

香港舞蹈概述

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Hong Kong Dance Overview 2019

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美術設計、排版 Graphic Design and Typeset	Felixism Creation	
出版 Publisher	Felixism Creation	
網站 Website	http://www.danceresearch.com.hk/	

出版日期 Published date 20 Sep 2021

國際標準書號 ISBN : 978-988-75925-2-5

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資助 Supported by



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‘Development in Progress’: Hong Kong Street Dance Development Alliance

Yau See-wing Catherine
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In the 1960s, as an immense Hispanic population poured into the United States, these immigrants and their descendants gradually developed a culture of their own to vent their suffering as they led lives of oppression and marginalisation. Hence in the 1970s, a unique dance culture began on the two coasts of the United States. Marginalised, their dance was not accepted in the respected circles and could only take place on the streets, and so was called ‘street dance’. There are many different forms of street dance, such as Breaking, Hip Hop, Locking, Popping, and House. As a means of emotional release, these dances always imply indignation, anti-mainstream, and anti-establishment. Another characteristic of street dance is its combative nature. Called ‘Battle’ or ‘Cypher’, these dance competitions allow combatants to challenge each other as a way to amuse and entertain.

As street dance continues to develop, it eventually reaches the wider public, and is introduced to many places outside the United States. It can be found in the commercial world while its appearance in popular music and films such as *Wild Style* and the *Step Up* series enhances its exposure to an even bigger audience. The craze brings street dance from the streets into dance studios, and to a certain extent formalises it. The inclusion of Breaking in the 2020 Olympic Games further testifies to the popularisation of street dance.

Street dance in Hong Kong enjoyed a relatively stable development in the late 1990s, before becoming more active after 2000, when various competitions and events began to take place (Fat Joe 2017, 5). At the same time, street dance culture flourished in universities and dance studios. Relating the story of Hong Kong street dance, *The Way We Dance* in 2013 raised awareness among the general public. Subsequently in 2016, the Hong Kong Arts Festival produced the original dance drama *Danz Up*, bringing street dance into the theatre where conventionally only more formal dances were performed.

Built on this foundation, the development of street dance in Hong Kong has taken different forms. One to note is the ‘Hong Kong Street Dance Development Alliance’ (HKSDDA), established in 2016, which pursues its own path by gathering a group of like-minded street dancers to promote and popularise local street dance culture. The first-ever ‘Street Dance Theatre Development Programme: THE BOX – Street Style Lab’ (hereafter referred to as ‘THE BOX’), produced by HKSDDA in February 2019, opened up possibilities and room for discussion for street dance.

‘Street Dance Theatre’: Paving the Way for ‘What’s Next’ of Street Dance

‘Must street dance never change? Are there no further possibilities for street dance?’ Chan Wing-yip, Chairman of the second HKSDDA committee and a committee member of THE BOX begins with this question in his exploration of ‘what’s next’ for street dance. He admits that ‘street dance theatre’ is nothing new and that there have been

precedents abroad but sees the importance of introducing this genre for the development of local street dance. He hopes 'to show the officials that there are people in Hong Kong who depart from the former ways of engaging in street dance... to raise (street dance) to an artistic, or academic level.' He also observes that there is survival space for dance practitioners coming out of institutions by creating dance pieces. He hopes that in addition to teaching classes and engaging in commercial productions, street dancers may find the additional option of working in the theatre.

Pong Chun-tat Louis is one of the choreographers of THE BOX. A world-class Popping dancer, Pong drew from his musical sensibilities and created *Sound City Vestige* where Popping was matched with the unique sounds of the city (such as traffic signals and piling) to paint the cityscape in dance moves. As also the Chairman of the HKSDDA committee from 2021 to 2022, Pong feels deeply that 'street dance is so niche that it is like indulging yourself in a small box, a small circle, with no way out.' Hence, he hopes that THE BOX would 'let different street dancers try something new', and more importantly, to 'present street dance in another way', so that people from different disciplines can also appreciate street dance. The key is the 'visibility' of the production.

This 'experiment' triggered different reactions. Chan and Pong quote some of their friends in the street dance scene: 'Why the theatre? You've chosen the streets and you stay in the gutters', 'Why are you doing that? Isn't this good enough for you?', which is also the kind of resistance

or thinking that usually emerges when established patterns are being challenged.

At the same time, Pong also receives encouragement from some veterans and students, who find it interesting to express abstract ideas through street dance. According to him, they ‘realised that there could be another way of expression for street dance.’ This has even prompted his students to take it on.

As Ching Tin-long comments in her review published in *dance journal/hk*, although the coordination of ideas and movements in some of the works needs to be strengthened, in general, the experiment has opened up a new path for Hong Kong street dance. ‘This collaboration across different genres of street dance has broadened the horizons of the various creators, and one can see that in the future there will be more opportunities to watch street dance in the theatre. Even when the streets have disappeared, Hong Kong street dance will go international in an even more glorious stance.’ (Ching 2019).

Elaine Lam, general manager of HKSDDA, quotes Lau Siu-ming, a senior practitioner in the film and dance industry, on the production: ‘These theatre works should be promoted to the status of wonton noodles.’ ‘Wonton noodles’ is the synonym of ‘authenticity’. ‘That’s because street dancers are the most authentic people with an authentic style. They are not imported from anywhere.’ Lam explains that the street dance of this generation is derived by the dancers from within through self-explorations and self-learning, eventually developing their own style.

Promoting Street Dance from the Perspective of Cultural Heritage

With the aim of ‘promoting and popularising local street dance culture and the related performing arts, and to increase the public’s understanding of street dance and enhance appreciation’,¹ HKSDDA, in addition to exploring the possibilities of street dance through THE BOX, organises an annual series of non-mainstream street dance activities to promote street dance from a cultural heritage perspective. In order that street dancers may gain more knowledge of choreography, during the early stage of the annual THE BOX, senior dancers such as Mui Cheuk-yin and Yuri Ng were invited to lead a series of choreography workshops for interested parties. Likewise, senior lighting designer Chan Pui-yee Claudia was invited to lead the ‘Dance and Stage Lighting Design Workshop’.

To bring street dance closer to the young people, HKSDDA launches the ‘Street Dance Appreciation Series 2020–2021’ with the school tour programme *Origin* in attempt to introduce street dance culture and its positive value into the schools, allowing more teachers and students to appreciate and practise street dance in various aspects.

Another aim of HKSDDA is for Hong Kong street dance culture to enter the academic arena, to promote the development of street dance through knowledge production. Since the early 21st Century, some universities in the west have begun to set up research centres and publish academic

¹ See ‘Hong Kong Street Dance Development Alliance’ facebook.

journals dedicated to street dance, such as *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies and Global Hip Hop Studies*. Towards this end, HKSDDA invited Fat Joe, a senior street dance host, to conceive and compile the educational brochure *What is Hip Hop: Street Dance* in 2017. He also organised 'Talk About Hip Hop!' in 2018 and invited veteran street dance practitioners from various regions such as Ayumi (Japan), Crazy Kyo (Korea), Benson (Taiwan) and BouBou (France) to share the development of street dance in their respective regions. 'Street Dance Education Seminar' organised by HKSDDA enhanced discussions on street dance education.

Obviously, 'Battle' remains at the core of annual HKSDDA programmes. Every year, 'Hong Kong Street Dance Championships' (hereafter referred to as 'Championships') invite street dance masters from various regions to judge the competition and give master classes. To the indispensable 'Open 1on1 Battle' is added the 'Experimental Street Dance Choreography Competition' and the 'Kid' and 'Youth' categories, so that children and parents can begin participating in the street art events at an earlier stage.

Another significance of the Championships is its 'localness'. Unlike other street dance competitions in Hong Kong, the Championships only accepts candidates who hold Hong Kong identity cards in an attempt to create a 'competition of the Hong Kong people, by the Hong Kong people, for the Hong Kong people'. Seemingly exclusive and xenophobic, this approach is however very important to the development of local dancers and is one practised by countries where street dance is more mature, such as Japan

and Taiwan. 'We want to focus on local dancers, and to send contestants to different places to exchange, to raise the standard of Hong Kong dancers', explains Pong. As a dancer candidate from Hong Kong who has participated in numerous international competitions, Pong adds, 'It's very "cool" to be able to represent Hong Kong... When you represent a region, you have an identity.'

Creating a Government-funded Street Dance Battle

The continued development of HKSDDA can be attributed to an informal meeting between Chiu Ho-yin Rex, initiator of the project, and Lo Liu Yiu-chee of the Hong Kong Dance Federation.

Chiu graduated from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, majoring in Musical Dance. During his tenure at Ocean Park, he met some friends who practised street dance, and saw possibilities and excitement in the collaboration between different dance genres. In 2011, Chiu founded 'The Autistic Genius', aligning the network of dancers to produce cross-disciplinary performances and conduct promotional activities in schools.

One of the programmes, 'Street Dance Carnival', brought Battle into the theatre where young people combat on stage. Lo watched the 2015 performance and raised the issue of safety. A verbal exchange led to a meeting in person. This dialogue eventually brought about the 'Hong Kong Street Dance Championships 2015', organised by the Hong Kong Dance Federation and a group of street dancers led by Chiu, modelled

on the International Dance Organization (IDO). HKSDDA was officially established in the following year of 2016.

As the convenor of HKSDDA, Chiu relates the initial idea behind the foundation of the Alliance, ‘When we started, the first problem to be solved was not being able to get funding to organise Battle... So, I tried to redefine my role, and became the organiser of an administrative body and recruited people from different fields.’ He invited eight other colleagues with different focuses such as B-boy, MC and Hip Hop, who were also dedicated to the development of street dance, to be the founding members of HKSDDA. ‘We may not represent everyone in Hong Kong, but still Hong Kong should have an annual Battle that is sponsored by the government.² Just like in many areas, there’d be government-sponsored things, commercial things, and things initiated by students.’ And he hopes to draw on the experience of other areas and organise a government-sponsored street dance competition to create more noise and attract public participation.

Fighting for Resources for Sustainable Development

From the very beginning, HKSDDA’s aim has been clear: ‘To fight for more public and government resources.’ Lam, who is responsible for administration and coordination, is keenly aware of the inequalities within the funding infrastructure. First and foremost, there are not enough street dance representatives within the funding mechanism of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. In addition, while surveying

² Editor’s note: According to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council website, since the founding of Hong Kong Street Dance Development Alliance in 2016 until the latest data available on the website in 2020, HKSDDA has received funding from HKADC every year for organising street dance competitions or promotional events. ‘HKADC Grant Recipients / Projects’, accessed 9 April 2021, <https://www.hkadc.org.hk/grants-and-scholarship/grants/project-grant/recipient-list>.

and observing the number of people participating in different dance genres, Lam realises that street dance practitioners are none fewer than traditional dance practitioners. She laments, 'Why isn't there reliable resources for the development (of street dance)?' She feels the need for an organisation that unites the voices and ideas of street dancers to fight for more government support for sustainable development. To which end HKSDDA is determined to produce quality programmes on an annual basis, so as to obtain the support of sponsors, practitioners and the general public, then gradually expands the scale of these programmes.

To control costs, they choose the cheaper Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) venues. Lam understands that the atmosphere of these venues is a far cry from that of the underground street dance culture, but adds, 'It is a crossover to hold activities at LCSD venues, the setting of which is not the most suitable for Battle. But if our premise is to popularise street dance, using LCSD venues can be a strategy.' She explains that the healthy image of LCSD venues helps to 'win parents over'.

The Next Decade of Local Street Dance

By introducing street dance into the theatre and using government resources for development, HKSDDA may be considered by some as turning to the establishment, betraying the street dance spirit of anti-establishment and sacrificing the atmosphere of improvisation and spontaneity, followed by the doubt of whether this will actually hinder the development of street dance.

Chan disagrees that HKSDDA has betrayed the spirit of street dance. On the contrary, by bringing people together, more resources could be obtained. The more the people are introduced to street dance, the ecology could be expanded. At the same time, different voices and practices could be engendered. 'We are not competing for resources within the field, but to ensure that everyone gets what he needs.' Just as THE BOX allows those who are interested in choreography to choreograph, the Championships are created for those who need a competition. 'We are building a platform with an audience, enough competitiveness and recognition, where combatants can prove their ability and hence decide whether to pursue the career of a professional dancer or not. They see options.' In terms of resource sharing, Chan says, 'For instance, through our Instagram account, we share news of the field, and we also help to promote other independently initiated competitions.'

Lam says, 'Why are we called the "Street Dance Development Alliance"?' For me, I am most concerned with "development". I really like this word, because it is organic, it gives people room for imagination.' She understands that different people imagine 'dance' and how it can be developed differently, but she believes that 'putting a new art form inside an old framework and language would kill its development.' She adds, 'As the new generation define themselves through street dance, the form will change. That is why I use the word "development", the definition of which is left to the new generation and those on the frontline. We will set up a platform for dialogue, a chance for collision between the arts and street

dance.' The development of street dance has just begun, in the world as in Hong Kong, and they are still exploring the way to go, says she.

At the same time, Lam envisions the development of Hong Kong street dance. 'I have been trying to imagine the stage it will lead to in ten years and the kinds of people it will address... If I were to imagine the *Hong Kong Dance Yearbook* in ten years, it will probably be addressing the many people engaged in street dance, with different voices. That is how I imagine it to be.' She hopes that the work of HKSDDA will bring her into contact with more people, and create a bigger space for street dance lovers, allowing more diverse voices.

Even though Lam and the other interviewees all say that they are still in the stage of reflection and exploration, this stage must continue to induce thinking and dialogue on the development of street dance between them and the practitioners and become an important stage in the development of street dance in Hong Kong. I look forward to witnessing how this step they take today will influence the next decade of local street dance development.

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