



# 44 HOUR DANCE CITY

Claiming space... weekend dancers in the Mong Kok pedestrian zone



Hong Kong is a city that never sleeps, and never stops dancing. The photographer **Vivek Prakash** and writer **Holmes Chan** track RAD dancers and Hong Kong movers from morning to night.

To dance in Hong Kong is to both celebrate the city and fight it. On any given morning, you can see seven million people each performing their own routines, choreographing their paths through the mass transit railway or the narrow streets.

Your neighbourhood *cha chaan teng* is staffed by what appears to be a professional ballet company, where someone will take your order, serve you food and boot you out the door with practiced grace. Dancing, then, seems like a natural state of living – we are all in perpetual motion. Our steps evoke many traditions, many histories, drawing from deep wells across China and Asia. Or it can simply be ecstasy, the kind that jumps up and down to prove we are very much alive. A Hong Kong dancer embodies all this: energy, curiosity, and a cosmopolitan charm.

But dance is also Hong Kong's necessary antidote. Every day the city closes in. When your home is barely larger than a parking spot, when you are always engulfed by crowds, soon you start to move like you are escaping a maze. For years, local dancers and choreographers have bemoaned the fact that their work is shut into specialist venues, unable to reach a wide audience. The city's political and economic structures have no place for them, and so each performance is a tiny rebellion. With a sweep of the arm, a pirouette, a Hong Kong dancer declares: this is my body, and with it I claim my space. I am here and no one can take me away.

## 10:00 AM

It was time for class at the RL School of Dance, located near the top of an office building in the bustling Jordan district. Students were practicing for their RAD exams. Ballet has been a perennial favourite in Hong Kong among parents finding a hobby for their children. Like many of her peers, Charlotte Wong started young: she first took lessons at four years old and just kept at it. Less typical – in Hong Kong at least – was her choice to continue her journey as a dancer while also holding down a full-time job.

'It's a big commitment. When you have work, you only have weekends for class. But when you're in a relatively high grade that's not enough,' she says. Wong says that most of her friends stopped taking classes after getting into university; she herself quit briefly in her teens, before returning to ballet

as a working adult. Unsurprisingly, with Hong Kong's hectic work culture – where a 50-hour week is par for the course – it is a headache to recruit a class of adult students.

Her classmate Peggy Ip works shifts at the hospital as a nurse. 'To me, ballet is a place to seek perfection. My work is very stressful, and dancing during my off hours is a way to relieve the stress. I end up less tired,' she says. Wong laughs: 'But when you dance, you always say you're tired, and then you start complaining about the patients!'

Both women have been attending the same dance school since they were children, and they show no signs of stopping. 'Our class is a lot of laughs,' Wong says. 'Sometimes we're so loud we annoy the yoga class next door.'







## 2:00 PM

Daniel Yeung Chun-kong has a theory about lions and it goes like this: ‘A lot of people don’t know that in China and much of Asia, there are no lions in the wild. The earliest lions were given to the Chinese emperor by the Indians as tribute. The common folk heard that lions were the king of the beasts – but nobody had actually seen one. So, when you look at the traditional lion dances across Asian cultures, you need to understand it’s not about lions. It’s about how people were *imagining* lions.’

Yeung is one of Hong Kong’s leading contemporary dancers, a self-taught maverick with dramatic flair. For the past few years, he has been working on *Contempo Lion*, an update to the traditional lion dance. It is mostly ceremonial these days, reserved for Chinese New Year and whatnot, and on the verge of fading – but not if Yeung can help it.

On this humid August day, he and his dancers were tucked away in a dim rehearsal space at the Cultural Centre. Pounding drums underscored their every move. They leapt, rolled, swayed and dashed with the precision of acrobats and the physicality of martial arts fighters.

‘Lion dance masters came here from [mainland China] during the Cultural Revolution, and then Hong Kong cinema showcased lion dance to the world,’ Yeung says. ‘It just feels right for us to do this. It’s something we’re meant to do.’





## 5:00 PM

Hong Kong has a labour force of about four million, but nearly one-tenth of it is invisible. Since the 1970s, workers – predominantly women from southeast Asia – have come to the city to be live-in domestic helpers. They have one day off per week and most earn £436 per month. By law they can only do housework, which means their home and their place of employment are one; most days the only reason to venture outside is to get groceries or pick up a toddler from school. You wouldn't think it possible, but this is how an entire population gets hidden.

Until Sunday, that is. Whenever these 370,000 foreign domestic workers go on holiday, Hong Kong is reminded of its true diversity, as downtown Central turns into a freewheeling carnival. It almost feels like a show of defiance against a city that has swept them under the rug – but really, they hang out on the streets because everywhere else they need to pay.

Many women are happy to spend the day chatting, but not Luna Sayon. In 2014, she founded Star Pinoy among her friends to test out the dance routines she designed. Four years later, the group has 18 members and receives more performance invitations than they can handle.

'I started to enjoy Hong Kong only after joining Star Pinoy. It's good to spend time on your day off doing things you like, instead of just sitting and being bored,' says Richell Araquil, a founding member. The group is welcoming, but also intense. Sayon is choreographer and commander-in-chief: her sassy dance routines are partly inspired by K-pop and Budots (a kind of Philippine EDM), and the group practice near the Central waterfront, at the public square outside City Hall.

For some, Star Pinoy provides a sense of community in what could be a lonely place. Others say it's about liberation, as they could not imagine doing this elsewhere: the group's members range from 24 to 40 years old, and many have children back in the Philippines. 'For us it's not only dance, it's more like a family, a second home,' Araquil says.

In their signature jerseys, the dancers moved into position as an unseen timer counted down the seconds. They are all expected home by 8pm, and there were still more steps to learn.









**SINGERS AND DANCERS WOULD SET UP  
ALONG THE STREET AND BECOME POP STARS  
FOR AN AFTERNOON**



### 6:30 PM

Some call her the Lady Gaga of Mong Kok but she goes by Mui. Thirty years ago, if not more, she would dance at nightclubs at the height of disco's golden era. Now the parties aren't what they used to be, she says, and most of her old friends have taken up more polite pastimes.

And yet, Mui couldn't resist – she would go to the pedestrian zone in Mong Kok, one of the most crowded places you will ever find, and relive her golden days. Singers and dancers would set up along a stretch of Sai Yeung Choi street, which was closed to traffic on weekends, and become pop stars for an afternoon.

'I was told about this place three years ago, and once I came here I was hooked,' Mui says. 'Some people say I dress and act too flamboyantly. But I've been like this since I was a kid.'

Not everyone liked the zone: some say it was too loud, or too crass. It was finally shut down in August after years of noise complaints. Mui says she and her Mong Kok will find someplace else – although it is still unclear where they would be welcome. But no matter. In any case, she says, 59 is a bit too early for a dancer to retire.





Easy grace... Genée dancers at the Mandarin Oriental

## 8:00 PM

For only the second time, the Genée International Ballet Competition had come to Hong Kong. In the run-up to the Final, a pop-up event was held at the sumptuous Mandarin Oriental hotel, featuring eight semi-finalists from Australia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Mexico and the US.

Crowds gathered to marvel at the dancers' impeccable technique and easy grace. Dancing in that foyer was a study in contrasts: the hotel was right at the heart of the city, and just out the window one could see the racing traffic and gleaming skyscrapers. Hong Kong stops for no one, but some dancers can make time stand still.

A short distance away was City Hall, where the Genée Final would be held. Throughout the day there were breathless dress rehearsals, with dancers preparing for their moment in the spotlight. What magic would they bring? As night fell, the audience took their seats ready to cheer – of all the people in this city, you can always rely on dancers to surprise.

