entrepreneurs and middle-class.

If the ballroom dance subject concerned in the English newspaper was the imperial British subjects, for the Chinese newspaper it was the dance hostesses, and more specifically, the Shanghainese dance hostesses. The reported stories of the dance hostesses were always obsessively exotic and spectacular. An extreme case was the close-following of the story of Pak Ying 白英, a dance hostess in Shanghai. On 21 July 1930, *The Kung Sheung Daily News* reported Pak Ying’s life story in an extended coverage with a very melodramatic title: ‘The karma of hostess Pak Ying’s depravation: the lonely life of a socialite in a deformed society; forced to commit suicide — a battle in a love triangle; an alert for modern romantic women’. The long-winded title summarized its highly sensual content. The same story was retold again four days later in the same publication, in a court hearing for Pak’s case, in which her lover who forced her into self-intoxication was trialled. Pak survived this incident, and travelled to Hong Kong on 29 August 1930 ‘with several men and women’, as reported again by the same paper (‘Dance Hostess’). The dance hostesses in Shanghai as represented in the Chinese press were intriguing mixtures of commodity, celebrity, sex symbol and social tragedy. And there was hardly any dancing mentioned.

Despite the frequent appearance in the news as such, the dance was considered a practice for the few privileged Chinese and the westerners. The editorial of the *Kung Sheung Daily News* on 29 February 1928, commenting on the Hong Kong dance craze and the rumour of the ban on dancing in Guangzhou, criticized the dance phenomenon as a decadent and luxurious hobby of the rich and powerful, who were usually the same people that advocated good morality in the public. While the dance itself was ‘a Western tradition. It is their norm that men and women skipped in braces on social occasions... There are many things that China should learn from the West but just not this extravagant practice’ (‘Can Dance Ban’). The early appearance of ballroom dance in Hong Kong Chinese newspapers indeed presented a picture of the rich and the powerful, sometimes with local Chinese (in)famous celebrities. The Jockey Club in Macau frequently held dances joined by both western and Chinese celebrities (‘The Dance at the Macau Jockey Club’); the farewell dance for Governor Clementi was featured, though the actual dancing in the event was not a concern for the press (‘A Farewell to Governor Clementi from All Sectors of the Society’); the many charity dances by British social organizations with the presence of some wealthy Chinese businessmen were also covered in brevity (‘Advertisements’).

As the mirror image of the Shanghainese dance landscape and culture, the Chinese ballroom dance culture in 1920s’ Hong Kong was inherently representative, in the Rancièrian sense: performing ballroom dance was about engaging a particular way of practice and fitting in a particular set of imagery defined by the culture. Such culture thus privileged visual representations of the dance, as witnessed in the use of ballroom imagery in advertisements, signifying a fashionable, westernized, middle-class lifestyle that supported the freedom for inter-sexual social encounter. Fig. 1.2-

1.5 show some very common and prevalent advertisements in newspapers, respectively selling a cough syrup (fig. 1.2 & 1.3), a perfumed ammonia (fig. 1.4), and a medicinal health supplement (fig. 1.5). The two cough syrup advertisements (for the same product) entwine ballroom dancing and romance with slightly different strategies: fig. 1.2 colours the black-and-white picture and puts the still image in movement with a small verse of four lines that describes a night of dancing from the beginning to the end, with the suggestion of taking the product if the romantic event



Fig. 1.2 An advertisement of a cough syrup Pak Loh Sin 白羅仙. Verses on the left read (from right to left): ‘Dancing in light and shades/Endless love flows between lovers/A cold triggers a cough after dancing/Take Pak Loh Sin immediately’.

Source: *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 28 April 1928

and the vigorous dancing induce coughing. Figure 1.3 advises that the product can aid an amorous situation by suppressing a hindrance — coughing — to intimacy. The subtle ballroom dance image used in figure 1.4 highlights the foreignness of the product, Scrubb’s perfumed ammonia, which is to be put in bath water for

fragrance and reducing stimulants in the water (according to the description), and aids a situation of intimacy where aromatic connections work best. Fig. 1.5



Fig. 1.3 An advertisement for the Pak Loh Sin cough syrup. The caption for the picture which depicts a man coughing and a woman frowning, reads: 'It won't be so disgusting if Pak Loh Sin was taken before hand'.

Source: The Chinese Mail, 24 December 1932

exhibits the undertone of the Chinese imagination of ballroom dancing: featuring a couple dancing in the middle, two traditional Chinese medicinal products stated on the sides, on the left is a medicine for regulating menstruation and curing gynaecological problems and on the right is a supplement specifically for men of frail bodies. The association

of ballroom dancing and sex-health products indicates with an overt concern of reproductivity, the assumption that inter-sex couple dancing is a pretext for copulation. The wide circulation of these images in the daily life of the Chinese in Hong Kong perpetuated their understanding and imagination of ballroom dance as a foreign and licentious activity.



Fig. 1.4 An advertisement for Scrubb's new perfumed ammonia. The title of the caption reads 'lasting and pleasant'.

Source: The Chinese Mail, 24 December 1932

Nevertheless, dancing demands bodily participation, especially a social dance like ballroom. Apart from advertisements that utilized the cultural image of ballroom dance, there were also advertisements for Chinese dance academies which, in fact, caught the unwanted attention of the European public and the authorities. In 1930, one dance academy, Miss Har Man Dancing School 夏文姑娘跳舞學校 gave classes on 'the latest dances' every day with tea dance practice sessions on Sundays.

Though the dances were not specified, the tea-dance arrangement, a conventional practice for ballroom dance, suggests that they were of this



Fig. 1.5 An advertisement for a pharmacy, Hip Wo 協和藥行. Two kinds of medicines, respectively for boosting the vitality of men and curing infertility for women.

Source: *The Chinese Mail*, 24 December 1932

kind. The simplicity of the advertisement, without any sensual or sensory enjoyment as attraction also shows that there were Chinese people dancing for the sake of dancing. Contrary to this dance academy was the King Edward Hotel, one popular venue for the Chinese to dance with western dance instructors assisting in a tea dance, as early as in 1927 ('Dance in King Edward Hotel'). Regular tea dances were organized on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday (fig. 1.6) and were frequented by local movie stars, famous socialites/prostitutes, and sometimes

western celebrities such as an Australian athlete ('Australian athlete organizing a dance today'). Each dance featured famous musicians and Chinese and western cuisine (fig. 1.6). All these advertisements indicate that among the Chinese, while the Shanghainese influence



Fig. 1.6 Advertisements of tea dance in the King Edward Hotel. The picture caption reads 'Dance in Chinese Clothing'. The description suggests the presence of 'famous musicians' and the provision of Chinese and western afternoon tea snacks.

Source: *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 28 April 1928.

was going strong in the general perception of the dance, in everyday practices people from a variety of backgrounds were dancing their way out in different manners.

### **The collapse of the two dance systems, 1932-34**

What is more interesting than the two parallel dance universes in one city, which are more than happy to disregard each other, is how they are brought into

encounters. A prelude of the period began in 1932 when the dancing academies operated by the Chinese caught English media attention, being praised as ‘well run and inexpensive’ (‘DANCING “ACADEMIES”’). But entering the sight of the European public and the authorities meant becoming an object of rule. In 1933, a legislator regarded the (Chinese) dancing academies as ‘social evils’ and demanded the licensing and regulation of the enterprises, arousing certain dissensus in the European public (‘Colony’s Dancing Academies’). Though this incident was concluded with an expression of authoritative power to reinforce the colonial difference essential for the ruler, the merging of the ‘two systems’ in ballroom dance was irreversible. The first open dance competition in 1934 with both western and Chinese participants was significant not because a Chinese couple won the contest, but because the pleasure all dancers regardless of ethnicity experienced denounced the binary structure of the coloniser-colonised/ Chinese-European/ powerful-powerless and suggested possibilities for new social networks and relations.

The merging of the ‘two systems’ was actually also seen in other aspects of the society in the form of breaking a common ground for attention: the local. For example, for the news coverage, local news — on ballroom dancing and other issues — began to take up more and more space and became a site of expressing concerns, despite the diverging perspectives in the English and Chinese press. These encounters of the dancers of the two camps, therefore, marked the crucial moments of ‘[t]he intervention of the Third Space of enunciation’ which makes the structure of meaning and references ‘an ambivalent process’ that disrupts Anderson’s homogenous empty time. Encountering the Chinese ballroom dance practices, the Europeans in town could not limit their understanding of the dance within the racial,

cultural and social boundary. And ballroom dance, although at that time already rendered in various practices, was further democratised — along a very different line this time. Ballroom dance, with its participatory tendency as well as the codified system of corporeal vocabularies for articulation, constituted a Bhabha's Third Space: 'It is that Third Space, although unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha 54). A Third Space cancels out the original colonial distribution of sensible *and* the inherent power structure.

In *The Hong Kong Daily Press*, an English newspaper on 11 August 1932, an article of considerable length and displaying an anthropological curiosity and carefulness, explored the 'dancing academies' run by the Chinese. A western reporter from the press was sent to get 'first hand[sic] knowledge of most of these places'. The article gives a detailed description of the then peculiar establishment in the eyes of the western reporter: it was founded by a Mr. Yip, 'a local Chinese dancing enthusiast', on 'the sixth floor of the King's Theatre Building', 'well run...with the utmost propriety'. The patrons in the dancing academies in general were decent responsible beings, as the reporter praises: 'All of these places are run as private clubs and only members and their friends are admitted. The members are all people of good repute, and they are responsible for the conduct of the friends they introduce. Rowdyism is strictly prohibited, and no intoxicating drinks are sold. The academies are run for dancing, and dancing alone'.

Compared with the comments on the dancing academies in the Chinese press that were later published, and the severe criticism and regulations that came in 1933,

this article seems to be written with a joy of naiveté in the discovery of a fascinating rendition of a familiar cultural form. The dance hostesses in the dance academies, in the eyes of the writer, were professionals; race did not stand out as an issue. Most of them were Chinese and a few were Portuguese and Eurasian and did not speak English; none of them were allowed to sit at tables with the patrons. Very few European patrons visited and ‘usually...[those] who speak Chinese’. A spectacle in the scene was the presence of the parents of some of the dancing partners ‘to escort them home’. The dance hostesses had earned the respect from the writer: ‘They are all paid on a commission basis and receive a percentage on the receipts of each dance. To these girls dancing is the business by which they make their living, and they do not mix business with pleasure’ (‘DANCING “ACADEMIES”’).

The reporter compares and comments on the dance academies visited with genuine concern for the quality of the experience. In some establishments, the dancers were not ‘clever’, and the music and the floor were inferior. Most of the academies had orchestras, and few relied on recordings. The writer celebrated the Chinese dance academies so much so that they were seen as better alternatives for the redundant customs and obligatory spending attached to the European social dance practices. These Chinese dance academies were regarded as ‘meeting a real demand by people who want clean recreation at reasonable price’. With his or her focus solely on the dance, the writer took much pride in the practice as well as in Hong Kong for the decency of the establishments:

Many of the Chinese, who until now were unable to dance, are taking to this European form of amusement. The good class of Chinese and Europeans who are patronising these dances is proof of the clean and honest manner in which these places are run. No one who has

attended these “academies” can with fairness compare them with the cabarets of Shanghai and Manila, where the amusement is on a far different standard. “Drunks” and women of the town are kept out of the cabarets as in most other Far Eastern cities. These academies do nothing to hurt the good name of Hong Kong and do a great deal to make life a little more enjoyable to the younger generation (‘DANCING “ACADEMIES”’).

A sense of belonging around ‘the good name of Hong Kong’ and ballroom dance arises in the encounter with the cultural other. Despite the good will and cautiousness of the western journalist, as Bhabha suggests, the real experience of the third space always comes as a shock — which might not always be pleasant.

Over the issue of the dance academies, opinions could no longer be divided along racial demarcation. In the *Chinese Mail* 華字日報 on 24 November 1932, an article titled ‘The flourishing of dance venues’ 方興未艾之跳舞場 took on the same subject in a detached tone, with slight contempt. The article began with the judgement that the dancing academies were in reality the same as the Shanghainese night clubs. It was not excited or optimistic about their development: there were once around twenty academies, although several had already closed down, and the trend had not subsided. This article shows that not only the dance academies were under Shanghainese influences; the way to look at them was too, and the focus was put on the dance hostesses instead of the dancing, as seen in the closing remarks: ‘Dance venues today are drastically different from the dance academies before. Both students and outsiders can buy tickets and choose to dance with any dance hostess. Normally one dollar for three tickets... The dance hostesses make good income. They probably get 40% from the total income and 60% of it goes to the venue. Good-

looking dance hostesses are particularly busy'. The disparate observations and understandings of the Chinese dancing academies, while proving the lack of common ground between the Europeans and the Chinese on the dance, can also be seen as the complexity of everyday ballroom dance practices that immediately resists all interpretations by allowing them all: it can be dancing, nightlife, leisure activities and business — and all at the same time.

The Chinese dancing academies, with a dance form similar enough to be identified (by the Europeans) and a social existence different enough to be called a problem, caught the colonial authority's attention. The news on 15 February 1933 on several newspapers then came as a bit of a shock: The Chinese 'dancing academies' made the headlines of both *The China Mail* and *The Hong Kong Telegraph*, being regarded as 'social evil' by legislator José Pedro Braga, who was going to raise the issue in the Legislative Council on the following day. Braga condemned the dancing academies as a 'a cause of very real anxiety and dissatisfaction among parents because of the dangers to which they expose young and inexperienced people', demanded that the Inspector General of Police provide details of the establishments, and questioned whether there were regulations on the operation of the academies ('DANCING ACADEMIES'; 'Colony's Dancing Academies'). Braga attempted to draw a line between the European dance he understood and the suspicious practice some Chinese did by the use of 'cabaret', and the emphasis on the fallacy of the name 'dancing academies', yet the dance mania of the time in the city — not just among the Chinese — did make it a rather difficult undertaking: right on the page next to Braga's questions among crosswords puzzle and advertisements was a vivid dance instruction article (fig. 1.7), showing how commonplace and popular ballroom dancing was in 1933. Interestingly, Braga's intention to curb the growth of the



regulations for opening hours and activities (Hong Kong Government 1933). It can be said that by enacting the ordinance, the authority had provided itself yet another channel to control the subject and enhanced its own regulatory power. Nevertheless, such an act had also positioned the Chinese subjects in a public beyond the institutional definition and redefined by the deliberate choice of practice — ballroom dance — instead of the predetermined racial identity. Apart from the appreciative European journalist(s) who regarded the Chinese dance academies as dance havens, after the Council meeting on 19 February, the editorial of the *Hong Kong Sunday Herald* expressed concerns over the issue that

care should be taken, however, that the regulations are not made too rigid as suppression may be attended by undesirable consequences.

There is not much night life in Hong Kong and dancing is a relaxation and entertainment which is a recognized part of modern life. As long as steps are taken to guarantee the good conduct of the dancing establishments no undue restrictions need be enforced.

Yet, a public is neither a homogenous whole nor even a totalized entity. The shift of the narrative in the English press from taking ballroom dance practices as a particular cultural phenomenon of a race to a universal practice with different social forms did suggest that on the everyday level the racial demarcation was loosened up, to assume harmony between the European and the Chinese would be an indiscreet judgment. In this dance academy saga, the Chinese press had a completely different perspective and concern.

The Chinese press took the regulation of dance academies as just another imposition of order, and this time not even a measure that would affect the life of the

majority. A translation of Braga's questions was published in *Tien Kwong Morning News* 天光報 and *The Kung Sheung Daily News* 工商日報 on the day of the meeting, on 16 February 1933. The titles of both articles mentioned Braga's suggestion of imposing a ban on the dancing academies, which he actually did not, according to the English press coverage and the minutes of the Council meeting. For the Chinese press, the focus of the issue was not on the government decision or the actual content of the public order but the reaction among the Chinese residents and its impact on the dance hostesses. The English press no longer followed the dancing academies' saga after the 19 February editorial, but that was the beginning of the Chinese press's concern over the issue: on 23 February in both *Tien Kwong Morning News* and *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, a notice of a debate on 'whether dancing is harmful to the society' that was going to take place at the University of Hong Kong, the only university of the colony then, was published.

While the public space for the Chinese to discuss local public affairs seemed to emerge among a new generation and class in a new institution, the newspapers continued to consider the authority irrelevant to the lives of local Chinese. On 1 June, a news article sourced from rumours from the dance academies stated that dance hostesses would need to get registered 'to avoid undesirable subjects', and former prostitutes were not allowed to get registered ('All Dance Hostesses'). In November, the rumour was confirmed, and later *Kung Sheung Daily News* reported that 'many dancing academies received notifications yesterday and all the dancing girls hurried to take photos for the registration' ('All Dance Hostesses Have to Be Registered'). On 16 November in *Tien Kwong Morning News* the registration method was explained: 'it is just like registering the prostitutes. Two photos would be taken, one for the record of the Department of Chinese Affairs and the other for

one's own license' ('Dance Hostess Registration Method'). The sole concern for the Chinese press in the regulation of the dancing academies were, still, the dance hostesses. In 1934, there were news reports suggesting a hiccup in the business with a drastic decrease in the number of both dance hostesses and academies ('The Recent Dance Scene'; 'A Drastic Drop in the Number of Dance Hostesses'). After the dancing academies saga, the Chinese press lost interests in dance hostesses as flamboyant and decadent celebrities, although a local orientation was taken with equal degrees of voyeurism and sensuousness.

The division of opinion between the government and the editorial in the English press presents a curious case that echoes and contrasts postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee's ideas, in his work *Empire and Nation*, on anticolonial politics and translates them into an approach to understand the formation of the local community. The government's urge to discipline the Chinese dancing academies illustrates the colonial authority's creation of a colonial difference for its rule; the 'two systems' were not so much for the autonomy of the ruled but an affirmation of the authority's power to create categories. Braga's description of the dancing academies as 'social evil' was necessary for 'the preservation of the alienness of the object of rule as well as of the ruling group' (32). However, in this case, the demarcating concept — race — could no longer function with the intrusion of dance that upset the original social and power relation. The opposition to the stern control of the dance from the European community makes the case intriguing: the dance system of the westerners was not as heterogenous as imagined. The scenario can be regarded as the beginning of an anticolonial project, as suggested by Chatterjee.

With the case of India as the point of reference, Chatterjee suggests that one misconception in understanding anticolonial movement is that it is taken as a

political project from the beginning ‘much too literally and much too seriously’ (26). For him, the anticolonial movement is, first of all, a creative movement reforming the everyday life, creating new forms of representation for the new subjectivity such as the creation of new prose for novels, new drama forms in India that were not western, not traditional Indian, but modern to nationalist India (28-9). He says ‘anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty *within* colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power’ (my emphasis, 26). In the case of Chinese dancing academies, ‘dissensus’ came from within the privileged community precisely in the name of local modern life. The gradual forming of a local form of life, that is the material and ‘inner’ domain regarded by Chatterjee, becomes a natural resistance to intervention. And the subject of resistance, as in the light of this case, cannot be defined in any clean, straightforward predetermined classification; it is the *local* that creates its own form of life and insists on it.

The Chinese dancing academies as a social form of ballroom dance practice presented an ‘ambivalent enunciation’ to the Europeans that conjured a discomfiting third space, borrowing Bhabha’s idea, in which the ambivalent encounter took place. The dancing-academy phenomenon was both exciting and incomprehensible to the English press, presenting an alien form of a familiar dance they too practice. This ‘moment of differentiation’ (Bhabha 51) both assured the universality of the (British) dance form and challenged the (British) cultural authority, introducing ‘a split in the performative present of cultural identification’ between the traditional demand for unity and ‘the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demand’ (ibid). Quoting Frantz Fanon, Bhabha regards the time of cultural uncertainty as the time of liberation, first and foremost

from the original system of signification. The indifference of the Chinese press and community to the regulation, although constituted by many factors, demonstrated how ‘the enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division...at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address’: the dancing academies, with their cultural legacy from Shanghai and America, were business models adopted by the Chinese and adapted locally without the slight concern to act against or along the European dance scene (34). Despite the fact that the regulation of the dance academies had not threatened the local Chinese ‘inner domain’ (Chatterjee) so that it might lead them into direct confrontation, the case showed that the ‘national’, for Chatterjee, sovereignty or that of any generic community, has to be disinterested in any external factors and independent in its own form of being to acquire an emancipatory political potential.

#### **The dance competition, 1934**

If the authority’s expression of power over the colonized within the realm of public order has normalized the disruptive power of the encounter of cultural differences without altering the imaginations of the city much, the encounter in the aesthetics of the dance forced the Europeans and the Chinese into a direct confrontation as dancers, stripped of other demarcations. On 28 May 1934, *The Hong Kong Daily Press* reported the colony’s ‘first open dancing competition’ held at the Hongkong[sic] Hotel while a letter to the editor on *The China Mail* on the same day made a criticism on the judging of the competition by popular vote. The competition was part of a promotional event organized by a local theatre to advertise its new movie *George White’s Scandals*. A total of 538 people attended the event to watch eighteen couples compete, marking a crowd the ‘largest recorded in the history of the hotel’ (‘CHINESE COUPLE WIN’). *The Hong Kong Daily Press’s*

coverage recorded that the champion had 91 votes, the first runner-up 85 votes, and second runner-up 78 votes. Judging from the names, only the female dancer in the third prize winner was a Westerner and the rest were all Chinese. Prizes included a Max Factor compact beauty set, a handbag (donated by the department store Sincere Company), and two free seats at the Kings Theatre for one and three months.

*The Hong Kong Daily Press* saw this event as a cultural turn in the local dance scene: 'The not unpopular idea that ball-room dancing in Hongkong is for the most part a means to attain a social end would appear to require revising'. However, not everybody was happy with it. A correspondent FAIR PLAY wrote to the editor of *The China Mail* complaining about 'canvassed voting'. Accusing that 'some of the contestants, or parties interested in some of the contestants, rallied forces to force a decisive vote on much the same lines as a Government gathers support for some item of legislation', FAIR PLAY proposed that 'it would be a sound plan, when and if similar competitions are held, to appoint a body of competent judges and thus eliminate the commercialization of what should be a sporting event' (FAIR PLAY). This criticism furthered the shift of the dance practice from social activity to artistic endeavour by proposing an external social form that might sustain and elaborate the common aspirations that brought the dance public together. In Chatterjee's words, this is an autonomous form of imagination of the community (33), a proposal of a 'state' — in its broadest sense — to 'protect the inviolability of the private self in relation to other private selves' (32). Despite all its short coming, this dance competition was still arguably the most democratic event in 1934 Hong Kong since 1841.

Chu busts the myth of the promise of prosperity endowed to ‘Two Systems’ in terms of the operational logic of the global political economy: on the one hand, this myth is sustained by Hong Kong’s historical role as ‘capital of freewheeling capital’ (Chow, quoted in Chu 15); on the other the hand, the ‘Two Systems’ is destined to collapse not so much because the socialist system would intrude Hong Kong, but China will eventually ‘surpas[s] Hong Kong in terms of capitalism’, and Hong Kong would lose its strategic value as a gateway for China to global market and capital.

Reconsidering Chu’s remarks on ballroom dancing in 1920s-1930s’ Hong Kong yields a different insight: while both designs were part of the colonial legacy, the ‘two systems’ of ballroom dance crumbled from within. Defined according to race and made functional by colonialism, this external distribution of two oppositional systems of dance and race was, in the end, dissolved not by any anti-colonial forces, but by the craving for and curiosity about dancing. As witnessed by the enthusiasm of the dance contest in 1934, the new subject that emerged was the collective dancers, regardless of pre-defined identity markers such as race, and organized around the participatory dance, in which people reinvented themselves and their awareness of the place they inhabited. Learning from the transformation of the ballroom dance landscape in early twentieth century Hong Kong, perhaps the crisis of the ‘Two Systems’ today may not look so grim and indeed calls for a more active self-transformation that would also transform the city.

Indeed, from the 1930s onwards, a variety of dance organizations began to emerge, which can be seen as the new collective subjects’ attempts to construct a social existence for themselves and their practices. However, as Chapter Two will show, the formation of dance organizations in Hong Kong has been influenced by

many forces that, most often, do not concern the aesthetics, practices and culture of the dance; these organizations more often dismantle than bring together the dance public. Chapter Two borrows Judith Butler's discussion of public assemblies to identify the difference forces that bring dancers together, the shape of their 'public bodies' and their influences, and to suggest that the fragmented dance scene in fact reflects the challenges that Hong Kong faces in building a spontaneous and meaningful public and its form of life.

## Chapter Two

### **The rise and fall of the Hong Kong ballroom dance public (and) organizations,**

#### **1930s to 1990s**

In her discussion on the dynamics and significance of mass protests today, Judith Butler suggests that '[i]t matters when bodies assemble' (7). This cannot be truer for the development of the ballroom dance tradition: the dance needs at least two people to happen, and always takes place with many dance couples dancing together on the floor with the audience around. Butler's understanding of freedom, as an experience that 'is more often than not exercised with others, not necessarily in a unified or conformist way' and 'a set of enabling and dynamic relations that include support, dispute, breakage, joy and solidarity' (27), is also one of the most precious rewards for many ballroom dancers. In Hong Kong nowadays, numerous dance organizations assemble ballroom-dancing bodies through different events such as competitions and dinner dances, and institutional systems and networks such as dance qualification examinations, organization membership and affiliations. However, excessive organizations separate the dance public rather than assemble them.

Tracing the development of the dance organizations in Hong Kong from a historical perspective illustrates how dance organizations change from the social form of existence of the self-organized dance public around dance practices and culture to profit-driven, self-contained entities that lead to the fall in attendance of the dance public. The corollary of the fragmentation of a collective subject is the loss of, to quote Butler's words, the relations of 'support, dispute, breakage, joy and solidarity' that enable the growth of a vibrant dance tradition and culture. The case of the development of the Hong Kong ballroom dance organizations, therefore,

proposes a reflection on mass assemblies, the public life in the city, and its significance in relation to knowledge and cultural production, which ultimately requires a collective subject. It also invites a reconsideration of Butler's performative theory of assembly around empowerment instead of precarity if we are to elucidate the performative and political capacity of the transient mass assemblies. As much as we need to understand everyday life in order to recognize historical events (see Chapter Three for discussion), we also need to examine what public assemblies make possible in everyday life to understand the changes that mass protests can bring about beyond the apparent futility in the ephemerality of the events.

Anthropologist and DanceSport practitioner Jonathan S. Marion regards the 'plethora of acronym,' of ballroom dance organizations in the world as 'alphabet soup' (20), and the term is particularly apt to sum up the situation in Hong Kong. Currently, the four most prominent organizations are: The Hong Kong Ballroom Dance Council (HKBDC), the local representative of the international World Dance Council; its biggest rival the Hong Kong DanceSport Association (HKDSA), the local representative of the World DanceSport Federation, an Olympic-Committee-recognized sports federation; the oldest organization, the Hong Kong International Professional Dance Sport Council (HKIPDSC), which has its own dance school; and the Hong Kong Ballroom Dance International (HKBDI), the local affiliate of the British Ballroom Dancers' Federation International. Apart from these four most prominent organizations, there are many more organizations, such as Asianeeds DanceSport Association (ADA), International (HK) Dance Association (IDA), and the Multi(International) Dancing Association (MD) etc.

What makes these acronyms look like 'alphabet soup' together is the randomness that results from the meaninglessness of most of these organisations to the dance

public. Their only difference lies merely in their names, which, ultimately, do not distinguish any difference in terms of aesthetic styles and forms, social practices or their representative dancers. These organisations, many of which were founded by only a small number of people, take in members and hold competitions and dance events for them. The more established ones also offer examinations for international dance qualifications. They do not matter to non-competitive social dancers, but they are omnipresent in the public realm of the dance, for example, the newspaper and the social and mass media, as these organizations compete for visibility. As the ballroom dance social media platform keeps circulating sponsored content from these organisations irrelevant to most dancers in the public, the platform fails to function as a public space to facilitate exchange. This myriad of dance organisations marks both the existence of a sizable dance population in Hong Kong as well as the fragmentation of this population.

Many of these organisations forbid non-members from participating in their competitions and sometimes even punish their own members from joining events held by other organizations to maintain their exclusiveness and protect their own members' dance titles by preventing unpredictable competitors from outside. The dance experiences of non-competitive-dancers have very little to do with these organisations. It is expensive to go to those dance events and these organisations are not fostering better dancing and dancers to make the dance experience — dancing and watching — more meaningful and enjoyable. For the competitive amateur and professional dancers, as they have to be affiliated with dance schools or be members of the event-holding organization if they want to compete in a particular competition, the choice of membership becomes a pragmatic concern. Among dancers I have interviewed, only very few younger dancers (Ng, Lam, Chan, and Tin) have actually

mentioned their organisation, in this case the HKDSA, as a supportive institution in their dance experience (see Chapter Five for discussion).

This phenomenon of the existence of superfluous organisations signifies the failure of social and aesthetic representations of the public, again illustrating Abbas' idea of dis-appearance: the appearance of dance organisations, which are supposed to make the dance community present, creates a disappearance of the collective subject and the necessary social condition for the aesthetic tradition to thrive. The problem incurred by this phenomenon is that the dance organizations, as social structures, fail to either represent the dance public and their aspirations or sustain and renew the dance tradition.

The idea of the 'public' matters in this discussion not only because it is the voluntary collective subject that emerges from the urban everyday life without being predefined by the authority. The public is also the subject that constructs practices and habits, sustains traditions, and almost invisibly but irresistibly builds and transforms everyday life by creating the conditions for their own lives to take place in a meaningful way. The ballroom dance form, culture, music, and places, for example, are some of these participatory creations resulting from dancers' everyday lives that, in return, shape their way of life. Public institutions are also called 'public bodies' as they *embody* the public, serving as the social existence and instrument for the collective subject of a city in excess. Similarly, if we need to understand everyday life to understand history (see Chapter T for discussion), we need to critically reflect upon the norm and the institutions that keep the everyday routine running in order to explore possibilities for change. Cultural traditions and social institutions are not only structures of hierarchical power relations or rigid and oppressive constructs but also conditions that incorporate shared values and

knowledge that is collectively produced. The highly codified ballroom dance form choreographs dancers' movements but also allows them to experience the freedom in their dancing bodies not accessible beyond dancing. Early dance organizations in Hong Kong created a level playing field for dancers to compete and co-produce dance experiences, knowledge and a tradition. Social and cultural constructs, in fact, testify to the fruitfulness and transformative capacity of everyday life and practices.

Judith Butler's attempt to conceive and articulate the global phenomenon of mass assemblies in public spaces against totalitarian governments or unequal distribution of wealth, through the critical lens of gender performativity, provides the necessary vocabularies for articulating the necessity of public assembly for the construction of a shared condition for individual beings. Conversely, the ballroom dance tradition — as a collectively constructed condition that allows self-transformation — proposes a reworking of Butler's framework around the agency instead of precarity of the collective bodies.

Unlike the gathering of the mass in dancing, in Butler's conception, mass political assemblies in different locations and at different times happened around precarity, which she defines as the politically induced condition that unevenly distributes fragility to part of the population, realized by not providing sufficient protection and exposing the subjects to violence (33-34). Butler uses gender performativity — the enactment of obligatory gender norm and the conforming of and/or contestation to the norm — as a mode of thought to articulate the political significance of these ephemeral collective actions. Butler argues that mass protests as collective appearances make a spatial statement of a shared condition of precarity refused by mainstream politics but affects lives from all walks and the demand for recognition.

The experience and the significance of the two forms of assemblies — ballroom-dancing together and a mass protest — diverge at this point: in political assemblies against precaritization, participants are driven by social and political inequalities into the precarious situation they are in; the situation is obligatory, and the individual experience is not empowering. Ballroom dancers today, however, dance voluntarily, and those who have clung to ballroom dancing for a long time often see dancing as an empowering condition where they can find their agency, however temporary. Indeed gender, as a social category that human beings are born into without a choice, is akin to the victims of precarity, people of some gender identities that are more socially vulnerable and culturally marginal. But, if we do actually want to identify the agency of ephemeral events, such as the public assemblies, that can entail changes, we have to shift our focus to the transformative and empowering experience of mass assemblies, which cannot be acquired individually. While each dance is ephemeral, the social structure and cultural norms that make dancing appear regularly include the location of the agency of mass assemblies. The norm that the people in the assemblies want to materialize is, therefore, the change to be inscribed in the fabrics of the existing reality.

Tracing the development of Hong Kong dance organizations in the light of Butler's concepts exhibits the trajectory of the rise and fall of a dance public. The first dance organization in Hong Kong was founded in 1939 in response to the growth of a culture of 'dance for dance's sake' and the rising popularity of the dance competition as a fashionable and significant practice. Between 1939 and 1952, the development of public bodies was marked by the attempt to normalize and formalize the dance competition practice and to promote ballroom dancing, as a performance to see and a dance to participate in, to the public beyond the dance circle. The

gradual standardization of competition and dance forms made ballroom dancing more participatory collectively, as dancers with the same set of corporal language could dance together and with each other more effectively. Around the routinized and standardized ballroom dance practices gathered a dance public bound by the same dance that allowed individual manifestations. The development of the dance organizations in 1967-1989 continued the formalization process by seeking international experience, connection and recognition. The emergence of community centres in the city in this period tremendously facilitated the formal teaching and learning of the dance. This phase of development has produced the generation of dancers and dance teachers that has nurtured the most prominent dance teachers today. As the tendency for professionalization and specialization in ballroom dance grew stronger, the dance, although still participatory, became less accessible to the public in the sense that one needed to engage specific social networks and places to acquire the corporal knowledge of the dance. However, the development after 1989 was characterized by the boom in organizations. Many organizations hardly represented any fraction of the dance public; they competed for economic interests and the monopoly of the dance scene by limiting dancers' freedom to dance in competitions held by different organizations. This development resulted in the fall of the dance public as well as the decline in the vitality of the local dance culture and tradition.

This chapter, by outlining the landscape formed and fractured by the dance organizations from a historical perspective, recognizes the need for the establishment of public organizations for the consolidation of ordinary ballroom dancers' collective effort, values and repetitive but ephemeral everyday practices. Yet, the authenticity of an effective public body lies in the values it celebrates and thus draws together the

public, which can only appear in many expressions and cannot be monopolized. The novelty of an organization should be defined by its particular form of expression of the irreconcilable new aesthetics. In other words, not all separations, or in this case the founding of new dance organizations breaking away from existing establishments, jeopardise the public. However, the present development of dance organizations in Hong Kong *is* a detrimental situation because it neglects both the space in which competitive dancers can appear and the condition for the collective social and aesthetic processes of the ballroom dance tradition.

### **1939-1952: Regular mass assemblies and the rise of a dance public**

The beginning of the formation of dance organization was characterized by the performative practices of the competition. In this period, the organizations made competition an instrumental practice for ballroom dancing. Each competition was an opportunity to refine its own structure, making it more effective as a condition for the mass dancing assembly for the public, and the regular appearance of a few members determined by their supreme quality of dancing. In this period, four organizations were established, namely, The Hongkong Chinese Dancers' Association 中華舞藝協進會 (HCDA, 1939), Three Dragons Arts Society 三龍藝術研究社 (TDAS, 1946), The Hongkong Chinese Dancers' Council 華人舞藝界聯合總會 (HCDC, 1947), and The Amateur Dancers' Association 香港業餘舞會 (ADA, 1949). All four organizations became extinct by the 1960s, but they had successfully created a dance culture outside of the nightclub and manifested the artistry of the dance to the public, gathering a loosely-organized dance public around various dance teachers, star performers and dance academies.

The HCDA's first recorded event, 'Hong Kong Amateur Dance Charity Cup', was held on 3 February 1939, 'to raise funds for the refugees, and the proceeds will be given to the British Fund for Distress in China' ('HCDA'). The competition lasted for three days, with the first two days for preliminary rounds and the final on the last day. It took place in the majestic Hongkong Hotel; competition events included quick foxtrot, waltz and slow foxtrot. The competition took up the international amateur competition musical settings, that is, three parts of quick foxtrot music with each part consisting of forty-eight beats; for the waltz, three parts with thirty beats each; for the slow foxtrot, three parts and twenty beats each ('First Day'). There were seven judges consisting of 'famous local dance teachers and British dancers' ('Dance Contest'). Audience members watching the competition needed to pay for a ticket, \$1.5 for the early rounds and \$2 for the final. This competition, therefore, created both champion dancers and an audience who watched the dance without dancing themselves. Though the competition was organized for charity purposes, it was considered an event to find 'the king of the dance circle' ('HCDA'). Three dance couples were chosen as winners and all of them were Chinese, although the competition was attended by both Chinese and western participants.

In 1940, the HCDA organized another competition on 22 December. This time, the competition was held unapologetically for the sake of the dance, in order 'to provide the opportunity for dancers, who are keen to study the art of dancing, to learn from each other' ('Dance Contest'). On top of the three dances in the previous competition, tango was added as the fourth dance. Eleven days before the competition, a newspaper article suggested that interested dancers to sign up for the competition in one of the three dance academies, namely Lai Sze 麗斯, Paramount 百

樂門 and the Moon Palace 月宮. The link between the HCDA and the dance academies implies the nature of the former as an alliance and a network of dance academies. The competition took place in Ritz Garden 麗池, a new extravagant restaurant opened on 29 August of the same year, with a dance floor and a swimming pool, in North Point 北角, on the east end of the Hong Kong Island. Three couples were chosen as winners, and the event concluded with a tango performance given by Kan Tang Chow 簡騰周 and Tang Lai Ping 鄧麗屏. HCDA's continuous effort to organize a formal annual competition shows an intention to popularize as well as to regularize dance competition as a norm. The competitions brought together various parties in the social network formed around ballroom dance including dance teachers, dancers, dance schools and hotel ballrooms.

The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong from 25 December 1941 to 6 August 1945 ruptured the local everyday routine of the ordinary people, ballroom dancing and competition included.<sup>1</sup> Dance competitions soon resumed after the war. On 20 April 1946, the HCDA held the 'Hong Kong Chinese Open Quick Foxtrot Competition on the rooftop dance floor of the Hongkong Hotel. The competitors and participants were 'exceptionally exhilarated, all dressed to their best, creating an event of unprecedented grandeur'. Three couples were named the winners ('A Note').

The post-war celebratory vibrancy of the everyday life in the city was marked by, in ballroom dancing, the emergence of another public organization. On 4 May 1946, the Three Dragons Arts Society (TDAS) organized a Three Dragon Cup Open

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<sup>1</sup> It was interesting to see the Hong Kong Government in May 1941 thinking of increasing the license fee for dance venues. The entire city did not seem to see the war coming, even a few months before it broke out.

Chinese Amateur Slow Waltz Competition in the Chung Wah Dance Hall 中華舞廳. Winners were chosen by popular vote ('Slow Waltz'). In 1947, TDAS formed a team representing Hong Kong in a team match against the Canton team and won. On 7 December 1947, a Hong Kong and Canton team match took place in Chung Wah Dance Hall, Hong Kong, and it received extended coverage in the newspaper. It was reported that the Hong Kong team had 'better technique' while the Canton team had 'more figure' (see Chapter Three for discussion of this event). Singing and tap dance performances were included in the programme of the event. In this cross-city competition, in the realm of ballroom dance a Hong-Kong identity emerged, distinguished by the aesthetic characteristics of dancers' dancing ('better technique') and not only the difference in origin.

The HCDA, nevertheless, remained the major dance contest organizer. On 7 July 1946, it held a charity slow foxtrot competition for the Tung Wah Hospital. The event took place in the Hoi Suen Dance Hall in Shek Tong Tsui and 'all amateur dance experts in Hong Kong would give guest performances'. The HCDA organized an All Hong Kong Open Amateur Four Dances Competition on 29 December 1946 in Chung Wah Dance Hall. Competition results were made by the adjudicators' decision and popular vote ('Competition Commenced Today').

The HCDA continued to organize the Open Four Dances Competition at the end of the year to make it a tradition. Originally scheduled for 24 December 1947, it was postponed to 18 Jan 1948. The ticket price was \$5 and all income was given to charity after deducting the expenditure. At the beginning, eight couples signed up but only four turned up. But the atmosphere was one of heightened enthusiasm and intensity ('Open Four-Dance Contest'). A first-person account of the happenings beyond the dance floor gave a profile of the scene: the floor was open to social

dancing before the contest started. The floor was packed with people's backs rubbing each other's; the performances gave the audience so much of a thrill that the situation was brought into a chaos. 'Some audience left their seats and were pushed to the edge of the floor; others got on the chairs and the tables, crushing many glass wares'; many dance hostesses were present among the audience and they knew each other and were recognizable by the dance public; reputable dancers Lee Tong Mei and Tse Lo Bat were among the crowd as audience members without competing or giving a performance (Kwai Lim). The participants of the event, from this portrait, did have a heterogeneous composition from all walks of life and all forms of ballroom dance practice. The event encapsulated the core of the ballroom dance public.

The Hongkong Chinese Dancers' Council (HCDC) was founded in 1947 'for the purpose of improving the standard of dancing in the south China' (Kwan). It might have been founded to distinguish the amateur dance public from the professional dance teachers, who were regular winners in competitions. On 1 August 1948, the HCDC organized the Open Chinese Amateur Quick Foxtrot Competition in the Hoi Suen Dance Hall, with all the prize gift sponsored by a dance hostess. Five teams did not show up the competition, so seven teams competed in three rounds (Bing). Tse Lo Bat and other dance teachers adjudicated the event and gave performances. The winners were not seen in earlier competition, implying the significance of the organization in providing the condition for new appearances, as well as the rapidly growing dance enthusiasts one generation after another.

The HCDA had planned to hold its 1948 All Hong Kong Open Chinese Amateur Dance Championship on 5 December 1948 in Hoi Suen Dance Hall 凱旋舞廳, but there was no evidence for the actual occurrence of this event, which could

have been the grandest with the most and the best local competitors and performers. The news coverage showed a forming tradition: when listing the (male) competitors, each was bracketed with the previous titles won and the year of award. For example, Lee Tong Mei was underlined as ‘the 1946 champion’, and Lee Wai ‘champion of a single dance this year’. Many of the local champions since 1946 signed up for the competition, and there were also applications from dancers in Canton. Many local popular dancers, considered to be professional, were on the list of the performance programme and they were marked by the dance academy or dance hall they belonged to (‘Open Dance Competition’). What was curious was the separation between the professional and the amateur, which did not seem to be a functional classification at that time. Participant Lee Tong Mei, for instance, who was listed as an amateur competitor, was openly known as the teacher of Tse Lo Bat, one of the most notable dance teacher and dancers at that time. There was certainly the chance that Lee was not by profession a dancer/ dance teacher, though the presence of such an experienced dancer in an amateur competition may incur questions of fairness.

But the professional-amateur division certainly became an issue after these competitions. A group of past winners of dance competitions had a meeting to discuss the establishment of an organization for amateur dancers. The Amateur Dancers’ Association was founded on 26 January 1949 (‘The Committee’). The HCDA competition on 15 January 1950 also responded to the concern of fairness for amateur dancers but the result was not well-received. Rules were set up to define the qualification for entrance to the competition: dance teachers and competition adjudicators in Hong Kong or else where were not allowed to enter the competition; dancers that could use the competition to promote their own business were also banned from the contest (‘Four-Dance Contest’). However, this attempt to level the

playing field was not appreciated. The first and second-place winners were regarded as 'expected winners' as they were 'students of the contest organizer'; the performances, except one by Lee Tong Mei and Lui Mung Na, offered 'no surprises' ('Result of the Dance Contest').

The exclusion of this 1950 event in the account of the HCDA's miniature history in 1952 thus became very interesting. On 16 January 1952, its annual competition was advertised in the newspaper as a return of a great event:

The HCDA is an amateur organization for local dancers. It has organized amateur competitions in 1946-1948 in order to promote the standard of dancing. However, the competition has been suspended due to many reasons since 1949 (Ching).

The competition took place in Kam Ling Dance Hall 金陵舞廳 and there was around 'a thousand audience'. The competition consisted of waltz, tango, foxtrot and the quickstep. The adjudicators judged the dancing in four aspects: posture, timing, figures and expressions ('Yesterday's'). The HCDA does not seem to have organized any event after this contest.

In the late fifties, although the competition dance scene was only in its nascent stage with a short history and with interruption by the Second World War, it was completely divorced from the space and culture of the nightclub. An article titled 'Thirty Years of Waxed Floor and Glitter Ball', published in a newspaper in 1960, reminisced about the ups and downs of local ballroom dancing entirely situated in the dance academies, dance halls and night clubs (Sheng Tung Siu). Despite the article's comprehensibility, the competitive dance activities were totally excluded from the picture, suggesting the parallel existence of the practices in two

separate realms. In fact, the nightclub employees founded their own organization, in the form of a workers' union on 25 Jun 1952 (Chong). The Hong Kong and Kowloon Dance Hall Workers' Union 港九舞廳工會 had a friendly relationship with the professional dancers, with the latter providing support to the Union's many social events by giving performances and adjudicating workers' dance competitions.

Each of the organizations formed in this period served a particular purpose and produced a dance public, although the HDCA was the only establishment that was able to begin and sustain a small tradition. Nevertheless, this period of development was essential in creating a public culture for the dance and setting a preliminary structure of social existence for the public dance practice. It also explained the stardom of Tse Lo Bat, who was the leading dance teacher and performer in social events and in films, as the formalized competition system allowed Tse to appear to both the dance public and the mass beyond the dance circle (see Chapter Three for the discussion). In this respect, the competition as a social practice fostered an aesthetic hierarchy and produced aesthetic representatives celebrated by the participating mass; in this process, the mass did not exist outside of the organization waiting to be approached, and it was in fact also the production of this social process.

### **1956-1988: Conventionalization and internationalization**

In the period between 1956 and 1980, ballroom dancing in Hong Kong first went under the surface of public attention, overshadowed by the craze for American popular dances, as well as taking roots in the mundane aspect of the everyday life as a proper pastime; then re-emerged to public attention in 1981 in the form of a spectacular and virtuosic global dance form, through the staging of massive dance

performances and competitions. Three organizations were established in this period: The Hong Kong Dancing Association 香港舞蹈協會 (HKDA, 1976), the Ballroom Dancing Board of Control of Hong Kong and Macau 港澳標準舞總會 (BDBCHK, 1981) and the Hong Kong Professional Dance Teachers Society 香港專業舞蹈教師協會 (HKPDTS, 1983). Building on the nascent ballroom dance culture, this phase of development of dance organizations was first marked by the conventionalization of the dance: it was no longer fashionable to dance ballroom; the dance became a specialized dance form that required deliberate learning and training to acquire. Then the second half of this phase witnessed the internationalization of dance competition practices, with a craving for better dancing and dancers.

Between the mid-1950s and 1970s, the wave of the western popular dance swept through Hong Kong, beginning with rock n' roll 阿飛舞 (literally 'the greasers' dance') through the film *Rock Around the Clock* in 1956. These dances — energetic, with body and limbs flexible and steps more improvisational than choreographed, which could be danced alone without a partner — soon replaced ballroom dance as the vogue for young adolescents. The company screening *Rock Around the Clock* organized a rock n' roll competition to promote the movie (fig. 3.1). One newspaper article commented that 'Hong Kong people are smart. The music has just come to town for a little more than a month, and everybody is able to sing and dance to it...The rock n' roll is going to be a hit for a good while; the passionate young men and women will not have the patience to dance the rigid steps of the waltz and foxtrot' (Mo). The overwhelming influx of western popular dances captured the entire youth generation; the novel sense of vitality and freedom induced through the exhilarating melodies and the spontaneity of small but rapid movements of body parts announced that the grace, smoothness, refinement and magnificence cherished



Fig. 3.1

Caption: 'The champions of yesterday's rock n' roll contest, Saville and Madona in action.

(Photo by Lui)

in ballroom dancing were dated sentiments, and the dance form these qualities represented had become an old-fashioned practice.

Indeed, ballroom dancing in the 1960s and 1970s ceased to be fashionable, but this is also the period when the dance became a common experience inseparable from everyday life and knowledge. The omnipresence of ballroom dance rendered the dance practice invisible to the eyes seeking novelty and spectacles, inscribing itself into the background of mundane life and the mass unconsciousness. Spaces and places for ballroom dancing, dance performances and a variety of practices often became the inspirations and materials for artistic creations such as literature and movies (see Chapter Three for discussion). In 1968, James Law and Pearl Chan, two local dance teachers, gave demonstrations and dance classes on TV (fig. 3.2). On

top of the pre-1960s dance development, two other phenomena also tremendously promoted ballroom dancing to the general public: the building of public community centres and the proliferation of the dance competition culture.



Fig. 3.2

Caption title: 'TV programme: The latest popular dance performances in *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*'.

Content: 'The TV Broadcasting Company announces that dance experts James Law and Pearl Chan will give performances of the latest dances'.

The flood of refugees from China in the 1950s brought a great demand for public infrastructures, for needs from housing to leisure activities, as tasks or the Hong Kong government. Following the building of the first housing estate in the former squatter-zone Shek Kip Mei 石硤尾 in 1954, the first community centre was set up in Wong Tai Sin 黃大仙, another area previously with a large refugee settlement. While refugees became the immediate cause for the mass development of the public and community facilities, the result of the large-scale city building was a

growing city public in various communities. The ballroom dance public also benefited from the mass-construction of urban infrastructure. In fact, before the building of the community facilities, there were some non-profit or charity organizations providing ballroom dance classes. Henry Cheung 張亨利, for example, taught ballroom dancing from 1951 for the YMCA, community sports club and teachers' association.

The community centres became another significant space for ballroom dancing from the 1970s as the site for the teaching and learning, and for competition. The community centres provided the site for the social, economic, aesthetic and cultural process for the local ballroom dance tradition to thrive and continue. The dance public that formed in the community centres primarily approached ballroom dance as a dance *per se*, unlike in the nightclubs or social occasions in which ballroom dancing was a pretext for other purposes. The space also developed the profession of the dance teacher and paved the way for the professionalization *and* the development of the dance industry. Pun Yun Ming 潘潤明, Wong Wing To 黃泳滔 and Yeung Ping Kai 楊秉佳 were among the first-generation dance teachers teaching in the community centres.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s, 'competition' became a popular form of dance practice: dance organizations, in particular the Hongkong Chinese Dancers' Association, held an annual Open Amateur Championship, with clear intention to invent and consolidate a standard form of competition practice and a ritual for the local dance tradition;

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<sup>2</sup> These dance teachers danced across several layers of the ballroom dance landscapes before becoming teachers in community centres: Wong danced in many restaurants all over Hong Kong and was already recognized by a loosely and informally organized dance public as a very good dancer before he won the Hong Kong champion title in 1981; Yeung taught dancing in night clubs and community centres; upon seeing his male students' new dance figures learned in night clubs, he went to those dance hostesses and asked for instruction.

Chinese restaurants arranged regular or random dance competitions to entertain diners and let diners entertain themselves, and sometimes in partnership with other establishments, such as the cinema, there were promotional events including a dance contest. The community centres also took the initiative to organize dance contests, sometimes jointly with business sponsors, to provide special entertainment events for the public (for instance, the contest organized by the Social Welfare Department and Shun Hing Electronic Trading Co. 'Open Hong Kong Social Dance Contest'), sometimes with established dance schools (such as the contest jointly held by Alan Li Dancing Studio and the Cheung Sha Wan Community Centre in 1990). The competitions, like Butler's idea of popular political assemblies, are transient. The 'critical function' (Butler 8) of these ephemeral events lies in their signification in excess of the collective embodied actions. Similar to mass gatherings such as 'vigils or funerals' which 'often signify in excess of any particular written or vocalized account of what they are about' (ibid), participants in each competition, although very likely dancing for their own pleasure, are in fact signifying in excess the knowledge of the dance, before it is standardized and formalized. Therefore, although in this period, the dance organizations were relatively inactive and few events were grand enough to attract the attention of the general public, ballroom dance knowledge and experiences seeped into the grains of everyday life of the ordinary people through the community centre dance classes and the competition culture and greatly increased the ballroom-dance literacy of the general public, nurturing the mass' craving for more and better dancing and performances.

The revival of the attempt to set up dance organizations between 1976 and 1989 witnesses the intention to institutionalize the culture of the competition and coordinate the dance public. On 23 July 1976, the inauguration dinner of the Hong

Kong Dancing Association (HKDA) took place in a restaurant. Led by amateur dancer Leung Pui Man 梁沛文 and professional dance teacher Chan Fung 陳峰, the HKDA aimed at ‘the study and the promotion of dancing past and present, Chinese and foreign’; at its first conception, the HKDA would focus on social dancing, with the hope to bring local dance quality up to the international standard. The HKDA was a non-profit organization and all the committee members were volunteers (‘Hong Kong Dance Association’).<sup>3</sup> The HKDA was the first local dance organization recognized by an international administrative body (that is, the International Council of Ballroom Dancing, ICBD, now renamed World Dance Council, WDC).

On 16 February 1981, the HKDA organized The First Hong Kong Open Amateur Dance Competition in the luxurious Hilton Hotel. The competition was held in the setting and size very similar to the present-day norm: several tens of dancers competed in front of hundreds of audiences; competitions were divided into Ballroom and Latin American categories, with each consisting of four dances; prominent foreign dancers — in this competition, from Taiwan — were invited to adjudicate the competition and perform. Even the news coverage of the event took up the contemporary appearance, with photos of the winners lined up and a portrait of a Taiwanese dance couple in action. The winners of the competition, Peter 劉兆賢 and Angela Lau 劉琪穎 for ballroom dances, and Wong Wing To 黃泳滔 and Wong Chi Hung 黃志虹 for the Latin American dances, are regarded by a local dance commentator as the first generation of local dancers. The four dancers are still active today in the dance scene teaching, organizing events and judging, and many of the

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<sup>3</sup> Chan Fung himself was a dance teacher from Shanghai. He started teaching in the 1950s (Ng) and was known as the representative of Latin American dance in Hong Kong before his student Wong Wing To rose to fame.

current local dance teachers are either their students or second-generation students. The Taiwanese adjudicator Lin Shui Sang 連水生 commented that Hong Kong dancing had improved since his visit in the previous year. A local dancer remarked that the quality of Latin American dancing in Hong Kong was lacking behind Taiwan's, though local dancers' recent study of the dances in Taiwan helped upgrade the standard; regarding ballroom dancing, local standard was 'comparable to the Taiwanese' but there was a shortage of female dancers (Kwan 1981). This competition set up a prototype for the contemporary form and the standard of a dance competition and produced dance subjects that sustain and carry on the tradition and practice, as well as organizing an open dance circle — even with non-local audience — by making itself the centre of the circle.

While the legacy of the competition asks for a reflection on the ephemerality of the event, Wong Wing To's personal experience before the event suggested that the competition had started before it actually took place, which also explained why this competition was historically remarkable: it was a site for the production of new dance knowledge. Wong went to Taiwan for an intensive two-week period of training to prepare for this competition. In 1981, Wong was already teaching dancing at the community centres. As he frequented many dance venues at his free time, he was widely known among the dance public and was regarded a top dancer. But Wong was in great awe upon seeing the Taiwanese dancers dancing: when they danced the rumba and cha cha, they commenced on the second beat instead of the first. Wong then realized that he, as well as all Hong Kong Latin American dancers, had been dancing it wrong. Wong half-jokingly attributed the introduction of the 'genuine' Latin rhythm to Hong Kong to himself. His experience underlines the success and significance of this 1981 competition: the event provided the initiative

and the environment for the learning of new knowledge, and confirmed the status of the representative dancers who received popular recognition.

In the same year, the HKDA organized another grand event at the Queen Elizabeth Stadium on 26 July (fig.3.3). The event was unprecedented in scale in terms of the capacity



Fig. 3.3 'Dancing in the Queen Elizabeth Stadium'.

of the venue, the variety of nationality of the competitors and the size of the audience. There were altogether sixteen teams from Britain, Hong Kong, Australia, Taiwan and Singapore. A British dance couple won the competition. As if the event was too big and too new to be handled, beyond the glamour of this historical event there were some gaffes caught by the witnesses: despite its formality and magnificence, this event was given different titles by the press: one news report called it the 'First International Standard Ballroom Dance Invitational Competition' ('Queen Elizabeth Stadium'), the other 'South East Asian and the Pacific Region International Dance Invitational Competition' ('Asian Pacific'). Another embarrassment gave the audience a good laugh: 'The ladies were mostly in low-cut dresses. The opening of the event had been delayed for thirty minutes, and the ladies were chilling in the freezing air-conditioning of the stadium. They looked particularly active in the Latin American dances; people joked that that was the way the ladies kept themselves warm' ('Queen Elizabeth Stadium').

The HKDA continued to organize massive dance events and was becoming increasingly mature as an event organizer. On 5 December 1983, the HKDA organized a Hong Kong-Taiwan Inter-city Dance Competition at the grand hotel Kowloon Holiday Inn (fig. 3.4). Each city had a team of four couples and the competition consisted of eight dances (waltz, tango, slow foxtrot and quickstep; cha cha, rumba, samba and *paso doble*). The Taiwanese team won the overall champion, although the Hong Kong couple Nick Fok and Helena Ho won the first place in the Latin American dance category (Kwan). Nick Fok



Fig. 3.4

Caption: 'Hong Kong-Taiwan Dance Competition. (Left) Ballroom dance champions Lin Zhao Nan & Song Chun Feng (Right) Latin American dance champion Nick Fok & Helena Ho

was, to a great extent, an exceptionally talented self-made genius as he invented a path to make himself a dancer that was non-existent in the 1980s. Nevertheless, Fok highly regarded the significance of Chan and his HKDA in providing him with the conditions to grow as a dancer: His first experience of 'real' ballroom dancing was in 1981 from American ten-dance champion Albert Franz, who was transiting from Hong Kong and invited by the HKDA to give dance lessons. At that time, most local dancers learned from local teachers, a few like Wong learned from Taiwanese

teachers, who studied a form of ballroom dance filtered through their Japanese teachers. Since that initial experience of a western dance teacher's instruction, Fok began studying Latin American dance every year in England (Fok). Fok, and his then partner Ho, soon became the best local Latin American dance couple and later South East Asian champions. They were definitely an exception, in their time and even today, but their legend was also a result of the conditions the HKDA provided.

The HKDA's success attracted competition. On 22 February 1981, the Ballroom Dancing Board of Control of Hong Kong and Macau 港澳標準舞總會 (BDBCHK) was established. The ceremony took place in Hilton Hotel ballroom and was attended by six hundred guests. A few dancers Ng Wai 吳偉 (fig. 3.5), Tsang Hoi 曾開, Wong Sze Hung 黃斯紅 and Cheung Wai 張為 gave performances. The BDBCHK was chaired by prominent dance teacher James Law 劉占士 who was widely-known through his televised dance class in 1968, and Kwok Bun 郭彬 'who was also a first-rate dancer in Hong Kong' ('BDBCHK'). Incorporated as a limited company, the BDBCHK was dissolved in 1996 (Hong Kong Company Registry). No record of the BDBCHK is found and no existing dancer or dance teacher has heard of this organization or its activity. Despite the involvement of notable dance figures, the brevity of the existence and inactivity of the BDBCHK hinted a trend in setting up organizations without a clear sense of purpose or a supporting public.

James Law and a few others founded the Hong Kong Professional Dance Teachers' Association (HKPDTS) in 1982, with dance teacher Paul Bishop, from Britain, as the advisor. Bishop endeavoured to internationalize Hong Kong ballroom dancing, both aesthetically and socially, through connecting HKPDTS to the British dance organizations, and inviting foreign dancers to Hong Kong for performance and competition to give local dancers better exposure to the vigour of the international

standard (Tong). Bishop received international qualifications for dance teaching and taught dancing after work in the China Fleet Club the 1980s when he was working in a pharmaceutical company in Hong Kong.



Fig. 3.5 Ng Wai giving a performance in the HKMBDC inauguration ceremony with his daughter Ng Man Yee.

Despite the fact that the HKPDTS was not the first local dance organization with international recognition, Bishop did internationalize ballroom dance in Hong Kong with his own British (dance) background and experience. His effort in organizing the 1983 Asian Pacific Ballroom & Latin American Dancing Competition, ‘held purely to promote the interest of young people in Hong Kong in a rapidly increasingly popular sport’ as he suggested, shows the minute, personal-level process of internationalization that, literally, materialized into the local everyday standard and reality. Bishop, writing on behalf of the HKPDTS, asked the then Urban Council for a subsidy for the event, since the additional cost to provide a

wooden dance floor surface incurred a ‘substantial loss’ to the HKPDTS (Bishop). Apart from showing the Urban Council the budget of the event to justify his claim, Bishop emphasized the necessity of the wooden floor — for the face of Hong Kong, as ‘we cannot embarrass ourselves, or Hong Kong by allowing overseas competitors to dance on a concrete floor’, as well as the universality of this practice in the global dance scene:

Actually, many such events take place every year in England at the Royal Albert Hall, Wembley Stadium, etc., and they all provide a wooden maple floor... which is also used for other sporting activities, and in my 20 years experience [sic], I have never heard of any damage being done by the dancers who have to wear special soft chamois soled shoes anyway.

Paul Bishop’s insistence on the wooden floor symbolizes the pragmatism that characterizes the development of public dance organizations up to the late 1980s driven by the craving for better ballroom dancing as a local experience. Although the approach for advancement was, unreservedly from the onset, westernization; the aspiration behind was nevertheless for more sophisticated and enjoyable dancing, for watching and performing. Indeed, the wooden floor is a metaphor for the indispensability, and the function, of a public body for the dance scene: it is the favourable condition, lasting and strong, that encourages the dance collective to appear as individuals to express and transform themselves. Although the dance organizations make their existence known by staging events, the site of agency of this assembly of collective (dancing) bodies lies in the routine and tradition the sustain and the new subjectivity they foster. The wooden floor also suggests that genuine ‘internationalization’ or cultural encounters, instead of the sheer consumption of cultural commodity, often take place in the form of the mundane and

tactile experience of the novel, tangible (mate)reality, without the splendour of ‘culture’.

The development after 1989, however, was driven and dominated by a capitalist logic to commodify dancing, monopolize the market provided by the dance circle and to maximize the monetary return, supported by the gigantic capital of few people that could keep the industry running. The result of the post-1989 development, the legacy of which still exerts a great influence today, is a fragmented dance public that could not support the social and aesthetic processes of the local dance tradition.

### **The fall of the public dancers: 1989-2000**

The emergence of the Hong Kong Ballroom Dance Council 香港標準舞總會 signifies the rapid process of maturing and the denaturing of the social organization for the local ballroom dance practices. The HKBDC was founded to harvest the formalizing social conventions, the budding ballroom dance culture, and the aspiring dancers and professionals. Since its inception in 1989, it soon attracted and dominated the professional sector of the dance scene through its exclusive membership scheme and the most well-established social structure with international recognition. Walter Wat 屈網權 has been the one and only president of the HKBDC from the inception of the organization up till today. At the moment of establishment, the HKBDC did consolidate the competition system and provide the social, financial and even material support to make ballroom dancing more accessible, enjoyable to the dance public and nurture dancers of better quality. However, utilizing its power as the sole exam board for dance teachers and adjudicators, as well as the status as the regional representative of the then International Council of Ballroom Dance (the

World Dance Council today), the HKBDC developed a monopolized business of dance qualification.

The HKBDC's undertaking consequently produced, in a short period of time, many qualification holders with insufficient dance experience: the adjudicators lacked credibility among the competitors, and the dance teachers were of low quality. HKBDC successfully created a bubble centred on itself by producing all the subjects that support its existence — dance students, dance teachers, competitors and adjudicators. The establishment of the HKBDC also began the mushrooming of dance organizations: some were formed as a rebellion against the HKBDC's dictatorship, others saw it as a successful business model and replicated the operation targeting the market on the lower end. The HKBDC has redefined the culture and role of the dance organizations: not aiming to be participatory and representative for the ballroom dance public, HKBDC and many following organizations are only cliques of stakeholders for securing and increasing their own interest.

Nevertheless, the early years of the HKBDC did create a vibrant dance environment by providing a unifying energy to bring dancers together, formalizing competition to create a level and exciting playing field, and providing platforms for the circulation of information. The first issue of the HKBDC publication, *Ballroom Dance News*, exhibits a vivid picture of the dynamic dance scene: local competitions were featured, and results were listed and recorded the surfacing of a new generation of dancers; international dance competition results and top dancers' news were reported, creating a discourse of ballroom dance around 'good dancing'. It also systemized the competition structure to ensure the fairness of the event, which made dance competitions a means to improve the standard of dancing instead of occasional

happenings without continuity or constructivist energy for the ballroom dance culture and practice. For example, the HKBDC required all competitors, with a few categories as exceptions, to move on to the next level of the competition in the following year after they had won as champions of one category (HKBDC ‘Regulations’);<sup>4</sup> the scrutineering system was explained to readers in detail in several issues. A free practice venue, a rented public indoor stadium, was provided to registered members (HKBDC ‘Benefits’). In one issue was also an article by Yeung Ping Kai, recalling the days when he was a young learner taking dance classes in the YMCA, his respect for his first teachers and secret admiration for a girl in class (‘The Song of Innocence’). The *Ballroom Dance News* then, resembling the HKBDC at that time, was a space that allowed the dance public to appear, an agency that recognized the past and a structure that organized this past into a forming ballroom dance tradition.

However, such vitality and democracy were soon overpowered by the HKBDC’s, or Wat’s urge for the monopoly of power and the market: adjudicators who served for, and competitors took part in, non-HKBDC events were severely punished; the population of HKBDC members, qualified adjudicators and dance teachers boomed, although the quality of these professionals was often questioned. Wat and his HKBDC put most of their effort to consolidate the wall of the clique and inflate his own authority. The special issue of the *Ballroom Dance News* published in October 1998 to celebrate the approaching of the tenth anniversary of the HKBDC was like Walter Wat’s personal edition, featuring himself on the cover in front of the Chief Executive’s office, and in the content many photos of him taken with a variety

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<sup>4</sup> Except Amateur and Professional, which are the highest event in their own divisions; and Senior, which has no sub-division.

of powerful figures, mostly non-dancers (fig. 3.6). The issue presents a clear visual statement: ballroom dancing does not have much role to play in the achievements of this organization.

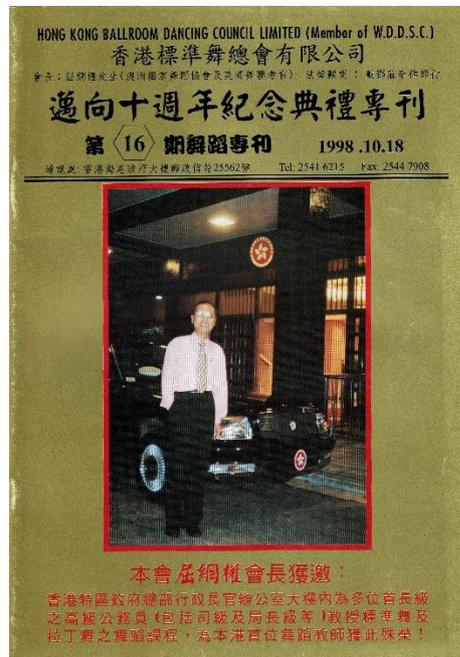


Fig. 3.6 The cover of the 16<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Ballroom Dance News*, with a photo of Wat in front of the Hong Kong Chief Executive’s car and office building. The lines at the bottom of the page reads ‘Our President Walter Wat is invited to the headquarters of the Hong Kong Government to teach many senior civil servants (including the Secretaries and department heads) to teach ballroom and American Latin dance. The first dance teacher in Hong Kong to have this honour!’

Wat’s blatant utilization of a public organization, in the name of Hong Kong, for personal interest becomes more a question than a problem today after twenty-seven years since the HKBDC’s establishment: why could Wat remain in his position for so long, without being challenged? But, to think about it the other way round, what is exactly the problem beyond the realm of personal conduct, and what is the impact of this problem or where does the problem’s significance locate? Following Butler’s arguments, the mass assemble to constitute both their appearance

and the condition that makes this enactment possible; the HKBDC's problem is that it produces a fake condition for appearances without the transformative potential. The HKBDC has failed to become a social institution that sustains the process of ballroom dance knowledge production. The HKBDC's first professional ballroom dance champions were Jimmy Chan 陳慶求 and Betty Wan 溫佩儀, who were already champions before the HKBDC came into existence and dominated the title in 1992-2005.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, Jimmy Yek 易德忠 and Carol Kwong 鄭倩莉 took over the title and maintained it until 2014 ('Hong Kong Closed'), when Conant Liu 廖光亮 and Wendy Wan 溫曉梅, who were brought up and trained overseas and partnered up in Hong Kong, defeated them. In other words, both the first and the third, and the present professional ballroom dance champions of the HKBDC are not cultivated from within its organization.

Jimmy Yek and Carol Kwong are, therefore, arguably the only generation of dancers HKBDC has nurtured. As the first local Chinese couple that could enter the second round of the Professional Ballroom competition in the Blackpool Dance Festival, they mark the budding of a generation of local world-standard dancers that was quickly snapped as the condition for their growth crumbled, and even this generation was dis-integrated, with different members scattered in different exclusive cliques so that they could not grow together as dancers. In the early 1990s, Yek and Kwong started dancing in their twenties in a social dance class held in the then Jubilee Sports Centre, now the Hong Kong Sports Institute. While the senior classmates would take them out to evening social dancing in myriad restaurants, they

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<sup>5</sup> Competitions with the Hong Kong Professional Ballroom Dance category will award the champion title, and currently there is no regulation to control the right to award the title. Therefore, even the competition held by a dance school can produce its own Hong Kong Professional Ballroom Dance Champion. However, for these two dance couples, when they held the title respectively, they were regular champions in competitions and also ranked first in the accumulative result.

soon found competition and practicing between themselves more enjoyable. As their teacher was the vice-president of the HKBDC, naturally they took part in the HKBDC competitions. Kwong recalled them returning to regular weekend dance practice, with a pram after their daughter was born, to the indoor arena in Mong Kong rented by the HKBDC for members' practice. The then looming ballroom dance industry featuring the western dancers also exposed them to the high-quality dancing that could not be accessed through local instructors. Yek and Kwong were in a condition unprecedentedly favourable to dancers: an active social dance scene was going on every night in every part of the city; a public body brought all the good dancers to dance together, kept track of their performance and provided facilities and other support for their dancing, and an emerging dance industry brought in foreign teachers of exceptional quality. And their success was generational: in Blackpool Dance Festival 2005, local professional Latin American dance couple Ken Tsui 徐劍雄 and May Hau 侯美嫦, who are friends of Yek and Kwong, reached in the second round of the competition. In a condition that sustains a social norm and structure that supports heterogeneous and democratic performances of the dance, subjects representative of the mass emerge. Yek and Kwong, and their generation of dancers, were representing and representative in the sense that they were part and parcel of the embodiment of the beauty, celebrated by the dance public and unattainable for most.

However, Yek and Kwong and their counterparts were also the generation ruined by the HKBDC and the severe conflict of interests between the organizations. Tsui and Hau left the HKBDC in 2000 for the Hong Kong Dance Sport Association (HKDSA), then the Hong Kong Dance Sport Federation; new amateur dancers were scattered in the many organizations founded after the establishment of the HKBDC.

In complicity with the later rise of a ballroom dance industry that produces and caters the need for rich women to dance with top young international male dancers (see Chapter Four), the HKBDC began an industry to sell internationally-recognized ballroom dance qualifications for profits. The impact of rising power of the HKBDC on the local development of ballroom dancing was devastating: the dance public was severely fractured by organizations, competitors could not dance and improve together, and good dancers such as Yek and Kwong did not receive the cultural and social recognition from the dance public. Consequently, good dancing — the pleasure and transformative potential from the experience of watching and practicing the dance — was displaced from the centre of the tradition as a unifying and constructive energy.

There was no shortage of protests against, or alternative group activities in critical response to, the HKBDC. In 1990, fourteen amateur dance couples made a public statement in the dance weekly protesting against the HKBDC's organization of the selection competition for the Hong Kong representative for an international dance championship. Despite the fact that they were the top-tier amateur dancers, they were not notified of the event. In the statement, the signatories questioned how representative the result of the competition could be, given the fact that only two couples were in the competition ('A Statement of Protest'). In 1993, seven angry former members sacked by the HKBDC broke into the organization's general meeting and created a stir ('Exhausted by Dinner Dances'). On 13 March 1994, a Hong Kong Ballroom Dance Council (DanceSport) 香港標準舞總會 (體育舞蹈) was set up under the leadership of James Law. The organization was later formally established as the Hong Kong International Professional Dance Sport Council (HKIPDSC) in 1995 ('Four Celebrities').

In the same period, a Hong Kong League of Ballroom Dancers 香港標準舞者聯會 led by Nick Fok actively organized public seminars at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre to share professional dance knowledge and insights with the general public ('The separation'), as well as competitions with all foreign adjudicators for the sake of impartiality, and the participation of overseas competitors to enhance the intensity of the event ('Foreign dancers'). In 1996, the Hong Kong Amateur DanceSport Federation was founded by Albert Au 區紹龔 (organization renamed Hong Kong DanceSport Association, HKDSA in 2011). Later, there were also the founding of the Asia DanceSport Council (2002) by a local professional ballroom champion Luk Kwok Hung 陸國雄, and also the Hong Kong Ballroom Dancers' Federation by Lawrence Chan 陳航行. All these efforts, as rivals of interests in or criticisms of the HKBDC's shortcomings and negligence to the dance community's need, segregated the dance public further before they could exert a constructive impact.

Nick Fok criticized the problem of the dance qualification industry in a 2004 HKIPDSC correspondence. Fok pointed out a paradoxical phenomenon: the number of competitions increased but the number of competitors decreased. Fok attributed the phenomenon to the dance teachers' outpouring of effort to training dance teachers instead of competitors. The practice discouraged dancers from competing by redefining ballroom dance learning as a means for earning professional qualifications, and the production of adjudicators that were not socially recognized by the dance population to judge the competitions. According to the HKBDC rules, professional dance teachers can be hired to judge competitions. However, as many organizations made the qualifications easily accessible for anyone that could afford them, even people with very limited experience in competition and poor quality of dancing could obtain the status. Fok asked: 'Put yourself in the competitor's shoes:

You have sweated and teared for your dancing for so many years, and now your performance is judged by a few “senior adjudicators” who have never participated in any competition and only learned a wee bit of dance knowledge from a decade-old book. They decide your rank and your dance standard. Will you be happy?’ Fok questioned the organizers of competitions directly at the end of the article, asking if they really have to provide the one-stop service of holding teacher-training course, examinations, and competitions to satisfy the clients (Fok 24-25). Indeed, local dance teachers deemed the boom of the industry as an achievement: Luk Kowk Hung of ADSC, for example, boosted the number of dance exam candidates from around ten people in each exam in 1998, to seventy to eighty in 2002 (‘Walter Luk’). The HKBDC’s professional membership (Fellow, Member and Associate Member) also grew from 85 in 1995 (HKBDC ‘Listed Members’ 1995) to 187 in 1998 (HKBDC ‘Listed Members’ 1998), and every one of these members is practically eligible for adjudicating competitions of different grades.

This consummative culture propagated through the dance organizations debilitated the dance competition practice and culture drastically by concealing the space for transformation: the physical space of a dance floor for the voluntary assembly of dancers, the social space of a democratic event, and the cultural space for the quest for aesthetic possibilities. Social systems such as the ranking and the award of titles could not function as a record for the self-transformation of the dancers. On 31 July 1994, two grand competitions took place at the same time. The HKBDC organized the Qualifying Competition for the World Cup 1994 in the Nam Cheong Community Hall, and the Hong Kong League of Ballroom Dancers organized the Fourth Asian Cup International Dance Championship. The report of these two events was titled ‘Asian Cup: Taiwan and Japan rule the floor; A split

Hong Kong team is self-destructive' and stated the obvious and immediate effect of the 'split' ('Asian Cup Awards').

Before the fifth Asian Cup that took place on 5 August 1995, the situation became aggravated. Local dancers were not enthusiastic for the event, despite the very exciting setting of the competition with international competitors from Japan, China, Malaysia, Macau, Taiwan, Indonesian, and Thailand ('Foreign dancers'). Before the competition, one organizer figured that the lack of local participation was 'due to the fame and quality of the overseas dancers that make them (local dancers) shy away'. The dance critic commented that '[i]f this is true then it is definitely not good news for the Hong Kong dance circle. Competitions make progress. The title claimed in a small, closed circle is no honour. The fear for failure is also a big hindrance to the improvement of the standard of dancing ('Progress'). The event took place at the Regent Hotel ballroom and the result was disappointing. One critic reckoned that the absence of local competitors in the event was 'due to the pressure of different dance organizations'. There were only two dance couples participating respectively in the ballroom and Latin American dance competition; both of them did not enter the final ('Foreign dancers').

Nick Fok, in the interview, regarded the mushrooming of dance organizations for only one reason: the conflict over the share of power (Fok). Personal and subjective as it is, the statement suggests that later organizations were formed for reasons other than dancing, and in fact this opinion was echoed by Kenji Po 蒲廣活, the current Executive Chairperson of the HKIPDSC (Po). Po inherited both the Creation Dance Academy 創藝舞蹈學院 and the HKIPDSC in 2009 after the demise of his brother Peter Po, who was the founder of these two institutions. The HKIPDSC today organizes competitions and professional and amateur examinations

for its individual and dance-school members. The self-contained mechanism for the production and absorption of the surplus value is well illustrated in its invitation to adjudicators: for the twenty-ninth Creative Cup which took place on 23 October 2016, all the HKIPDSC professional members, that is, ‘those that have paid the 2016 professional membership fee \$300’, are invited to adjudicate for the event. In the reply slip for the applicants, two options are listed, namely presence for the morning or the afternoon session, and both require the applicant to buy an \$800 ‘adjudicator’s ticket’ (HKIPDSC). In other words, Po’s — and other HKIPDSC school members’ — dance school organizes classes for potential teachers, and his HKIPDSC holds exams and issues qualifications for these teachers.

The HKIPDSC also provides opportunities for the teachers to utilize their qualifications and makes a profit out of it. The qualified dance teachers supply students for HKIPDSC competitions – who have to pay for each event they participate, and adjudicate their own students’ performance in competitions. The evening session of the events often consists of the finals of the most intense competitions such as the Professional and Amateur Ballroom or Latin American Dance, with dance breaks and guest performances between competitions. The dance floor is open to social dancing for the participants, and guest performances are sometimes amateur or ProAm performances<sup>6</sup> given by the honorary members of the organization, who pay a sum of money varying from fifty to hundreds of thousands of dollars (Zhang, in interview) for the title and the performance opportunity that comes with a sizable audience.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘ProAm’ is the form of competitive and exhibition ballroom dance practice, with the dance couple constituted by one professional dance teacher and one student. See Chapter Four for discussion

This form of operation is the norm among the dance organizations, with slight difference in practice, market, and organisational structure. The ADSC (2002), for example, does not have its own member dance schools and depends very much on the financial support of its honorary members. It often organizes large-scale events in major stadiums, such as the Queen Elizabeth Stadium (with a capacity of 3500) or the Macpherson Stadium (with a capacity of 1850). Its 23<sup>rd</sup> President's Cup competition, which took place on 11-12 April, 2015, admitted 1900 entries from seventeen countries. While competitors had to pay an entrance fee from \$250 to \$600, the audience also had to buy tickets costing from \$100 to \$380, and the minimum price of a VIP Table ticket was \$9000. In a competition of a smaller scale held on 17 April 2016, the 18<sup>th</sup> Districts Elites Dance Championship, there were 309 day-time events. According to the programme, *all* the competitions were in their final rounds ('ADSC competition rundown'). Such events minimize the space for competition between dancers and ensure that each participant will receive an award. The space for one of the most treasured aims for the competition — the self-transformation of the dancers — is concealed, as everyone wins before the competition begins.

Indeed, the organizations are different in names but, in practice, they are all only commercial competition organizers without making other efforts to construct the condition that makes ballroom dancing more accessible or enjoyable. The only exception being HKDSA, which began as just another clique for profit but eventually became a genuine organization that organizes a dance community around DanceSport, a derivative form of ballroom dance conceptualized and realized as a competitive sport. The HKDSA was recognized by the then International DanceSport Federation (now World DanceSport Federation, WDSF) in 1997, which

is the only global ‘rival’ to the WDC. The struggle for power and economic interest between dance organizations is devastating to the dance community and the dance tradition, as the freedom to dance together is suppressed. Mass assemblies of bodies are exploited as opportunities for the accumulation of surplus value.

Paralleling the rise and fall of dance organizations is the changing shape, practice and culture of the ballroom dance public. The next chapter will look at the formation of the dance public from a more subjective perspective with the focus on aesthetic experiences and understanding of the dance in literature, movies and everyday dancing, from 1930s to 1960s. This period witnessed the localization of a ballroom dance culture and landscape from the imported Shanghainese nightclub dance culture. Through dancers’ active embodiment of the dance, a local ballroom dance form evolved from a nightlife entertainment to become an everyday mass artistic practice for creative self-expressions, as evidenced in cinematic representations of the dance. This formation of a dance culture and public underlined the development of an idea and form of public life in 1960s Hong Kong, which fostered the building of public facilities in the city and a general sense of togetherness in the society.

### Chapter Three

#### **Dancing in everyday life: from nightclubs and the silver screen to community centres, 1930s-1960s**

在香港，藝術是最不受重視的東西，抽象畫家受盡奚落，不到外國去舉行展覽會，就不能獲得知音。電影雖然被人稱作第八藝術，實際上，跟交際舞一樣，一到香港就變了質。交際舞成為販賣色情的藉口，電影藝術卻是商人賺錢的另一種方式。

劉以鬯，《酒徒》，頁 154

In Hong Kong, art is the most ignored issue. Abstract painters are properly teased and they don't get any attention except after holding exhibitions overseas. Although the cinema is regarded as the eighth type of art, in reality, just like ballroom dancing, it is denatured when it comes to Hong Kong: ballroom dance becomes an excuse for selling sex, the cinema another means for the businessmen to make money.<sup>7</sup>

Lau Yee-Cheong, *The Drunkard* 154

First published in 1961, *The Drunkard* is considered the first stream of consciousness novel written in Chinese (Chan Ming, cited in Cao). The novel depicts the life fragments of a writer, Lo Lau (老劉 'Old Lau') from Shanghai, who is passionate for and well-read in modern literature. He dreams of pursuing the art of writing but ends up compromising the consumerist reality of Hong Kong by writing lucrative serial sex stories for tabloids. *The Drunkard* is saturated with severe

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<sup>7</sup> My translation.

criticism and sarcasm at the highly materialistic and money-worshipping society of Hong Kong in the 1950s-60s, which commodified everything from literature to sexualized female bodies. On top of the agony of the betrayal of his dream is the failure to acquire the transient superficial beauty of one dance hostess and the genuine love of another. Lo Lau, narrating in the first person, relies on alcohol for forced temporary withdrawal from the suffocating reality.

*The Drunkard* is considered to be highly autobiographical as the narrating writer's experience echoes the author Lau Yee-Cheong's 劉以鬯 life in reality. Shanghai-born and educated, Lau migrated to Hong Kong in 1948 during the civil war in China. He worked as a columnist and a popular novelist to support his family without giving up his literary pursuit. *The Drunkard* is one of his early works that has now become a canon in Hong Kong literary history. Lau himself is nowadays regarded as a seminal figure in Hong Kong literature, as a writer and an avid promoter of the art who even established the first local literary magazine. *The Drunkard* and Lau's life together present both the melancholy and oppressiveness of the 1950s' Hong Kong and its creative potential that can only be recognized after many decades. Paralleling this production of a literary master and his masterpiece is the emergence of ballroom dance as a form of art from the decadence of the nightclub ballroom dancing of the same period. The 'high-class refugees' from Shanghai — as one dance magazine in Shanghai regards them (Shen 11) — many of whom were wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs, were driven to Hong Kong by the social and political turbulence in China since the 1930s. They brought with them tremendous capital and the symbol of the hedonistic Shanghainese night life: the nightclub. The nightclub in Hong Kong at first was a westernized Shanghainese

nightlife entertainment colony and remained so from the 1930s to the early 1950s, after which it became a major site for the development of the local ballroom dance tradition, with local dancers and dance teachers emerging up to the 1970s.

When nightclubs are taken as a site of cultural production, it is necessary to identify and articulate the roles and the agency of dance hostesses. The two dance hostesses who appear in *The Drunkard* are portraits of the stereotypical image for the profession of the time (see Chapter One for discussion): Sima Li 司馬莉, a rebellious daughter from a rich family, is vain, materialistic, seductive and beautiful; the other character, Yeung Lo 楊露, is driven into the business to support her family as well as to escape from it. She is drugged and raped by her dance teacher in the dance academy when she is learning to become a dance hostess. Most of the meetings between Lo Lau and dance hostesses revolve around alcohol, conversation, food and sex. So much so like the appearance of daily life, the mundane reality of the life of a dance hostess appeared repetitive and unproductive. This chapter, drawing from everyday popular culture artefacts, i.e. magazines and movies, shows how the nightclub served, though unintendedly, as a site that anchored dance practices in the everyday life of the city, out of which a dance tradition emerged.

Lau — embodying both the writer he was in real life and the character he creates — condemned the lack of art in his time and changed it by creating it. In a similar vein, Hong Kong ballroom dancing outgrew its status as an inferior replica of the Shanghainese nightclub entertainment, ‘an excuse for selling sex’, and gradually transformed into an everyday participatory dance practice. Both the transformation of Lau and ballroom dance manifests not the power of radical, singular events to create history but the capacity of the ordinary, everyday life as the root of the extra-

ordinary. Indeed, *The Drunkard*'s first appearance was in the form of a serialized novel on *Sing Tao Daily* 星島日報 instead of a finished, bound entity, confirming British cultural historian Joe Moran's perception of the everyday 'as a space for the quiet accumulation of repetitive acts, and of more subtle, unnoticed transformations' (217). The formation of a ballroom dance tradition, in and out of the nightclub space, evidences the significance of the seemingly banal everyday routine as a transformative process, and the faceless mass as the subject that brings about the change.

### **The everyday routine as a process of transformation**

The everyday is often deemed as the shadow of important historical events that encapsulates inescapable embarrassing banality and inherent belatedness. It is never the site of exciting events but the passive location for unconscious residue and aftermath, 'the place where significations rise and then fall away into insignificance' (Moran 222). Moran argues for the importance of the everyday from two negative approaches: first, the modern experience of boredom and waiting, which 'can gradually produce a desire for utopian transformation in its accumulated drip-drip daily frustrations' (228), and second, the interruption of everyday life by radical events for the revelation of the historical significance of the latter. The two approaches are intertwined in Moran's discussion of the Berlin Wall, the construction of which made mundane practices such as walking in the city an impossible task for several decades, and the consequential shock resulted in its demolition when people from either side of the wall saw the drastic difference in the ordinary life of the other, with a normality totally unthinkable.

Ballroom dance in Hong Kong nightclubs suggests a third approach: the creative agency of ordinary people in everyday life. The emergence of a ballroom dance tradition from the nightclub landscape actually confirms Moran's belief that is not explored in the discussion: 'the everyday is also a space for unfulfilled possibilities and for unseen but profound transformations' (233). The popularization of ballroom dance in Hong Kong through the nightclubs suggests that what keeps the everyday practice of unseen and unforeseeable historical and transformative significance going, such as dancing in the nightclub, is not frustration but the simple pleasure that makes dancers return to the floor again and again. The ballroom dance routine — both the local social and cultural routine for the dance practice and the gradually conventionalized dance routines — affirms, for Moran, that 'the extraordinary can be routinized, can develop its own rhythms, expectations and realities' (217). Moreover, like a dance routine, 'all routines are learnt: the mundane practices of daily life are simply those in which the learning process has been erased' (226).

This dialectical relationship of the everyday and history, Moran suggests, busts the 'great modern myth of the revolution as total act, radical break, absolute renewal' which Henri Lefebvre also criticizes. The ordinary men's and women's everyday dancing is not a revolution but Lefebvrian 'moments' that highlight 'certain experiences [that] can help to reveal the everyday as that which lags behind, opening up its apparently inevitable dreariness to the reality of "what is possible"'. Lefebvre's notion of a 'moment' is 'a stimulus to critical thought rather than revolutionary action', and it incorporates 'not only moments of radical upheaval but the experiences of love, friendship, play, knowledge, memory and so on'. In the light of the 'moment', some apparent failures become hopes for future success, if not

a/another beginning of a transformative process; the short-lived socialist revolutionary attempt, the Paris Commune, in the eyes of Lefebvre, ‘succeeded in visualizing and temporarily transforming the taken-for-granted rhythms of everyday life’ (quoted by Moran 230). It is by recognizing and articulating the change the event has made that the subject can know how to live with the legacy in everyday life. Nevertheless, Moran emphasises that ‘it was not enough simply to interrupt the everyday; it had to be gradually transformed’ (231). Indeed, without the recognition of the historical significance of those moments, it is impossible to establish them as historical events that define the trajectory of development.

This chapter recollects moments of as such and scrutinizes their historical significance in the grain of the local aesthetic tradition of ballroom dance. Finding ballroom dancing in the Hong Kong 1930s-60s nightclub scene is significant for both a history of the local ballroom dance tradition, which makes the forming and formative trajectory comprehensible and also a reconsideration of human agency in everyday space and time possible. The first part of this chapter looks at the Shanghainese nightclub ballroom dance colony in Hong Kong and its imported subject, the dance hostesses, who were always reluctant subjects to the profession, but nonetheless played an indispensable role in popularising the dance in the city without their own recognition. The second part of this chapter identifies several moments among the ordinary dancers in this period in movies and in real life that signify the accumulation of creative knowledge and the gradual formation of a dance tradition.

This process of change of the dance, as this chapter attempts to illustrate, is not immediately recognizable and requires a critical distance to perceive. Lau deplores the consumerist Hong Kong for ‘denaturing’ ballroom dance and other

forms of art, but this process of ‘denaturing’, revisited from the present, presented the dance to the Hong Kong Chinese population not as a foreign social ritual but an everyday entertainment, however licentious in the beginning. Supplementing the dissolute images of the nightclubs are the many records of discussions on the art and skills of dancing in popular magazines and newspapers, dance competitions in which participated dance hostesses, as well as the emergence of the dance teachers later as the subject of the ballroom dance scene who taught the dance hostesses to dance, evidencing the significance of the role of dancing in the hub of expensive sensuous pleasure. The nightclub also encouraged the boom of the dance academies in the same era which served as suppliers for trained dance hostesses, a provider for basic dance knowledge to potential clientele, and a cheaper form of nightclub entertainment. The dance academies became a conduit for ballroom dancing to seep into the everyday life of the ordinary people across class, race, gender, and later, age.

### **The Shanghainese everyday in Hong Kong nightclubs, 1930s-1940s**

On 2 April 1938, the Hong Kong newspaper *Kung Sheung Daily* reported an assault that had taken place in Kam Ling Dance Hall 金陵舞廳. A dance hostess was severely injured by a man after a quarrel in which, according to a bystander, the dance hostess dumped the man because he had ‘gone broke’. Between the title of the news and the content, there is a short description of the background to the case:

Ever since Shanghai was conquered [by the Japanese military forces], many of the dance academies closed and quite a few dance businesses relocated to Hong Kong. Therefore, many of the dance hostesses in Hong Kong are from Shanghai. In the dance hall on the fifth floor of the Kam Ling Restaurant in Shek Tong Tsui 石塘咀, nine out of ten dance hostesses are Shanghainese.

Every night the music blasts and business booms. This morning around 1am, when the men and women were dancing gleefully, all of a sudden a dance hostess was kicked to the floor and shouting for help. The crowd stopped dancing immediately...('Kam Ling' )

Nightclubs in Hong Kong, from the 1930s to the post-war years, constitute a space of Shanghainese apocalyptic decadence and nostalgic ambiance, in which a violent break-up between a man and a woman would take up the epic background of a war between two countries. The influx of immigrants from China to Hong Kong has never ceased since the 1920s. In the interwar period, most were refugees escaping the political turbulence caused by the struggle of power between the communists and the republicans, as well as Japanese military aggression in China. They sought temporary abode in this culturally and economically peripheral 'backwater' (Carroll 89), unlike many post-war migrants who came to Hong Kong for its economic prosperity and relative social and political stability.

The socio-economic pattern of immigration was reflected in the Hong Kong ballroom dance landscape. After the establishment of the first dance academies in the 1930s, the first dance hall was opened in 1932 on the fifth floor of Shanghai Dai Chung Wah Department Store 上海大中華百貨, an enterprise established by 'a very successful Shanghainese businessman' ('The grand opening'). This marked the beginning of the rise of the Shanghainese dance colony. Shanghainese dance hostesses frequented Hong Kong for business, and dance halls named after the most famous dance halls in Shanghai were built one by one. Although defined predominantly as a Shanghainese phenomenon, the dance halls were nevertheless the first social space designated for the dance for the Chinese urbanites in Hong Kong.

Chinese Jazz Age history specialist Andrew David Field's detail account of Shanghai's dancing world in 1919-1954 presents a vivid picture of a sensational excitement and danger entangled in the touching bodies of the men and women and political events national and international inside the ballrooms. Having its heyday in the 1920s until the establishment of the communist People's Republic of China, nightclub culture of Shanghai came to an end with the demise of the foreign settlement. The semi-colonial setting of Shanghai, which began in the 1840s fostered by the establishment of foreign settlements, exposed the city to European and American nightlife entertainment. The blossoming of the Jazz Age in Shanghai, 'as part of a global consensual fantasy', provided a distraction, first for the Western settlers and the upper-class Chinese, and then for the many urbanites in the chaos of the turning point of history when every aspect of the existing reality from ideology, political system to everyday life was in crisis. It was the era that witnessed the rise of the two political parties that were going to rule China: mass 'political, economic, and social movement organized by students, workers, and other Chinese citizens of the new Republic'; a 'heightened consciousness of the impact of the Western-style imperialism', and the semi-colonial status of the country (Field 19).

Without a heterosexual social dance tradition, unlike western social dancing where men brought their own dance partners to the event, paid female dance partners became indispensable for the dance industry in Shanghai. All dance venues that provided the paid dance-partnership service were operated on a ticket system: the male patrons bought one ticket for a dance; if they wanted to monopolize the time of certain dance hostesses for an evening, they could pay a lump sum to the dance hall, plus extra to the dance hostesses as a gift. The access to the instantaneous physical proximity in dance was readily translated, in the context of early-twentieth-century

Shanghai, into a novel form of public courtship. The dance, in complicity with the rise of the film industry and culture, became a convenient and glamorous modern outlook of the traditional courtesan tradition of the wealthy Chinese men and gave birth to the ‘dance star system’, as well as a new sexual-social relation that permeated down the social ladder. The dance stars ‘modelled themselves on the Hollywood star system, which the Chinese film industry had adopted during the 1920s’. Thus, the nightclub industry produced dance hostesses as its subject for manipulation, which were very influential without the posing threat of subverting the system: ‘Dance hostesses with good reputations thus had a great deal of bargaining power with their host institutions, since they could leave the hall and take their client base with them’ (Field 65).

Dancing in Hong Kong in the 1930s was personified by the Shanghainese dance hostesses — at least, the Shanghainese dance world liked to believe so. In the myriad dance pictorials and tabloids published in Shanghai at that time, Hong Kong was featured regularly as a paradoxical mixture of general affluence and poor business and many dance hostesses’ site of regrets and hopes. In 1936, the dance magazine *Dance Nation* 舞國 described ‘the contradictory condition of the Hong Kong dance scene’ on several levels: for the dance hostesses, ‘[w]henver the dance business dooms, or for other reasons, Shanghainese dance hostesses would cry “off to Hong Kong”. “Hong Kong” seems to become the only opportunity for Shanghainese dance hostesses to find a way out’; the dance patrons in Hong Kong, regardless of the immature dance culture and environment, ‘have already acquired a taste for novelty. One dance hall had a boom when a new batch of dance hostesses was hired, but the popularity did not last and clients soon got tired of them. The dance hostesses, therefore, had no choice but to return to Shanghai’; for the economy

of the scene, the difficult business did not make dancing more economic. And ‘in order to attract and to keep their patrons, dance hostesses were inclined to offer extra services on the demand of generous clients (Jing Xiao 25). In a later issue of the same magazine, columnist Zheng Bai Shui 鄭白水 condemned the Hong Kong dance business as outright sex trade: ‘It’s sad to talk about it — the life of the dance hostesses in Hong Kong is a thousand times harder than in Shanghai! A patron always wants to sleep with the dance hostess after spending three dollars on dancing. If the dance hostess refuses, the client will immediately opt for another woman; in other words, if the dance hostess wants to survive, she has to sacrifice herself.’ At the end of his column, Zheng reaffirmed the moral supremacy of the Shanghainese dance scene: ‘Luckily, the dance culture in Shanghai still remains its original spirit of a tasteful entertainment. Despite existing impropriety, at least dancing is not a sex business in disguise. I only wish my fellows in the dance scene to dance for spiritual peace and excitement to cure the dullness of everyday life’ (Zheng 20).

The cultural supremacy of the Shanghai dance scene became a marketable asset in Hong Kong among Shanghainese clientele. According to a 1938 report in the magazine *Supreme* 至尊, the biggest dance hall in Hong Kong, Chung Wah 中華 (opened in 1932), outran its competitors after its operation was taken over by businessman Charlie Gray, who refurbished the dance hall in a Shanghainese style:

‘The band is from Shanghai, eight out of ten of the dance hostesses are from Shanghai. You can hear all the Chinese music heard in Shanghai as well as the Shanghainese accent everywhere. The mania has got all the Shanghainese in Hong Kong in a dance fever’ (Yue). Another two top dance halls, Cathay 國泰 and Dai Wah 大華, relied solely on two Shanghainese movie stars to attract patrons as the

impetuous band's music could hardly be danced to: 'after three quick foxtrots comes a rumba, out of pace from time to time. With such hot temperature and stuffiness of the hall, many find it impossible to dance'. 'Shanghainese' was the equivalent for the quality of dance halls. Nevertheless, there were also dance spaces for other subjects: Kam Ling 金陵 was frequented by local students and businessmen; Lido 皇宮 targeted foreigners. Selling four dances for one dollar, Lido provided dance hostesses of, and to, a variety of nationalities. 'The majority of the patrons were British soldiers and foreigners; Chinese clients were rare' (Yue 5). All the names of these Hong Kong dance halls could be found in the Shanghai dance world, although there was no business connection as Chung Wah, Dai Wah and Cathy were all operated by Gray, who later, in 1941, opened the grandest dance hall — the Paramount Ballroom — in the business centre of the city.

Although Hong Kong and its dance scene were considered second-tier, it was still a popular destination for the Shanghainese dance hostesses' voyages, as these trips symbolized the dance hostesses' wealth and power. Dance tabloids often specified if the dance hostess was in Hong Kong, as shown in fig. 2.1 & 2.2, although another possible reason could



Fig. 2.1 Photos of dance hostesses

Caption for top-right photo: 'Chiu Har Fei (Hong Kong Chung Wah): None of the thousands of women I have seen is comparable to this fair lady!'

Caption for bottom-left photo: 'Leung Choi Chu (Hong Kong Dai Wah): The charm of her smile put all the beauties in the shade!'

Source: *Dance Fashion* 舞風, Vol.3.1938: p.14.



Fig. 2.2 Photos of dance hostesses

Caption for photo no.1: 'Hong Kong 'Kam Ling' Shu Tsz Sai (Photo courtesy of Chiu Chiu)'

Source: *Dance Fashion* 舞風, Vol.4, 1938: p.1

be that the dance halls in Shanghai and Hong Kong shared many common names. These studio portraits of the dance hostesses, featuring their fair look and *only* their look in a style resembling the photos of Hollywood movie stars of the same decade,

suggest that dancing was not the most important issue in the Shanghainese dance culture.

While dance hostesses were extensively represented in publications in the form of news coverage and studio portraits in entertainment magazines, one dance hostess wrote herself into a literary existence. Sing Oi Lun 成愛倫, a dance hostess by day and a writer by night, published *Sing Oi Lun: A Collection of Essays* 成愛倫小品 in 1952, an anthology of her writings published in a column in the daily tabloid *Robin Hood* in Hong Kong. Sing is a two-fold representative of the 1950s dance scene in Hong Kong, personifying its reality and possibilities: the Shanghainese cultural and lifestyle inheritance in Hong Kong and the many shades the image of a dance hostess can contain. Originally from a well-educated family in Shanghai, Sing began writing for newspapers after graduating from secondary school. Sing was driven into the dance industry after arriving in Hong Kong. 'Being low-profiled in style yet eloquent in opinion, her writings often severely criticize gender inequality', among her other interests and thoughts and feelings on a variety of subjects, ranging from love, travel to folk culture (Hui). The anthology is prefaced by ten Shanghainese writers, and at the end of the anthology is a collection of advertisements of dance venues (Hui). Lau saw the Shanghainese influence on and export to the Hong Kong dance scene as well as a site of cultural and personal transformation; by becoming a dance hostess in Hong Kong, Sing was able to follow her vocation as a writer.

This denaturing process, or localization of first the dance business and then the culture and practices, took place in everyday life at a pace unnoticeable yet unstoppable. Little by little, the Shanghainese influence subsided. In 1947, a small

booklet was jointly published by the five top dance halls in Hong Kong, titled *The Pictorial of the Dance Scene* 風光畫報, to advertise the specialties and the most popular dance hostesses of each of these establishments, as well as to state opinions and analyse of the dance culture and practices. In the preface titled ‘Driven by Passion’ 興趣之驅使, the editor, Fan Yuk Fei 范欲飛, attempted to redefine Hong Kong ballroom dancing as a hobby of refined taste for men and women with social functions and artistic nourishment and a culture in its own right without any Shanghainese quality (1). The Shanghainese imprint was still visible; for example, in one article on the dance glossary, the vocabularies were still very much the same as in the Shanghainese dance scene, although some words started to mean differently (19); the layout of the coverage of the dance hostesses’ photos were like mirror images of the Shanghainese dance publications (fig. 2.3).

What makes this publication interesting is the analysis and critique of the local dance practices and culture, which suggested an effort and intention to establish a new order, as well as the growth of a new dance culture. There is a clear intention in this booklet to elevate the status of the art of dancing. One article analyses the five kinds of (male) dancers in the dance hall and it regards the dancers who ‘dance for dance’s sake’ as the most respectable subjects. These dancers ‘choose [dance hostesses] according to their dance standard instead of appearance. Dancing on the dance floor, with all attention paid to the music and the steps, they devote their hearts and souls totally to the experience of the dance. These dancers comprise only five percent of the total dance population’ (17). There is another article introducing the music for dancing and recommendations on the tunes for waltz, tango, and foxtrot (22-3). Gradually, ‘dancing’ in Hong Kong started to symbolize a variety of

enjoyments and activities; it was not the 'Shanghai dance hostess' that was in decline but the influence of the Shanghai dance culture in general.

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Fig. 2.3 'Famous dance stars of Chung Wah dance hall'.

Source: *The Pictorial of the Dance Scene* 風光畫報, 1947: p.6

In 1950, a new weekly popular entertainment magazine *Technicolor Weekly* 七彩週刊 was published, featuring serial novels, short stories, comics, pen-pal information, an agony-aunt column and discussions of local leisure activities. Among these columns was a weekly section on the dance in nightclubs, ballrooms and dance academies, featuring gossip of dance hostesses, news of dance events by various dance venues, conflicts between dance teachers and hostesses, discussions on the experiences of the dance and how to woo hostesses, etc. Finding dancing in lurid stories of dance hostesses' love life and light-hearted discussion of the dance culture and practices demands a renewed understanding of the everyday as the process of the making of a dance tradition. For example, in 'Dance Halls and Academies in Hong Kong: An Overview', in describing how the owner of one dance hall would spend a fortune to ensure the quality of dance hostesses, the author comments: 'if your beauty is captivating and your curves are real, even if you don't know the slow foxtrot, the boss would hire a specialist to teach you' ('Dance Halls'). Though the emphasis here is precisely that the look and the physical appeal of the dance hostess were more important than dancing in the 1950s' dance culture, why a dance hostess must learn to dance becomes intriguing.

In an article covering — and also fuelling — the dispute between local dance teacher Tse Lo Bat 謝魯八 and Suen Yi Tsang 宣義增 from Shanghai on the art of slow foxtrot, Tse's student Tam was asked by the author 'How is the real slow foxtrot danced?' As reported, Tam said 'In Suen's dancing, there were two steps that were apparently foxtrot, the middle part was more like his own invention. The slow foxtrot is a very popular social dance. Suen was only dancing along the music according to his own will and steps, it's more like tribal dancing' (Chu Zi). Tam was, certainly, teasing Suen about his style rather than initiating a serious discussion

about his art and technique. However, this is exactly how creative agency and the accumulative effect of everyday life escape our sight: in the disguise of different emotions, thoughts and creativity are expressed subconsciously and often manifested in other practices. These events, instead of rupturing everyday life, slowly constitute a participatory situation for everyday life to happen. It is with this awareness that the agency of the mass and the transformative potential of the everyday can be recognized. In another article, being put together with advice for dance-hall male patrons, such as how to remove lipstick stains from shirts and how to respond to the dance hostesses' intentional bodily contact, was one on how to dance to music correctly:

Be very careful if you don't go to dance halls often or know music. Recently, many dance halls begin with a part of slow foxtrot, then followed by a part of calypso or samba or even quick waltz. If you are not prepared you will freak out; people around the floor would laugh at you for being like an idiot (Ng Sik).

Apart from notes as such, mentions of dance hostesses' refining of their dance skills for dance competition preparation were not uncommon (Shuen; Chan Ki). The dance hostesses *did* have to dance. Though detailed and in-depth public discussion of the dance had yet to appear, embodied dance knowledge, practices and culture were produced on the dance floor. Nightclubs, together with their patrons and dance hostesses, localized ballroom dance in Hong Kong not only by setting the dance free from its Shanghainese origin and the extravagant culture but also inscribing the dance as a participatory practice into the fabric of the mass' everyday reality.

### **Everyday ballroom dancing on the silver screen**

Before he left Hong Kong for the United States in 1959 at the age of eighteen, one of Lee Jun Fan's 李振藩 many pastimes was dancing. In several films in which he played a supporting or a main character, Lee showcased his dancing to spice up the clichéd cinematic narratives with the youthful fashion of the time. He danced a cha-cha with actress Man Lan 文蘭 in the comedy *Darling Girl* 甜姐兒 (1957) and a jitterbug with Yam Kim Fai 任劍輝 — a Cantonese opera singer — in *Too Late for Divorce* 早知當初我唔嫁 (1956). He danced another cha-cha in *The Orphan* 人海孤鴻 (1960) in a restaurant as a troubled youth.

Lee, even beyond the silver screen, was an avid dancer. He took notes of eighty-two cha-cha steps.<sup>8</sup> His steps are not on the list of steps in the standardized international ballroom dance exam syllabus, and the informality and obscurity of some of the names of the steps, such as 'simple step', 'technique step', and "'R' step', suggest that they could be Lee's own invention for his own dancing. Next to some steps written in English with blue ink in a cursive script are ticks stroked by a pencil. Some ticks have an extra stroke across the long arm forming half-ticks. There is no way to inquire into the thoughts in Lee's mind at the moments when these traces were sketched, but any dancer that has stubbornly repeated the same movements again and again would involuntarily identify the ticks as satisfaction markers for one's dance practice.

The ordinary youth dancer Lee Jun Fan eventually became Bruce Lee, the world-renowned martial arts movie star. The pencil strokes of ticks and half ticks thus, symbolically, mark the process of transformation and the dialectics of everyday life and history. Bruce Lee's stardom retrospectively confirms his past as a historical

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<sup>8</sup> Items of the Bruce Lee Foundation Collection.

process of transformation literally through a new name and an unrecognizable appearance; the historical potential and significance of the everyday requires a historical event and subject to be established. The fact that Bruce Lee is not known for his dancing and that the notes were personal impressions and symbols rather than public or institutionalized knowledge, begs the question, ‘What kind of facts have these notes recorded?’ The mundane nature of the notes and the indecisiveness and bewilderment inscribed become a form of resistance against a consistent and progressive history of a legend, suggesting that the legend is also an ordinary person, sharing the enjoyment and frustration of dancing and going through the practices in which all dancer would participate. Secondly, these records of everyday, ephemeral thoughts and experiences mark not events but instances of the process of a forming dance tradition, which served as an opportunity for the dancers’ self-reinvention — including the invention of new names for the novel bodily movements.

Since the mid-1940s, ballroom dancing — not only the industry and the business establishments but the dance form — flourished and was woven into the fabric of people’s everyday lives. The corporal forms and musical rhythms of ballroom dance trickled out of the space of the nightclub, providing the material for creative appropriation and expressive rendition in different realms, on both a personal and social level. The cinematic representations of ballroom dance between the late 1930s and the early 1960s record the popularization of the dance across social spaces, age, and class; in return, the dance provided an artistic device for cinematic expressions and helped the evolution of Hong Kong cinema from a means of realist representation to a creative tool and medium. The popularity of ballroom dance also provided the musical situation for the creation of the first generation of

local Cantonese popular music (Yung 218; Wong). The rearrangement of traditional Cantonese operatic melodies and popular tunes into dance beats, and the writing of new lyrics about modern urban life to these musical forms, made local everyday life a source of inspiration and thus began the local production of mass musical entertainment; at the same time, ballroom dance opened the local (dance) music scene to western dance music fashion, which also led to the rearrangement and adaptation of foreign music for local dancers.

The change of ballroom dance from adult nightlife entertainment to a popular dance exercise is reflected in the cinematic representation of ballroom dance. The most indicative feature of the transformation is the shift in the representation of the dance floor, from the backdrop of sporadic scenes in the narrative, to the space in the spectacle for showcasing ballroom dance performances. From the late 1930s, the dance floor in nightclubs and restaurants often appeared in movies, sometimes as a space for social occasions such as house parties or dances in restaurants, and usually as the licentious space of desire and decadence. The war-time movie *Incident in the Pacific* 太平洋上的風雲 (1938), aligning itself with the Chinese Communist Party, presents a typical dinner dance scene at the home of a corrupt Nationalist army official who throws a luxurious birthday party in the face of civil war and Japanese military aggression; a socialite-dance hostess, formerly a communist guerrilla, takes advantage of the army official's affection to spy on the Nationalist army and uses the money she earns to support the Communist guerrilla. This dance scene takes no more than twenty seconds; the dancing is out of time with the music, probably due to post-production technological limitation, but the triviality of the dance scene, which is a straightforward symbol of the enemy's decadent lifestyle, makes the discord between

the dance movements and the music not a concern. Nevertheless, it is a discernible waltz, as can be perceived from both the iconic three-step dancing and the music.

In another war-time movie, *The Twelve Wives, part two* 金屋十二釵續集 (1938), the nightclub is depicted as the site for the pseudo-emancipation of women, away from the destiny of being a reproductive accessory to men in a patriarchal society. The story resolves in a happy manner for all twelve women, all concubines of their shared deceased husband, who quit their respective professions (including that of dance hostess) to set up a hospital to provide medical support for soldiers fighting at the frontline, under the leadership of their shared stepson. While the original dance scene is now lost, the programme of the film suggests that ballroom dancing was becoming a performance art at that time: actress Chan Wan Sheung 陳雲裳, cast as one of the dance hostesses who won the title of queen of dancing, painstakingly perfected her dance performance on the screen as if her good looks were not sufficient. The director Tong Hiu Dan 湯曉丹, ‘for the sake of artistic excellence’, made Chan dance so many times that she ended up with a red and swollen ankle (‘The Real Story’ 7). The emergence of serious dance performances from the film also indicates, apart from a change in the ballroom dance tradition, the evolution of the cinema at that time from a space for realistic presentation to one for the visual representation of spectacles.

Post-war movie productions further accentuated the spectacular quality of cinema through the exhibition of theatrical dance performance — ballroom and other genres with experimental choreography — with improved cinematic technique. *Honeymoon for Two* 洞房移作兩家春 (1949) features an extended exhibition-dance performance by dancers Tse Lo Bat 謝魯八 and Tang Bak Ling 鄧白菱. In

*Honeymoon for Two*, Tse and Tang, who are introduced as dancers and use their real-life names, give a two-minute 'special' performance in a restaurant to entertain the diners in the movie. The performance does not serve the plot or the narrative of the story although it is in harmony with the movie's goal of impressing audiences with state-of-the-art amusement, in both film technology and ballroom dance virtuosity. The film, a comedy about the accidental and hilarious reunion of two lost brothers who look identical, uses one actor to cast the twin brothers, who appear simultaneously on the screen at the climax of the story. The ballroom dance performance serves a similar function: to provide visual extravaganza to the mass audience with a virtuoso display of modern dance techniques and art. The immature filming technique for dancing unfortunately limited the directors' ability to represent the performance in a more appealing and impressive manner. The camera was always too close to the dancers, often failing to showcase their crafted lines and figures. Another problem, not unrelated to the dance culture at the time, was that too much emphasis was placed on the face of the dancers instead of their movements. Moreover, the dance couple's choreographies were not designed for the screen; the smoothness in their flow was rendered into blandness in a two-dimensional surface. The intention to use the visual appeal of ballroom dance to attract the audience was evidenced in the film programme, which presented Tse and Tang on the cover in a sophisticated, picturesque dance figure despite the lack of coverage of the dance couple in the content.

Later representations of ballroom dance in movies from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s show the absorption of the dance into more private, leisurely and youthful spaces; the dance was also incorporated into the narrative in a smoother manner,

often with a narrative function. This development represents an advancement in the general understanding of dance as an expressive bodily language rather than a social ritual or a performative spectacle. This evolution was obvious in the contrast between the performances of the mixed Spanish dance in the 1955 melodrama *Sweet Dreams* 花都綺夢, and the comedy *A Perfect Match* 門當戶對 in 1962 respectively. In *Sweet Dreams*, a story about a love triangle between an impoverished painter and two singer-hostesses, a ‘Spanish tango’ is performed in a scene in which singer Lulu invites the painter Lee Man Shu to a nightclub so as to embarrass her love rival, Rose, who is one of the dancers in the performance but has previously introduced herself to Lee as a teacher. The ‘Spanish tango’, as announced in the film, is, from today’s perspective, a mixture of flamenco and *paso doble* that is danced throughout in an open position with the two dancers facing the audience, instead of each other, most of the time. Although the dancing itself is not particularly impressive -- if not unnecessarily long, it is one of the first attempts in local film production to use dancing to serve a narrative function and convey a dramatic effect.

In *A Perfect Match*, the dance performance to Spanish music is a much more integral part of the story and successfully introduces a comical effect into the hilarious comedy through the visual representation and the concept. The film is about a daughter rebelling against her mother and an arranged marriage, with the head of the household — a meek husband and a pampering father at home and a macho man who loves being surrounded by random women in nightclubs — caught in the middle of the mother-daughter conflict. The dance performance, taking place in a restaurant, is used to reinforce the contrasting aspects of the father and heighten the comedic effect. The man, Chan, is forced out of bed in the middle of the night by

his wife to look for the daughter who has disappeared from her locked room — with assistance from her father. Instead of searching for his daughter, Chan takes the rare opportunity to get out of the house late at night and goes to a restaurant to enjoy cigar and several women's company. The Spanish performance then begins. The male and a female dancer stage a drama of a love conflict, with the man pursuing the woman but being constantly rejected. The dance develops against a background of Spanish music and postures and movements inspired on *paso doble*. The vigour of the fight is both graphically delivered through the passionate staccato in the Spanish music and the vivid body language tempered with humorous expressions. At one moment the male dancer is, as designed, pushed to the floor, and Chan — then half-drunk — stands up from the audience and joins the performance, commencing an unexpected second half of the show. Chan even sings a new song to the Spanish music, telling the male dancer that he need not to be frightened, and that a man should be fearless and fight back.<sup>9</sup> Chan then dances with the female dancer using tango steps and holds; being thrown by one man to the other, the female dancer poses in dance figures with the man when she is caught, which adds a hint of lyricism that transforms the otherwise farcical moves into a hilarious dance that

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<sup>9</sup>The lyrics and translation:

強橫唔洗怕 Do not fear her atrocity

還拳頭抵抗 Resist with your iron fists

男人無畏懼, 嚟我度 Men are fearless, just come here

唔洗怕待我嚟 Let me handle this

男人無火氣 Men without power

老婆時時蝦你 Will be bullied by their wives

淋純唔惡仲衰 Softness of the heart is a curse

會被人哋當爛泥 That makes you as trivial as dirt

男人無火氣 Men without power

老婆時時蝦你 Will be bullied by their wives

奄尖潑辣真惡抵 These picky fiery women deserve some punishments

老公一撈亂劈亂噬 When their husbands get wild and violent

effectively enriches the story and moves it forward. In this performance, ballroom dance is an artistic device instead of a mere cultural or social symbol. It also evidenced a great advancement in the artistic representation of the dance with its aesthetic effects.

A similar use of the dance in movies as an artistic device for narration can be found in an earlier production, *Precious Daughter* 嬌嬌女 (1956). A scene of two men stalking and flirting with the female actress on her own in the street is choreographed into an imitative tap-dance performance to ease the sense of danger and tension and make the scene consistent with the relaxing atmosphere of the comedy. The abstraction of ballroom dance and other dance forms from their cultural contexts and their utilization for creative representation is evidence of the localization of foreign dance into the inescapable ordinary routine, the unconscious process of everyday life learned as one learns his/her mother tongue and responds naturally to normal life situations. An incidental and personal space of ballroom dance springs from such instinctive, individual and corporal practices. In *Too Late For Divorce* 早知當初我唔嫁 (1956), to tease his shy home-tutor of classical Chinese, a teenage boy grabs his tutor by the hand and begins to do swirls and in jitterbug; in *Instalment on Marriage* 分期付款娶老婆 (1961), to drop the guard of her cautious mother, the daughter teaches the 'O.B. cha cha', the short-form of the off-beat cha-cha, which is a simplified form of the dance. The mother-daughter duo dance and sing to the Cantonese adaptation of *Kiss Me Honey Honey* (*Kiss Me*), alluringly, about how to dance and the joy of dancing.<sup>10</sup> The scene itself, of a fair young lady

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<sup>10</sup> The lyrics and translation:

Daughter :

埋嚟教你 OB 啫啫 Let me teach you the o.b. cha cha  
第二必偷空咗喂吓 Wiggle on the second beat

and an old plump woman dancing, is extremely entertaining; more importantly, the hilarious situation provided by the dance puts the two characters in rivals in a temporary, harmonious partnership; the immediate transformation of the mother, who overcomes her stiffness in both body and mind and acquires slickness and lightness in dancing, is a pleasure to watch. The performance also suggests that, at that time, ballroom dancing was a practice freed from the original heterosexual and courting contexts and could be shared by any two persons for sheer pleasure.

The learning and using of ballroom dance as a corporeal language, like any language, involved many experiments of code-mixing with the existing languages. In *Charming Night* 月媚花嬌 (1952), the result of the yet-to-mature experiment is a hybrid performance of a triple-meter song in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, which has a very minimal existence in traditional Chinese music, sung in Cantonese and in operatic voices, with lyrics that use a mixture of both spoken vernacular and refined written classical Cantonese expressions, and an out-of-time ‘quick

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泵啲喳喳喳喳泵啲 Boom ba cha cha cha boom ba

第二必偷空得擰吓 Jiggle on the second beat

**Mother:**

原來咁樣 OB 喳喳 So this is the o.b. cha cha

第二必偷空咗吓 Wiggle on the second beat

泵啲喳喳喳喳泵啲 Boom ba cha cha cha boom ba

第二必偷空得擰吓 Jiggle on the second beat

**Daughter:**

第一學扭擰扭擰聽我話 Just listen to me and move your hips

**Mother:**

要扭吓扭吓好似篩芝麻 Shaky shaky like shuffling sesame seeds

**Together:**

大家學扭擰扭擰真快活 Let's wiggle and jiggle together

查實一樂也 It's so much fun and laughter

**Daughter:**

泵啲喳喳喳喳泵啲 Boom ba cha cha cha boom ba

練熟 OB 喳喳吓吓 Practice the wiggle of the o.b. cha cha

**Mother:**

肥婆爭啲標出膏咯 The fatty woman almost sweats oil

大汗通身濕嘩真熱咯 I am wet all over oh I am steaming

waltz' introduced after some operatic singing. This performance evidences how ballroom dance provided a musical situation for the transformation of local everyday music practices that, in turn, created a new genre of music: Hong Kong Cantonese pop music.

This musical and rhythmic situation, of hybridity and experiments, was exemplified by the musical reality of the nightclub. Cantonese opera/music-scholar Yung Sai Shing summarizes the musical diversity in the night club in the 1950s and the embodiment of these differences through dancing that harmonized the heterogeneous musical existences: 'We can imagine, in the night clubs, the music that carried the rise and fall of the dancers on the dance floor included the Cantonese operatic music and folk tunes from Canton, Mandarin pop music from Shanghai, and dance music from Europe and America. In other words, post-war Hong Kong nightclubs were a unique cultural space of the encounter and mixing of popular music from the East and West' (216).<sup>11</sup> The intriguing performance in *Charming Night* illustrates that the transformation that resulted is not only a mix of multiple cultural elements but novel concepts of space and time: The musical reality of nightclubs became a source of inspiration and an object for reflection in musical creation; local sentiments and everyday experiences of the here-and-now became texts for appropriation and appreciation, and regular situations of possibilities for aesthetic experimentation.

### **Towards a local ballroom dance tradition**

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<sup>11</sup> My translation.

Hong Kong popular music historian Wong Chi Wah argues that the making of Cantonese dance music was the beginning of the local Cantonese popular music tradition. Through careful organization of the early production of works, Wong describes the tender moment when the Cantonese dance music genre emerged, when nobody was aware that that was the beginning of a new local music tradition:

[M]any novel phenomena, at the time of their birth, are not acceptable to many people. Cantopop encountered the same situation when it first emerged. The genre did not even have a unifying name, some called it ‘modern Cantonese music’, others ‘pop music from Canton’, ‘Cantonese music for dance’ or ‘dance songs’...it was entirely a chaos. What was more confusing is that the Cantonese pop music makers...were all from the Cantonese opera circle. Their ‘Cantonese dance music’ recordings contained many operatic works, even though some were closer to Cantonese folk tunes, which were saturated in Cantonese musical flavour...In this situation, Cantonese opera lovers considered these music pieces Cantonese operatic works instead of pop music, and those who favoured western pop music would not enjoy pop music adapted from the Cantonese opera (g).

This novel practice of conventional Cantonese music was dubbed ‘spirited music’ 精神音樂 in the 1940s (49).<sup>12</sup> The genre quickly evolved into Cantonese dance music as its novelty was only limited to the use of western instruments, while the latter

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<sup>12</sup> In the programme for the Chinese Opera Festival published by the Provisional Urban Council in 1997, *A History of Cantonese Operatic Songs and Music* 廣東曲樂時蹤：從古腔古樂到近代戲曲, the ‘spirited music’ is translated as ‘jazz-assimilated Cantonese opera music’. The genre is introduced as ‘Western musical instruments such as violin, saxophone, electric guitar, cello, Jazz drum are played together with Chinese instruments *dahuan*, *muqin* etc’ (10).

signified a musical transformation and the induction of a new sensibility: the beginning of the creation of local pop music is also the beginning of the making of the local; a sense of place arose and demanded to be articulated in its own voice and beat. Ballroom dancing not merely brought western elements to the existing Cantonese music but also the sense of time and space of the city.

Ballroom dance performances in movies and Cantonese dance music became rarer after the mid-1960s when new social dances such as calypso, twist, soul dance, and other popular American styles replaced ballroom in the everyday dance scene. Interestingly, in the history of Hong Kong cinema, the 'dance movie' era commenced with movies featuring theatrical dance performances or choreographed group dances as a dramatic device to introduce an imaginary space to the reality in the scene, which, therefore, does not attach to the existence of any actual space such as the night club. Just like in the movies, ballroom dance in this period, in representation, was the background for many events, providing musical pulsation, corporeal vocabularies, and places such as nightclubs and restaurants. In this phase of development, a new subject that was indispensable in the construction of the dance as a situation emerged: the dance teachers. In corollary, the dance academies became the major space of the dance practices of ballroom dancing.

The dance couple Tse Lo Bat and Tang Bak Ling featured in the 1949 movie mentioned earlier represented the redefinition of stardom in the ballroom dance scene: the subject of attention was no longer the dance hostesses but dance professionals. Prior to the release of the movies in 1949, Tang and Tse's dance school, Paramount Dance Academy 百樂門跳舞學院, was already a reputable establishment, and the couple were renowned dancers in town. Opening their dance

academy in 1938, the couple frequented local and intercity competitions and were regular winners, and they were also popular show-dance performers (Lam). Before a Hong Kong-Canton (present-day Guangzhou) dance competition in 1947, a news report gave a detailed description of all the six dance couples' background (three from each city). Tse, at the age of twenty-nine, was 'the youngest dance artist in south China'; he had acquired the secret of the art from his teacher, Lee Tong Mei 李湯眉, and his fame had spread to Macau, Hong Kong and Canton; apart from ballroom dance Tse was also an expert in tap dance. Tang, who 'learned her dance from Tse', was the principal of the dance academy. Born into an artistic family with all her siblings being musicians and singers, Tang gave the most dance performances in Hong Kong from the end of the Second World War up until 1947 (Lam). The rise of Tse and Tang symbolized the 'denaturing' of ballroom dance from a nightlife entertainment to a dance practice that was in itself a body of professional knowledge and skills — one which required teaching and learning.

An awareness of the local was also fostered in this process of transforming the dance; any localization of knowledge and culture is also the production of the local space of cultural production. In the dispute that erupted between Hong Kong and Shanghainese dance teachers mentioned in the first part of this chapter, Tse was regarded as the leader of Hong Kong dance teachers at the time. Considering the fact that the Hong Kong ballroom dance has its roots in the Shanghainese nightclubs, this dispute signifies a rupture in, and a new era for, local ballroom dance history, during which dancers identified themselves with Hong Kong and pursued an independent cultural identity.

Tse and Tang's Paramount Dance Academy was featured as the most prominent dance school in a newspaper coverage in 1948. A possible piece of sponsored content, an extensive coverage titled 'The Zenith of the Dance Academy' was published in *The Kung Sheung Evening News* on 22 August 1948, and it exhibited a narrative turn in local ballroom dance practices and culture: no more Hollywood-style portraits of glamorous dance hostesses but photos of actions by dance professionals. In fig. 2.4, the emphasis on 'proper' behaviour in a dance academy showed the intention to redefine the establishment as a space for decent and healthy dance practices. The article begins with a comparison of the cost of nightclubs and dance academies and praises the latter for its value for money. The comparison also illustrates the spending habits in these two dance spaces: in a mid-range nightclub, men were free to enter, a cup of tea would cost two dollars;



正 式 舞 學 生 上 課 時 情 形

姿 態

糾 正

帶 步

Fig. 2.4

First line caption: The scene of a proper dance student in class.

Second line captions, from right to left: Leading, Correction, Posture.

as single dances were not sold, a dance hostess' half-an-hour presence would cost eleven dollars, but the manager would assure that each male client present employing a hostess or the client would be 'expelled'. Together with the dance hostesses' tea expenses, it cost at least thirty dollars for an hour in a dance hall. On the contrary, in dance academies, the tea was free; the practice fee ranged from two to three dollars; a male client could choose any dance assistant he favoured whenever she was free, and there were no extra charges. Private teaching from a particular dance assistant incurred an 'instruction fee' of six dollars and 'allowed you to have the equivalent enjoyment as in a ballroom, without the hassle from the ballroom manager' (Kwai). Some academies provided a monthly package that charged thirty dollars for unlimited dancing.

Dance assistants were often dance hostesses from other dance halls that were 'naturally not very popular' (ibid); some dance hostesses worked in the dance academies to make extra income. But the flow of the dance hostesses went both ways: the very popular dance assistants might be head-hunted by dance hall managers and became dance stars. A dance assistant could earn on average three to four hundred dollars a month. The academies developed their own dance culture: men could invite every woman to dance; as a convention the women would not decline, even if they were partners of their male companions. The subtext of the practice lay in the learning environment of the space, in which all patrons were only dance students. Nevertheless, very few men took their female partners to dance academies to dance. The article also listed a few academies for the readers, with Tse and Tang's academy on the top of the list (ibid). Together with a few other dancers who also appeared frequently in newspapers, Tse represented a new ballroom dance culture that was not about the dance hostesses but participating and watching dance

performances. Finally, in the name of dancing, the dancers were shown in dance actions instead of in still portraits demonstrating their apparent beauty.

In 1959, a Cantonese adaptation of British singer Shirley Bassey's version of *The Banana Boat Song, Dance and Sing Together* 高歌起舞, was released and became an immediate hit. The original song is a Jamaican folk song and Bassey's version is marked by a clear calypso influence. The Cantonese version underlines the calypso influence by presenting a song celebrating this Caribbean dance, a form of simplified cha-cha danced without handhold. The first stanza of the lyrics reads:

Dance and sing together, let's dance a calypso

Forgetting all the sorrow, let's everyday dance the calypso

Rumba and mambo are dated, the fashion today is calypso

Foxtrot and quickstep are boring, no embrace and separate the torsos (Chow line 1-4).

At the turn of the decade into 1960s, new dances with Afro and Latin American influences with emphasis on more spontaneous and individualistic and less codified movements swept across the young generation in Hong Kong. These new dances included calypso, rock'n roll, pachanga (a form of the South American social dance, salsa), and the twist (popularized by the African American singer Chubby Checker with the song *Let's Twist Again*). Later the a-gogo would be danced on one's own without needing a partner, allowing more room for self-expression: arms were in the air, feet stamping on the spot without needing to travel around the dance floor or

following any routine, bounded by music with other dancers on the floor without any partnership. This song declared that conventional ballroom dance forms — rumba, mambo, foxtrot and quickstep — were out of style, and while it was more an expression of the desire for the new freedom than a statement of the obsolescence of ballroom dance, to a certain extent, the song marks the transition of the dance as shown in this chapter. From a decadent nightlife entertainment imported from Shanghai, then a localized night-time social activity to an everyday participatory dance form, ballroom dance in Hong Kong was transformed from a physical gesture in motions prefacing other forms of close encounters to a means of creative self-expression, and from an escape from everyday life to an integral constitutive part of it. This process illustrates, at the same time, the agency of ordinary people in transforming the city space by transforming themselves, through engaging and sustaining the dance tradition that lures city dwellers into movements and rhythms as well as the city life and spaces that ballroom dancing embodies.

However, apart from the agency of dancers, there are other forces that also actively shape the ballroom dance culture and landscape. In a city like Hong Kong that prides itself on its capitalist lifestyle, market economy has exploited ballroom dancing for profit by commoditizing the illusion of immediate transformation through the selling of professional dance partnership. As Chapter Four will show, though the ballroom dance industry in Hong Kong targets a small circle of the wealthiest clientele, its impact on the culture and economy of ballroom dancing is profound: dancers are alienated from the dance tradition and become clients and labours in the industry.

## Chapter Four

### **The glamour of the ballroom dance industry and its shadow, 1990s to present**

When asked about the unique symbol of the Hong Kong ballroom dance scene, many local dancers, professional and social, mentioned the *tai-tais* 太太 (Kwong, Wan and Hau). The *tai-tais*, literally meaning ‘wives’, in the local ballroom dance scene refers to middle-aged and older married women with very rich husbands and a great deal of money and time to spend. Among the *tai-tais* are some high-profile socialites from the wealthiest families in town. They are the centre of attention in public, and even more so in the dance circle, because of their visibility and distinctiveness in terms of class and behaviour. Unlike everyday social dancing, in which participants dance with their companions, friends’ partner in company or with strangers in the same space, or in competitive dancing which requires stable dance partnerships, the *tai-tais* often appear in public in the company of their paid male dance partners, usually western and much younger than the *tai-tais*.

From 2001 onwards, the dance activities of the *tai-tais* have become a favourite subject of the press. The paparazzi followed the poshest *tai-tais*’ overseas journeys with their male dance teachers, covering stories in the narrative of infidel wives in secret rendezvous with lovers (‘Exclusive’). The second-tier *tai-tais* who dance with Chinese male teachers in Hong Kong or from mainland China were portrayed by the mass media as lonely housewives or divorcees that needed temporary comfort from male companionship (‘Housewives troupe’). In tabloids’ coverage, most of the time they were lustful, occasionally they were innocent and fell prey to swindlers in the disguise of charming dance teachers, causing them financial loss and emotional injury (‘Housewives’). All these various and variable

practices and incidents have been presented in the name of ballroom dancing in the mass media from 2000 onwards.

The *tai-tais* in Hong Kong, at first glance, seem to be the local representation of a particular kind of dance subject in the contemporary global ballroom dance phenomenon: the inappropriate women who make themselves stand out as public spectacles. Propagated by the ProAm (which stands for professional-amateur partnership) ballroom dance industry, the phenomenon of hiring professional partners for competition and social dancing is also found in Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Philippines. But Hong Kong is an exceptionally lucrative market for the industry: according to Simon Zhang in the interview, one of the owners of the Star Galaxy Dance Club which specializes in providing professional dance partnership services, said that most of the top two-hundred dancers in the world ballroom dance competition ranking are earning their livings in Hong Kong (Zhang, in interview).

Dance scholar and former US professional competitor Juliet McMains regards the senior women that pay professional teachers to perform in competitions as ‘the grotesque’ element in partnership with their glamorous and much younger partners. These women are everything opposite to the mainstream idealized and commoditized image of women that are young, slim and sexually appealing (McMains 39). Sociologist Julia Ericksen, a ‘grotesque’ dance subject herself by McMains’ definition, is caught between the exhilarating joy of dancing, the temporary empowerment from the physical ‘instant intimacy’ in the physical encounter in the partnership and the guilt of betraying her feminist beliefs (kindle location 377). McMains suggests that the American ballroom dance industry is simultaneously powered by and produces Glamour, an ideology of transformation

that sometimes incurs actual changes (such as the economic status of the dance teachers in the industry) but most of the time only provides feelings of immediate social and sensual transcendence. For the Glamour-mechanism to operate, the grotesque has to exist to purchase and consume Glamour in the form of young male dance partners, flashy costumes, ‘exaggerated facial expressions’ (McMains 39) and so on. Following McMains’ logic, the grotesque, or the inappropriate women, are themselves constructs of the ballroom dance industry. And the organizing force behind is not the exhilarating experience of ballroom dancing but the dance economy’s craving for profit (see Methodology for a discussion of McMains’ work).

The picture of a prosperous ballroom dance industry and a considerable number of *tai-tais* mesmerized by Glamour illustrates Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno’s theory of the culture industry and its mass deception. Adorno condemns the culture industry for the standardization of the products and the degradation of aesthetics in works of art through the mass industrial production of commodities. The ballroom dance industry presents a very intriguing case for the elaboration of the theory for two reasons: firstly, dancing requires one’s use of his or her own body, the physical body does not need to be purchased and the physical experience together with the sensations are not purchasable. The commodification of ballroom dance practices shows how lacks — their inappropriateness — are created by the industry to foster the pseudo-need in the consumers and in corollary their desire to purchase the glamorous experiences that are, ultimately, superficial and ‘anti-enlightenment’ (Adorno 106), preventing radical personal transformation and keeping consumers ‘addicted’ (McMains) to Glamour. Secondly, the specificity of the ‘inappropriate women’ suggests that the ‘mass’ targeted by the culture industry is the industry’s own production, an undemocratic market it can capitalize on. Adorno

accuses the culture industry of using the democratization of culture as an excuse to justify its standardization and homogenization of the products for the fair and wide distribution for all. The subjugation of the *tai-tais* in the ballroom dance industry shows that the industry's rationale is a fallacy: while 'inappropriate women' are targeted as the prime market of the industry, the term is actually an empty signifier that does not have a social or cultural existence beyond the industry; the 'inappropriateness' is being regulated and sustained by the industry to ensure continuous consumption.

The rise of the ballroom dance industry in Hong Kong therefore signifies not the effervescent development of the local dance tradition but the boom in the economy of the industry that exploits the pleasure of the dance. In fact, the Hong Kong ballroom dance industry produces its own culture of luxury that has redefined the existing dance culture and had an adverse impact on the budding local dance ecology. Since the opening of the first dance studio in 1993 with ownership of the enterprise separated from the dance teachers, the industry developed and created its own market and commodities around the ideology of luxury — the discourse and the market strategy that makes the conceptualization of the *tai-tais* possible. The *tai-tais*' prominence as a representative of the local dance culture, despite their stereotypical notoriety of unimpressive dancing, the craving for attention and vanity and a relatively small, self-enclosed population, indicates both a change in the defining subject of the local dance tradition and practices from good dancers to wealthy clients, and the gentrification of the ballroom dance practice, which is made into a luxury for the few. These impacts underline the importance of Adorno's emphasis on (the loss of the) aesthetics: when the economy of the social organization of an aesthetic tradition does not centre on the aesthetics, it is no longer democratic,

consequently destroying the generic social, culture and aesthetic tradition of the dance and its community.

This chapter aims, firstly, to trace the historical development of the ballroom dance industry in Hong Kong in the light of McMain's concept of Glamour, to expose its operational strategy and ideology. Below the 'glamorous' prosperity of the phenomenon is, I argue, the capitalization of the existing social, cultural and economic practices and conventions of ballroom dance collectively constructed by the local dance community. The ballroom dance industry redefined the local dance culture into a luxury-consumption behaviour devoid of aesthetics, which is the essential condition that propagates the dance tradition and community. The second part of this chapter begins with the deconstruction of the industrial production of the *tai-tais* and their essential but often forgotten western dance partner-escorts, the *gweilos* 鬼佬. 'Gweilo' was once a derogatory term, literally translated as 'ghost man', and nowadays is a common colloquial term used to describe a western man. In the Hong Kong ballroom dance scene, the Caucasian male dancers earning their livings as paid dance partners are reduced to the anonymous *gweilos*, stripped of their nationality, professional performance and artistic style. With references to Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry, this part of the chapter argues that the 'identities' the ballroom dance industry creates, such as *tai-tais* and *gweilos*, are administrative categories and pseudo-individualities for the industry's manipulation.

### **The production of glamour (and the grotesques): the rise of the industry**

The year 1993 witnessed the founding of the first dance business that eventually led to the boom of the local dance industry. The first studio that was

financed by joint-partnership and employed dance teachers to provide instruction was opened and it became the prototype of the industrial operation of the ballroom dance business. The model separates the dance-establishment ownership from the dancer-teacher and situates the latter in a new social relation — the labour — in the primordial ballroom dance industry. Dance studios of this sort in Hong Kong are, however, not factories that (mass) produce dancers, but rather shops that cater to the customers. In her discussion of the American ballroom dance industry, McMains regards the ‘machine’ that runs the whole industry as Glamour, which is both ‘the overarching mechanism that drives the system’ and ‘its objects of production when they take on value symbolic of the entire system’ (1). A similar Glamour machine was also built and running in the Hong Kong ballroom dance industry although its glitter is defined in terms of luxury. In the light of Glamour, Adorno’s notion of ‘culture industry’ thus takes up a new layer of meaning: it refers to the industrial production of some cultural artifices — though Adorno insists it is by nature anti-enlightenment and refutes the real meaning of culture — and also the production of a new culture, that is the ‘symbolic system’ that endows the industrial practices and products with meaning. The ballroom dance industry has not produced a new dance culture but a consumerist culture of Glamour that makes commercial and industrial practices within the industry meaningful, which is necessary for the industrial operation that arbitrarily capitalized the local social, cultural and economic tradition and practices for its own benefit and so removed these conventions from their original discursive contexts.

Glamour, McMains suggests, is a quality — in and of the spaces, commodity, and experiences within the ballroom dance industry — that allows the representation of binary-oppositional characteristics in reality through over-exposure, which

illuminates and blinds at the same time, in the public space. Glamour, in the American ballroom dance industry and culture, 'enables people to negotiate sexual dichotomies of virtue and vulgarity, as well as distinctions of class or race' (2). To produce Glamour involves 'the "public visibility of a desirable object, its management or control, and its resulting value as class marker or commodity"' (3). Careful monitoring of the accessibility of Glamour is required because the industry does not erase the inequality and bipolarity in the value but takes advantage of it and creates a need out of it. The industry regulates Glamour through controlling the 'visibility and inaccessibility of its objects of desire, the calculated tension between intimacy and distance', mediated through the continual presence of very personal, intimate, and sensual kinds of touch as well as sight' (3). The dichotomies or differences being negotiated in the American ballroom dance industry include class, sex, economic status and physical bodies. Therefore, despite her passion for the dance, McMains confesses that 'Glamour sustains its power by sustaining social inequalities' (7-8), and it serves as an escape that provides the joy that 'drives people to ignore the multiple social structures and histories in which a dance practice is embedded, and the politics and cultural models it nourishes and repeats' (9). In fact, the consumers themselves, as part and participants of these problematic social models, are victims too. The fantasy of empowerment the consumers experience in the dance 'enmeshes them in destructive cycles of desire and consumption within it...offering their followers distraction and momentary escape from the realities of life without' (18).

Taking the phenomenon of Hong Kong ballroom dancing from a historical perspective, Glamour has been conjured with accumulative layers of meaning according to the marketing strategy of the industry. In 1993 the Academy of Dance

舞藝舞蹈學院 was opened in Causeway Bay. Such form of business originated in the need of some female socialites at that time to satisfy their love of ballroom dance and privacy. The investors in the Academy of Dance included Maria Chan Fang Nin-sang, the twin sister of then Chief Secretary of Hong Kong (Go Goh 528), and Shia Ping Lee, the founder of a company that introduced French luxury goods to Hong Kong (Consulate General of France in Hong Kong and Macau). The Academy of Dance was frequently featured in the dance weekly section ‘The World of Dance’ 跳舞世界 in *The Metropolitan Weekly* 城市周刊 as a private dance club for high society in which the most notable member was Lydia Selina Dunn, the first and only woman in Hong Kong awarded a life peerage (‘Person Page - 19122’). The Academy was thus founded to stage the private (but) social life of the celebrities, and exclusivity is essential for a culture of luxury. In the beginning the baroness’ social dance class was not social, as she took private classes without the presence of other students. Eventually she changed her mind and was seen dancing at a dance party organized by the Academy.

The Academy made itself known to the public through the advertisement first seen in ‘The World of Dance’ in issue 552 (fig.4.1). According to the advertisement, the selling point of the Academy included the 4500 square-foot dance floor, the ‘comprehensive courses featuring a variety of dances from cha cha, tango, rock n’ roll to waltz’, the ‘most advanced video and recording facilities’ and ‘professional teachers from Britain’. Among those described as ‘teachers from Britain’ were Paul Bishop and his wife Rosanna, despite the fact that Paul Bishop had been in Hong Kong since 1970s and his wife was a local Chinese. Foreignness has always been one of the defining qualities of Glamour in Hong Kong. With ‘enjoy leisure in dancing’ as the catch phrase, the Academy defined ballroom dance as an active

pastime in a protected, controlled environment. The not infrequent coverage of the Academy of Dance, before its closure in 1996, in a tabloid magazine simultaneously provided an inaccessible spectacle of high-society life to the ordinary people and opened a dimension in the image of the ballroom dance as a practice for the privileged class. What it promoted was not a dance style but a life style, of pleasure and classiness. Comparing the advertisement of the Academy to a local dance school's in 1994 shows an attempt to redefine ballroom dance in abstraction: fig. 4.2 is an advertisement of Hong Kong Dancing Centre, established in 1984 by professional dance teachers Charles Wu and Diana Yau. The picture portrays the couple in action, with the motion of the flare of the dress and the elongating torso felt in the stillness of the picture. Above the photo is a caption stating their grand titles '94' Hong Kong Open Professional Standard Champion' and 'Hong Kong Professional Ten Dance Champion'. Putting the two advertisements side by side, the two face-less figures presented by the Academy at first look like the silhouette of the real-life dancing couple on their right, projected onto a wall. Yet a close look reveals that they are in a non-ballroom dance figure — probably closer to the Argentine Tango but not quite, and the laxity in the narrative of the advertisement suggests that it is not important: The Academy sells not dance but an impression and a feeling of the dance. The real-action photo does exhibit a heightened glamour but the abstract image of the dance whispers a tempting short-cut: glamour is an image immediately accessible.

In 1995 Paul Bishop became the school principal of the Academy. Bishop invited British dancer Scott Todd, who was only twenty years old at that time, to teach at the Academy. This decision sowed the seeds for the formation of the ballroom dance industry. Todd was, according to the information provided by 'The



Fig. 4.1 The advertisement of The Academy of Dance. The caption reads ‘enjoy leisure dancing’.



Fig. 4.2 The advertisement of Hong Kong Dancing Centre, with a photo of dancers-teachers Charles Wu and Diana Yau in action.

World of Dance’, a student of Latin American dance legends Gaynor Fairweather and Donnie Burns and Standard world champions Marcus and Karen Hilton. He was a ten-dance champion in British juvenile, British and European amateur categories (Go Goh ‘Reform’). Todd soon became a phenomenon in the ballroom dance scene but not for his supposedly superb dancing. The budding dance industry defined his social and cultural capitals in completely different terms. In 1996 he was featured in

the news after being stabbed with a knife by a student-lover. The violent attack and the court case that followed were even reported by the *Sunday Mirror*. The British tabloid was entirely unsympathetic to Todd and regarded him as a ‘toyboy’ that ‘waltzed his way into the arms of a beautiful, 40-year-old Chinese divorcee’ (Dillon). The assailant was said to have lent Todd \$36,000 (£2,947.7) before the assault. Todd denied the affair in court (Dillon) but he did open his own dance school, Scott’s Dancing School on 2 June 1996 (Go Goh ‘British dance champion’).

In his first year in Hong Kong, Scott Todd set the prototype of the present-day image of the *gweilo* by making himself into one. His story contains all the elements of the stereotypical image of the professional male dancer-teachers in the ballroom dance industry: a young, handsome, charming, top in the dance scene and white male dance professional pairing with a much older, wealthy and emotionally-wounded female client, on and off the dance pool. Nevertheless, at that time ballroom dance was still one of the focuses in the trade. The advertisement of Scott’s Dancing School 時代舞藝學院 was titled ‘Professional Instruction of Standard and Latin Dance’; it provided ‘individual, group, regular class and competitor training’; ‘extreme good quality British professional dance teacher’, that is Todd himself and Throstur Johannson from Europe were in residence to teach dancing. There were four dance practice-parties every week and they charged \$70 (£5.70) for a single person and \$130 (£12.60) for a couple during the discount period for the opening of the school. It is beyond doubt that Todd had a very strong dance background and expertise, however his presence was more exotic than aesthetic.

Compared to Paul Bishop, the first British ballroom dance teacher who had lived in Hong Kong for more than two decades and had become localized in the city and the dance scene, Todd was more British than his British counterpart. Exoticism,

McMains argues, arises out of ‘economic and political inequity’ and ‘national or cultural difference’, which are harmonized in a commercial relationship. Exoticism, and its inherent inequalities and differences required for its operation, enriches the content of Glamour, widening the gap between the binary oppositional qualities and making class differences and the temporary trespassing exciting. Todd was a perfect combination of the differences and inequalities that both made him marketable and the trade comfortable: he was economically at a lower status than his wealthy clients but his identity as a very good dancer, an artist, eased the inferiority and even made him a cultural icon. However, his biggest cultural asset, in the context of Hong Kong in the 1990s, was definitely his uncontaminated British heritage. Never has the distant Empire been more accessible in a fine tangible human form, with its superiority (in all aspects) reassured in Todd’s first-rate dancing. McMains explains the correlation between exoticism and Glamour that both ‘emerge out of fascination with and fear of difference, a simultaneous desire to understand and to own the Other’ (12). In the business setting, the cultural Other is more than happy to be owned in order to earn a good fortune.

Scott Todd’s success story, ‘[a]t 21 he has just opened his first dance school...with an investment of \$500,000’, sparked off a wave of establishing luxury dance studios. In 1998 Dancing Paradiso 喜舞地 was opened first in a posh neighbourhood and then relocated to Causeway Bay, by Jenny Choi, a tycoon who was said by the press to be Todd’s new partner (Young ‘Dancer’s’). Dance Paradiso closed shortly after its first anniversary due to Choi’s suicide (‘Mid-age indebted woman committed suicide by burning charcoal’), yet its short-lived existence accelerated the maturing of the *tai-tai* market, the consumable image and labour force of the *gweilo* and the culture and practices of the industry. The melodrama

surrounding Todd ironically recalls the stereotypical representation of the dance hostesses in 1930s-1950s Hong Kong, suggesting a long-lasting space of disappearance that kept reproducing dance subjects that were not recognized for their dancing.

Dancing Paradiso in one year made frequent appearances not only in 'The World of Dance' but also in the celebrity news section. With the presence of the most prominent *tai-tais* and Choi's personal influence as a powerful business woman, all the Dancing Paradiso events were filled with extremities: the richest of the upper class, the most famous celebrities, the newest foreign dance teachers and the most well-known and controversial guests in the dance scene. The first anniversary dinner party-cum-celebration of the birthday and regular residence of new Scottish dance teachers Mark Lucas and Delia Crossley on 20 July 1999 was covered in the high-society events section in three newspapers. Nevertheless, the focus of the news decided its content and the people featured included the wife of the CEO of a listed infrastructure company; the Chief Secretary Anson Chan's sister-in-law; the fourth daughter-in-law of the local 'king of steel'; the daughter of a famous architect and her cousin; the wife of a second-generation banker; the daughter of an American banker as well as former Miss Hong-Kongs from the local annual beauty contests (Chan 'Welcoming Party'). These upper-class women, known in, and defined by, Hong Kong society for these titles endowed by wealth and kinship, found the dance pool a public space in which they could appear as themselves through their own dancing bodies, despite the need for the assistance of the (male) bodies. The duo-subject of the industry, wealthy *tai-tais* that go by their family background and their anonymous *gweilos* with slicked hair, was gradually taking shape.

Dancing Paradiso's ephemeral existence symbolizes the expression of Glamour: excessive, transient, intense, extravagant and spectacular. To establish a style of life and a business model in such a short time, the three kinds of practices previously developed out of ballroom dance locally were entwined together to maximize the consumption of the dance services. The taxi-dancing in the nightclubs, social dancing in everyday public venues and dance classes in community centres and dance schools were all absorbed into the business. The role of the dance hostess, popular from the 1950s onwards as paid dance partner and nightlife companion, was taken up by the male dance teachers. Apart from the reversal of the gender, the male dance teachers then served as escorts off the dance pool with their clients, unlike the dance hostesses many of whom were wooed by their male clients and the relationship has a dimension of social and human interaction. In other words what is worse than the commodification of women as dance hostesses is the alienation of male dancers as personal escort service providers — it was their service and labour that counted, not themselves as individuals (see Chapter Two for discussion). The social practices in the local ballroom dance scene such as tea dance, evening dance and dinner party dance were all incorporated into the regular routine of operation. With regular and stable partnership, the clients danced as much and as frequent as they wanted to; the tea dance and the evening dance were essentially not social as they danced with fixed partners, their teachers. Social rituals formed among local dance schools, such as dinner party for the celebration of school anniversary and the teachers' birthday, also became the 'themes' of the events, despite the fact that in Dancing Paradiso the dance teachers were all employees and labourers.

Dancing Paradiso was also the first studio that capitalized the international ballroom dance competition result, making the competition ranking of a (male)

dancer one of the decisive factors for his price in the market. Again, the explicit hierarchical difference marked by the ranking reinforced the significance of difference in the consumption of Glamour and also made the value of a dance professional more clearly exchangeable in the dance market. Before hiring Mark Lucas and Delia Crossley, ranking in the top 20s in the British national professional category, to teach in residence (Chan 'World-renowned'), top international dancers such as the first runner-ups in the UK Open professional Standard, Andrew Sinkinson and Charlotte Jorgensen, were guest teaching for a period of time and their classes were 'all fully booked' (Go Goh 'Andrew'). The competitiveness of dancers in the social practice of the aesthetic tradition was redefined: the *tai-tais* would show-off the rank and achievement of their *gweilos*, 'like comparing the price and novelty of each other's handbag' said Zhang in his interview (Zhang), the director of Dance Culture, another studio that began to trade in 2000.

Nevertheless, ranking and the quality of dancing (not to mention that a good dancer might not be a good teacher) were not the only factors affecting the price of labour. The price of good dancers rose quickly as the market grew, so cheaper sources had to be found. Apart from the 23-year-old British dance teacher Anthony Miles who was hired at the beginning of the establishment of the studio, Dancing Paradiso introduced Russian (male) dancers to the scene. On 4 November, a party called 'From Russia with Love' was held to welcome the three new Russian male teachers Sergey Tokarenko, Sergei Konik and Andrew Azarov (Mo Tam 'From Russia'). The ranking or competitive achievements of these dancers were not mentioned and in fact cannot be found in major competition records. But they were marketable for a different reason: Dancing Paradiso owner Choi in an interview

stated that ‘our dance teachers would dance with ladies that join our evening social dance on their own, to enhance their interest in the dance’ (Go Goh ‘Three’).

Dancing Paradiso created its own space, market and labour force and it fostered an event culture to keep up the momentum of the operation. Dance parties were regularly organized, catering good food as well as providing professional dance performances for watching and opportunities for dancing — social dance and giving ProAm performances in a controlled public space. The parties were organized in different names, but a birthday party for a *gweilo* teacher and a Christmas party are essentially the same dance event. There was a party on 2 March 1999 for the Chinese Valentine’s Day, a festival in the lunar calendar that had gone antiquated for long (Mo Tam ‘Celebrating’); on 17 May a party was held to celebrate Anthony Miles birthday (Mo Tam ‘Socialite women’s favourite’). There were also grand parties such as the ‘spring party’ on 24 April at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in which Andrew Sinkinson and Charlotte Jorgensen gave performances. Each seat cost \$1,200 (£98) and all were sold out. Four ProAm performances were given including one by the owner of the business and her *gweilo*. In this party the first generation and top professional dancers from mainland China, the most famous western dance teachers in town including Gaynor Fairweather and Scott Todd, and many senior local Chinese dance teachers were all present (Chan ‘East meets West’). Since then in the media coverage, some dance teachers, the *tai-tais* and the *gweilos* were associated with each other in the glamour of ballroom dancing. Dancing Paradiso also maximized media exposure through collaboration with different notable individuals and public organizations. On 8 May the studio was rented to the one of the first local international competition dancer Helena Ho for her own dance school event (*Mo Tam* ‘Many dance programmes’).

Dancing Paradisco set up a profitable dance business model that was followed by several other companies not limited to Hong Kong. In 1999, Gang Long Wudao 港龍舞蹈 ('Harbour Dragon Dance') was founded in Shenzhen, a young city in mainland China sharing part of its border with the north of Hong Kong. Shenzhen was designated as a Special Economic Zone in 1980 as one of the five cities served to be the experimental sites of capitalist practices and market economy in communist China. Founded on 15 May 1999, Gang Long — as it is commonly called by dancers — very quickly absorbed the newly produced ballroom dancers from dance academies in all over China into a cheap and enormous work force. Located right next to the station for the train commuting between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, Gang Long took advantage of the geographical proximity and the less-developed economy of mainland China and successfully made itself a marginal extension of the Hong Kong ballroom dance industry landscape (Shum Fan).

Hong Kong local dancers tried to follow this business model too. On 15 November 1999 Dance Culture 舞文化 was open in Causeway Bay by Nick Fok and a *tai-tai* Vicki Wong Choi Ha 王彩霞 (Go Goh 'Dance Culture'). However, Fok quit the partnership after three months and later the ownership of Dance Culture was sold to Simon Zhang and business partners from China in October 2000 (Fung Mun Lau 'New ownership'). China-Hong Kong ballroom dance relation symbolized the changing relation and entanglement between the two regions: the economic superiority of Hong Kong no longer signified a cultural superiority as the quality of dancing in China had surpassed Hong Kong; the new rich in China had also emerged, inscribing themselves into the Hong Kong ballroom dance industry landscape with both monetary and dance capital.

The ballroom dance industry later expanded into Sheung Wan, the western part of the Hong Kong Island. Scott Todd's former business partner, Icelander Throstur Johannson, opened his own studio Dansinn in late October, 1999. On 23 November 2001 Heavenly Dance 亨文舞蹈國際舞蹈中心 was set up by Anna Pao Sohem 包陪麗, a daughter of a late shipping tycoon and her Chinese dance teacher ('Anna Pao'). Following the previous dance studio models and sharing — though not without competition for — the same pool of top international dancers, Dansinn and Heavenly Dance continued and consolidated the culture, social network and practices of the luxury dance industry. While Heavenly Dance was very much like the *tai-tais*' private club, Dansinn was more localized and it did not only situate itself in the economic realm of the local ballroom dance scene. Apart from making Hong Kong his permanent home, Johannson's dance practices engaged him to the wider dance community: he participated in the shooting of an advertisement for a rice company, in which he danced with a local actress;<sup>13</sup> he hired Ken Tsui 徐劍雄, his student and one of the new professional Latin dance champions in town at that time, as the first Chinese dance teacher in his studio in November 2004 (Mo Tam 'Hau Chau Mui'); according to Alan and Irene Young, a former local dance couple actively competing overseas in amateur category, Johannson even lent them the key of the studio and let them practice as much as they wished, and they were forever thankful for his support for local young competitors (Young & Young). Johannson's case suggests that not all western male professional dancers are readily *gweilos*, and the sphere of ballroom dance is bigger than the realm of the industry. Eventually in 2010, a group of foreign former dancers took over both Dansinn and Heavenly and

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<sup>13</sup> hk00adloversinc1990a. 'Hong Kong Advertisement: Golden Crown Rice (Josephine Siao)'. *YouTube*, 16 Sept. 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOxQr05yTDQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOxQr05yTDQ).

merged them into one –DansinnHeavenly, currently the studio in town with the most regular non-local teacher and the most famous hub ‘where the *gweilos* provide company to the *tai-tais* for tea’, as one local professional dance teacher says (Kwong).

### **Deconstructing the *tai-tais* and the *gweilos*: culture industry reconsidered**

In 2006 a court case brought ballroom dance into the limelight in the Hong Kong and even the international ballroom dance public. The scandalous event exposed a condensed miniature of Hong Kong ballroom dance industry reality in every detail and in extreme expression. Then HSBC senior banker Monica Wong sued her dance teachers Mirko Saccani and his wife, Gaynor Fairweather, fourteen-time-undefeated former world Latin dance champion, for the return of a prepaid tuition fee of \$62,000,000 Hong Kong dollars (£ 5,306,928, half of the total Wong agreed to pay in the agreements with her former teachers). Wong accused Saccani for breaking the mutual trust, and thus the agreements, after being verbally abused by him in public. Wong won the case at the end (Tsui). The scandalous event provided the city — and the global ballroom dance community — a good glimpse at the inside world of the dance life of the super-rich in Hong Kong: all the dance teachers involved in the case as defendants or witnesses were westerners, and apart from the second defendant Fairweather, the rest of them were all male; many of them were veteran or even active world-renowned professional dancers. The services that Saccani and Fairweather agreed to provide had consisted of priority in and unlimited sessions of dance classes, practices, tea dances and dinner parties, and for Wong and Saccani’s partnership in overseas ProAm competitions, and in every competition trip they travelled first-class and stayed in extravagant hotels. At the height of her

enthusiasm Wong took six lessons a day, seven days a week; each lesson was forty-five minutes long.

The event that led to the fall-out of the two parties took place in one dance session in Li Hua Restaurant 麗花大飯店 also in Causeway Bay, when Saccani and Wong were practicing alongside Donnie Burns, Fairweather's former dance and private partner, and Burns' student Ling Nelson, who had learned from Saccani till the latter came into an agreement with Wong that banned him from teaching other students. Despite the discrepancy between Wong and Saccani's recounts of the event, the presence of Burns and Nelson won the attention and applause of the scene and affected Saccani and Wong's mood. Wong was said to be extremely nervous and did not perform well; Saccani was furious over Wong's performance and was heard shouting to Wong in public 'move your arse' or 'lazy cow'. Wong cried at the end of the practice ("Mimi Monica Wong v. Mirko Saccani and Another.").

The case summarizes the stereotypical impression of the scene and its dark side, contributing to the popular image of the dance in Hong Kong as a luxury leisure practice for the *tai-tais*. Wong symbolizes the defining characteristics of the *tai-tais*, except for the fact that she is a widow and had her own profession, as well as the manifestation of the characteristics in incomparable extremity. She was able to afford an outrageous amount of money and time on dancing; all her teacher-partners were the standard *gweilos* — white, male, good-looking, the cream of the profession — without a single Chinese; she was very much emotionally involved in the relationship with her dance teachers, though not romantically. Saccani, an Italian, on the other hand was also the archetype of the *gweilo*, in particular his comment on his rich clients as 'cows' justified the mass belief that the *gweilos* were no more than swindling gigolos that please and cheat their old women clients.

Wong and her dance teachers' dispute proves Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry correct: '[t]he quarrels in which the artistic experts become involved with sponsor and censor about a lie going beyond the bounds of credibility are evidence not so much of an inner aesthetic tension as of a divergence of interests' (37). Regardless of the huge input of money and the presence of so many first-rate dancers, the conflict between the two parties has nothing to do with aesthetic or stylistic differences but is a mere business matter and a melodrama full of sensational details and spectacles of extravagance.

Taking the film industry as a representative of the technical modes of operation for the culture industry, Adorno regards this mode of production as the agglomeration of 'extensive division of labour, the employment of machines, the separation of the labourers from the means of production (100-101). The imprints of the culture industry on its products are 'the standardization of the thing itself...and to the rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process' (100). This might distinguish Adorno, who coins the term 'culture industry', from later discussions of the industrial organization of the production of cultural artefacts which generate new names such as 'cultural industries' and 'creative industries'<sup>14</sup>. For Adorno, the problem of this form of production is precisely the indifference to the content and the effect of culture: 'it is industrial more in a sociological sense in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even when nothing is manufactured' (101). Together with Horkheimer, Adorno regards the industrially produced and mass-disseminated cultural artefacts such as

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<sup>14</sup> Lily Kong traces the genealogy of the evolution of the idea and perception of the term 'culture industry'. The UK government's adoption of the term 'creative industries' in its 1997 policy canonized the term into the economic narrative and made it a catchphrase in policy making in many countries, despite the lack of a clear and practical definition.

radio and television programmes, films newspapers, popular music and novels as a unified phenomenon of ‘mass deception’ (Adorno & Horkheimer 31) that ‘cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises’ (38) which is, Adorno believe, the freedom and happiness in enlightenment (Adorno 4).

Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry sheds a light on the meticulous structure of the Glamour machine that keeps the Hong Kong ballroom dance industry running. Despite the fact that they regard the industrially produced culture as a ‘mass deception’, the mass, in this case the *tai-tais*, is the first homogenized production of the industry; the second strategy of the industry is the creation of the ProAm dance form as a culture and standardized, universal practice that maintains the *tai-tais*’ permanent dependence of the *gewilo*. The hyphenated term ProAm symbolizes an absolute binary opposition that cannot be overcome to sustain the need for Glamour; the space of the dance industry is a bubble that accommodates all the social and cultural dance practices (though all are essentially commercial) around the ProAm structure that allocates the consumers and the labourers in their social relation predetermined by the industry and prevent them from uniting in the multiple, aesthetic subjectivity: the ballroom dancers.

In other words, *tai-tai* and *gewilo* are in fact the names produced by the ballroom dance industry to fashion this ProAm and consumer-labour relation. The *tai-tais* do not have a natural social or cultural existence. It is an empty signifier without the signified, a signification subject to the marketing strategy of the industry and is produced by the industry through a stereotypical exoticized image of the local through the eyes of the cultural other. Beyond the ballroom dance scene, the *tai-tais*’ status as a unique local spectacle was arguably perceived in the eyes of the local westerners. The idea emerged in the 1970s when the term *tai-tai* appeared in the

English press and its equivalent in Chinese, *foot-tais* 闊太, literally meaning 'rich wives,' did not become a regular vocabulary in the Chinese mass media until the 1990s when charity and extravagant brands events became frequent. Gladys Palmer, a columnist and fashion illustrator for *South China Morning Post*, often speculated on this peculiar local species in the 1970s. Calling them 'full-time ladies of leisure' and the 'female, non-employed population', Palmer compared the often busy and tired *tai-tais*, whose everyday life was filled with luxury shopping, Cantonese and French classes, brunch, tea and dinner parties, phone calls to their counterparts and the wait in between, to the equally exhausted race horses ('Tired'). The *tai-tais* were one of the symbols of the backwardness of Hong Kong, for Palmer: 'Hong Kong is approximately 20 years behind in attitude. There is...no serious effort to develop individual talent. (In the U.S.A. even Jacqueline Onassis and Charlotte Ford work!)...What there is, is a huge surplus time on the *tai-tais*' hands' ('Boeuf W syndrome'). The modern day interpretation of the *tai-tais* has not changed in essence. Though they have not got rid of the parasitic existence, they have become the pillar of the luxury industry. In their discussion of the cult of luxury consumption in Hong Kong, Chadha and Husband regard the *tai-tais* as one of the several subjects that are disciples of the cult and define them as 'ladies who lunch'. The characteristics of the *tai-tais* include 'a seemingly bottomless bank account at their disposal, the wives of tycoons, typically in their 40s or 50s, lead a life of beauty treatments, shopping expeditions, and lunches with the girls at trendy restaurants followed by leisurely afternoon teas with possibly a manicure squeezed in between. There is a healthy rivalry between these women and that translates into outdoing each other on the shopping front' (52-53). In other words, the *tai-tai* is a gendered upper-class identity constructed by the discourse of luxury and leisure; her

significance today is, therefore, also endowed by the luxury industry, which has given her the identity. The ballroom dance industry in Hong Kong, positioning itself in the luxury market, exploits the *tai-tais*' desire by producing the *gweilos* for their consumption.

There are certainly a considerable number of full-time leisured super-rich Chinese married women in Hong Kong but to organize them into the collective homogenous identity is a totalizing operation through certain discourse by an external agent. The *tai-tais*, the name of the mass consumers of ballroom dancing, is conceived by the industry in Hong Kong for the sake of opening a market for luxury. But when each *tai-tai* is approached individually, every *tai-tai* is an exception to the empty signifier. One *tai-tai* interviewed, Lu, takes two lessons a day, seven days a week. She claimed that she had taken classes from more than two hundred foreign teachers. She is also one of the business partners of a new dance club, Star Galaxy Dance Club in Causeway Bay, one of the busiest shopping district, which she visits everyday to dance. A typical fanatical dancing *tai-tai* by the industry's definition, Lu's initial intention to dance was to improve her health: in 2002 she gave birth to her daughter at the age of 40, and she wished to 'live longer in order to spend more time with my daughter' (Lu). On top of that her husband dances as well and they are both good dancers who genuinely enjoy the immense pleasure shared by every dance lover. Lu was very proud of losing 80 lbs after dancing and this seemingly material, mundane change signifies a long and devoted transformation — at least in the physical aspect. When every dance practitioner is understood as a dancer, the impassable abyss — class, culture, social differences predetermined and allocated by Glamour as the distribution of the sensible — separating them disappears. At the end

there are only two kinds of dancers, good one and bad ones; and the difference is subjective and not absolute.

In the same way that not every wife is a *tai-tai*, not every western male dance professional is a *gweilo*. Indeed, countless western dance teachers visited Hong Kong long before the rise of the local dance industry. Since 1990, western ballroom dancers had been invited by local dance professionals to Hong Kong to give performances in parties and competitions and to provide short-term private teaching. In 1993 there was on average one top couple visiting every month. Though in the early 1990s chances for western dancers' performances and teaching were no longer scarce, those dancers were still highly praised for their art and achievement as dance artists, each dance couple recognized as different teams of artists in their own names. The production of the *gweilo* by the industry as the anonymous foreign male labours selling their bodies and achievement becomes a very big contrast to one of the first visits by a 'gweilo' — and his partner — in 1933. In that year British ballroom dancers J.A. Andrews and Ursula Preston's performance in Hongkong Hotel was given extensive coverage in the press, with emphasis on 'their demonstration of that most famous of all features of English ballroom dancing technique, the Contra-Body-Movement' (S.A.G. 'Accomplished Dancers'). There was even Andrews' own voice in the press commenting that the standard of dancing in Hong Kong at that time was 'not so bad' and on the attitude difference between dancers in London and Hong Kong (S.A.G. 'OUR DANCING'). What is involved in the transition of the perception of the western top dancers from 'Ballroom Expert' to *gweilos* is not only the global flow of human capital or culture that deflate the value — and price — of the dancers. The industrial organization of ballroom dancing redefines the social relations in aesthetic encounters and anchors dancers into allocated positions such as

‘professional’ and ‘amateur’; dance students become clients to be served, particularly in the ProAm system.

ProAm as a form of ballroom dance practice developed to fortify the social, economic and artistic inequality and differences between the amateur clients and their professional dance teachers for the benefit of the industry. The teacher-student partnership structure standardized by the industry ensures that consumers will always be entertained without being enlightened, and the *tai-tais* will not become the self-conscious and well-equipped dancers that can dance their own dance and with any dancer. The profound gap in the level of dance knowledge, experience and technique between professional dance teacher and the amateur inexperienced student — the standard structure of service fostered by the industry — will never require or allow the student to develop her own subjectivity. The industry exploits the unique aesthetic structure of ballroom dance — the two dance as one — and conceals the aesthetic condition for personal transformation, replacing it with instant pleasure that needed to be endlessly purchased, tendentiously eliminating ‘the autonomy in the work of art’ (Adorno 99). In the case of dancing, the autonomy lies in the bodily freedom one produces for him or herself. Apart from the internal aesthetic structure of the dance, the social references of the dance practices are also removed. The industry at the end sells just one thing: dancing with the professional dance teachers, in numerous events and occasions the industry provides. Tea dance, dinner dance, party and competition are all detached from their original social setting, cultures and practices and standardized into homogenous dance sessions. The pursuit of unique subjectivity through aesthetic practices is replaced by the consumption of apparent differences — in the ranking and the look of the teachers, the price and the style of the dresses — that provide temporary ‘pseudo individuality’. These differences are

merely ‘calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system’ (Adorno & Horkheimer 36). In the industry ‘the individual is an illusion...What is individual is no more than the generality’s power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such’ (Adorno & Horkheimer 40). The unifying picture that the ballroom dance industry presents is the *tai-tais* dancing with their *gweilos*, no matter how special they feel.

McMains does not consider the amateur dancer in a ProAm relation as ‘duped’. Instead she believes that their active complicity is intentional as the consumers are making the ‘perverse’ system work for their ‘temporary satisfaction’. Even for her use of the term ‘grotesque’ on the amateur dancers, she justifies it by regarding it as ‘a logical response to an illogical system’, in her context the American society that demands and defines the femininity of women through extreme manipulation of the body, in the narrative of women’s self-control of their own bodies but ultimately for the male gaze in a patriarchal society (41-42). Adorno has no sympathy for the consumers either and believes that they choose pleasure over genuine cultural transformation and deliberately fall for the swindle (103); to blame the industry entirely for providing the trap would deny the *tai-tais*’ agency just the same, though indirectly. Indeed, considered as an aesthetic condition, like any dance form, ballroom dance does not guarantee the acquiring of aesthetic subjectivity and one can only become a subject by chance and the *tai-tais* can as well perceive the happiness in dancing shared by other dancers. The focus of critique, therefore, is not how the *tai-tais* fall for the ‘swindle’ or the dancers sell themselves to the labour market of the industry. Both *tai-tais* and *gweilos* are produced by the industry, extracted from the universal collective identity of ballroom dancers. Adorno’s relentless condemnation of the culture industry ultimately resides in his

vehement concern for the loss of aesthetics in the works of art and consequently the genuine cultural experiences that allow personal transformations.

The political implication of the loss of aesthetics, for Adorno, lies in the complicity of standardized mass culture — either in the form of the propaganda for the authority or popular culture — and the rule of totalitarianism in any form. The culture industry, as exemplified by the development of the Hong Kong ballroom dance industry, produces and disseminates ideology by mass-producing homogenized and standardized commodities and concealing the aesthetic condition of the dance to prevent personal enlightenment and the social changes in corollary. McMains elaborates this complicity and suggests that ‘[t]he Glamour Machine obscures the failure of society to provide, for example, adequate physical and emotional intimacy in an increasingly isolationist culture’. The solution that the American ballroom dance industry offers to amend the social flaws ‘has also folded these solutions back into the capitalist system itself, offering intimacy as a form of commodity that only sustains further inequality’ (55). At the end what the industry provides is not a solution but temporary escape and instant relief for the pain inflicted by the same system the industry is part and parcel of, which ‘has always reproduced the fragility of society’ (Adorno & Horkheimer 41).

What is, then, the ‘fragility of society’ in Hong Kong that is repeatedly produced and sold by its ballroom dance industry? The ProAm structure is actually a metaphor for the social and political reality of Hong Kong: from being led by the British to now by China, Hong Kong has been the rich *tai-tai* that does not feel the need to acquire her own identity and follows along the dance programme developed by her foreign leader. The fragility of Hong Kong society lies in the lack of a local subjectivity, which breeds the craving for foreign capitals to sooth the insecurity

within. As a city that prides itself as the one of the most liberal financial market for the free flow of global capital, realizing the curse of the influx of human and cultural capital is a painful disillusionment to many disciples of market economy. Adorno cannot be more accurate on the illusion of liberation brought about by the capital: 'Capital does not possess such immediately emancipatory forces or elements; the drift of capitalist development, even the underlying or implicit drift of such development, is not towards freedom but further integration and domination' (3). The pain comes in when one realizes he or she cannot go against his or her own will to integrate into the power structure or succumb to domination. That is, when the *tai-tai* realizes money can buy a *gweilo* but cannot buy her own dancing and the joy and freedom in the experience of a dancer. The process of becoming a subject fundamentally involves both the resistance to the external control and the active creation of a new form of existence, and the latter is an aesthetic operation. Adorno regards a great artist's style in his or her work is 'a way to hardening themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth. The style of their works gave what was expressed that force without which life flows away unheard'. For Adorno art itself is not political but radical, so much so that it is an antithesis of the reality, in the form of a necessary hypocrisy: a work of art 'unconditionally posits the real forms of life as it is by suggesting that fulfilment lies in their aesthetic derivatives' (Adorno & Horkheimer 37). It is not an easy task for a *tai-tai* to transform her body, learn her steps and choreograph for herself, nevertheless it is just as difficult and necessary as for every ballroom dancer.

The prosperity of the Hong Kong ballroom dance industry does rely on the local aspiration for foreign/ western culture. But the relatively slow development in

the systematic and professional training of dancers becomes an advantage for the industry, in a manner very similar to the first-world economic exploitation on the third-world, which is dependent on the discrepancy in economic development.

Despite having a considerable history of the social practices of ballroom dance, the dance, as a dance form, has yet been localized in Hong Kong with its own tradition. It is, however, not necessarily a bad thing as this is one the rare instances in which the reality of Hong Kong is not narrated in economic terms and indeed calls for an alternative rhetoric and social-political reality. Adorno and Horkheimer condemn the culture industry for sacrificing 'the logic of the work' and the social system' (33), and these are precisely the necessary tasks for the building of a local ballroom dance tradition: re-joining the social reality with the aesthetic experience of the dance practices. For Adorno, genuine cultural experience is everything opposite to the industrial operation:

Culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings: but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honouring them (100).

Culture is then an ongoing process of self-reflection and transformation. A genuine social and economic organization for such cultural process should 'sublimate instead' of 'represses', allow 'self-negation' instead of providing 'surrogate identity' (Adorno & Horkheimer 37-38). The primal problematics that lie in the phenomenon of *tai-tais* and *gweilos* is, they can dance like any dancers, but they choose not to. Bad dancing is, therefore, sometimes not only an aesthetic issue. Yet the denouncement of culture industry does not begin with the refusal of capitalism itself but the intolerable mediocracy in the aesthetics of the experience, as Adorno and Horkheimer say that '[w]orks of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry

is pornographic and prudish. Love is downgraded to romance' (38). To resist or survive the ballroom dance industry and its 'culture' is, therefore, to refocus on the aesthetic experiences of the dance and invent social and economic network around it. And it is in this relentless, 'unashamed' quest for the possibility of aesthetic freedom and the happiness experience that chances for radical and emancipatory politics for a different reality can be perceived. In the light of this pursuit, the rise of DanceSport (see Chapter Five) around 2000 takes up a different layer of meaning: the athletic ballroom dance practice is not just another derivative of the dance but a reinvention of the dance; the sometimes seemingly exaggerated virtuosity and craving for extremity mark a rebellion against the tamed, safe and obedient dancing programmed by the industry.

## Chapter Five

### DanceSport: the unfinished project of modern consciousness, 1998 to present

The combination of painstaking make-up, intricate hairstyle, sparkling dancewear and a tracksuit jacket and trainers is a norm in every ballroom dance competition in Hong Kong and all over the world (fig. 5.1). Off the dance floor, dancers — especially the female Latin dancers, put



Fig. 5.1 Wheelchair DanceSport athletes and Hong Kong representatives, Philip Wong and Holly Yau.  
Photo courtesy of Holly Yau

on track tops to stay warm and cover the often expressive glimmering dresses. The tracksuit is also a team marker stating the dancer's affiliated dance school or team. The interesting combination of the seemingly contradictory qualities — athletic simplicity and ornamental flamboyance — created a discordance. The harmony of

this combination is historical and social, in the sense that its form is normalized in time through collective embodiment out of practicality in the realm of DanceSport.

Despite the new form of appearance, it has forged, DanceSport is generally considered a term for administrative purposes instead of a contemporary derivative of ballroom dance. McMains suggests that 'DanceSport' was coined in 1990 to describe organized competitive ballroom dancing, for the sake of participating in the global sport culture to win wider recognition, and the attention from the Olympic Committee, in particular (1). Such an impression is reinforced by the incessant controversies of, and criticism about, the practices of the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF), the international government body of DanceSport recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The World Dance Council (WDC) has been the sternest critic to the WDSF, as disputes often take place between the two organizations over member dancers' right to participate in certain events with different affiliations. This conflict between the WDSF and the WDC on the international level is also incarnated locally in the Hong Kong ballroom dance scene, reinforcing the existing division of the dance public and the interests-obsessed coterie (see Chapter Two). Somewhat similar to Adorno's critique that all disputes occur in the culture industry have nothing to do with the aesthetics of the works, the conflicts between the WDC and WDSF, as two international social organizations competing for the monopoly of the same pool of dancers, have nothing to do with the transformative capacity of the dance. In this consideration, it is important to separate the social organizations, cultural practices and the aesthetic experiences of the dance, or say, to separate DanceSport from DanceSport, with the former a cultural and aesthetic derivative of ballroom dance and the latter an organizational concept.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the HKDSA was founded in 1998 in defiance of the HKBDC, though targeting the latter's monopoly rather than aesthetics. What makes DanceSport a curious case is that the term at first was introduced to Hong Kong for distinguishing a different social organization from the existing institutions, but eventually it does breed a unique aesthetics and culture locally. What is more significant than having a different organization is that the HKDSA, structured and operates around the aesthetics and culture of the dance, reconnects public institutions with the everyday life and aspirations of individual dancers, even with its own structural and operational shortcomings.

In the light of 'sport', competition has become the most common and sensible form of public event. The regular practice of DanceSport, instead of tea dance and dinner dance for ballroom, takes place in the form of repetitive exercise and refinement of movement, focusing on the improvement in corporal qualities such as strength and stamina as well as artistry. The aesthetics of ballroom dance changes according to these new social and cultural norms: the emphasis on the artistic excellence and skilfulness in the performance demands regular partnership; improvisation is less valued (though still much appreciated by the spectators in a competition); physical vigour and theatrical affect are emphasized, making bodily movements more elaborate, sharp and intense, unlike in social ballroom dancing where dancers avoid standing out as the odd ones. The redefinition of ballroom dance from a social dance ritual to a sport also attributes to its successful popularization of the dance in the general public. In Hong Kong, heterosexual physical contact in public spaces, such as ballroom dancing, has never succeeded in ridding the sexual implication of actions to become normal social encounters. Local professional ballroom dance champion Carol Kwong, for example, being very proud

of her career and achievement and understanding the aesthetics of the dance very well, still could not help but feel uncomfortable when she was asked by strangers how much did she charge for one hour (for a dance lesson). ‘As if I am a dance hostess,’ she said, though she was well aware that the enquiries very likely were not suggestive (Kwong). The idea of ‘sport’ is particularly effective in Hong Kong for a perspective for understanding physical contacts as transformative and decent instead of carnal.

The narrative of sports also provides the language for ballroom dancers to express their incessant quest for personal and aesthetic transcendence, which cannot be accommodated in the relaxing social dance that celebrates smoothness and softness in actions and interactions. In DanceSport, new vocabularies are used to describe the dance experience: health and fitness come to define the benefit of dancing, sportsmanship replaces inter-personal etiquette in the social bonding of the community, dancers are mostly referred as athletes, and their teachers from ‘dance teachers’ to ‘coaches’, and vigour gains an upper-hand over grace, though the latter is hard to be completely denounced. The narrative of sport detaches ballroom dance from its imagined notorious past consisted of nightlife, sensuous pleasure, luxurious and decadent lifestyle and negative sexual connotations. As a result, ballroom dance as a positive, beneficial and physical activity, receives government recognition — and funding, consequently — for the promotion of the dance as a sport and gains public acceptance as a healthy, competitive and leisure sport.

By looking at the global social history of ballroom dance in the 1930s, the first part of this chapter suggests that DanceSport is a modernist differentiation of ballroom dance. Its appearance marked an attempt for the dancers to establish a social organization to accommodate their renewed historical relationship with the

ballroom dance tradition and its aesthetics. A prehistory of DanceSport in the name of 'modern dance', in the 1930s Europe, suggests that DanceSport has its historic and social legitimacy as a sub-genre of ballroom dance, with the appearance of a wishful radical rupture from its past and precursors. The imprint of modernism located not only in the name of the new dance form but also the contradictory sentiments of the desire for change and the need for new order, the faith in and the fear for rationality. It arose at the time when the newly canonized ballroom dance in Britain proliferated in Europe and migrated across national borders and cultures which gradually disengaged the dance practices from its original geographical location and cultural context in Britain. After the codification and standardization of basic ballroom dance knowledge by the Ballroom Branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing in England in 1924, competition became a regular and popular form of ballroom dance practice. A new kind of ballroom dance subject appeared, namely, the amateur dancers, who were not necessarily dance teachers by profession but competed regularly in Britain and continental Europe. The need for a trans-national/ global competitive dance organization emerged with this new subject and began the development and experiments of a social system for the dance competition. A new ballroom dance culture, defined not in national/territorial terms but the aspirations for sportsmanship and athleticism, outgrew the cultural imprints of the British society on the dance. The modernist impulse that characterised this period of development survives to this dance in the thriving development of DanceSport as well as dancers unceasing search for possibilities in aesthetic experiences.

The second part of this chapter traces the importation of DanceSport to Hong Kong and examines how the narrative of sports localizes the ballroom dance as a

dance, instead of a cultural practice or commodity saturated with pre-determined meaning. The introduction of DanceSport to Hong Kong around 2000 in a way inherited the modernist concern in 1930s Europe and indicated a moment in which some dancers felt the need to negotiate and renew their relationship with the local ballroom dance history. The new generation of local dancers emerged from DanceSport since 2005 have an entirely different understanding and attitude of the dance from their predecessors. Competitively eloquent and artistically forceful in their corporeal language, this generation of dancers find harmony in the social relations defined by sportsmanship and the embedded egalitarianism. The last part of this chapter, therefore, discusses the unnecessary conflict between the WDC and WDSF through a reflection on the ballroom dance competition as a social practice for creating temporary hierarchy that maintain the hegemony of the aesthetics of the dance, which promises the democratic performance and derivation of the dance and resists the homogenizing monopoly of representation. It suggests that the narrative of sports allows the universality of the aesthetics of ballroom dance to be manifested in Hong Kong, cradling a social structure that supports a process for the pursuit of personal aesthetic transcendence.

### **In the name of modern: DanceSport and the modernist consciousness**

The term 'DanceSport', let alone the organizing international body in the name of DanceSport today, is a contemporary invention as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. However, its social, cultural and aesthetic origin can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, as part of the global modernist project in the inter-war period, as well as a moment of change when new agents of aesthetic transformation pressed themselves into the social reality and the artistic tradition.

In the 1930s the division of the British dance scene between social dancers and avid competitors became ubiquitous: there were the casual, ‘social occasion’ dancers who saw ballroom dance as a social activity, and the competitive dancers on the other hand who took the dance ‘as a skill’ (Silvester 46). The problem caused by this division was first and foremost mundane and spatial: ‘Competitive dancing required spacious floors with only a few dancers performing at any one time. The fact remained that most people wanted to dance rather than spectate’ (Cascinaï 85). The competitive dancers, not surprisingly, thought they had every right to the dance floor. This division, though seemingly irreconcilable, could actually be seen as the result of the emergence of a new agent of aesthetic transformation in the ballroom dance tradition, which yearned for the freedom from a new kinaesthetic of the time. This division embodies the contradictory characteristics of modernist experiences, as identified by literary scholar Rishona Zimring. Zimring argues that social dancing represented in British literature in the inter-war period embodies the ‘symptom and the cure’ of modernity — ‘its dissipation, numbness, apathy, malaise, fragmentation, problematic hybridity, rampant conformity, addiction to fun — and a therapeutic solution to problems of alienation and disintegration, a new way of establishing intimacy, giving pleasure, nurturing a feeling of belonging, and forging coherence’ (21). Though Zimring’s social dances included many collective dance forms not limited to ballroom, she aptly identified the major characteristic of modernity encapsulated in the development of ballroom dance in the 1930s: the presence of contradictions in all aspects on all levels. The ‘twofold cultural context’ Zimring identified — ‘the mechanization of everyday life’ and ‘the graceful, therapeutic movements’ (18) was obvious in that era of conflicts for ballroom dance. Aesthetically, the formalisation of dance technique and practices and the corporal

freedom experienced in the dance emancipated from the original social and cultural settings; culturally, the perfection and canonization of the 'English style' and the 'cosmopolitan hybridity' of the dance owing to its popularity and the global dispersal (Zimring 20); socially, the establishment of the Board as a centralizing public representation and the immediate split and a cry for a new representative body incurred by the emergence of the amateur dancers. It was a time that craved for a break with the past yet feared the unknown and was more than ready to canonize new structures that inevitably induced resistance.

A new public space for communication for the emerging competitive dancers was, consequently, also sought after. In 1934 the first issue of *The Modern Dance* (also *The Modern Dance and the Dancers*) was published and became the second regular dance journal in Britain along with *The Dancing Times*, which was founded in 1894 and is still thriving today. In fact, in the same year *The Dancing Times* quietly changed its subtitle 'A review of dancing in its many phases/ With which is incorporated "dancing & the ballroom"' by adding "'the amateur dancers'" before "'dancing & the ballroom'" (No. 286). The amateur dancers, in the name of 'modern dancers', emerged with a presence that could not be ignored. The birth of the new magazine, though seemed to be in competition with its antecedent, was a natural and organic response to the social need of the agents of the new aesthetics of the dance. In the December 1935 issue, a few articles in the publication revealed the predicament the then new dance and dancers were facing, including the sometimes conflicting, other times friendly relationship with the existing ballroom dance establishment and the vibrancy of the new community. The arguments, though often charged with much frustration and subtle anger, were expressions of the new modern dancers' pressing desire for public appearances and representations.

The 'Editorial' of the debut issue of *The Modern Dance* in 1934 already contained severe criticisms to the existing order of the ballroom dance scene. The Official Board of ballroom dance in Britain, which was established in 1929, was accused of not being representative for the wish of modern dancers to compete internationally and lacking clarity in the organization of domestic competitions. The 'Editorial' attributed all the problems occurred to one reason, that is, '**no individual society** was capable of handling the matter adequately, and that the Official Board, **the one body which represented all branches of the dancing fraternity**, was the only medium through which international challenges should be received and dealt with' (emphasis original. 'Editorial'). The event concerned was a dance competition co-organized with Denmark. As the modern dancers had no seats in the Official Board, there was no way they could effectively participate and organize international events as such. The 'Editorial' also proposed guidelines for forming of a national team to participate in international events, including ways for nomination of judges and competitors and making audition of competitors a must. This proposal, disregarding existing membership of several organizations and with strong emphasis on dance competence, despite its impartial and democratic outlook, posed challenges to the newly formed social and cultural norms of the British ballroom dance scene. It was also a nervous attempt pressing the collective existence of the amateur dancers into the public presence.

A scornful remark at the end of the 'Editorial' indicated the modern dancers' attitude and aspiration towards competition and awards disparate from their social dance-counterparts: 'Congratulations to the Board on its issue of regulations governing championships. We remember, in a previous issue, printing side by side the reports of **two** "Championships of Surrey," and calling attention to this ridiculous

anomaly, asking for such matters to be regularised. We hope that all concerned will insist on the strict letter of the law being kept' (emphasis original. 'Editorial'). In the 1930s, as England was swept by the ballroom dance craze, competitions big and small were organized frequently and dancers participated for sheer enjoyment. It only became a problem when the amateur dancers took competitive dancing as their vocation, pressed for excellence not just individual but collective in the dance performance and demanded authenticity and official and public recognition for the achievement. The fury behind the sarcasm towards the two championships had its root in the ardent desire for the incomparable excellence in the dance art, and the social and public recognition of for this artistic excellence. These flares of emotions immortalized in print, tedious as they seem, can in fact be deeply felt and empathized in Hong Kong today, when titles and qualifications have lost their social currency and cannot represent the aesthetic qualities the ballroom dance public aspires.

The modernist restlessness and agitation were prevalent in the amateur dancers' grievances in every existing ballroom phenomenon. A.H. Franks' article 'Unfair Verdicts' in the same issue commented on the lack of sportsmanship in the local dance circle and the consequential shortcomings: disrespect to verdicts and gossips. He began with praising the Danish custom of bowing to the judges and fellow competitors and urged the English dance scene to adopt: 'Any method of fostering the spirit of true sportsmanship in the competition world must of necessity cry out for our commendation and immediate adoption. Because there is no doubt that far too many competitions held in this country suffer through the appalling lack of sportsmanship and even decency displayed by many of the entrant' (24). Franks' admiration to a foreign practice in the (originally British) dance and the insistence of sportsmanship shows the underlining internationalism and the redefinition of the

quality of a dancer in his 'modern' perspective. Criticizing how 'ugly gossip' had turned the dance scene 'a hotbed of scandal', Franks concludes that '[c]ountless times have I disagreed with a verdict. But it never seems very difficult to me to decide as to who is the more likely to be correct — the official judges of myself. As soon as I think myself more capable of issuing a verdict than say, Jacques, Silvester, Ford, Moore, Barrell [all were of ballroom legends and some were Board members], or any of the others who have done so much for ballroom dancing, then shall I apply for election to the Official Board — or for admission into a nice comfortable mental institution' (24). What is worth noting here is that Franks' respect to the Board suggests that while modern dancers were unhappy about the failure of the Board to make events happen and represent them in their way, they respected the Board members for their good dancing. Indeed, by lining up a list of legends, Franks was constructing retrospectively a dance tradition that he was engaging in a dialogue. He was aware of the condition of ballroom dance in which he had transformed himself, though he did not realize he had grown out of this tradition and was breaking away from it.

The pressing sense of modernity, in fact, arose at least a decade before the rise of the self-proclaimed 'modern dancers'. In his dance manual and history book *Modern Ballroom Dancing: History & Practice*, one of the founders of the Ballroom branch in the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD), Victor Silvester, regarded the arrival of the 'modern' time of ballroom dance at the moment when it was standardized in 1924. At the time among myriad variations popular and expert interpretation and performances of the dance, 'the five teachers,' including himself, 'were the first people in the world to analyse that change and discover exactly what it was'. They decided that 'the modern technique was based entirely upon natural

movement' (41). As a legend himself in the history of ballroom dance, Silvester saw the codification of a new scientific knowledge and the establishment of a new social organization as the historical event. Alex Moore, another famed dance teacher, in his dance handbook *Ballroom Dancing*, held the same view and attributed the then growing global popularity of the dance as a consequence of the historical event:

Perhaps the most significant point regarding the progress of Modern Ballroom Dancing can be found in the way in which it was able to achieve international prominence in a fairly short space of time...[Despite the "chaos" brought by the new vogue "Jazz" in the 1920s,] the standardization of a few basic steps and the gradual clarification of the technique that governs them, have resulted in tremendous progress being made, until, to-day, the English style of Ballroom Dancing stands pre-eminent throughout the world.

This international interest, achieved without very much publicity, is the natural result of the recognition of English Ballroom Dancing as the greatest indoor sport and recreation the world has ever known (1).

For Moore, the international widespread phenomenon of ballroom dance as an 'indoor sport' was a pleasant occurrence and it did not contradict the dance tradition. In fact, Moore and other dance teachers contributed to the modernization of ballroom dance by taking a technical and rational approach to the standardization of the dance: in the 1930s the four standard dances — the Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep and Tango — were set; techniques of the dance on fixed steps and 'the laws which governed such subtleties as body sway, contrary body movement, and rise and fall' (Silvester 41) were codified; an examination syllabus and system were established for the admission of new members to the ISTD. The rule of rationality, science and the

yearning for order in the process made sport, the practice long arrested by the narrative of science and objectivity, a natural discourse for the re-invented dance; the 'modern' in 'modern dance' not only signifies the pride in formulating the state-of-the-art dance technique; it was also an imprint of modernity.

The term 'modern dance' did not triumph over ballroom dance nor has it survived. Today, 'modern dance' refers to an entirely different form of theatrical dance with a rebellious emphasis on free-style and the rejection of classical ballet. At the same time, nowadays the competitive quality and feature of ballroom dance practices are widely recognized without the need for a new name to distinguish these particularities. Nevertheless, the amateur dancers, characterized by their longing for artistic virtuosity and technical advancement in the dance like any competitive sport, were slowly fusing ballroom dance and sport together and forming social organizations and culture around their dancing. While the British dance organizations began with gathering the professional teachers, the amateur dancers in other European countries formed their organizations and competitions. In 1957, the International Council of Amateur Dancers was founded with Germany taking leadership (WDSF 'History'). The appropriation of the international sport culture allowed the flourishing of the dance in Europe and the linking of ballroom dance and the national identity in international competitions. Nevertheless, owing to its longer tradition, the historic competitions that are still producing new dance legends and a less rigid organization, today the WDC and its dancers is relatively more popular and visible. The WDSF's 'athletes' — as the dancers are called on its website — take up roles at home like athletes in a national team, in a sport that is embarrassingly less recognized compared to other kinds of sports. Over the years, the conflict and rivalry between the WDC and WDSF persisted, in their pre-history and present existence,

over the right to organize competitions and the monopoly of exclusive membership, arousing much resentments and many complaints among dancers worldwide, as the interest-driven battle between the two international bodies often incurs adverse impacts on the local dance scene that ultimately sacrifices dancers' freedom to dance in events as they wish.

The rivalry of the two international camps becomes so acute and influential today that, very often, the modernist spirit intrinsic to the rise of DanceSport, which is inherent at the moment of the emergence of every novel dance form, is forgotten. DanceSport did emerge at the peak of the modernism but what it symbolizes is, in Jürgen Habermas' words, 'the consciousness of a new era developed...through a renewed relationship to classical antiquity' (39). Calling modernity an 'unfinished project', Habermas regards it as the moment when one 'repeatedly articulates the consciousness of an era that refers back to the past of classical antiquity precisely in order to comprehend itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new' (ibid). In other words, every self-searching and reflective operation that forges new forms of being for a new subjectivity and bids farewell to a past (created by this new subject) is modernist in nature. In the process, the 'modern' is created, which is 'what assisted the spontaneously self-renewing historical contemporaneity of the *Zeitgeist* to find its own objective expression' (ibid), while the residual of the past, as the classical, and is what 'endures through the ages' (40) The contradictory qualities and expressions of modernity find their root in the permanent struggle of the ephemeral appearance of the new to overcome its own transitoriness, that 'expresses precisely the yearning for a lasting and immaculate present. As a self-negating movement, modernism is a "yearning for true presence"' (ibid). Though nowadays the modernist spirit of DanceSport is overshadowed by the disputes

between the WDC and WDSF, its localization in Hong Kong and the consequential change it affected evidences its modernist potential and universal appeal.

### **DanceSport and the ballroom-dance modernity in Hong Kong**

In 1996 the Hong Kong DanceSport Federation (HKDSF) was established, amidst the proliferation of dance organizations. It was recognized by the International DanceSport Federation (IDSF) — the former name of the WDSF today — as its local representative in Hong Kong in 1997. The HKDSF inherited the power struggle from its international parent organization and became a major rival to HKBDC's monopoly of dance events. Nevertheless, for a generation of dancers, the struggle was socially and aesthetically necessary. Ken Tsui 徐劍雄 and May Hau 侯美嫦 were local professional Latin dance champions in the early 2000s and became two of the first coaches of HKDSA for the first batch of youth athletes for the Hong Kong team in 2007. Before June 2006, Tsui and Hau were still competing in and for HKDBC. Hau regarded the decision of relocating to the then young organization a reluctant obligation as the HKDBC was, for her, conservative if not corrupted: competition results did not reflect the actual performance of the dancers, and competitions were regulated to avoid real competition so that some dancers would always win; non-member dancers were not allowed to compete and member dancers were barred from taking part in non-HKDBC events (Tsui & Hau). Hau's judgement on the HKBDC might be subjective but the contradiction, between the then existing structure of the dance circle and the emergence of a new generation of dancers, was collective and existential. It was not merely a moral problem of some individuals but a collective demand, by the dancers modern to their time, for a cultural and structural

change for the organization. The norm in the past became the corrupted reality, and the definition of ballroom dance also came under challenge.

The HKDSF was not the first organization that incorporated ‘sport’ in the name but the first to produce a new language and a social organization around the idea. While the change was greatly attributed to its affiliation with the WDSF, which has had a set of rules and regulations for practices and organization that the local representatives are obliged to follow, the HKDSF nevertheless has successfully localized the international standards into local regular practices in everyday life for the growing young dancers to evolve. The idea of sports reinforced the health benefit of ballroom dancing as a physical practice, the target practitioners thus also expanded from mid-age adults, as a pastime and a form of socialization, to school children as a sport. Started in 2001, the HKDSF began the cooperation with the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong government to promote DanceSport to the public by providing training to new dance teachers in community sports spaces (Siu Fung), and school children through the School Sport Programme in 2002 (‘Milestones’). Dance competition in the form of a sport event was made the major form of happening, unlike the existing norm in the dance scene where dance competitions were often part of a social and dining gathering to provide (self-)entertainment. In March 2005, the first Inter-School Dance Competition was held with the participation of twenty-four secondary and primary schools and 114 couples (Hung Hung), evidencing HKDSF’s power in producing new dance teachers, students and events to keep the everyday teaching-learning process going. The strength and influence of the HKDSF grew even more rapidly since 2006 when Tsui and Hau’s generation of dancers took over the leadership. Apart from their capacity and dedication as dancers and operators, that was also the time for (the beginning of)

the harvesting of the cream of the crop of the children dancers, thus making the formation of a quality local team possible.

The HKDSF — renamed the Hong Kong DanceSport Association (HKDSA) in 2011 — is today financially secured with government and patrons' support due to its status and influence, which are testified by the organization's cradling of the top-tier Latin dancers in the city according to their performance in major international events. But the success of the HKDSA does not lie in these areas but the drastic change it has brought about to the local ballroom dance culture and practices. The individual story of the HKDSA dancers, born after 1980 and mostly in the 1990s, reveal a rupture in the understanding and the social and aesthetic experiences of the dance compared to their precedent dancers. Sam Ng 吳森雋 and Michelle Lam 林惠怡, one of the best Latin couples in Hong Kong, were benefited by the School Sports Programme. They were talked into joining the newly opened ballroom dance class by their P.E. teacher when they were respectively in Form 5 and Form 3, as the class was too new to attract student participants. Their first teacher failed to enchant them with the dance, as Ng and Lam's P.E. teacher soon realized that the dance teacher, who was supposed to be a qualified dance instructor, could not dance to the beat. The dance teacher was then replaced by Tsui and Hau, and Ng and Lam soon got absorbed into the new rhythmic bodily language for self-expression and self-creation. Ballroom dance for them has been just a form of addictive sport, and they practiced everywhere in the school campus, such as in the corridor or at the corners of the playground, and the practice has nothing to do with anything other than dancing. Ng and Lam are currently the regular first runner-up in the HKDSA professional competition, and their best result to-date is placing 97 in the Amateur Latin competition in the Blackpool Dance Festival in 2014. Indeed, the interview

with them was a very special experience: they spent a lot of time illustrating and explaining their understanding of the aesthetics of the dance, their struggle in terms of style and personality in the dance performances. The fact that they were university graduates did make them verbally more expressive, but their conscious understanding of the dance as a pure aesthetic practice was also a result of the condition the narrative of DanceSport and the social environment provided by their teachers and HKDSA. One of their struggles, for example, was the balance between art and sport, self-expression and fulfilling the requirement of the system for better competition results. Explaining to me the judging criteria of DanceSport, Ng and Lam expressed their struggle in maintaining the autonomy of expression and aesthetic integrity and at the same time impressing, succumbing to the gaze of the adjudicators. They also appreciated the creative freedom DanceSport/DanceSport allows, though sometimes they were amused by some quirky expressions in dancers' outfits and movements that, for them, upset the defining aesthetics of ballroom dance (Ng & Lam). Unlike many dancers from older generations whose dance experiences were more social, cultural than aesthetics, Ng and Lam and their generation evidence how the discourse of DanceSport enables but not distorts the understanding and practice of ballroom dance as a form of dance.

The proliferation of DanceSport in Hong Kong is the result of the hard work and dedication of many people. Yet the DanceSport narrative does make the aesthetic condition of ballroom dance more accessible to Hong Kong people, at the same time induces a modernist moment in the local history of ballroom dance. Witnessing the athletic prowess and artistic power of DanceSport, the public cannot cling to their imagination and impression of ballroom dance as a dated pastime or nightlife entertainment; the highly formalized and standardized training, on one hand

mould dancers according to particular codes and rules, on the other hand the sophisticated and scientific visceral language, allows the dancers to articulate their new beings in the self-transformation process. The change is also reflected in the spaces produced by the DanceSport practices: the site where dancing takes place becomes a space for dancing, as DanceSport is first and foremost an individual aesthetic experience instead of a collective or social practice that take place in particular designated spaces. The success of the HKDSA also suggests the curious correlation between democracy and aesthetics: aesthetics, that is, the participatory condition for encounters that induce new sensibility and thus subjectivity, is the foundation for democracy; democracy is, consequently, the resulted yet never completed circumstance consisting and allowing subjective representations of the defining aesthetics. DanceSport, in the case of Hong Kong, becomes the social situation that exposes the aesthetic condition of ballroom dancing and eventually democratizes the dance community.

### **The hegemony of aesthetics: hierarchy and ballroom dance competition**

The 50<sup>th</sup> Blackpool Dance Festival, 2015, has become a historical event in ballroom dance history. Eight-time undefeated World Professional Latin Dance Champion Michael Malitowski and Joanna Lewis announced their retirement from their competitive career after winning the title for the last time in this most prestigious competition. In their honour dance they once again demonstrated their unique architectural beauty and mechanical precision, channelling a heightened sensitivity intensified through meticulous control that was almost like a self-suppression. More affective than emotive, Malitowski and Lewis' dancing made the entire audience that packed the Winter Garden ache with an implosion of ecstasy and sadness, euphoria and the reluctance in seeing the end of it. Standing ovation became

a physical obligation for easing the contraction of every muscle. The entire space was induced with a painful joy felt in the tightening of the skin and in the roots of the hair.

The Blackpool Dance Festival and the making of the world champion (awarded by the WDC) are widely celebrated among ballroom dancers all over the world, a reflection of its organization reveals a social structure that could be considered conservative and out-of-date in the modern day context: the competition and the building of a world ranking are hierarchy-building practices in its most explicit form; the champions and few top dance couples rule the scene with an affective dictatorship; the global dance public's worshipping of the top dancers endorses the power of the champion and surrendering themselves into practices for the building of the hierarchy and the ruling order. Considering there were 293 couples competing in the World Professional Latin Dance Championship in 2015 (Winter Gardens Blackpool), Malitowski and Lewis as the champions did not represent the 1% but, numerically, the 0.3% of the competing dancers. The rest of the 99.7% dance population, many of them were top dancers in their own countries and even more knew from the beginning that they would not be able to enter the second round, return to the competition year after year uncomplaining and always excited. The vibrant global ballroom dance common becomes a stark and almost ironic contrast to the political common in the Occupy Wall Street Movement which claims to be the 99% suppressed and exploited by the 1%, which monopolizes economy represented by the transnational corporates on Wall Street. The powerful few, the anonymous majority and the hierarchical structure are consolidated in the former realm and challenged in the latter; while the ballroom dance tradition and community last, the political movement against economic inequality is, David

Harvey observes, ‘a movement of movements’ that is ‘ritualized as periodic demonstrations against...international meeting on any issue’ (119). Does it imply that hierarchy, inequality and monopoly are the only practical structures in organizing urban society?

The comparison between the global ballroom dance common and the political common of the OWS might seem random if not irrelevant due to the difference in the location of reality and the operating discourses. However, it is precisely such difference that makes the comparison meaningful: the widely-recognized success of the Blackpool Dance Festival shows that an aesthetic hegemony ensures social democracy; Harvey’s quest for a strong political coalition among the oppressed cannot be realized — practically and even theoretically — without understanding the formation of the common as an aesthetic process. From Blackpool Dance Festival, we can see that in an aesthetic hegemony, the unrepresentable nature of the aesthetic truth, in this case the ‘good dancing’, rules and grounds democracy by requiring individual presentations in various styles in the pursuit of the endless possibility of the good and personal transcendence; a sustainable community is formed in this process with its shape varies at different times in history. The Blackpool Dance Festival gives inspirations to Harvey’s questions, rephrased into three concerns for organizing a city: the need of an over-ruling order, the structure of a democratic organization and the forming of an urban common. The global ballroom dance common suggests that the over-ruling hierarchy must have a commonly celebrated value that cannot present itself as its locus; the hierarchy must be built by a process that allows personal transformation and transcendence, and the forming of a common is a positive, constructivist process that empowers its participants and celebrates human subjectivity.

Harvey regards the social relations formed in the city as the urban common. The uses of the common 'are either exclusive to a social group or partially or fully open to all and sundry' with 'the principle that the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as... both collective and non-commodified — off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations'. Despite Harvey's belief that the common is social in nature and is a 'self-defined' collective entity (73), he talks about the crisis of and the demand for the common in economic and environmental terms. Harvey claims that the city commons are nowadays threatened by neoliberal politics that diminish the provisions for the infrastructures of public goods, and sometimes in the name of the public the common and the environment it produces are capitalized by the market supported by the state. In such a crisis, Harvey suggests that the 'only one possible response... is for populations to self-organize to provide their own commons'. He believes that 'the political recognition' of the social benefit of the commons can become 'a framework for resisting capitalist power and rethinking the politics of an anti-capitalist transition'. 'The point,' Harvey suggests, 'is to ... find creative ways to use the powers of collective labour for the common good, and to keep the value produced under the control of the labourers who produced it' (87).

The ballroom dance common, global and local, agrees with Harvey in the forming of a common but suggests a necessary paradigm shift to allow the political capacity to be manifested. The 'common good' that forms and is contrived by the urban common is, from the beginning, not defined by the (economic) value. What makes the perception of a new urban common so difficult is precisely because a (capitalistic) economy is always taken as the perspective in the attempts to understand the organization of a common, but the collective labour of the commons

does not form for the accumulation of capital. The dominance of the economic narrative distracts our focus from the forming of the sustainable urban commons that actually produces its own organic and vibrant economy following its own internal order and logic. Today the global ballroom dance common is socially and economically vibrant and what keeps dancers coming together in certain spaces and times is, ultimately, the dancing experience that they cannot get elsewhere or in other forms. The ballroom dance tradition flourishes as a global dance tradition because of its indiscriminate aesthetic appeal; in other words, its participatory, democratic quality lie in its aesthetics, while the social and cultural practices that gave birth to or bred by the dance are local phenomena particular to different places and cultural contexts. The dominance of the aesthetics in the current global ballroom dance common establishes a ‘hegemony’ that provides the basis for democratic participation.

The aesthetic hegemony of ballroom dancing can be represented by the many dance legends such as Malitowski and Lewis, and indeed the multiplicity of the ‘dance legend’ aptly symbolizes the democracy inherent in aesthetics: the ‘good dancing’ that dictates the common is infinite and cannot be represented or contained by a singular subject. The universal ‘good dancer’ comes into being in many bodies and styles. Its dictatorship is rooted in the fact that it represents the entire ballroom dance common, the authority of which emerges out of the competition as a hierarchizing process that coerces aesthetic performances and transcendence to their edges. To say Malitowski and Lewis represent every dancer is absurd as their status precisely comes from how far-removed their artistry is from other dancers. But they are celebrated precisely because every passionate dancer sees him or herself in them—their being and transcendence, reality and possibilities, imaginations and the

inconceivable. They represent the unrepresentable in every member in the dance common, felt deep down in every sore fibre of their muscle by every dancer watching the competition. The Blackpool Dance Festival, as the most representative dance event to-date, supports the aesthetic hegemony by staging a democratic ritual: literally every dancer can participate in any event (apart from the Under21 category, which has a specific age limit) and it does not impose any prerequisites. The participation, therefore, means not merely a participation in one competitive event but an organic system of knowledge, a musical and somatic tradition, a changing cultural history and a universal aesthetic condition. The name 'Blackpool Dance Festival' acquires new meaning nowadays when competition becomes the major form of events and practice for the dance tradition: as a festival, it is by nature a celebration of the commoning value.

In 2015, WDSF Latin dance champion Aniello Langeilla and WDC Professional Latin finalist Anna Melnikova formed a partnership that attracted much attention in the global dance circle. The two dancers were among the best in their respective organization; both are looked up to by the dance public for their distinctive styles and temperament. It is unfortunate that the partnership did not last long enough to create a bigger impact through their aesthetic creation, but the partnership suggests that the strongest force that brings, in this case, dancers together is the wish to dance with the best partner one can have; it is the same force that will overcome the boundaries that become obstacles for the subjects' transformation. Nevertheless, this partnership also implies that both the DanceSport and competitive ballroom dance system can serve as conditions that allow dancers to evolve and transform; the drastic difference between the aesthetics of the two dancers imply that the two systems interpret ballroom dance aesthetics differently. It is only when the

two systems co-exist, then the democracy embedded in the aesthetics of ballroom dance can be realized.

## Conclusion

In 2012, Hong Kong dancers Chan Hing Wai Cedric and Tin Lai Ki Jennifer were placed ninth among 175 dance couples in the Under 21 Latin competition in the Blackpool Dance Festival in Britain, making a record for the best result ever in Hong Kong ballroom dance history. However, in the local dance circle, their dancing and achievement were overshadowed by an incident. When the semi-final of the competition began and competitors invited to the dance floor, Chan and Tin were introduced as dancers from China. An adjudicator immediately indicated the mistake to the host, who quickly corrected himself. On the following day on Weibo,<sup>15</sup> many dancers from China complained about Chan and Tin's assertion of their identity with comments such as 'Hong Kong is part of China, how could they deny they are Chinese'; 'Chan has been trained by a Chinese teacher since he was a teen' (L. Chan 80).

This confrontation, in the first glance, encases and exemplifies the peripheral and peculiar cultural-political situation of Hong Kong in relation to China: even a dance competition in a foreign country could turn into a battlefield of cultural identity between the two regions in a way beyond imagination. The fact that the event took place in the United Kingdom and with the presence of an oppressive China further reinforces the conventional narrative of the dis-appearance of Hong Kong in hyphenation, between the East and the West, and as cultural theorist Rey Chow puts it, between colonizers (151). The culture of dis-appearance not only persists but, in the imposed decolonization in a nationalistic narrative of re-unification with China, evolves into a force of effacement that suppresses any

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<sup>15</sup> Weibo, an online microblog platform akin to Twitter for sharing short messages in China.

expression of Hong-Kong identity and locality, as represented in the objection against their statement as well as in this ‘glance’ that only sees two victims being condemned for making an identity statement.

But the loosening of the distribution of the culture of dis-appearance after a series of social and cultural movements endows new eyes to look at this incident, and new dimensions permeated with possibilities for emancipatory politics become perceivable to the senses. The identity crisis of Hong Kong was not the only event that happened, but also the international appearance of two first-rate dancers, which signifies the existence of a thriving ballroom dance tradition and common in the city that cradles them. Indeed, the appearance of Chan and Tin is first and foremost defined by their dancing, without which the issue of identity would not even arise; they had to make a statement of their identity because they were very good dancers, and not just because they were from Hong Kong. Their emergence recites Rancière’s proposition of the politics of aesthetics and evidences a gradual redistribution of the sensible in Hong Kong culture, from dis-appearance to embodiment: the materialization of the reality one aspires through becoming that reality in one’s own form.

This mode of cultural production results in representations that are against immediate visual consumption and recognition; spectators do not *find* the Hong Kong they desire to see. Instead, and as a second characteristic of the culture of embodiment, the ‘representations’ are often defined by their formal qualities that translate and realize thoughts into material and corporeal experiences. For this reason, these cultural expressions are often charged by emotional and perceptual intensity. As a personification of this culture of embodiment, Chan and Tin’s emergence makes their city visible with an evolving ballroom dance tradition and

common, as delineated in this research. In this process, the aesthetic regime of ballroom dance emerges, contributing to its political potential today by being a participatory condition for the acquiring of subjectivity that refuses external domination. This transition is not limited to the realm of ballroom dance but a process of reconfiguration of the space of cultural production in Hong Kong. An understanding of the aesthetic turn in the sphere of ballroom dance allows the recognition of the transgressive potential and impacts of recent social movements, which are deemed immediate failures on the surface as they were unsuccessful in achieving the original goal.

### **The politics of aesthetics: embodiment as a form of appearance**

In their interview with the local dance magazine *Let's Dance*, Chan and Tin express their bewilderment in the identity 'conflict' inflicted on them (Chan & Tin 19). Like all dancers of their level, they have been coached by dance teachers of diverse backgrounds, including Chinese from China. And their statement of their Hong-Kong identity was made without the slightest provocative intention. This incident exemplifies the operation of the politics of aesthetics: passive as it may seem, the 'resistance' is irreducible as much as one's own being in the particular form one desires. Their cultural identity is part and parcel of their artistic being which they cannot and do not want to abandon. When their very wish to be themselves becomes a dissensus, the harmonizing and homogenizing intention of the existing distribution becomes visible. In this incident, the conflict is political but the foundation of the dissensus is aesthetic. The existing and imposing distribution is challenged not within its configuration but legitimacy.

The mesmerizing power of Chan and Tin's dancing and their achievement disillusioned Hong Kong ballroom dancers from different circles from the spell of reverse-hallucination, confronting them with their undeniably great and globally recognized dancing. Their dancing is marked by distinguished and aestheticized personal imprints, characterized by the softness in the dynamic of corporal tension and the connection between them, the fluidity of movements without sacrificing the power of action, meticulous embodiment of musical phrasing and details, and occasionally Chan's signature quirky playfulness in comical expressions. In the realm of DanceSport, dancers tend to accommodate as many virtuosic and projecting actions as possible to impress the adjudicators in the less than ninety-second time span of each dance in the competition. The choreography packed with stuns is, very often, danced to the beat only instead of the overall musical quality. Chan and Tin's dancing, on the contrary, frames along the musical phrases and aura, presenting mellowness in dynamic motions. They do as well highlight musical emphasis—a strong beat, a dramatic ending of a musical sentence, but they also have a special preference for underlining subtle musical details through minute responses: a whimsical shrug by Chan, for example, to a melodious comma in the tune uttered by the brass in a cha-cha.<sup>16</sup> Their dancing is also characterized by the nuance of the mood in every piece of music, instead of following the conventional definition of each dance. They gave a rumba show dance recently with a warmth rarely witnessed,<sup>17</sup> as the standard narrative of rumba is a tragic love story often ends with a sad separation of the lovers. Danced to the string and piano version of *Somewhere in Time*, the theme music of the movie of the same title, Chan and Tin's rumba

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<sup>16</sup> DanceSportRu. "Hing Wai Chan - Lai Ki Tin, HKG, 1/8 Cha-Cha-Cha." *YouTube*, 11 Aug. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMwUMRsbWyk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMwUMRsbWyk).

<sup>17</sup> Viva Dance company ltd. "2017 Wanchai DanceSport Festival Open Competition. Show Dance Rumba." *YouTube*, 11 Sept. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNn2o1i2eol](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNn2o1i2eol).

emphasizes the deeply emotional undercurrent in the music beneath its serene melody, and translates the tension and connection between them into a sense of intimacy. Tin's dazzling continuous spinning in the frame that Chan provides to the piano arpeggios radiates lightness and warmth without the emotional distance of a spectacle, as the harmony of movements, rhythm and the emotion of the music transcends the sheer exhibition of virtuosity. This performance is a reinterpretation of their own rumba routine, as well as rumba as a dance form enquiring its expressive possibilities. The grace and clarity of this performance is a drastic contrast to a jive of theirs in one ranking competition of the HKDSA, the local organization they belong to.<sup>18</sup> The relative relaxing atmosphere of the event and the light-hearted, youthful jive music give ample room for Chan and Tin to properly be themselves. Added to their jive routine (that is also seen in other events) is a playfulness with an accentuated comical quality: by exaggerating the chillness of his upper body and his look, Chan evokes a hilarious contradiction with his swift and hyperbolic leg movements. The jive is usually danced with the female dancer going around the man as the centre, in their position as well as in terms of the initiation of movements. But in this performance, almost self-teasing their tremendous height-difference (which is uncommon and not desirable conventionally for a partnership), Chan and Tin dance in many shadow positions to highlight and play with the contrast. When Chan swings around Tin with both his arms straight up, the wacky effect is heightened with Tin's smooth and refined expressions in front of the wall personified in Chan's torso. In Chan and Tin's dancing, musical notes unnoticed

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<sup>18</sup> Chan Hing Wai & Tin Lai Ki. "First ranking competition in 2017." *Chan Hing Wai & Tin Lai Ki*, Facebook, 15 Feb. 2017, [www.facebook.com/CedricandJennifer/videos/1854662501424068/](http://www.facebook.com/CedricandJennifer/videos/1854662501424068/).

before are made visible, and the sighting of their performances change the audio experience of the music.

Chan and Tin's dancing represents an aesthetic turn in the local perception and practice of ballroom dance. Though the non-aggressive presentation and the preference for subtlety in Chan and Tin's dancing may not be favourable qualities in a dance competition that favours forceful, fierce and dramatic dancing, Chan and Tin remain faithful to their own style and form. Instead of presenting the Latin American dances as they are known, Chan and Tin present their transcended selves in movement through the corporeal language of the dance. Though their artistry is far above the average standard of their generation, Chan and Tin are not alone in this aesthetic turn. In the interview with Ten Dance couple Zhao Shanshan and Ocean Vanderlely, Vanderlely recalled the late Taiwanese veteran professional ballroom and Latin dance teacher Ken Chau 周志坤 describing the defining features of ballroom dance in Hong Kong as 'fun-loving' and 'jolly', owing to its origin in nightclubs and social dance floors (Vanderlely & Zhao).

The recent aesthetic turn in the realm of ballroom dance transforms the light-heartedness of the long-time leisure and social dance culture into an inward aesthetic pleasure in dancing that results and is resulted by the formation of an autonomous aesthetic regime of ballroom dance, which has become more prominent and dominant since the rise of DanceSport, which provides the social organization and practices that make dancing as an aesthetic practice seen to the public. The consequence of the aesthetic turn, interestingly, is the increase of visibility and influence of their dancing, evidenced by their ascending local publicity and international ranking. And in return, their success also indicates the legacy of Blackpool Dance Festival, as a space and a tradition that celebrate artistic refinement

and self-reinvention and expression. The international recognition they receive also shows that the social and cultural assumptions and definitions of ballroom dancing are, though persisting and still affecting aesthetic representation and judgement, subject to negotiation and reinvention in local embodiment.

### **Claiming the right to the city through ballroom dancing**

In the light of Chan and Tin's dancing, the ballroom dance landscape of Hong Kong as a space of cultural production demands a renewed understanding. Instead of a space for the free-flow and accumulation of global capital, Hong Kong becomes a productive site with its own locality and subjects. This new *sense* of place produces new readings of past narratives concerning the status of Hong Kong and even postcolonial discourses. The late Hong Kong poet, writer and literature scholar Yesi's 也斯 has long complained about the difficulty to tell a story of Hong Kong – as every appearance dis-appears the place, and self- consoles that '[a]t the end, the only thing we can be sure of is that those different stories, while not necessarily telling us things about Hong Kong, will tell us something about the story teller, his location when he speaks' (26). Chan and Tin's dancing, however, does pin Hong Kong on the global map of ballroom dancing, and tell a story about transforming Hong Kong. 'Locality' in this respect is not a strategic construction of a nostalgic and long-lost past, but a creation of a presence that extends into both the past and the future.

Literary and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's originally critical statement about one's search for the cultural 'root' needs reconsideration in this aesthetic turn. Spivak's deconstructionist sensitivity often targets the privileged ideological centre that organizes a discourse without being part of it, particularly for critical thoughts

such as postcolonialism, feminism and Marxism that claim to seek emancipation and change. In *The Post-Colonial Critic*, her intellectual sensitivity leads to her self-teasing but nonetheless critical response, to her once impulsive saying of going 'home' to India, that '[i]f there's one thing I totally distrust, in fact, more than distrust, despise and have contempt for, it is people looking for roots. Because anyone who can conceive of looking for roots, should, already, you know, be growing rutabagas'. For Spivak, the problem is not in the idea of root *per se* but that '[o]ne carries one's root' (93), and any externalization of the foundation of existence often leads to the otherization of the foundation, which reaffirms the privilege of the speaking subject. Indeed, Spivak's thought explains the operation of dis-appearance of Hong Kong culture: the root of Hong Kong has always thought to be Britain and China, not Hong Kong *per se*. However, the appearance of Hong Kong in the global map of ballroom dance through Chan and Tin's dancing suggests taking Spivak's saying literally: roots are something to be grown bottom-up; 'one carries one's root' because rooting is an unconscious process taking place when one transforms him/herself together with the place that allows such process.

Chan and Tin's dancing marks an unprecedented historical development in which an environment structured around the pursuit of ballroom dance art emerges, enabling them to practice the dance as a form of art, among other possibilities. Both born in the 1990s, Chan and Tin grew up in a flourishing ballroom dance culture and economy. Competitions, particularly for children, became a common practice. Many professional dancers from China and overseas worked in Hong Kong as instructors and paid dance partners. They thus had exposure to good dancing and teaching since they were very young, and their initial experience defined ballroom dance for them as a form of dance more than a social practice. In their secondary school years, from

Form Three to Form Five Chan and Tin lived in Shenzhen, the Chinese city neighbouring Hong Kong, and trained five hours everyday and only returned to their school in Hong Kong to take tests and examinations. Such arrangement provided them the training of unprecedented vigour and efficiency for Hong Kong dancers. In their mid-teens, Chan and Tin were already searching for overseas competitions themselves to participate, with the urge to be on the same floor with better dancers (Chan & Tin). They are currently WDSF Hong Kong Latin Dance representatives, and owners of dance studio Viva Dance which holds an annual competition that is becoming a phenomenon in the city. They were transformed in their dancing, conditioned by the city's ballroom dance landscape, and today in return making an imprint in the space.

Chan and Tin's experience provides an example of the exercise of the right to the city and an outlook of the appearance of political changes in Hong Kong today. Their story suggests that what upsets the *a priori* system of senses and sensory experience and forces the excluded reality back to the picture is, in the case of Hong Kong today, aesthetic subjectivity and events. This is another reason why these events of claiming the right to the city often escape the sight of the public, on top of the legacy of the culture of dis-appearance. Chan and Tin are now participating both WDC and WDSF major competitions and none of the local representative organizations would penalize them for participating in unauthorized competitions, as they are too good for any of these organizations to lose. The aesthetic quality of their dancing ridicules the conflicts between local dance organizations, which are ultimately not related to the aesthetics, culture or the tradition of the dance and thus are totally unnecessary. Their dancing ruptures the ballroom dance culture by unifying the long-alienated spheres of the aesthetics of the dance, the dance

community and the social infrastructure, and presses for a change in the culture and social organization of the dance common.

The rupture of the distribution of the sensible is a process that does not complete when it happens. The recovery from the reverse-hallucination is also a gradual procedure. Identifying the look of emancipatory politics is the first step towards the recognition of signs of hope. In the case of Chan and Tin and their generation of dancers, their performances are events that underline the political and transformative potential of their everyday practice. The perceived mundanity and ordinariness of the everyday operation are in fact, the influence of the lingering cultural misrecognition. In my interview with the dance couple in 2014, when Chan was asked how he started dancing, he thought for a moment and said: 'My mother forced me into it', adding that his mother made him practice every day because 'she said she had spent so much money for the lessons'. When I asked Chan about the significant moments of inspiration in his journey as a dancer — or the moment he stopped hating the dance, Chan said, scratching his head, that he did not remember (Chan & Tin). Understanding Chan and Tin's appearance as an event requires grasping the particularity of their dance aesthetics and the determined processes they have undertaken, which every subject has been through though with different degrees of manifestation and visibility. In other words, their appearance has to be understood not as accidental or a miracle but a result of the changing culture and a force resulting this change. The radicality of the practice of claiming the right to the city in Hong Kong today lies in its aim of seizing the encompassing and inescapable everyday life through ongoing embodiment of the ideal form of life. The subjects embody their 'hearts' desire' and materialize them collectively, transforming the city

landscape through inscribing imprints with their ephemeral dancing bodies in the turns, twists and flicks, into the concrete reality of the city.

**The aesthetics of politics: the emancipatory potential of occupation as a performative event**

This research has taken ballroom dancing as a method to capture moments of change and the forming of norms in the process of cultural production in the realm of the dance in Hong Kong. This method, taking into account the dialectics of voluntary actions and involuntary sensory experiences, personal and social transformation, subjective feelings and emotions and the external social distribution of the sensible, allows the perception of a participatory process of the making of Hong Kong by its inhabitants as humans with potential agency (instead of theoretical constructs such as post-/colonial subjects). Ballroom dancing, taken as a form of dance, is the metaphor for a means to examine embodied transformative practices in which the individual bodies, the aesthetic system (that is, the dance) and the social milieu mutually construct. The two dancers' story that opens this concluding remarks provides a summary of the aesthetic features of political change and emancipatory politics in Hong Kong today: their appearance as an event breaks the internal division of the dance common through by embodying and presenting the aesthetic possibilities of the dance. They produce and inscribe their new aesthetic form of existence unintentionally in, but nevertheless ruptures, existing distribution of the sensible and, indirectly but irrecoverably forcing the social organization of this distribution to change accordingly. Their appearance is ongoing and takes place in everyday life, beyond the influence of the external temporality.

In the light of the method provided by ballroom dance, the significance of the Umbrella Movement (the Movement hereafter) in Hong Kong in 2014 becomes discernible; its political implication can only be understood in terms of aesthetics, and the emancipatory promises it offers lies in its form of appearance — occupation. Its three-month duration, ephemeral as a stage performance, is embedded with the eternity of a truth in the aesthetic condition. The change is beyond sight because it is omnipresent in every individual involved and moved in this event. And also the change is realized and carried on in entirely different names and forms, taking place not in the public city centre but the intimate and everyday space of living. People are not democratizing politics, they democratize the collective life of the city. This aesthetic turn in the comprehension of the Movement as a collective embodied performance is necessary for the resolution the contradiction between sublimity the individuals experienced in the course of the event and the despair and futility in the aftermath.

After the Movement in late 2014, Hong Kong has been haunted by hopelessness and desperation: on the one hand, the civic society was traumatised by the immediate failure to alter the Beijing government's decision of implementing a screening for the candidates for the election of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong government, as well as the division of the campaign supporters due to disparate opinions for the strategy for the power struggle and diverse imaginations of the future of the city, from independence, autonomy to the return of British rule. On the other hand, the Beijing government became more determined to suppress dissensus and dissidents, and to exercise their authority over Hong Kong in the most unimaginable way. One of its recent actions includes supporting the Hong Kong High Court's disqualification of four opposition lawmakers, for taking oaths

improperly, nine months after they were elected, making the pro-Beijing camp the majority in the Legislative Council. Another example is the Beijing government's recent decree that the high-speed rail station in the heart of Hong Kong, that will link China's rail network, is designated as a special zone in which Chinese law would be enforced. The political hierarchical structure of the 'One Country, Two systems' design gives no right or position to Hong Kong to challenge this decision.

Beijing government's overwhelming and abrupt interference in the everyday reality of Hong Kong dis-appears the emancipatory possibilities of the Movement with the veil of futility. But learning from Chan and Tin's story, and indeed the historical formation of a ballroom dance tradition and landscape that can be called 'local', the site of conflict — and hope — does not lie in the Hong Kong-China relationship but local inhabitants' exercise of their right to the city which transform themselves and create the city as the extension and projection of their collective being. Understanding the Movement as an embodied aesthetic practice makes the recognition of the event as an act of claiming both the city and the right to it possible, despite the lack of prospect from the socio-political perspective.

In the seventy-nine-day occupation, three major intersections in the city were blocked by tens of thousands of protestors. They set up tents in the occupied zones, eventually developed community spaces — public living rooms with sofas and other facilities such as tables for playing ping-pong, study corners for students, waste recycling stations, shrines with the statue of Chinese folk warrior god *Kwan Kung* 關公 and a picture of the Christ put side by side, just to name a few — and practices. Among the three occupied zones, the one in Mongkok, Kowloon was often subject to the challenge of the police and triads in late night, while most of the time mundane

activities with an experimental emphasis of public participation, from regular discussions on politics to the collaboration of making art works in the streets, took place in the occupied areas. The cynicism and amusement in the CNN reporter's comment that the protestors were 'freaking nice' (Riley) was shared by many local observers who considered the Movement not radical enough, especially after the retreat of the occupants without the realization of the goal as encapsulated in the main slogan of the movement: Real universal suffrage now 我要真普選 ('I want real universal suffrage'). Such disappointment neglects the desire for the 'real' in the cause beside democracy. Occupation as a form of protest realizes the real through participants' active embodiment of the society they long for. Art as a perspective is necessary for the recognition of the formal qualities of the novelty/ radicality of the event and the articulation of the aesthetic configuration of the real in embodiment.

Among many scholars who attempt to theorize, assess and ultimately understand the Movement in a wide range of perspective from critical discourse historiography (Flowerdew), politics (Chan, Yuen, Rülíg), media studies (Lo) and others, local scholars Pang Laikwan and Sampson Wong bring in the element of art to the discussion and examine the Movement from the art works and artistic practices appeared in the event. Their strategy is more helpful in as many works stop at stating that the Movement has made 'a difference' (Flowerdew, Yuen, Rülíg) without success to name this difference to yield more inspirations and vision for the possibilities of future. Many of these works cannot escape the contradictory frustration that, with full recognition of the tremendous impact of the Movement, the result of it is its failure in making constitutional and legal changes. The issue at stake is the location of its political power, and indeed as a new form of politics the Movement cannot be identified and narrated in existing discourses and narratives.

Pang's and Wong's discussions of the Movement are able to explore the significance of the event as (the beginning of) a rupture that is eventually transforming the existing distribution of the sensible in which centres on the postcoloniality of Hong Kong.

Pang has not defined 'art (works)' in her research and uses 'occupation art' to discuss all artefacts resulted by the occupants' voluntary actions. For example, a public toilet for women carefully managed and furnished with toiletries by occupants is considered an installation art that transforms a non-place to a space of politics and for the community (157); the 'deep embeddedness' (159) of the *Lennon Wall*, which is a concrete outdoor stairway leading to the entrance of the government headquarter covered by colourful sticky notes of people's political messages, in which 'the work and the people mutually enfolded each other' (ibid). These expressions and artefacts are put together in discussion with performing art events such as the *Umbrella Dance*, initiated by the local renown dancers and choreographers Mui Cheuk Yin 梅卓燕 and Daniel Yeung 楊春江 and collaborated with other dancers and occupants using the dance technique of contact improvisation. With 'art' as a frame to arrest and comprehend sporadic and dissipated moments of change, Pang discusses how protest arts reinvigorate the notion of art and participatory art, without the enquiry of political possibility through art.

Wong focuses on the form of production of art in the Movement and identified two kinds of art: centralized projects, with occupants' collaborated effort organized around professional artists' designs such the making of status, and decentralized creations by the occupants' 'more spontaneous and individualized aesthetic practice' (196), such as the encampment in the driveway, and 'micro-creative projects' like the numerous hand-written and home-printed posters and

banners ‘covering every inch of the space [of the occupied zones]’ (202), for example. Wong’s attention directs inward enquiries to the Movement and suggests that the distinction of these two forms of art, and the local and international attentions’ privileging of the former and neglecting the latter represents the events’ ‘radical decentralization and the lack of dialogical mechanism’ (198). Wong explains that these crowd creations’ functions were ‘endogenous’ (201), as ‘a means for occupy participants to re-order their disrupted normal daily lives’, transform the space occupied from ‘generic spaces to meaningful and decorated places’, and overcome boredom through the empowerment of art-making process (ibid). Wong is correct in that the operations and functions of participatory art have an immense exogenous aspect but how these exogenous functions exert their power in politics has yet been discussed.

The aesthetic turn in local cultural production illuminated by the evolution of ballroom dance suggests that, instead of identifying art in the Movement, the whole Movement should be considered as an aesthetic event. Citizens transform themselves in the process of experimental embodiment of the everyday reality they wish to see, while the art works are political statements; the occupation is the aesthetic performance of utopian aspirations. It is a collective embodied performance of the right to the city that simultaneously asserts this right and implants it in the reconfigured distribution of the sensible of the city. The staging of everyday life routine in major motorways – a representative of public non-spaces that do not serve the formation of community life and identity – declares corporally that ordinary life is a process of occupation by the city dwellers that has built this place. The formal quality of the performance of occupation –place-making through continuous embodiment of space and time, re-enacting and reinventing everyday life on-site –

create new sentiments and awareness that define a new distribution of the sensible: the historical awareness in everyday life; and empathy and imagination for the long-lost past as human experience instead of remote and irrelevant events; the contingency of events that may recourse the trajectory of a happening; the promises of transcendence in ordinary life, which is the foundation for extra-ordinariness.

And most importantly, the experience of a possible world in embodiment, which one can only choose to follow or betray but cannot undo. Such is the reason why the Movement must last for 79 days to display the necessary continuation of the everyday life as city-making process, but must end just like any performing art event. As French philosopher Alain Badiou suggests, that

[d]ance, precisely because it is an ephemeral art — because it disappears as soon as it takes place — harbors[sic] the strongest charge of eternity. Eternity does not consist in ‘remaining as one is,’ or in duration. Eternity is precisely what watches over disappearance’ (68).

Eternity is, perhaps, the name of the returning exhilaration and joyful relief a dancer experience in every moment of dancing. The ephemeral art of ballroom dance has constituted social and cultural situations that call for active participations and it is the ordinary people’s everyday dancing that make the tradition last. My Latin dance teacher Alan Li once said in a class that, according to sports science, to learn a new movement, one has to do the movement correctly for twenty-one times and for twenty-one days consecutively, in order to build the muscle memory. The city is, indeed, our collective public body that can also be trained and transformed. Many efforts may deem ephemeral and effects not immediately visible. But just for the

flares of hope and moments of empowerment we have experienced, we should keep doing it, again and again.

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**Films**

*Honeymoon for Two* 洞房移作兩家春. Directed by Chiu Shu-sen, performance by Lam Hok-Sing, Lai Yee, Lam Kwan-San, Grandview, 1949.

*My Love is Like the Wind of Spring* 郎是春日風. Directed by Wong Toi, performance by Cheung Ying, Mui Yee, Yi Chao-Sui, Grandview, 1949.

*Charming Night* 月媚花嬌. Directed by Cheung Wai Kwong, performances by Ho Fei Fan, Fong Yim Fan, Wong Chin Shui, Tai Seng, 1952.

*Sweet Dreams* 花都綺夢. Directed by Tong Dik-sang, performance by Yam Kim Fai, Bak Suit Sinn, Leung Sing Po, International, 1955.

*Instalment on Marriage* 分期付款娶老婆. Directed by Yeung Kung Leung, performances by Sun-Ma Sze-Tsang, Lam Tan, Tang Kei-Chan, Doh Po, 1961.

*A Perfect Match* 門當戶對. Directed by Cheung Wai Kwong, performances by Man Lan, Lam Ka Shing and Leung Shing Po, Daat Fung, 1962.

**List of Interviewees**

Date (all done in 2014)	Name of Interviewee(s)	Remarks
26 May	Holly Yau	Amateur dancer, formerly a competitor, now a personal fitness trainer.
27 May	Wong Mei Pui	My Latin dance class partner. A regular performer, non-competitor. Has danced over 15 years.
12 June	Peggy Tam	My Standard dance class classmate. Has danced over 25 years. Housewife.
14 June	Renee Tsang	My Latin dance classmate. A national dance teacher.
24 June	Becky and Chu	My Latin dance classmates. A couple in private. Have danced more than 10 years. Often fight over to enter competition or not.
25 June	Fiona Wat	My Latin dance classmate. An NGO director. Has danced for over 8 years.
27 June	Louis Wong	A dance studio owner.
27 June	Lydia Wong	A worker in a dance studio.
8 July	Peter Yung	An amateur Latin dancer. Recommended by a friend for Yung's stubborn passion for the dance.
15 July	Irene and Alan Yeung	Founders of the first local online shop and platform for the ballroom dance community. Formerly local amateur DanceSport champions.
17 July	Victoria Yeung	My Latin dance class classmate of my age. Has danced for six years.
11 August	Henry Pi	My Standard dance class classmate. Took up dancing after he had had a minor stroke.

12 August	Jacky Li	A singer performs in restaurants to social dancing.
23 August	Albert Au	Peter Yung's classmate. Also a very dedicated dancer. Has danced for more than 15 years.
25 August	Wong Wah	My Standard dance class classmate. Has danced for over 20 years.
28 August	Eagle Chan	Henry Pi's first teacher. Teaches dancing in a park, many students are living in public housing.
31 August	Yeung Ping Kai	One of the first professional dance teachers in Hong Kong. In his mid-70s.
3 September	Or Lung Yuen	A professional dance teacher from Shanghai. In his 70s.
13 September	Kevin Lau	My Standard dance class classmate. An amateur competitor.
21 September	Sam Ng & Michelle Lam	DanceSport professional dancers. Hong Kong representatives.
25 September	Ken Tsui & May Hau	Hong Kong Professional Latin Champions. Ng & Lam's teachers.
6 October	Simon Zhang	Owner of Star Galaxy Dance Club
8 October	Wong Wing To	Kevin Lau's current teacher. Veteran dance teacher. Alan Li's teacher.
9 October	Lulu Lo	A shareholder of Star Galaxy Dance Studio.
10 October	Ocean Vanderlely & Zhao Shanshan	Hong Kong Professional Ten Dance Champion.
17 October	Jimmy Chan & Betty Wan	Hong Kong Professional Ballroom Dance Champion.
21 October	Michael Gao	Dance teacher in DansinnHeavenly.
27 October	Joe Lo	Hong Kong Professional Latin Dance Champion. Alan Li's student.
28 October	Fiana Cheng	Owner of dance boutique 'Fiana'.

17 November	Jimmy Yek & Carol Kwong	My Ballroom dance teachers. Hong Kong Professional Ballroom Dance Champion.
19 November	Nic Tse & Mable Wan	Peter Yung and Albert Au's Latin dance teachers.
20 November	James Chan	Fiana Cheng's dance partner.
21 November	Alan Li	My Latin dance teacher.