

PRINCIPLES AND VALUES INFLUENCING HANDS PERCUSSION MALAYSIA COSMOPOLITAN MUSICAL CREATIONS IN COLLABORATION WITH GLOBAL ALLIANCE

Clare Suet Ching Chan

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
clarechan23@gmail.com

Hands Percussion is a percussion ensemble formed by the Chinese of Malaysia in 1997. In their early days of formation, Hands Percussion focused on Chinese drumming patterns and choreography related to Chinese festivals and cultural traditions. In the early 2000s, Hands Percussion recreated music and incorporated their interpretations of the music of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia into their concerts. In recent years, Hands Percussion began to explore global soundscapes through their musical alliances with performing artists and drummers around the world. In 'Wind of Nomads' (2017), Hands collaborated with Dafra Drums from USA and Burkina Faso to introduce sounds from the *djembe* and *kora* of the Manding Empire (West Africa). They synchronised the complex rhythms of the African talking drum with the Indian *tabla* and the newly invented Swiss *hang drum* into their musical creations. This paper explores Hands Percussion's identity from local to cosmopolitan musicians, whose opportunities for musical alliances are enhanced through international networking and collaborations. While Hands is exposed to many different musics from around the world, I argue that Hands Percussion's choices for international musical alliances are not random but determined by several principles and values including 1) Malaysian Chinese values and virtuosic skills in drumming 2) openness, flexibility and desire to learning new musics 3) artistic quality and philosophical values. Through interviews with Hands Percus-

sion artistic directors and performers, this paper examines the choices for global musical alliances made by Hands choreographers in the construction of new pieces.

From the visual images and youtube videos of Hands concert promotion trailers and performances on the Internet, one may wonder the origins of this performing arts group. Which country, ethnic origin or cultural identity do these performers represent? Their physical appearance and the Chinese *shi gu* (lion drum) allude Hands Percussion to Chinese ethnic origins. However, their performances also include other musical instrument such as the *gamelan*, *gendang*, *kompong*, *rebana*, *tabla*, *guqin*, *sape*, *guitar*, *bongo* and *conga*. Hands has also incorporated the Japanese *taiko* and *shimetaiko*, Taiwanese *tao gu*, African *djembe* and Swiss *hang drum* into their concerts. In this paper, I explore the notion of a 'cosmopolitan' identity among Hands Percussion performers. I posit that Hands Percussion members embody a 'cosmopolitan' identity as global citizens consuming selected global trends, goods and items made available through international trade and online access. In recent years, 'cosmopolitanism' is also presented in their performances through the development of performances in collaboration with international performing artists, especially drummers and percussionists. These alliances are developed during their travels and tours to perform at festivals around the world. Hands most recent concerts were at the 2018 '53th Edition International Folklore Festival Op Roakeldais', Warfum, Netherlands; '60th Werelddansfestival Hello!', Schoten, Belgium; and 'Tbilisi International Festival of Theater' in Georgia, Canada (Kaleidoscope 5: Unbeatable, 2018) In Europe, arts festivals, concerts and a variety of public events have flourished in southern European countries promoting intercultural dialogue and cosmopolitanism are increasingly becoming a public policy focus (Albahari, 2008, p. 11).

After independence, many colonised countries felt to the need to assert a national identity through the construction of national paraphernalia such as the national flag, song,

dance, language, identity and others. Nations and nation-states promoted their citizens of heterogeneous ethnic groups to see themselves as 'one nation'. This 'one nation' developed along side Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' – "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion [Anderson, 2006 (1991)]. The nation-state represents what Giddens (1994) called a 'power container' with a totalising, homogenising and formally equalizing effect. It implies a bounded community and imposes a set of cultural norms and expectations to the principle, which binds the community together (blood or territory), and determines the incorporation (naturalisation) rules for the insider.

The ethnic origins or inspirations to Hands Percussion recent musical creations transcend beyond the music of the local Malaysian soundscape. If a musical ensemble representing Malaysia had to be confined only to musical creations sources from the diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia, then Hands Percussion has not complied with this concept. They represent the current and changing identity of Malaysians. The movement from a purely Chinese to Malaysian and then more 'globalised' musical ensemble affirms that identity is porous and malleable. New identities overlap with previous identities as Hands Percussion interacts with the social, cultural and technological changes. In this paper, I argue that Hands Percussion is in fact at the frontline in representing the identity of today's cosmopolitan (2018) Malaysians, exposed to many global trends and values. That being said, I also assert that Hands Percussion's 'cosmopolitanism' values are selective, they are not random choices. This paper seeks to understand Hands Percussion's basic principles and values that influence and determine their international musical alliances, consequently, their new musical creations.

The Origins of Hands Percussion

Since its formation in 1997, Hands Percussion has grown into three teams categorised by age and experience. Team A consists of Generation X (born before 1980s) drummers; Team B comprises of Generation Y (born between 1984-1996) and Team C, Generation Z (born after 1997) the new recruits. Most Hands Percussion drummers grew up mastering Chinese drumming skills through the 24 Jie Ling Gu, also known as the 24 Festive Drums, a curricula in the Chinese elementary or secondary schools of Malaysia. The 24 Jie Ling Gu is a Chinese drumming ensemble genre created by the Chinese in Malaysia in 1988. Its music and choreography manifests the Malaysian Chinese' romanticised idea of the agricultural activities, festivals and natural environment inherent during every *jie qi* (sub season) in the Chinese agricultural calendar in China (Chan, 2002; Chan, 2006). In the early 90s, the powerful, loud and dynamic sounds and movements of the 24 Jie Ling Gu created a feeling of euphoria which united the spirits of the Chinese in Malaysia. Set against the budding nationalistic spirit invoked to create a sense of solidarity among the Chinese. The 24 Jie Ling Gu is a newly 'invented tradition' [Anderson, 2012 (1983)] developed to contest the homogenisation concept of a one *bangsa* (race), which paradoxically promoted 'unity in diversity'.

After years growing up with Chinese drumming skills, some of the drummers of the 24 Jie Ling Gu desired to explore performance beyond the sounds and movement related imagined phenomena in China. The rules and regulations for the music and choreography fluctuated depending on the decision of the counsel of elders that judged annual 24 Jie Ling Gu drumming competition. Some teams found themselves disqualified for including items such as a fan dance in their choreography. Many of the Generation X drummers found that these limitations suppressed their creativity and discouraged them from exploring new music and movement. In 1997, Bernard Goh, the founder of Hands Percussion, made a decision to break free from these limitations. He formed

Hands Percussion, a percussion ensemble founded on Chinese drumming styles. Hands Percussion extended beyond the boundaries of the 24 Jie Ling Gu to explore the soundscape of Malaysia through collaborations with local artists in their performances.

Interculturalism

Interculturalism in the performing arts is a conscious interactive dialogue between two or more cultures in the construction new performance pieces. Hand Percussion celebrate interculturalism, embracing philosophical and musical dialogue among artists from various backgrounds in the construction of new pieces (Chan, 2015, pp. 30–31). Interculturalism grew alongside the notion of ‘multiculturalism’, which implies separate cultural traditions performing alongside each other. Interculturalism champions cross-cultural dialogues and interaction across cultures. It challenges the passive acceptance of multicultural communities coexisting effectively (Penas, 2006, p.15). Meer and Modood (2011) state that interculturalism is “something greater than co-existence, allegedly geared toward interaction and dialogue than multiculturalism.” Cantle (2012) defines ‘interculturalism’ as:

1. Less ‘groupist’ or more yielding of synthesis than multiculturalism
2. More committed to a stronger sense of the whole, in terms of societal cohesion and national citizenship
3. Liberal and relativistic, likely lead to criticism of illiberal cultural practices (as part of the process of intercultural dialogue) (Cantle, 2012).

Hands Percussion began exploring dialogues of sound and movement within the ethnoscares of Malaysia. In their early concert, *Ri Yue Chu Yin: The birth of Hands Percussion Gamelan*’, Hands performed the piece titled, ‘Makan (eat)’. ‘Makan’ highlighted the special foods in Malaysia such as *nasi lemak*, *nasi goreng* (fried rice) *telur goreng bistik* (bistik fried

egg) by playing with melismatic techniques on the syllables, polyphonic overlapping of melodies and improvisation on the gamelan, trumpet, saxophone and trombone. These woodwinds accompanied the gamelan with a funky and jazzy rhythm. 'Tchaikovsky on Gamelan' was choreographed with 3D effects and graphic displays integrated with experimental lighting that projected on a cloth fine arts elements including calligraphy (Hands Percussion, Tchaikovsky on Gamelan, 2014). In Kaleidoscope 2 (2012), the *tao gu*, *kompong* and Indian drum was combined with joget-style movements accompanied by intriguing drumming patterns (Chan, 2013, p. 112). The 'Gong Trilogy' deconstructed the five *kempul* (gongs) from its original hanging to a horizontal position. Placed horizontally on the five tables, Hand Percussion drummers wearing neon-litted suits performed interlocking patterns on the *kempul* using a variety of hand and drumming techniques (ibid.). In 'The Next' (2014), Hands Percussion learned to play the percussive patterns of the randai by slapping the extended cloth below their pants. Randai is a storytelling performance from the Minangkabau people of Negeri Sembilan. Hands designed a new look for the pants and also composed their own rhythmic patterns for 'slapping the extended cloth below their pants' (Chan, 2015, p.31).

Cosmopolitanism

I examine the term 'cosmopolitanism' through the notion of a 'world citizen', someone who is less bounded by traditional geopolitical and cultural divisions derived from national citizenship and are more global in their creative and conceptual frameworks for performance compositions. Embracing this concept allows Hands Percussion performers to create new musical productions that represent the contemporary identity of Malaysians today (2017). Cosmopolitanism is commonly explained as a "way of thinking about, engaging with cultural difference, and cities represent the prime, although not exclusive, sites for these encounters" (Skribs and

Woodward, 2013, pp.99-100). Our social, cultural and political environment, especially in the urban areas provides a landscape for cosmopolitan encounters.

Cosmopolitanism is the ideology that all human beings belong to a single community, based on shared morality (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2002). During the times of Greeks, a cosmopolitan society was an imagined ideal utopian society that was a topic of discussion and debate among Greek philosophers. In his famous phrase "I am a global citizen", Socrates discussed the idea of "community through the incorporation of the whole humanity" and the adoption a non-hierarchical vision of cultural value. Socrates posited several perspective whereby he 1) rejected the polis as the absolute limit point to political belonging 2) defined the idea of community through the incorporation of the whole humanity 3) asserted that human rights were not constrained within geopolitical boundaries 4) encouraged an attitude of self-awareness through genuine curiosity and open challenge with the other. Socrates' vision is relevant in the early 21st century due to the ubiquitous access to information due to global connectivity through travel, tour and communication. The ideas, values and trends from different parts of the world are accessible to anyone with access to the Internet. A large part of society today is able to make choices; they have some power to decide otherwise on subscribing to a monolithic religion, conventional values or other hegemony such as consumerism and materialism.

Hands Percussion is one group that has transcended some forms of hegemony, firstly the traditional idea that a Chinese ensemble should be based only on Chinese concepts, musical instruments and styles. Secondly, they are able to transcend the stereotype of needing to subscribe to a 'national' identity based only on the Malaysian culture. Hands Percussion has also challenged criticism that they have no core identity, that they are 'rojak' (a local salad consisting of mixed fruit and vegetable). I posit Hands Percussion represent the very identity of many Malaysians today – the 'cosmopolitan' identity of the early 21st century.

Appiah (1997) suggests the possibility of a cosmopolitan community in which individuals from varying locations (physical, economic, etc.) enter relationships of mutual respect despite their differing beliefs. He states that 'cosmopolitanism' is a catchphrase for expressing the 'duty' to live with all the other people in this world and the moral challenge that humanity should rise up. Appiah's concept is currently being lived in specific parts of the world. There is a growing acceptance of gender differences and differing belief systems in many parts of the world today. There are also collective efforts to assist countries facing emergencies, such as disaster management, the most recent (2018) being the earthquakes and tsunamis in Lombok and Sulawesi. Hands Percussion have developed many global alliances during their travels and performance tours at festivals and concerts. With the mobility of travels, easy access to the Internet, and global media, listening and learning about other cultures facilitate the choices for collaboration and appreciation of diverse cultural aesthetics. During these tours, Hands Percussion make a conscious effort to develop friendships with performing artists. These friendships have led to performances by international artists in Hands Percussion concerts. Among them are Abbos Kosimov, from Uzbekistan; Ben Walsh. U-Hee Company, Korea; Majd Hass, Syria who performed in Hands recent concert – Kaleidoscope 5 (K5): Unbeatable (2018). Collaboration with local artists continue with the involvements of Prakash Kandasamy, Dhol Alliance, Mat Din, Tan Su Yin, Arifwaran, Kathryn Tan and Yuan Leow Yunn. While I listed the artists based on country affiliations, I propound that collaborations are not determined by country or ethnic origins but by mutual beliefs in artistic excellence. Bernard Goh (2018) states.

A common thread that runs through all artists in K5 is that each of us believes in striving to be the best versions of ourselves. We have all failed countless times, but the lesson in that to always get up, dust off and keep moving forward. These guys deeply believe that our

music and art is important enough to work hard for. Crazy enough to sacrifice everything that we've got to make it beautiful and brilliant to share. We know that a decision to move forward and do things differently can change your life forever (p. 4).

This statement affirms that Hands Percussion choice of collaboration derives from mutual philosophy and artistic goals.

Hands Percussion and Cosmopolitanism

In the last decades, Hands Percussion began collaborating with many international artists. In 2017, they collaborated with Dafa Drums from Burkina Faso, USA to perform the 'Wind of Nomads'. In this paper, I examine how Hands Percussion contributes to a new kind of 'cosmopolitanism' today.

Prior to discussing how Hands Percussion present a cosmopolitan identity, I discuss the basic values of Hands Percussion to understand the limitations or limitlessness in their performances. Questions interrogated in this paper are "What are the principles and essence of Hand Percussions?" The answers to these questions led me to answering two other questions 2) How do Hands Percussion principles determine their musical alliances? 3) How do these musical alliances influence the type of 'cosmopolitanism' inherent in Hands Percussion?

I draw out three-core essence of Hands Percussion from interviews with Bernard Goh, the artistic director and Jimmy Ch'ng, the principle percussionist and assistant artistic director.

1. Values and Skills
2. Philosophy and Artistic Values
3. Openness, Flexibility to desire to learn

Values and Skills

In order to achieve the standards of a Hands Percussion performance, one must have the basic knowledge of Chinese drumming skills, as many of their pieces are highly technical and require highly virtuosic drumming skills and a keen musical sense. Some of the values that bind Hands Percussion members together are:

1. Chinese values of discipline and diligence
2. Practical knowledge of Chinese drumming patterns and musical styles
3. Highly virtuosity in percussion performance

All Hands Percussion members have advance skills in percussion performance and an agile body for performance. These skills do not ensure sustainability of the team. Chinese values, attitude and principles are crucial to the success of this group. The amount of training and discipline required to perform at the level of excellence in Hands Percussion requires the attitude of hard work, perseverance and diligence. This attitude has origins in from their forefathers of the Chinese in Malaysia who worked very hard in the tin mines, plantations, transport and other industries during the early 20th century. Performance practices are highly observed in the teaching and learning style of the Chinese schools in Malaysia. Training from the 24 Jie Ling Gu instills three important Chinese values including the rooting of discipline, respect for elders and perseverance (Chan, 2006, p. 98). Children who learn the 24 Jie Ling Gu usually take part in competitions that require the synchronization of rhythm and movement. In competitions, a single mistake by a drummer can cause the team to lose when their competitors are all equally good. While teamwork is important, the development of each individual's strength of heart and mind are strong for sustaining foundation of the team (p. 98). To be a Hands Percussion performer ... Bernard states,

... Your technique has to be very good, before you go further ... so everything has to go back to being a percussionist, your discipline has to be there first (Bernard Goh, personal communication, 20 May 2018).

This virtuosic ability developed through discipline and diligence is important to master and grasp the various types of rhythmic patterns that Hands Percussion explores in their pieces. On whether certain rhythmic patterns from different cultural groups are more difficult to master than others, Jimmy Ch'ng, the principle performer and artist in Hands Percussion states,

I don't see ourselves as having a very traditional background, so we can gel with others ... I would not see it as difficult as long as you have a mind to work something out ... (Jimmy Ch'ng, personal communication, 3 June 2018)

While Hands Percussion embrace membership from all different origins, those that are able to survive and endure the hardships are usually those that are durable, strong willed and persistent.

Philosophy and Artistic Values

All of Hands Percussion concerts are motivated by philosophies of life and artistic endeavours in their performances. They have a subconscious attraction to performing artists or ensembles that share similar principles. The shared background, such as hardships encountered during their childhood years, the struggle to maintain the financial resources, and the challenges experienced in being a freelance team. These are some challenges that eventually connect them as an entity.

According to Jimmy on selection,

... From their shows, we know this group is really good in their skills ... they have some philosophy ... this group is not so commercial, maybe, their art direction is quite similar with us ... then only we decide to work with them (Jimmy Ch'ng, personal communication, 3 June 2018).

The intercultural explorations of Hands through travels, communication, friendship, and networking expand their ideas and visions for new pieces. Commercialisation is not the objective of Hands Percussion but earning an income is important to support the livelihood of their full time musicians. Musical alliances do not suddenly emerge; they develop over time through communication, trust and mutual ideas for creative pieces.

On collaborating with Oliver Tarpaga in the 'Winds of Nomad' concert, Bernard Goh states

Oliver and I started up a friendship via e-mail, discussing everything under the sun. From our thoughts and ideas, cultures and rituals, possibilities and restrictions, differences and similarities, of food, music and experiences. We shared a deep connection which eventually led us here' (Bernard Goh, personal communication, 3 June 2018)

On the question of whether they had specific cultural aesthetics in terms of selecting groups for collaboration, Bernard replied: "No, as long as they are good artist, and they should be related to percussion and drum." On whether there are limits and boundaries of musical ideas that Hands Percussion would not explore, Bernard states, "No".

... I just do, I just create, I just think its good for us to try ... we are free, we are free to explore no held back (Bernard Goh, personal communication, 3 June 2018).

This statement explains that musical alliances are developed through similar artistic direction and aesthetics, as well as experiences of hardships and challenges that have taxed the survival of the groups. Skrbis and Woodward (2013) notes that the identification with others is not automatic ... there is an interactive relational dimension to the patterning of local and global interests, of home and away, which are structured by historical, and political processes as much as media formats and personal psychologies of reception and interpretation, empathy and hospitality (p. 80).

Openness, Flexibility to desire to learning

When Bernard first formed Hands Percussion, he had an open mind toward learning new music and choreography. Since their formation, Hands Percussion members have studied western percussion techniques, classical music, Balinese gamelan, African drumming, *sitar*, *gendang*, *hang drum*, *randai*, *miyake* and many others. Hands Percussion is not bounded by any religious or cultural regulation that restricts them from exploring beyond. Bernard created many opportunities for these members to study music and drumming technique. Jimmy took lesson on playing western percussion with Louis Pragasam, a local Malaysian percussionist. In the early years for their formation, they joined a drumming workshop by Bill Cobham from the United States of America.

In 2007, Hands Percussion purchased a gamelan set from Indonesia and utilised it as a percussion instrument. They did not learn the traditional Gamelan Melayu repertoire but created their own music on the gamelan. They ventured into composing and adapting western classical music into the gamelan in their concert titled 'Tchaikovsky on Gamelan'. The curiosity of learning different musical styles enriched their knowledge of diverse musical skills, rhythm and styles.

Conclusion

From the interviews and performances, I suggest that Hands Percussion demonstrate a kind of cosmopolitan identity that makes 'cosmopolitan' choices based on the principles of virtuosic skills, philosophy, high artistic value, discipline and diligence, non racialised openness and flexibility toward learning. Musical alliances based on trust, friendship, reciprocity and similar art directions are important. Hands Percussions' cosmopolitanism affirms Appiah's (1997) statement that cosmopolitanism is about individuals from varying locations (physical, economic, etc.) entering relationships of mutual respect despite their differing beliefs. I return to Socrates' cosmopolitanism as "community through the incorporation of the whole humanity" – perhaps not the whole humanity by selections and choices – one may be curious and fascinated by another culture, but there may not be chemistry between the groups. While Hands Percussion has met many percussion groups, the choices for collaboration is not random, the shared background of the artistic directors, including their hardships and struggles to survive in the performing arts world are some motivators for collaborations. As stated in the programme notes of 'Winds of Nomad' (2018),

"At the end, we realised that the production is not just about Malaysia or Africa or Africans or Chinese. It is about the balance of body, mind and soil. It's about deep connections and meaningful experiences leading to new creations and growing minds." (Bernard Goh, 2018, in Wind of Nomads programme notes).

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Biography

Clare Suet Ching Chan graduated with a PhD in Music (Ethnomusicology) from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 2010; Master of Arts (Ethnomusicology) in 2002 and Bachelor of Arts (Music) in 1998 from Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. She was a recipient of the Fulbright Scholarship (2005-2007), the Asia-Pacific Graduate Fellowship in Ethnomusicology (2005-2007) and the East-West Center Graduate Degree Fellowship (2008-2010) from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Clare is an currently an associate professor at the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, where she served as the deputy dean of research and graduate studies from 2011-2017. She is also the Chief Editor of the Malaysian Journal of Music (2015-). Her research interest includes issues of identity, nationalism, tourism and globalisation in the performing arts of Malaysia.