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# Life

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## It's been a long and bumpy ride to the top for China's modern dance pioneer, writes **Kevin Kwong**

His contributions over three decades have earned him the epithet, Father of Modern Dance in China. Yet choreographer Willy Tsao Sing-yuen says he owes his career to a knack for being in the right place at the right time.

"I didn't have any goals at the beginning. It just happened," says the 52-year-old of his decision to venture north to teach a modern dance course at the Guangdong Dance School in 1987, a time when the mainland was still a closed book to many in Hong Kong.

The upshot was that, having founded the City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC), Tsao went on to inspire the growth of two others – the Guangdong Modern Dance Company and the Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company. This week, all three troupes, in which he serves as artistic director, will appear together in the triple bill *Awakening*.

The son of a garment factory owner, Tsao returned from the US in the mid-1970s with a business degree and followed up with a master's degree in business administration from the University of Hong Kong. But his heart was in dance, and his parents eventually gave him HK\$500,000 to launch his troupe.

He attributes CCDC's rise to similar good timing. "We started in 1979 when the Hong Kong economy started to boom. In the same year, China began its open-door policy, so 1979 was a good year," says Tsao.

Again, he "just happened to be there" when Guangzhou underwent a similar economic take-off in the late 80s. By 1992, he'd amassed enough experience and contacts to take over the newly formed Guangdong company, which came under the province's cultural department.

But his biggest opportunity grew from a new policy of the mainland

authorities in 2005 to allow arts groups to operate independently. That paved the way for Tsao, who was fortuitously teaching in Beijing, to set up a modern dance group in the capital.

Despite his genius for promoting modern dance and discovering new talent, Tsao has also faced many setbacks in his work on the mainland. "In the beginning, it was very difficult. When I ventured into the mainland, modern dance was still considered a very dangerous art form," says Tsao. "It was regarded as advocating individualism and western philosophy and, sometimes, it was associated with capitalism, which was a no-no, especially in the late 1980s, during and after the June 4 incident."

But as an adviser to the Guangdong dance school, he learned to lie low whenever the "red light" came on, with political factions waging campaigns such as the anti-capitalism movement. "I'd gained experience in assessing situations, so whenever there was a red light, we'd stop production. We'd go into the studio to rehearse and avoid drawing attention."

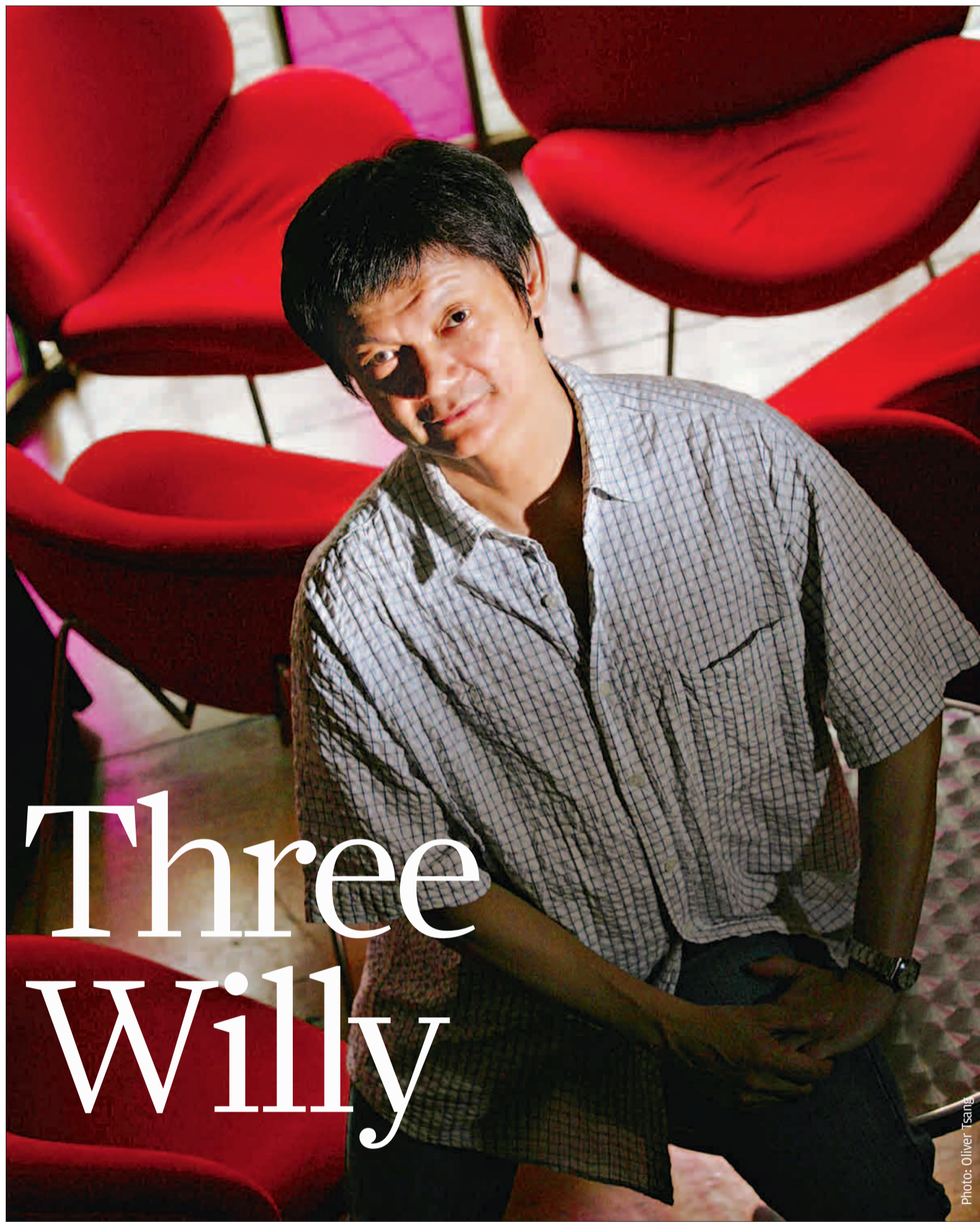
"When the atmosphere became more relaxed, we'd do promotion and invite people to see our shows."

When the company was formed to take in the school's first graduates in modern dance, he was appointed its artistic director. "I was the only one available with some connection outside and understanding of the situation in China," Tsao says.

"After five years, the mainland authorities sort of trusted me because of my devotion to my work. They saw me as patriotic."

It was only later that he realised what a bold decision his posting was for the provincial government: recruiting a Hong Kong artist for such an important cultural position was unheard of.

But for all his skills at negotiating political minefields, Tsao became a victim of his success. Within four years, the Guangdong troupe was gaining international attention.



# Three Willy

Photo: Oliver Tsang

And government-appointed administrators, who had left him alone when it was a struggling company, began to assert themselves. "There was a lot of power struggles," he says. "I felt I was being pushed around and couldn't make any decisions artistically... That's when I thought it was not fun anymore."

Tsao didn't have to wait long for a new challenge – a teaching position opened at the Beijing Dance Academy to give him a foothold in the capital. A year later, he received an invitation from the Beijing Modern Dance Company to take over from transsexual dancer Jin Xing as artistic director.

The troupe was "in a mess" and rebuilding it was hard going, he recalls. Yet when the company began to gain recognition after six years' hard slog, history would repeat itself with another acrimonious departure for Tsao.

"I found people were taking advantage, taking money away here, corruption there, it was horrible," says Tsao. "My experience in Beijing was 10 times more horrible than in Guangzhou."

A joint tour of the US with the CCDC and the Guangdong troupe in 2005 proved to be a turning point with the Beijing dance company. Its director accused Tsao of siphoning

off funds from their US presenter and threatened to take him to court.

"I thought: 'This is totally wrong and absurd.' So I quit," says Tsao. "He then tried to sue me for stealing his money. Of course, he had no case. The contract stated very clearly how the money was to be spent and I had all the papers and receipts."

Just then, the authorities announced their policy freeing arts groups from official reins, and it couldn't have come at a better time. Tsao set up the Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company, bringing with him most of the dancers from his previous troupe.

Had I stayed [in Hong Kong] it might have been difficult for new people to come in. So I'm happy to go elsewhere

Willy Tsao, choreographer

Despite such bitter experiences, Tsao still finds work up north fascinating. It's vital to be able to see the Chinese perspective in any cross-border collaboration, he says.

"You need to understand them, be friends with them, work with them and learn from them. You try to influence them through your standards. It works."

"Mainlanders are smart, especially those in the government. They learn and they understand the world. Once they decide to play the game, they catch up very fast."

Illustrating his commitment to mainland dance, Tsao resumed his artistic director's post with the Guangdong company three years ago, when a new provincial leadership brought him in to promote the troupe, which has been privatised.

Tsao says the differences between Hong Kong and the mainland not only give him a better understanding of the world but also enrich his creative work.

"Sometimes, I think if it wasn't for my association with the north, I'd probably have quit at an earlier age. Had I kept doing the same things – dance, dance, and put on productions in Hong Kong – for 28 years, that would be very boring," Tsao says.

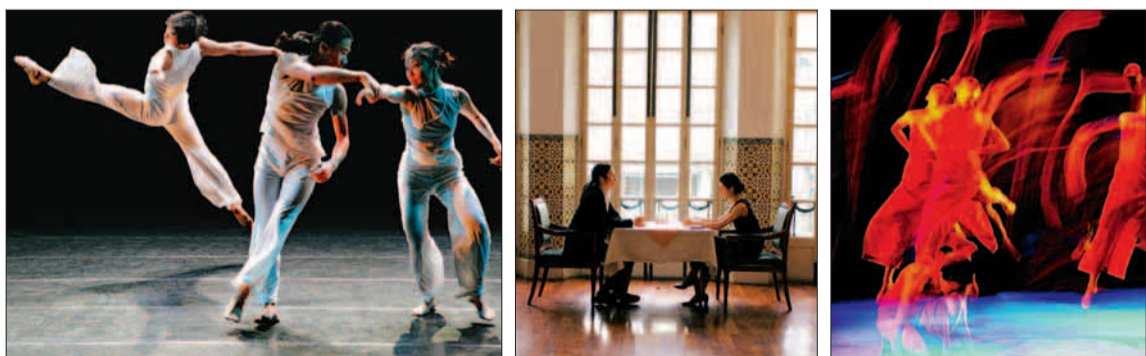
"Also, Hong Kong isn't big enough to support more than one modern dance company. But there are so many talented performers and choreographers we need to provide opportunities for them to put on new work."

"Had I stayed it might have been difficult for new people to come in. So I'm happy to go elsewhere, set up new companies. Then I have another set of dancers to work with, more inspiration and more room for development. And that's a good thing."

Tsao says *Awakening* is a showcase of Chinese contemporary dance rather than an account of his achievements.

"It offers a good understanding of the standards and of the three best contemporary dance companies in China."

**Awakening, Friday and Saturday, 8pm, Kwai Tsing Theatre Auditorium, HK\$120, HK\$160, HK\$220 urbtix. Inquiries: 2329 7803**



Choreographer Willy Tsao (top) presents *Awakening*, featuring works by his three troupes (from left): Guangdong Modern Dance Company (*Upon Calligraphy*); Hong Kong CCDC (*It's so Easy to Fall in Love*), and Beijing LDTX (*All River Red*)

## People

Photos: EPA/AP

### Actress Barton rushed to hospital

Actress Mischa Barton, former star of the hit television series *The OC*, was taken to a Los Angeles hospital after suffering a reaction to medication.

Barton (above) had been taking antibiotics for bronchitis she contracted while visiting Cannes, London and Paris in recent weeks and suffered the adverse reaction after drinking alcohol at a party during the weekend.

The 21-year-old Barton, who was born in London and grew up in New York, was said to be "resting comfortably" with family. *Reuters*



### Tyson shakes a leg for Bollywood

Mike Tyson danced to Bollywood music for a promotional video for a new Indian movie about a diamond heist, but he performed in Las Vegas, not India. The former boxing champion had been expected to travel to India to film a dance sequence for the movie *Fool n Final*, but the scene was instead shot in Las Vegas because there wasn't a proper venue in India, director Ahmed Khan said.

"We couldn't find a suitable stadium in India to shoot with him," Khan told the *Mumbai Mirror*. "I was also worried about Mike's security, so we decided to shoot in Las Vegas."

The Indian media reported last month that Tyson (right) had set several conditions before agreeing to shoot in India – no media, no spicy food and an entire hotel floor reserved for himself. But Khan and the producers said it was a better location and tighter security in Las Vegas that made the filmmakers opt to shoot the sequence there.

The music video was shot over a two-day period with almost 100 American performers, he said. *AFP*



### German artist Immendorff dies

German expressionist artist Joerg Immendorff, famous for his surreal and provocative paintings and sculptures, has died at the age of 61 in Duesseldorf after a long illness, his wife Oda Jaune-Immendorff said.

Famed for his work as well as his flamboyant lifestyle, Immendorff was diagnosed in 1998 with degenerative amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

He was born in June 1945, when Germany lay in ruins after the second world war. Much of his art addressed the enduring impact of that conflict on German postwar identity. His marriage in 2000 to a former student, 30 years his junior, was splashed across the tabloids. They had a daughter in 2001. *Reuters*

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