

# Princes Can Be Asian, Too': A Dancer Breaks Barriers in Ballet

Chun Wai Chan is the first principal dancer from China in New York City Ballet's 74-year history.



By Javier C. Hernández

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On a sleepy summer morning recently, a group of about 50 dancers from New York City Ballet gathered inside a sunny rehearsal studio at Lincoln Center and stretched. They had come from three weeks of rest and were back in company class, preparing for a tour in upstate New York. Some carried energy drinks and bottles of hand sanitizer; others brought their dogs, who settled into naps under the barre as the dancers began a series of exercises — pliés, tendus, jumps and pirouettes.

Tall and stately, Chun Wai Chan stood near the center of the studio. In May, he became the first principal dancer of Chinese descent in City Ballet's 74-year history, only the fourth Asian to hold that rank. At the studio that morning, some dancers were still easing into their routines. But he brimmed with energy, vowing to use class time to exercise each muscle.

"I need to focus," Chan, 30, said. "I really need to push myself."

Born in Huizhou, an industrial city in southeastern China, Chan has a loyal fan base in his home country. (During the pandemic, he competed on "Dance Smash," a popular Chinese television show.) While he joined City Ballet only last year, after a decade at Houston Ballet, he has already emerged as one of its rising stars. In performances of Jerome Robbins's "The Cage" and Justin Peck's "Partita" last season, he won praise as an elegant and agile artist. He has also developed a large following on social media, where he posts clips of dancing, as well as tutorials on topics including building abdominal muscles and applying makeup.



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Chan has embraced the history of his City Ballet appointment, speaking out about the struggles of Asian dancers to win recognition and the stereotypes about Asians that persist in classics like “The Nutcracker.” At the company, where nine of the 96 dancers are of Asian descent, his colleagues and teachers have celebrated his promotion.

“It’s an amazing moment not only for him, but for the institution,” said Georgina Pazcoguin, a fellow dancer who, as an activist, has worked to eliminate degrading depictions of Asian people in ballet. “I can’t underline enough how wonderfully joyous this is and how proud I am — and, in the same breath, also know that we have still more to do.”

Chan wants to help reinvent an art form whose main lineage is from Europe, and to change perceptions about ballet dancers. “I’m the first one, but I really hope it’s not going to take another 70 years to have another,” he said. “Princes can be Asian, too.”

At a young age, Chan’s parents, with Olympic aspirations in mind, enrolled him in swimming lessons. But after he accompanied his sister to ballet classes, he had other ideas.







As a child, Chan decided he wanted to become a dancer after accompanying his sister to ballet classes. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

At 6, he began his own ballet studies and was one of only a few boys in his class. His parents were skeptical of his passion, and they encouraged him to pursue a career as a lawyer, doctor or accountant instead.

When he was 12, he wrote a letter to his parents describing his determination to study dance and perform on the world's biggest stages. They agreed to send him to a boarding school for the performing arts in Guangzhou, a city about 90 miles away.

Chan's break came at 18, when he was a finalist in the 2010 Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland and won a scholarship to study at Houston Ballet. He joined that company as a dancer two years later and became a principal in 2017.

There, he garnered a reputation as a confident and sensitive performer. He also worked with Peck, the resident choreographer of City Ballet, who in 2019 created "Reflections" for Houston Ballet.



Chan as the Cavalier in “George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker” last year, with Emilie Gerrity as the Sugarplum Fairy. Erin Baiano

Peck was impressed by Chan’s curiosity. “He’s always keen to dig a little bit more, to digest specifics, to understand the intent behind a movement or a step,” Peck said. “After working together on ‘Reflections,’ it was completely evident to me that Chun Wai had a tremendous work ethic, focus and onstage presence.”



In the Black Swan pas de deux from “Swan Lake.” Gia Kourlas, The New York Times’s dance critic, wrote that Chan was “a noble, generous presence in every role I’ve seen him dance.” Erin Baiano

The two had dinner in Houston, where Chan expressed interest in dancing in New York one day. In early 2020, he was invited to participate in a class at City Ballet and was offered a position there as a soloist, beginning in the fall of 2020.



But he would have to wait. The pandemic hit, and as cultural life across the country came to a halt, Houston Ballet canceled dozens of performances. During the shutdown, Chan taught online classes and recorded dance videos with friends.

In mid-2020, eager for a chance to perform before live audiences again, Chan returned to China, where coronavirus infections were low and many theaters remained open. He joined the second season of “Dance Smash,” which brought together artists from a variety of genres, including modern dance, ballet and traditional Chinese dance.

Chan won over audiences with soulful performances of ballet and modern dance, and advanced to the final four before being eliminated. He built a following of more than 200,000 people on Weibo, a Twitter-like Chinese social media platform. His fans called him the “prince of ballet.”

He returned to New York last year as something of an outsider. The majority of City Ballet’s dancers spend years together at training at the prestigious School of American Ballet. There, they develop a specialty in the choreography of George Balanchine, the company’s co-founder and longtime artistic director.

Chan, who was trained in the Russian Vaganova method, initially struggled to master Balanchine’s choreography.

“It felt like everything I had learned was questionable — that it meant nothing,” he said. “They broke me into many pieces and rebuilt me. And after a few weeks, I felt much more comfortable, like there was more musicality and more freedom.”

Jonathan Stafford, City Ballet’s artistic director, said that Chan adapted quickly to the Balanchine aesthetic. “He’s got this magnetic quality onstage,” Stafford said. “He can be elegant, very naturally, but he also can be really dynamic. He just draws you in.”



“I’m not only performing in a way that Western people do,” Chan said. “I also bring some of my Asian culture and Asian values to my body language as well.” An Rong Xu for The New York Times

When City Ballet returned to the stage after the pandemic shutdown, Chan made several debuts, including in “George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker” and in the Black Swan pas de deux in an excerpt from Peter Martins’s version of “Swan Lake.” During this year’s spring season, Gia Kourlas, The New York Times’s dance critic, wrote that he was “a noble, generous presence in every role I’ve seen him dance.”

Chan is eager to reimagine cherished roles. He said that his Chinese identity has influenced his style. While performing the pas de deux from “Swan Lake,” for example, he said he tried to be humble and tentative while expressing his love, which he said felt more Chinese to him, rather than the role’s typical confidence and regality.

“I’m not only performing in a way that Western people do,” he said. “I also bring some of my Asian culture and Asian values to my body language as well.”

Chan’s promotion comes at a time when cultural institutions are facing public pressure to diversify their ranks. About 27 percent of City Ballet’s dancers identify as ethnic minorities, compared with about 14 percent in 2010. A recent spike in violence against Asian people in the United States has reverberated in the dance world, prompting discussions about the lack of Asian dancers in prominent roles and the depiction of Asians in the performing arts.

Many companies have in recent years taken steps to eliminate stereotypes, including in “The Nutcracker,” which often incorporates bamboo hats and stereotypical movements during a short routine when performers introduce tea from China.

Chan said he was encouraged by efforts to rethink outdated tropes. “Any time there are changes to make people more comfortable, I think it’s an improvement,” he said.

In China, Chan’s success has become a source of pride. News of his promotion to principal dancer was widely circulated, and he has been featured repeatedly in the Chinese media, under headlines like “The Ballet Knight” and “After ‘Dance Smash,’ he conquered New York.”

Chan is interested in bringing back what he has learned to China — where, he said, appreciation of ballet is lacking. He also hopes to increase understanding of traditional Chinese dance in the United States.

After performances, audience members sometimes tell Chan that they have never seen Asian dancers in leading roles. He has been moved to hear young dancers of color say his example has given them hope for their own careers.

“I used to think I danced just for myself,” he said. “Now I’m dancing for my family, for the audience, for the whole dance community.”

Javier C. Hernández is a Culture reporter for The New York Times covering the world of classical music and dance in New York City and beyond. He joined The Times in 2008 and previously worked as a correspondent in Beijing and New York. @HernandezJavier

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