



Willy Tsao. Photo: Anne-Cécile Guthmann

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MAGGIE FOYER meets the father of Chinese modern dance

Willy Tsao has been called the father of Chinese modern dance. He laughed when I mentioned this but agreed that he had probably been the right man in the right place at the right time. We met in Houston where his Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company was performing at the Dance Salad Festival. Not only is he founder and artistic director of this company, but he has three other associated companies; City Centre Dance Company and the Guangdong and Beijing Modern Dance Companies.

His birth in Hong Kong gave him a privileged status in China as well as the freedom to travel. But he said, "the environment also helped me to achieve what I am doing now. Hong Kong itself was a colonial state and we don't have a mindset that says we are Chinese or English or Orientals. We are able to shift our perspective and it enables us to criticise Chinese policy while at the same time defending China in a certain sense. We see things from a different viewpoint. This gives a sense of freedom that is really helpful, especially in the modern dance movement in China."

His MBA from Hong Kong University accounts for his administrative acumen, but dance? "It was in my tenth grade that I first caught a show in City Hall in Hong Kong. An American dance company came to perform and I still remember vividly what happened on stage, all those people running around, the

energy, the flow of movement. There was a kind of resonance that made me want to join them. I was searching crazily for this thing called 'modern dance' but there was nothing available in Hong Kong, only lots of ballet schools. Then I went to the States with the intention of studying business administration and I noticed there was something called modern dance available, so I took dance as my elective. I was hooked." He graduated with more credits in dance than in business studies but still did not dream that this would be his life's work. "I went back home, got my Master's degree and then formed my first dance company."

This was City Contemporary Dance Company, founded in 1979 with Tsao as choreographer and director, but where had he found his dancers? "In the beginning I just went round and talked to my friends. There were also young people who had studied abroad and had some training. We worked together as a group, gradually started touring and built up an audience. We found more and more people were interested."

Well before Hong Kong officially joined China in 1997, Tsao had already made the move. His CCDC were trailblazers, touring China since 1980. He was already a well-known figure, but when he was invited to teach there, he found the Chinese had secretly researched his background. "They wanted to find out why I was spending so much effort in teaching dance without asking for any pay. They thought I might be a spy!"



Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company in *The Cold Dagger*. Photo: Anne-Cécile Guthmann

As a Hong Kong businessman keen to work in China, Tsao was in pole position. "When China wanted to open up, they looked first to Hong Kong, which they saw as part of China but also as a gateway. I remember one reporter said to me, 'you planned it ahead'. But it was just the dance that took me there." In 1979 China instigated its Open Door Policy and the adjoining province of Guangdong was a pioneer in implementing the policy. While there were many state-run dance schools, teaching classical and ethnic dance, the school in Guangzhou wanted to introduce modern dance into the curriculum. There had been some collaboration with the American Dance Festival, who sent a few teachers each year but only for a month or so. This was clearly not enough and in 1987 Tsao was invited to teach there, bringing much needed continuity to the training. He taught for six years and from 1992-98 also directed the Guangdong Modern Dance Company. He also had the opportunity to teach in other cities in China and noted how the new openness increased the students' interest. "There was a real hunger for it, they realise how much they had missed in former times."

Willy Tsao said there was no cultural problem in finding male dancers but I wondered if there was a similar passion for modern dance in both sexes. "Yes, I would say so but I think it is easier for the men to do the transition. This is because classical training can condition the girls to conform and 'look pretty'. It's a problem. The younger generation and especially the good dancers are so interested. When I talk to some of them they say they start their training at the age of 10 or so and then continue dancing in the same style. They feel they want to do more, and modern dance is a way of developing themselves. I think modern dance in China is something like a renaissance for the young people. They have discovered some-

thing that is not stale or rigid."

Tsao was keen to stress that modern dance was enjoying a rebirth and it was not entirely a new concept. "Martial arts training has always been considered part of Chinese culture. I remember giving class in the remote Henan province and trying to teach some basic of modern dance but the students couldn't get it. Then one day I saw some people practicing Kung Fu. I saw they were using this pelvis movement, this Dan Tian which is a point below your navel deep inside, the energy source. And I thought okay, Graham training, especially the floor work, is very similar. I started to explain this and I found they could easily grasp it because it was inside their bodies; they made the connections between the Graham and Kung Fu." He added that this was not "in the diehard Graham tradition" but that it was very helpful in teaching.

China's first encounter with modern dance had come much earlier. "In 1938

Wu Xiao Bang was the first one to bring modern dance into China. He had studied in Japan and Japan was friendly with Germany, so it was in the expressive dance tradition. He came back to China and created very patriotic dances. Later, when the Communists took over, dancers were encouraged to express grievances about the old society but the regime soon realised that modern dance was a dangerous art form. Because of the close association with the Soviet Union, China adopted the Vaganova method and ballet took precedence. They really rebuilt a new tradition. During the cold war modern dance was considered a Western thing neither encouraged nor allowed for

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a long period until the Open Door Policy." He mentioned how in 1980 CCDC were invited to perform, not for the general public but only for a select audience of dancers and cultural people.

Tsao believes that although modern dance started as a movement in the West, the basic philosophy has links to ancient Chinese culture. "Modern dance is actually returning to our roots; it is a renaissance. There are references to this, especially in Taoism, the religion and the philosophy which preaches that people should regard their individuality as the supreme value. In China there is also the other stream, Confucianism, which emphasises the relations within society. The thing I want to emphasise is that in China there is a different mentality, a collectivism. If there is any contribution of the so-called Chinese modern dance to the world dance community, maybe it is this. Not just a particular movement

vocabulary; that could be learned, that is transferable, but this kind of mentality that is peculiar to China. It works very well because each of the dancers maintains their own idea of what they want and yet they easily submit themselves to other people's aesthetics." The striving for balance between individualism and common purpose is a theme in the company's work.

I was interested to know if the company's work was censored. Tsao said that when he went to China he talked to the government officials and asked what they were not allowed to do. "They said that there were only two things; no complete nudity and no open criticism of the government. But they are quite open and sometimes they look at something and even if they are not quite happy about it, they don't say anything. In the days of the Cultural Revolution you had to have a strong positive message in your work and you had to tell the story very clearly. Now we are allowed to do works like *The Cold Dagger* that you saw yesterday."

The staff of the Chinese consulate in Houston had been present at the premiere. Tsao said they certainly appreciated it, especially the response from the audience. He felt there was a realisation that there may be more to dance than just technique and that they were beginning to understand how the arts work in the West. "Before, the government officials needed the arts to have a propaganda purpose. Whenever they see something on the stage that is not glorifying China, they feel upset. They want people on stage to look happy. The comment we get most often from the government is, 'why are the dancers not smiling on stage?'"

With our television screens nightly showing Tibetan protests, I wondered how far a choreographer could go. "Well, I will tell you a story. We have a Tibetan dancer, Ji Jia Sang, who studied modern dance with me in Guangzhou. He then got a scholarship to work with William Forsythe, where he spent four years before returning to China to join LDTX. I remember when he was working with my company we performed in Washington DC at the same time as president Jiang Zemin was visiting. A reviewer said that along with the demonstrations on the street there was also a protest on stage about the independence of Tibet. This was because Sang was dancing a solo and expressing his own feeling. That particular review would have caused a lot of problems in China because it would be considered dissent. But modern dance is open to interpretation. So I would have to explain to our government and say this is the reviewer's viewpoint, it has nothing to do with us. What we do is about ourselves, our feeling, Sang's feelings about his family, his country, because dance is not



Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company in *The Cold Dagger*. Photo: Anne-Cécile Guthmann

management and the company was also plagued by internal politics, so when new government policies came into force in 2005 allowing the formation of independent companies, Tsao grasped the opportunity and formed the Beijing LDTX.

Amazingly, Willy Tsao still finds time to choreograph. "I have my choreographies in each of the companies. But I don't usually tour with these works because I think each company has its own identity which is based on their choreographers. Li Han-zhong runs the Beijing Company so when we tour I want to bring his work. My vision of a modern dance company is that people join not just as a dancer but also as a choreographer. The dance company is really a platform to show their works."

Each of the companies has about 14 places. With so many wonderful dancers I wondered how these very special individuals were chosen. "In a way I think they choose us rather than we choose them.

Only if dancers leave the company do we open up for auditions. But usually we already know the dancers that are really wanting to join. They come to study with the company and sometimes they are friends. The chemistry is very important. We live like a family so it is very important that they are compatible and to get a good mix of people. But it is only for those who really insist on coming and presenting themselves.

"The pace of change in China is unnerving but Willy Tsao takes it in his stride. "Yes, dance is moving very fast. China is so big, so many people in each city and numerous colleges and universities. I think the young people, especially college students, are choosing modern dance as a form of true expression. So you play a game. I don't think there is a world that is completely free and as an artist you work in an imperfect environment. You have to use your art to create within it and I think that is good enough. There is enough room for the artist in China."

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propaganda. Modern dance has this freedom that is abstract, that does not put things into words."

In 2003 Tsao choreographed *Letter to Aung San Suu Kyi*, which was performed in Hong Kong. "It is a letter to her and people can read it whichever way but I refuse to lay a specific comment on it. And that is one way we survive." He is obviously a past master in the art. When the Guangdong Company visited New York in 1997, critic Anna Kisselgoff wrote, "one would have to be naïve to think that ... *Undetermined Domain* would not recall the crackdown on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square" but she noted that, unlike propaganda, this was art where the specific could be extended into the universal.

Tsao remembered how in the beginning he would write articles to defend his works. "We had a lot of criticism from the government and the older generation of dance people. They would say 'this is not correct' and we would say 'but that was not our meaning'. They found out that they could not condemn any specific points on the works."