

REPRESENTING ASIAN-NESS THROUGH  
CONTEMPORARY DANCE: CASE STUDIES OF FIVE  
DANCE COMPANIES IN SINGAPORE

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## Summary

Dance has rarely been looked at as a repository site for discourses on nationalist or regional identities in Southeast Asia. Somehow there has been more focus on culture, politics and identity in theatre and other performing arts rather than dance. Hence, in an endeavor to fill this gap this thesis looks at how contemporary dance is a dynamic space where Asian identity takes on complex and meaningful constructions through the lives and work of contemporary Asian dance artists located in Singapore.

This thesis contends that contemporary dance, an aesthetic expression, is an important site to analyze the construction and meanings of Asian identity in parallel to social scientific analyses of nationalist and Southeast Asian identities, which have amongst other things, centered on the “Asian values and identities” discourse in Southeast Asia. Although the search for the “local” and “indigenous” has always characterized Southeast Asian scholarship, focus on a broader Asian identity began with the rise of the region and assertion of difference from the West promoted through the “Asian values” discourse since the late 1980’s. Social scientific analyses of the Asian identity discourse in Southeast Asia tend to relegate Asian values as elitist, if not nationalist, constructions. For instance, the discourses on Asian values are viewed as elitist identity politics such as in the context of Singapore where the then prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, used an Asian identity, particularly Chinese values and beliefs, to define the Singaporean identity. While this thesis acknowledges the political strategy of the state and elites in the construction of an Asian identity, it argues that not all constructions can be reduced to elitist or state instrumentality.



An in-depth investigation of the works and lives of eight artistic directors/choreographers from 1994 to 2005 under the auspices of five Singapore-based contemporary dance companies saw them assuming a significant role in defining “Asian-ness” in their own way. These dance artists were seen to be influenced by their personal biographies, which were a result of cultural heritage, acculturation as well as sojourns and exposure. The work they produced centered around unresolved tensions between prioritizing cultural continuity and/or particularity as well as the uncritical acceptance of Western outlooks. This study shows that Singapore, with its historical, geographical, political and demographical particularities, becomes a conducive and meaningful place for both local Singaporeans as well as immigrants such as Asian Americans and Southeast Asians, particularly those of Chinese or part-Chinese descent, to live and create their Asian contemporary dance forms. The space created by the Asian values and identities debates coincides with the visions and struggles of the Asian-artist diaspora that are not necessarily defined and contained by Singapore’s nationalist ideology.

For many of these artists, at times Asian-ness is understood as a specific Asian culture associated especially with Chinese ethnicity, which is thought to be both intrinsic as well as something learned. At other times, however, it is not necessarily about ethnicity but embracing multiple Asian cultural influences, i.e. reflecting different local contexts of various Southeast and East Asian societies such as Malaysian, Indonesian, Korean, etc. Yet in other instances, Asian-ness is not about a particular Asian ethnicity but more about acculturation with, or influenced by values, ways and aesthetics associated with Western societies.

Furthermore, towards the creation of various Asian contemporary dance forms, three approaches were identified: interculturalism, multidisciplinary and body-centeredness. While these three approaches are also found in Western as well as Southeast Asian performance creations or somatic practices, more important was the way in which they were utilized by contemporary Asian dance artists towards reclaiming contemporary dance as an Asian form, or on Asian terms, to establish representational difference in today's world. Through these approaches, contemporary dance is transformed from a Western form into an Asian form. Called "Asian contemporary dance" in this thesis, it expresses Asian themes, has a hybridized mixture of Asian/Western movement vocabularies, a combination of Asian/Western multidisciplinary artistic collaborations as well as Asian translations of Western technique and approaches in dance creations.

Hence, this thesis shows that the realm of contemporary dance is a site where diverse and complex interpretations of Asian-ness are embodied. While the discourse of Asian identity is a Singapore nationalist doctrine, Asian-ness could not be contained solely within the nationalist framework because both local and migrant artists who live in Singapore have their own sense and meaning of Asian-ness that extends the discourse of Asian identity debates beyond nationalist definitions. This thesis argues that Asian-ness need not take the form of political or elitist rhetoric alone, but is also about the expression of multi-faceted imaginings of individual or collective differences about ethnicity, community, heritage and culture through artistic agency.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis investigates how contemporary dance is a site for various expressions of the Asian identity in Singapore through the lives and choreography of eight dance artists under the auspices of five Singapore-based contemporary dance companies from 1994 to 2005. (A profile of each company is found in Appendix I –V). The peak of the “Asian values” discourse in the 1990’s, while considered contrived and politically driven on one level, coincides with the emergence and development of Asian contemporary dance in Singapore and finds dance artists consciously constructing and reflecting “Asian values” in their choreography. This research shows how Asian contemporary artists are serious in asserting their contemporary Asian identity by drawing on cultural ethnicity and heritage, yet also embrace Western expressions through exposure. Their different views of the Asian identity represent a range of unresolved tensions including prioritizing cultural continuity as well as the uncritical acceptance of Western outlooks and are reflected in the creation of Asian contemporary dance forms utilizing interculturalism, multidisciplinary and body-centeredness as creative frameworks.

Although Asian identity issues have been discussed at considerable length in the fields of anthropology, history, geography and cultural studies at both elitist and popular levels in Southeast Asian societies, less attention has been given to their study in the performing arts, much less contemporary dance. While contemporary dance is recognized as a viable medium of cultural identity, there is little research, if any, with regards to contemporary dance and its connection to Singapore’s cultural or Asian identity. Contrary to dance, there has been more

focus on linking theatre and cultural identity issues in Singapore. Thus, this thesis aims to fill this gap and show that contemporary dance produced by Asian dance artists located in Singapore, otherwise called Asian contemporary dance forms are aesthetic representations of the historical, social and political context from which they have emerged. Various constructs of “Asian-ness”, which may or may not be complicit with Asian identity and values discourse, are also simultaneously developments from both within and without, i.e. external forces such as globalization, internal dynamics such as the Ministry of Information and The Arts manifesto on becoming a Renaissance City, and agency or the personal biographies, locations and sojourns of the individual dance artists.

The local dance scene has gained momentum but documentation of its development and study of its cultural significance and implications are lagging behind. I have not known of any Singapore-based scholars who have produced academic work on dance in Singapore as extensively as Chua Soo Pong, who has published books, monologues and articles.<sup>1</sup> Chua belongs to a group of Asian dance writers who have produced a broad perspective on dance in Southeast Asia utilizing a flexible and multidisciplinary approach. These writers include indigenous Asian dance scholars educated abroad in the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Equipped with the knowledge and skills of anthropology, kinetography, Labanotation,<sup>3</sup> ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology,<sup>4</sup> they have endeavored to document and describe the multitude of indigenous dances in

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<sup>1</sup> Ad hoc articles and reviews as well as papers have been produced by Singapore-based writers on dance in Singapore but not a body of work like Chua's.

<sup>2</sup> Among the scholars who have written in-depth accounts on dance in Southeast Asia are Mohamed Anis Md Nor on Malaysia and Basilio Esteban S. Villaruz on the Philippines.

<sup>3</sup> Kinetography and Labanotation are terms used by practitioners to describe a kind of movement script first developed by Rudolph Laban in 1928 and is continuing to develop.

<sup>4</sup> Ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology refer to the theoretical and practical study of music or dance respectively in their cultural context. While ethnomusicology is considered the anthropology and ethnology of music, ethnochoreology is thought of as the anthropology and ethnology of dance.

Southeast Asia as well as discuss the development of dance in Southeast Asia in a cultural context. Their writing is “Asia-centric”,<sup>5</sup> i.e. written by and about Asians with a strong interest to preserve established cultural ideologies. Thus, Chua’s work focuses on traditional and cultural dance forms, particularly Chinese dance and Chinese opera. However, to date, an in-depth account of contemporary dance in Singapore has not been published, much less studied as an expression of Singapore’s contemporary culture. It is the aim of this thesis, therefore, to fill this gap.

### **Personal location**

My interest in investigating the topic of Asian-ness expressed through contemporary dance began ten years after I came to Singapore with my husband to live and work in 1992. When I first arrived I was representative of the typical American expatriate (“expat”) who viewed Singapore as a temporary destination with sights of returning to America one day soon. However, unlike many expats, my husband and I were not on a company contract; instead we had our own business so our tenure in Singapore was not fixed and when our business direction changed in 1997 I became more involved in the contemporary dance scene, first as a substitute lecturer, then part-time lecturer, assistant associate head and eventually Head of Dance (1997- Nov 2004) at LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. During these years my perspective and different roles in the contemporary dance scene in Singapore intensified. As my position at LASALLE-SIA became more involved I also committed myself to other areas of developing contemporary dance in Singapore including being advisor with government bodies – National

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<sup>5</sup> The term denotes the debates on Asia-centric scholarship argued by John Smail. Smail considered the autonomous history of Southeast Asia the domestic stories of the region from an Asian perspective.

Arts Council (NAC), Ministry of Education (MOE) and People's Association (PA), initiating and directing several contemporary dance projects, designing curriculum centered on contemporary dance, as well as writing numerous articles and reviews for local publications. I also got to know, both formally and casually, many contemporary dance artists and seen numerous contemporary dance performances. In other words, I became more than familiar with the contemporary dance scene in Singapore; I had become entrenched.

Furthermore, through my deepening involvement I began to see that contemporary dance in Singapore and Asia was different than what I experienced in America. Up until this point, I understood contemporary dance (also referred to as modern dance) primarily as a Western construct because of my background and training in the USA which included my initial training in the Humphrey-Limon modern dance technique based on “fall and recovery” with Betty Jones, one of the pioneer dancers with the Jose Limon Dance Company.<sup>6</sup> I then expanded my training in the post-modern “movement-for-movement’s sake” dance style based on the concepts of time, space, shape, energy and motion, developed by American post-modern dance pioneer Alwin Nikolais. Following my training I went on to dance with the Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company<sup>7</sup> whose repertoire was an eclectic mix of post-modern styles by choreographers including Alwin Nikolais, Murray Louis, Kei Takei, Bill Evans, Tandy Beal,<sup>8</sup> among others. Hence, for me and many Western-based artists, contemporary dance was a Western expression

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<sup>6</sup> The Jose Limon Dance Company was founded by Jose Limon, a student of Doris Humphrey, in 1946. Humphrey was the company's first artistic director and helped Limon to develop his repertory and technique/style. Chapter 2 gives more background information on the development of contemporary/modern dance.

<sup>7</sup> Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company is a contemporary dance company based in Salt Lake City, Utah, and was founded by Joan Woodbury and Shirley Ririe in 1964.

<sup>8</sup> Each of these choreographers had their own characteristic style: Nikolais produced multi-media spectacles; Louis injected wit; Takei played with pedestrian movement and Beal theatricality.



that emerged during the cultural era known as modernism (1890-1945) in the West and continues to evolve. Each subsequent generation of modern dancers, like their predecessors, have challenged what went before and reflected their own concerns and issues. Dance critic Jack Anderson says:

Since America has often liked to call itself a nation ‘on the move,’ it could be argued that modern dance represents one way of channeling the energy for which Americans are famous. Modern dance can also be said to exemplify both American self-reliance and, in its creatively permissive spirit, American ideals of democracy and nonconformity.<sup>9</sup>

Modern dance in America was linked to American nationalism, often couched in the term “patriotism”. However, what I observed in Singapore during the 1990’s was the discourse on nationalism of a somewhat different kind – it did not refer to a Singaporean identity as much as appeal to a larger Asian identity. In Singapore what I observed was the transformation of Western contemporary dance into new Asian contemporary dance explorations and forms. Western contemporary dance technique has over the years been transferred through expatriates like myself who settled in Singapore, visitors or Singaporeans who have studied dance in the West, but I observed that instead of perpetuating contemporary dance as a Western tradition, it was often incorporated in broader association with Asian themes and other Asian elements, rather than a more particular Singaporean identity, towards the creation of new contemporary dance forms. These contemporary dance forms, therefore, seemed to assert various

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, Jack. “Phoenix of Modern Dance”. Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History (Second Edition). Dance Horizons: New Jersey, 1992. 172.

constructs of the Asian identity utilizing contemporary dance as one of the expressions.

While I recognized this to be happening in the local contemporary dance scene, I questioned my own practice as a dancer, choreographer, dance educator and administrator. I saw that there was a need to caution myself about the transference but also verification of contemporary dance only through a Western perspective. It could not be assumed that even if Westernization seemed to be overtly embraced it was in totality. Instead, I saw that contemporary dance was taken seriously by local dance artists as a vehicle to explore and express difference through an Asian identity. It was in this context that I also reviewed my own cultural identity, artistry and sense of responsibility of developing dance in Singapore as an Asian American artist and teacher.

To begin, my sense of personal cultural identity is complex. I am a second generation Asian American, born in culturally diverse Hawai'i, the 50<sup>th</sup> state of the USA. I am of Asian ethnicity (i.e. Filipino/Spanish from my father and Filipino/Chinese from my mother), acculturated in mainstream American culture but also embracing what could be referred to as sub-cultures of the Asian, Polynesian and Hispanic populations. My family only spoke English, observed American traditions and customs such as Thanksgiving, Halloween, Easter, President's Day, etc., enjoyed American sports like football, basketball and baseball, ate American food, and I learned to play the piano and flute. However, because Hawai'i is a melting pot of several ethnic groups I was exposed to Filipino, Hawaiian, Portuguese and Chinese traditions and customs, among other cultural groups, primarily through my family as well as through formal education and state celebrations and festivities. In particular, I experienced my Filipino

heritage through the food my parents prepared, the attendance of Filipino celebrations, listening to my parents sing with their Filipino choral group as well as viewing Filipino Fiesta, a popular Filipino television variety show. I also absorbed other cultures like Portuguese, Chinese and Hawaiian cultures through the marriages of my immediate family members as well as my own marriage to a Caucasian man with direct lineage to America's founding forefathers. In other words, I describe my cultural identity as subscribing to mainstream American ideals yet belonging to a Filipino ethnic heritage as well as acknowledging other Asian, Polynesian and Hispanic influences.

Although I also consider my personal dance artistry as primarily Western since, as I mentioned earlier, my dance training and exposure was in Western, i.e. American, contemporary dance techniques and styles, I have also ventured on occasion into interculturalism, i.e. experimenting with bringing different cultural aspects together through dance. On one hand I believe that contemporary dance is universal in conception as well as expression, and I often explore the concepts of time, space, shape and energy, and/or deal with emotional states resulting from my own unresolved issues such as feeling lost, exiled and isolated, fear of death, etc. However, there is also another part of me that yearns to express my complex cultural identity. One of the few instances in which I explored the possibility expressing my personal cultural background was through my Masters of Fine Arts thesis project in a series of dance videos comprised under the title *Sojourns* (1988). "Oneness" looked at my Asian side through a work that exemplified what I believed to be virtues embraced by East Asian philosophy such as "order, balance, peace, inner strength, unselfishness and tolerance",<sup>10</sup> set against a

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<sup>10</sup> Carino, Caren. Sojourns. Notes. Hawai'i, 1988.

backdrop of projected images from China. In “Kai Malie-Kai Ko’o-Kai Malie”, translated as “Calm Sea-Rough Sea-Calm Sea”, I performed in the serene tidal pools as well as pounding surf in Hawai’i to a Hawaiian chant performed live. I wrote in my notes about the piece:

A woman embarks on an emotional journey. She walks along the shoreline of an island contemplating the surrounding beauty but also feels isolated. These mixed feelings turn into frustration. Her turmoil ends when she finds a shell on the beach. She is captivated by it. The shell lulls her into a deep sleep. Literally [as she is gradually covered by sand] and metaphorically she becomes part of the island.<sup>11</sup>

In another dance video in the same production, “Beneath the Surface”, choreographed by dance colleague Karin Frank, I performed part of the dance on a crosswalk during winter in Salt Lake City, Utah. I portrayed “a Hispanic woman’s struggle to discover her unique strength and beauty separate from pressures of idealized beauty stressed by Western society and media”.<sup>12</sup> The duet “Forlane” took place at a cocktail party created on a proscenium stage and set to a live piano composition by Ravel, where a Filipino man fantasizes about a relationship with a Caucasian woman whom he feels is not possible in real life because of their different cultures. Later when I relocated to Singapore, I choreographed the solo *Pikaki Ballet* for the ASPACAE conference in Singapore. In this dance I experimented with combining ballet and Hawaiian dance movement and aesthetics set to a contemporary Hawaiian melody. My most recent cultural

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<sup>11</sup> Carino, Caren. Sojourns. Notes. Hawai’i, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Carino, Caren. Sojourns. Notes. Hawai’i, 1988.

choreography *Con Carino* (2002), translated as “With love, Carino”, celebrated the romantic connotation of my namesake. Choreographed for Passages – The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Contemporary Dance Festival<sup>13</sup> it was a lively duet in which my partner and I were physically connected throughout the piece accompanied by live guitar.

During my tenure as Head of Dance and lecturer at LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, I first set out to develop a program that followed primarily in the Western artistic tradition of the College, i.e. consisting mainly of Western technique training such as ballet and modern dance. However, I soon recognized the growing population of non-Singaporean/Asian students enrolled in the program as well as emerging Asian contemporary dance artists practicing in the community and an increasing trend utilizing interculturalism in the creation of contemporary dance works in the region. Thus, I believed that dance needed to be addressed in a wider cultural context in Singapore and created a contemporary dance festival, borrowing the words of the late Carl Wolz, founder of World Dance Alliance, to “[celebrate] the variety, the depth and the beauty of human difference through the art of dance”<sup>14</sup> as well as introduced subjects in the curriculum such as World Dance and Dance Across Cultures. I was also interested in introducing the possible approaches in the creation of Asian contemporary dance forms through composition classes as well as workshops and collaborations with contemporary Asian artists. However, it was at this juncture that I left the College to pursue my Ph.D. studies.

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<sup>13</sup> A series of contemporary dance festivals I initiated at LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts from 2000 to 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Wolz, Carl. Asia Pacific Dance Bridge. Program booklet. Singapore: World Dance Alliance, 2001.

## **Description of fieldwork and data collection**

As noted earlier, prior to the undertaking the formal research of this thesis, I was already interested and involved in the contemporary dance scene in Singapore. My range of roles and experience placed me in a privileged position to investigate how contemporary dance artists located in Singapore understood Asian-ness and how this was reflected in their Asian contemporary dance forms. Thus, from July 2002 to 2005 my formal fieldwork and data collection was more of an extension and intensification of what I had already been doing. I continued to attend performances and write for *The Arts Magazine* until the magazine's discontinuance after its July-August 2003 issue as well as continued to serve on the assessment panels for NAC's annual and seed grant schemes for dance companies. Although not directly related, I also found that by participating in other dance assessment committees for the NAC, advising on dance issues, adjudicating the Singapore Youth Festival and conducting teacher's workshops for the MOE Co-curricular branch as well as advising the PA on dance matters, I was kept informed of the related developments in contemporary dance, thus giving me a deeper and broader perspective.

Since my research was concerned with looking at contemporary dance forms in Singapore from 1994 to 2005, the artistic directors/choreographers of five contemporary dance companies established at the time became the focus of my research. Although there were other companies such as Frontier Danceland, People's Association Dance Company, National University of Singapore's Dance Ensemble as well as independent dance artists producing contemporary dance work in Singapore, during this time there were only five companies who primarily produced contemporary dance at a professional level and called themselves

contemporary dance companies. Beginning in August 2005 through to November 2006, I interviewed the following artistic directors/choreographers: Tammy L. Wong of Tammy L. Wong Dance Company; Aaron Khok Ah Hock and Ix Wong Thien Pau of Ah Hock and Peng Yu (AHPY); Angela Liong and Elysa Wendi of The Arts Fission Company (TAFC); Danny Tan of Odyssey Dance Theatre (ODT); and Lim Chin Huat and Tan How Choon of Ecnad Project Ltd (Ecnad). Since I already knew all of the respondents, my requests for interviews were readily accepted and many interviews were conducted over lunch or tea. The only problem encountered was arranging dates for the interviews as they were often busy with the daily management of their companies, rehearsing, creating new works, traveling, etc. These initial interviews focused on what these artists felt were important in their dance creation and activities. I then returned to conduct second and sometimes third interviews focusing on their personal biographies and artistic vision.

However, my first interviews were with Lim Fei Shen and Angela Liong to get an idea of the emergence of contemporary dance in Singapore. I knew both women through our association with LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts – Angela was Dean of Performing Arts/Head of Dance and Fei Shen was a part-time lecturer. I felt that because both women were clearly accepted by the dance community to be among the few pioneers of contemporary dance in Singapore, they would provide valuable background information for my research. Also, in June 2005 I was invited to conduct interviews with Angela and Fei Shen to record their artistic vision for a festschrift called *Shifting Sands: Dance in Asia and the Pacific* in honor of Wolz.

From July 2005 to February 2006 I decided that it was important to interview the dancers from each of the dance companies to give me another perspective, i.e. I was interested in finding if the dancers' own philosophies resonated with the artistic direction of their respective companies. I proceeded to interview one dancer from each company who had been with their companies for a considerable period of time; they were Silvia Yong (ODT), Ebelle Chong (AHPY), Kon Su Sam (Ecnad), Scarlet Yu (TAFC) and Elaine Chan (Tammy L. Wong Dance Company).

Another group of respondents that I later felt important to interview were tertiary dance students/alumni. As both audience members and, in many cases, project dancers with at least one of the contemporary dance companies in my study, they provided an outsider/insider perspective. From September to December 2005 I interviewed Law Soo Leng, Lee Mun Wai, Vincent Yong Wee Long and Zhuo Zihao who were chosen because of my acquaintance with them as students at LASALLE-SIA, and my impression of them as being articulate and forthcoming with their ideas. Since they continued to stay in touch with me after I left the college my requests for interviews were easily accepted.

As mentioned earlier, attending as many dance performances produced by the contemporary dance companies of my study formed an important part of my research. Documentation of these performances took various forms such as reports I wrote for the National Arts Council, my own notes, as well as articles and reviews I wrote for various publications. I also obtained videotapes/DVD's from the dance companies of some of the performances which gave me a chance to see those that I missed and at other times another opportunity to see performances



again. I made notes of my observations utilizing descriptive analysis, a common practice in recording dance performance.

I also referred to secondary sources for supplementary information including reports produced by the Ministry of Information and The Arts; reviews and articles in major Singaporean newspapers: *The Business Times* and *The Straits Times*; *The Arts Magazine* published by The Esplanade Company Limited as well as program booklets and press kits obtained from the contemporary dance companies studied in this thesis.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The objective of this thesis is to show that Asian contemporary dance forms produced by artistic directors/choreographers in Singapore reveal various conceptions of the Asian identity. However, in order to understand how contemporary dance becomes a medium through which Asian artists explore and express their Asian-ness, a background of contemporary dance as well as the theories surrounding the construction of Asian identity must be established. Thus, in accordance with this objective, this thesis is structured as follows.

In chapter two, I discuss contemporary dance in the West and its changing dimensions throughout history, i.e. key creators and their contributions, to provide a background of the artistic form that was later transferred in Asia. I also look at how the term “contemporary dance” came about and its usage in this thesis. I then go on to generally describe the emergence and transformation of contemporary dance in Asia with particular attention to Singapore – influences and personages significant to its development.

Chapter three is divided into two parts. I first provide a survey of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial scholarships on Southeast Asia's local identity in order to understand how current issues about cultural identity expressed through contemporary dance are linked to existing scholarship. I focus on the "Asian values" discourse, particularly in reference to Singapore, as an endeavor towards the establishment of Asian difference from the West followed by various constructs of Asian-ness associated with this discourse. I then look at three key approaches – interculturalism, multidisciplinaryism and body-centeredness – utilized towards the expression of Asian-ness in the creation of Asian contemporary dance forms, how these approaches are used and interpreted towards the creation of contemporary dance forms, focusing on Asia/Southeast Asia and finally Singapore.

In chapters four through eight, I focus my analysis on eight contemporary Asian dance artists located in Singapore, identified earlier, and their Asian contemporary dance creations for their respective companies. These choreographers/artistic directors are discussed in separate chapters according to the company of their affiliation. These chapters aim to show how each dance artist understands Asian-ness based on their personal biographies, location and sojourns, and looks at their Asian contemporary dance forms as expressions of the Asian identity utilizing and interpreting one or more of the following approaches: interculturalism, multidisciplinaryism and body-centeredness.

In the concluding chapter, I recapitulate that the analysis of contemporary Asian dance artists located in Singapore and the Asian contemporary dance forms they have produced reveal varied and complex understandings and expressions of Asian-ness. Hence, I state the need to look beyond politics and existing debates on

Asian-ness in the social sciences and pay attention to the performing arts such as contemporary dance as an active site where the Asian identity continues to be taken seriously, reconstructed, contested and negotiated.

## **Chapter Two: Background**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is divided into four sections to provide a background of the development of contemporary dance. The first two sections explain the development of modern dance/contemporary dance in the West, highlighting the use of both terms. I move on to discuss how contemporary dance emerged in Asia as the transference of Western modern dance techniques and styles interpreted by contemporary Asian artists to create Asian contemporary dance forms, a term that will be used through this thesis. While modern dance in the West emerged during a cultural revolution called modernism, I argue that its appearance in Asia, including Singapore, was often a response to identity issues following foreign colonization or occupation. The final section looks specifically at Singapore and how the aspirations and policies of the nation-state have played a critical role in the development of dance throughout its history. It is in this context that cultural/ethnic dance, ballet as well as Asian contemporary dance grew. Here, special attention is given to Asian contemporary dance in Singapore with reference to the key individuals, companies and programs as part of its progress.

### **Western modern dance**

Modern dance emerged as a Western performance expression during “modernism,” a movement of artists, writers and designers who rebelled against late 19<sup>th</sup> century academic and historicist traditions such as classicism which came to represent bourgeois culture. In dance, the established tradition at this time was ballet. Dance researcher Susan Au writes in her book *Ballet & Modern Dance*:

Ballet in America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century mirrored the state of contemporary European ballet: an increasing emphasis on technical virtuosity and visual spectacle had resulted in the loss of expressional content and depth. Ballet scenes often formed a part of sprawling extravaganzas calculated to dazzle the eye with the splendor and ingenuity of their settings, costumes and stage effects. In this context, dance became little more than an extension of the decorative scheme: entertaining, enjoyable and undemanding.<sup>15</sup>

Modern dance thus arose as a counter-expression to ballet which was considered a historicist and elitist tradition originating as the entertainment of royalty in Europe's 16<sup>th</sup> century courts emphasizing formal values such as clarity, harmony, symmetry and order as well as spectacular display. Modern dance challenged "contemporary attitudes and preoccupations"<sup>16</sup> through freedom of experimentation.

American iconoclasts Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), Loie Fuller (1862-1928) and Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) led the way with their avant-garde forays long before modern dance was named. Considered as the forerunners of modern dance, each dancer experimented with expressing the human body and spirit in her own way. Duncan, dubbed the "Puritanical Pagan", skipped, jumped and ran barefoot in a simple tunic while Fuller created luminescent images with her china silk scarf dancing on a glass platform lit from below and St. Denis's "goddesses,

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<sup>15</sup> Au, Susan. Ballet & Modern Dance. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Au, Susan. Ballet & Modern Dance. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 119.

dancing girls, and harem women went beyond the popular orientalist fantasies to show the metamorphoses from the physical to the spiritual”.<sup>17</sup>

Martha Graham (1894-1991) and Doris Humphrey (1895-1958), both danced with Denishawn, a company formed by St. Denis and her partner Ted Shawn (1891-1972) in 1920, and rebelled against the artificial exotic dance entertainment of the company as well as the decadence and constraints of ballet. Both Humphrey and Graham shared “a strong socio-cultural concern that dance should be recognized as an art form communicating the rhythm of contemporary life”<sup>18</sup> and “should provoke, stimulate and inform rather than simply entertain”.<sup>19</sup> They each developed their own dance techniques, styles and vocabularies. Humphrey explored “fall and recovery” while Graham experimented with “contraction and release”. Graham codified and systemized her dance form, which was taught at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance, a school she established in New York in 1927. Although Humphrey established exercises and vocabulary based on “fall and recovery”, unlike Graham, she was unable to demonstrate because she was stricken with polio and confined to a wheelchair. This left her dancers to re-conceive and re-generate her modern dance form, one of whom was Jose Limon. Later, dancers from both Graham’s and Humphrey’s companies went on to form their own dance companies, following their own vision and developing their own techniques.

The new forms developed by Graham and Humphrey became accepted by the establishment in the 1930’s and are referred to as modern dance. American dance critic John Martin describes modern dance at this time as “movement made

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<sup>17</sup> Jowitt, Deborah. “Introduction”. *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers*. Ed. Martha Bremser. London: Routledge, 1999. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Partsch-Bergsohn, Isa. *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*. Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Au, Susan. *Ballet & Modern Dance*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 119.

to externalize personal authentic experience”.<sup>20</sup> In the development of modern dance, Duncan, Fuller and St. Denis are regarded as the avant garde, i.e. predecessors of modern dance, while Graham and Humphrey are considered the pioneers of modern dance.

Simultaneously in Europe, modern dance was introduced in the 1920's largely through the efforts of Kurt Joose (1901-1979) and Mary Wigman (1886-1973). They are considered the first generation of dancers in Germany who “regarded themselves as revolutionaries creating a new world”<sup>21</sup> during post-World War I after Germany's defeat, a time when “all the nineteenth-century bourgeois aesthetics and values it had represented”<sup>22</sup> toppled. Joose and Wigman created Ausdrucktanz, also called German expressionist dance, influenced by German expressionistic painters. Wigman developed her form of modern dance based on her belief that “art grows out of the basic cause of existence”<sup>23</sup> and is best known for her use of exaggeration, distortion and strong movements to convey emotional intensity. Joose included large-group unison work and individual characters to create productions that were socially conscious. His best known production was *The Green Table* (1932) depicting the futility of peace negotiations of the times. The Ausdrucktanz tradition was built up by Joose, who established Ballet Joose in 1928 and was dance director at the Folkwang Hochschuler,<sup>24</sup> as well as Wigman who established several schools throughout

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, John quoted by Selma Jean Cohen. “Modern dance”. *Dance Words*. Ed. Valerie Preston Dunlop. Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995. 18

<sup>21</sup> Partsch-Bergsohn, Isa. *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*. Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Partsch-Bergsohn, Isa, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Wigman, Mary, “Stage Dancer-Stage Dancer”. *The Vision of Modern Dance In the Words of Its Creators* (Second Edition). Eds. Brown, Morrison, Naomi Mindlin and Charles H. Woodford. New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, 1998. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Kurt Joose was director at the Folkwang Hochschuler from 1929 till 1934 when he was exiled and again after his exile in 1949. Pina Bausch succeeded Joose.

Germany in the 1920's and a branch in New York in the 1930's. Since Ausdrucktanz was a method rather than a codified dance training system, dance artists were encouraged to improvise and experiment and create new forms.

Later in the 1950's, primarily in America, the second generation of modern dance choreographers began producing dance independently from their founders. Unlike their predecessors, this group of choreographers were interested in movement for movement's sake rather than an expression of the human condition as well as in incorporating modern dance as one component in combination with other artistic disciplines.<sup>25</sup> Thus, their creations resembled "collages combining music for full orchestra, often electronically amplified, with dialogue, singing, film, sound, slide projections, dance episodes and scenes from conventional dramas".<sup>26</sup> American choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919-) brings together various artistic forms such as music/sound, stage design and dance. However, they are "treated as independent entities...although music occupies the same time span as the choreography, and the design the same physical space, neither has to relate in any other way to the dancing".<sup>27</sup> Another American choreographer, Alwin Nikolais (1912-1993), was also interested in integrating dance with music and design. Unlike Cunningham, however, he did not collaborate with other artists but served as his own composer and designer besides choreographer. Au says Nikolais has "compared his work with non-objective art, which does not aim to represent 'real' objects, but instead draws the

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<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, Nancy and Malcolm McCormick. No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. 607.

<sup>26</sup> Reynolds, Nancy and Malcolm McCormick. No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. 607.

<sup>27</sup> Au, Susan. Ballet & Modern Dance. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 155.



viewer's attention to its substance – shape, color, texture, space, time – which becomes the focal point of the work".<sup>28</sup>

In the 1960's-1970's when individualism and freedom of expression prevailed in America, a group of modern dance choreographers sometimes referred to as postmodernists in dance, were not interested in dance technique, the proscenium stage or repertory. Instead, they utilized non-dancers and ordinary objects as well as explored natural movement and spontaneity in spaces like fountains, museums, plazas, rooftops and walls. The famous manifesto by American choreographer Yvonne Rainer (1934-) sums up the vision of modern dance by this group of dance artists:

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction or spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, dance at this time represented a break from what had previously been established, i.e. the dance formalism of Cunningham, Nikolais and Taylor. Dance critic Deborah Jowitt writes:

At a time when young people worldwide were questioning the political and social establishment, these artists were querying the separation of the arts, the hierarchical

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<sup>28</sup> Au, Susan. Ballet & Modern Dance. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 160.

<sup>29</sup> Au, Susan. Ballet & Modern Dance. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 165.

arrangement or compositional elements, the elitism and potential eradication of individuality inherent in much academic training.<sup>30</sup>

Dance artists tore down all conventions and perceptions about dance to start anew and from this point onwards modern dance took many directions.

Since the 1980's modern dance has gone on to include an eclectic range of experimentations by choreographers who continue to express their present experience through "new and unconventional explorations",<sup>31</sup> often bringing together multiple elements from various artistic disciplines and giving them their own name, including Pina Bausch (1940-) in Germany who created a form called Tanztheatre, a further development of Ausdruckstanz. Her productions bring together "animistic borrowings, mime, spoken texts, bizarre vocal effects and occasional slapstick"<sup>32</sup> and employ stage designers to produce living rooms, cafes, public spaces and natural landscapes on stage.<sup>33</sup> Another multidisciplinary form referred to as New Dance, synthesizes release technique<sup>34</sup> and various somatic practices, both therapeutic as well as Asian martial arts.

### **Terms: modern dance and contemporary dance**

The term modern dance coined in about 1927, quickly became an umbrella concept to encompass the development of all modern dance forms from its

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<sup>30</sup> Jowitt, Deborah. "Introduction". Fifty Contemporary Choreographers. Ed. Martha Bremser. London: Routledge, 1999. 7.

<sup>31</sup> McDonagh, Don. "Introduction". The Vision of Modern Dance. Eds. Brown, Jean Morrison, Naomi Mindlin and Charles H. Woodford. USA: Princeton Book Company, 1979. 200.

<sup>32</sup> Reynolds, Nancy and Malcolm McCormick. No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. 639.

<sup>33</sup> These landscapes were often made up of made of old leaves, peat, grass, bushes, large cacti, fields of carnations, sand dunes, water puddles, etc. on stage.

<sup>34</sup> Release technique channels the body's natural flow of energy through breath and momentum to facilitate movement.

pioneering stage to present, much like the role played by modern art galleries that display all forms of modernist art. Thus, modern dance is characterized by what American dance critic Marcia Siegel describes as “the discarding of all traditional requirements of form and the establishment of a new principle upon which each dance makes its own form...its resistance to the past, its response to the present, it’s constant redefining of the idea of dance”.<sup>35</sup> Later, contemporary dance, a parallel term to modern dance, was coined in the United Kingdom by Robin Howard following the set up of the Contemporary Ballet Trust in 1966 and later London Contemporary Dance Theatre. It was first used in Britain as another term to describe modern dance – from its inception to present. For the most part, the term contemporary dance is adopted in British colonized or influenced countries and places such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, as well as Australia, Western and Eastern Europe. The term modern dance, however, is most often used in Germany, America and American-impacted Asian countries such as the Philippines, Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

While both terms are generally used interchangeably, there are some differences. Modern dance is also often understood specifically in reference to early modern dance techniques or forms that emerged during the early period of modernism in the West such as those established by Graham and Humphrey. For example, dance critic Deborah Jowitt comments, “American dancers, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman,...linked dance with modernism as a force in art and architecture.”<sup>36</sup> Given that “modern” (or modernity) is a term closely entwined with Western experience and/or origins, the term contemporary

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<sup>35</sup> Siegel, Marcia quoted by Valerie Preston Dunlop. “Modern dance”. *Dance Words*. Ed. Valerie Preston Dunlop. Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Jowitt, Deborah. “Introduction”. *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers*. Ed. Martha Bremser. London: Routledge, 1999. 3.

dance has been widely used in place of modern dance (except when specifically referring early modern dance) since it appears to have a more neutral image.<sup>37</sup>

Jowitt observes that “only in its early years could modern dance be considered to have anything in common with modernism as a movement in the arts”.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the trend favoring the term contemporary dance over modern dance was gradually observed in much of the Asian world. For example, in Malaysia the preference of the term contemporary dance is explained by the likes of Krishen Jit, the late Malaysian theatre director as well as dance and visual art critic. Jit wrote in an article:

To the international dance community, modern dance is very nearly synonymous with the works, techniques, and inventive genius of Martha Graham... Contemporary dancers and choreographers bristle against the parental rein exercised by the Graham technique upon modern dance... In short, contemporary dance is the purist’s nightmare. It is many things, including ballet, modern dance, and the fusion of one or both of these genres with traditional dance. It is the sum of its parts. It is eclectic and plural. It defies genre.<sup>39</sup>

Choreographer/educator Joseph Gonzales notes in his book *Choreography: A Malaysian Perspective* that the use of the term contemporary is intentional. He says since “decades have passed accompanied by the evolution of styles, the term modern is regarded by some as being dated. How can it be

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<sup>37</sup> Modernism refers to a cultural era in the West beginning in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>38</sup> Jowitt, Deborah. “Introduction”. *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers*. Ed. Martha Bremser. London: Routledge, 1999. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Jit, Krishen. “Contemporary Dance in Malaysia”. *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*. Ed. Kathy Rowland. Singapore: Contemporary Asian Art Centre, 2003. 197-198.

‘modern’ when it is a hundred years old?”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Chinese Malaysian choreographer/dancer Mew Chang Tsing describes “a small group of [choreographers] who prefer to find their own identity on dance, who aim to develop ownership over their work and crave for an acknowledged sense of belonging from their audience, chose to work in the form of Contemporary Dance”.<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary dance has now come to refer to all dance forms incorporating Western modern dance forms as well as the contemporization of established dance forms such as ballet, called neo-classical ballet and contemporary ballet; the contemporization of traditional/ethnic dance forms such as contemporary Indian, also called neo-traditional claiming little or no Western influence; and other present-day, often popular, dance forms such as jazz, hip-hop, etc. The concept of contemporary dance, therefore, does not refer only to Western modern dance but includes a variety of contemporary dance forms that may or may not be associated with Western modern dance.

Since this thesis focuses on performance expressions of Asian-ness through the creation of dance forms influenced by Western modern dance styles and techniques, the term Asian contemporary dance will be used. The term modern dance will be used only in reference to a Western dance component when it is utilized within the Asian contemporary dance form.

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<sup>40</sup> Gonzales, Joseph. Choreography: A Malaysian Perspective. Kuala Lumpur: Akademi Seni Kebangsaan, 2004. viii.

<sup>41</sup> Mew Chang Tsing. “Tracing the Beginning of Chinese Contemporary Dance in Malaysia”. Diversity in Motion. Ed. Mohd Anis Md Nor. Kuala Lumpur: Cultural Centre University of Malaya, 2003. 55.

### **Asian contemporary dance: Western modern dance transplanted in Asia**

Modern or contemporary dance styles or techniques were introduced to Asia through the efforts of Asian dance artists who went to America and Europe to study, bringing back with them their training and exposure in modern dance, as well as Western dance artists who located themselves in Asia, bringing with them their background and experience in modern dance. As contemporary dance is largely understood as a Western construct utilizing Western frameworks in dance creation and discourse, its eventual location in Asia sets an exciting but thorny ground for artistic creation due to the dilemmas and complexities that surround it because of its association with Western knowledge and aspirations. Through global-local tensions, contemporary dance has taken different forms in Asia over time because of the region's preoccupation with asserting local difference – allowing cultural flows across boundaries but maintaining difference based on particularities. While Western cultural influences have flowed into the region's dance forms, the various forms of Asian contemporary dance have arisen out of the different positions taken by Asian modern dance artists in their search for the contemporary Asian. The forms reflect their predicament, i.e. their anxiety over emulation, rejection and negotiation of Western ideas. On one hand, artists embrace the ideals and aesthetics of the West, seen as progressive but, on the other hand, they constantly reject the West because of their need to express local autonomous meanings which differ from Western notions.

When Western modern dance techniques and styles were introduced in Asia and utilized as components in an expression unique to contemporary Asians, the tension of its Western origins was encountered. Modern dance in Asia became a vehicle to express progressive ideals of modernism, as in the West, yet it carried

Western notions that were not necessarily Asian. Modern dance was thus adapted on local terms, i.e. local values and ideals were re-asserted or re-invented by contemporary Asian artists, and inherent in these new contemporary dance forms is the search for the contemporary Asian identity. However, Asian contemporary dance forms have not evolved homogeneously throughout Asia largely because its transference from the West has been recognized but improvised through different ways of incorporating practices, like interculturalism, multidisciplinaryism and body-centeredness, as reflecting different meanings of the contemporary Asian identity or Asian-ness. These practices are discussed in the next chapter as part the analytical framework of this thesis.

Like in the West, the emergence of Asian contemporary dance arose in many Asian countries out of particular social conditions. However, unlike the West, where this was developed through the cultural conditions of modernism, contemporary dance in Asia was often a reaction in the aftermath of foreign occupation or colonization. For example, in Japan, during its post-war years, established values were criticized and destroyed and *butoh* emerged as a Japanese contemporary dance expression seeking to express a contemporary Japanese consciousness. In Taiwan, after the Japanese occupation in 1945, the “Taiwanese Consciousness” emerged and Taiwan proceeded towards recovering its indigenous cultures as well as creating contemporary dance forms in the late 1970’s. In Singapore, contemporary dance emerged in the mid 1980’s and gained momentum in the 1990’s, a period that coincided with the height of the Asian identities and values discourse promulgated in Southeast Asian politics. This was about 25 years after its colonization by the British and independence from Malaysia. Thus, the

emergence of contemporary dance is a relatively recent development which reflects a changing and multi-faceted Asian cultural identity in Singapore.

### **Contemporary dance in Singapore**

The development of dance in Singapore is a reflection of the country's history and evolving cultural identity in which an Asian identity eventually came to signify the Singaporean identity. Dance is one site where the search for a Singaporean identity that is also about the construction of an Asian identity can be studied.

During Singapore's initial colonization by the British (1819- 1945) dance served the purpose of providing a sense of community for the different immigrant populations – the Chinese, Malays and Indians, rather than cultivated as an artistic expression. The following passage by theatre arts scholar William Peterson states:

[I]n Singapore the British expropriated a sparsely inhabited island from the indigenous Malays and effectively created a kind of terra nullis that quickly became peopled by immigrants and convict labor from countries both within and outside the region. From the beginning Singapore was a place where people came to make money or give of their labor rather than to settle permanently and create a new culture or nation.<sup>42</sup>

However, Singaporean dance scholar Chua Soo Pong observed that after World War II (1942-1945) during which time the Japanese occupied Singapore, when the British returned to rule, dance was linked to national identity:

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<sup>42</sup> Peterson, William. Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2000. 53.



In the post-war years, dance in Singapore, like other forms of expressive culture, played an increasingly important role in strengthening and propagating the symbolic formulations of the nation. Singaporeans identified themselves with the people in Malaya as they aspired to free themselves from British rule.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, during the 1950's known as the anti-colonial period in Singapore, Singaporean dance artists of various cultural backgrounds saw the need to unite towards the development of a new Malaya culture. Dance artists practiced interculturalism<sup>44</sup> that saw Singapore's Chinese, Indians and Malays learn each other's cultural dance form. Chua observed:

The most important contribution made by [the Bhaskar Academy of Dance] was its ability to attract the Chinese student activists, who were in the 1950's, keen to learn the non-Chinese arts, cultures and languages, as part of their mission to 'create the new Malayan culture'.<sup>45</sup>

Additionally, Chua acknowledged the "pioneering [of] cross-cultural productions: staging in Indian dance drama style stories of non-Indian origin". These were just a few efforts signifying the beginning of interculturalism through dance in Singapore.

Singapore increasingly moved towards self-governance that culminated in a brief merger with Malaysia (1963-1965) and finally independence in 1965 when it ambitiously attended to nation building – establishing political and economic

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<sup>43</sup> Chua Soo Pong. "Singapore". *The Dances of Asean*. Ed. Tinggal, Zainal Abiddin. Brunei Darussalam: Asia Printers, 1998. 172.

<sup>44</sup> See section on interculturalism in Chapter Three: Analytical Framework.

<sup>45</sup> Chua Soo Pong. "Singapore". *The Dances of Asean*. Ed. Tinggal, Zainal Abiddin. Brunei Darussalam: Asia Printers, 1998. 195.

stability as well as a Singaporean identity. Chua explains the development of dance during this time, under the leadership of the then prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew (1959-1990), as having a role “in anti-colonial campaigns, in political competition between the ruling government party and its opposition and in forging unity. It is doubtful that performing arts [including dance], can be totally cut off from the cultural roots and emotional importance of the three major ethnic groups”.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Chinese, Malay and Indian dance, including Chinese opera, Malay folk dance and Indian dance dramas, were promoted separately as well as cross-culturally as expressions of the Singaporean identity. Chua observed, “Artists from different cultural backgrounds worked hand in hand in the presentation of cultural shows which featured dances of three communities,”<sup>47</sup> and in 1960 the People’s Association (PA), a grassroots cultural organization was formed by the Singapore government “to promote cultural activities and racial unity, to create a bridge between the government and the people”.<sup>48</sup> It has accomplished this through Singapore’s numerous community centers and, since 1973, in its organization of the annual Chingay Parade, a procession featuring dance among many displays, in celebration of the Chinese lunar new year. Other developments include the annual Singapore Youth Festival organized by the Ministry of Education’s co-curricular dance branch since 1967 of which the following is said: “The Singapore government realized that theatre dance

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<sup>46</sup> Chua Soo Pong. “An Overview of Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Issues of Cultural Identity”. Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia. Ed. Chua Soo Pong. Singapore: UniPress for SPAFA, 1995. xxii.

<sup>47</sup> Chua Soo Pong. “Singapore”. The Dances of Asean. Ed. Tinggal, Zainal Abiddin. Brunei Darussalam: Asia Printers, 1998. 172.

<sup>48</sup> Pee, Teresa. “Singapore Ethnic Dance Development in the Socio-Economic and Socio-Political Environment”. International Dance Conference, Taiwan – Conference Proceedings. Ed. Janice LaPointe-Crump. Congress on Research on Dance, 2004. 190.

activities, if properly presented, could serve as an exercise in cultural identity.”<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, “[t]he real significance is in the participation of schoolchildren in a highly educational activity which stresses the search for identity, advocates unity emerging from cultural diversity, and inculcates a strong sense of purpose.”<sup>50</sup>

Through the progress of Singapore’s economic development which began in the 1960’s and continuing into the mid 1970’s, the Singaporean identity was still very much thought of in terms of the three major ethnic groups and dance primarily served a function rather than was recognized for its artistic contribution. Singaporean dance academic Teresa Pee writes:

[W]hether [dance] as an art form, a theatrical work, or social interaction, was not an important issue. What was important was the incipient attempt to mould an embryonic national consciousness, to try and graft the ethnic identities of the various groups, into the fabric of a Singaporean identity through their cultural practices such as dance. Dance was used as a cultural medium for political rallies and as an ambassador for cultural exchanges that took place.<sup>51</sup>

Pee also notes that the government’s economic policy at the time encouraged foreign investment and was also paralleled in the arts through the presentation of foreign performing groups. Furthermore, Singapore’s traditional Chinese, Indian and Malay dance forms were promoted overseas through the government

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<sup>49</sup> Chua Soo Pong. “Singapore”. *The Dances of Asean*. Ed. Tinggal, Zainal Abiddin. Brunei Darussalam: Asia Printers, 1998. 175.

<sup>50</sup> Chua Soo Pong. “Singapore”. *The Dances of Asean*. Ed. Tinggal, Zainal Abiddin. Brunei Darussalam: Asia Printers, 1998. 177.

<sup>51</sup> Pee, Teresa. “Singapore Ethnic Dance Development in the Socio-Economic and Socio-Political Environment”. *International Dance Conference, Taiwan – Conference Proceedings*. Ed. Janice LaPointe-Crump. Congress on Research on Dance, 2004. 189.

supported National Theatre Dance Company established in 1968, National Dance Company that became full-time in 1970 and People's Association Dance Group set up in 1971. These activities eventually led to a shift in recognizing dance as an artistic form, i.e. expressive form, by the late 1970's. Pee observes:

Dance development from the late 1970's was as much an individual effort as a community one. The Singapore Cultural Foundation, set up in 1979, was a government initiative to help local artists by giving them financial support for their various projects, while individual artists and performing groups embarked on their own creative paths in their search for artistic expression and fulfillment.<sup>52</sup>

The consideration of dance as an artistic expression also arose from Singapore's rapid development towards realizing "the vision of a culturally vibrant society"<sup>53</sup> albeit the Singaporean identity still appeared at times to be rooted in its major cultural groups. In a report produced by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts in 1989 it was recommended that "our multicultural heritage [makes Singapore] unique and we should promote excellence in our multi-lingual, multicultural art forms",<sup>54</sup> meaning that of the Malay, Indian and Chinese. However, eventually multiculturalism was expanded to mean pan-Asian or even cosmopolitan. For example, the Singapore Dance Theatre, was a ballet company formed in 1988, "whose unique cosmopolitan character is one that is reflected in a

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<sup>52</sup> Pee, Teresa. "Singapore Ethnic Dance Development in the Socio-Economic and Socio-Political Environment". International Dance Conference, Taiwan – Conference Proceedings. Ed. Janice LaPointe-Crump. Congress on Research on Dance. 2004. 192.

<sup>53</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter One: The 1989 Report – Ten Years Hence". Renaissance City Report. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter One: The 1989 Report – Ten Years Hence". Renaissance City Report. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 2.

look defined by the delight in the inherent physical beauty of its dancers and in a style marked by an ability to cross – whether in concept or in movement – the boundaries between the East and West, modern and classical, traditional and contemporary”,<sup>55</sup>.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dance was acknowledged primarily as an artistic expression as the government focused its intentions of becoming a world-class city in which a high quality of life and prosperity were key signifiers. As highlighted in the 1989 Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts in *The Renaissance City Report*, culture and the arts:

- a) give a nation its unique character
- b) broaden our minds and deepen our sensitivities
- c) improve the general quality of life
- d) strengthen the social bond; and
- e) contribute to our tourist and entertainment sectors.<sup>56</sup>

Dance was one of the performing arts vehicles to engineer a social consciousness and creative mindset key to the creation of global cities such as London and New York. Since Singapore is desirous to join the ranks of such cities, i.e. to become a “hub for business, financial services, electronic commerce, travel, tourism, telecommunications, information, education and innovation”,<sup>57</sup> a vibrant arts scene is critical to attract and sustain these industries. It was quoted in The Rt Hon Chris Smith’s *Creative Britain*:

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<sup>55</sup> Singapore Dance Theatre. *Ballet Under the Stars: Dancing By Numbers*. Program booklet. Singapore: Singapore Dance Theatre, 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Chapter One: The 1989 Report – Ten Years Hence”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 12.

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Chapter Three: “Benchmarking Cities”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 24.

The greatest resource possessed by any nation is the imagination of its people. Imagination nourishes invention, economic advantage, scientific discovery, technological advance, better administration, jobs, communities and a more secure society. The arts are the principal trainer of imagination. They can enrich, not replace, the literacy, numeracy, science and technology we need for prosperity.<sup>58</sup>

The importance of developing the arts, gave rise to concerted efforts to grow and promote dance. Infrastructures such as the National Arts Council (NAC), formed in 1991, absorbed the functions of the various cultural agencies of the Ministry of Information and The Arts (MITA), the National Theatre Trust and the Singapore Cultural Foundation to oversee the development of the arts. NAC provides various arts development programs (e.g. artist-in-residence), financial support schemes including various grants: training, travel, annual, seed, project as well as scholarships and bursaries. The NAC is also responsible for organizing performing arts events in the heartlands<sup>59</sup> through its ArtReach program as well as the increasingly popular Singapore Arts Festival that features both foreign and local talent. Furthermore, the organization acknowledges artistic excellence through the Cultural Medallion<sup>60</sup> and Young Artist Award<sup>61</sup>. Thus, the NAC is a

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<sup>58</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter Four: Culture and Creativity in the Future Economy". Renaissance City Report. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 29.

<sup>59</sup> A term used in Singapore to refer to its suburban areas where residential communities are located.

<sup>60</sup> The Cultural Medallion was initiated by Singapore's late president Ong Teng Cheong and is currently administered by the National Arts Council. It recognizes artistic excellence in the areas of literary, visual and performing arts as well as film.

<sup>61</sup> The Young Artist Award was established in 1992. It recognizes young artists who have demonstrated high artistic potential in four broad areas: literary arts, visual arts, performing arts and film.

key influencer on the arts as many artists look to the organization for financial support as well as confirmation of artistic achievement and status.

However, coinciding with governmental initiatives to forge an active arts society are the aspirations of individual artists. T. Sasitharan, co-director of Practice Performing Arts School says, “Some may say that there can be no great nation without great art or high culture. But there can be no great art, no living culture, without great lives, at least lives lived not just more expansively but also more deeply.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, amidst government ideals were two individuals in key positions to influence the dance scene in Singapore. Both women were primarily responsible for the introduction of Western modern dance techniques and styles: Lim Fei Shen was the artistic director and main choreographer for the PA (1985-1991) and Angela Liong was a major choreographer for the Television Corporation of Singapore (1984-1989). Although the choreography they produced was mainly in the jazz style, their Western modern dance proclivities influenced the way they trained dancers and when they produced their own work they created Asian contemporary dance works utilizing Western modern dance movement vocabulary. Both women are responsible for cultivating a generation of dancers. Angela bred a line of contemporary dance artists through her Head of Dance position at two tertiary arts institutions, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1989 and later LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts in 1996. She trained student dancers whom she later employed in her own company, The Arts Fission Company (TAFC) formed in 1994, on a full-time basis including Rusman Rahmat, Sim Wai Ee, Alvin Tan and Elysa Wendi. Later, several of Angela’s students went on to form their own dance companies, such as Lim Chin Huat, Tan

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<sup>62</sup> T. Sasitharan. “Visions”. *Selves: The State of the Arts in Singapore*. Kwok Kian Woon, Arun Mahizhnan and T. Sastharan. Eds. Singapore: National Arts Council, 2002. 25.

How Choon and Choo Lei Lei who formed Ecnad Project Ltd (initially called Dance Dimension Project). Aaron Khok Ah Hock was also a student of Angela's for a brief period before taking up a scholarship at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, returning to Singapore after completing his studies to join TAFC and later co-founding Ah Hock and Yu (AHPY) with his Chinese Malaysian partner Ix Wong Thien Pau.

Lim Fei Shen, a solo artist, has taught in several educational institutions including the National University of Singapore, National Institute of Education, LASALLE-SIA and NAFA, where she is presently a full-time lecturer and Head of Studies. It is said of her choreography, "Her works focuses upon the development of unique cross cultural dance forms which draw from traditional Asian sources."<sup>63</sup> Fei Shen has influenced many dance students through her teaching, primarily in the areas of dance composition and improvisation.

In spite of the efforts of Angela and Fei Shen, among a few others, the contemporary dance scene developed at a slow pace in Singapore into the mid-1990's, with the only companies producing solely contemporary dance at a professional level established before this time being TAFC (1994) and Ecnad (1996). Then a second push for culture and the arts was heralded by Singapore's second prime minister, Goh Chok Tong (1990-2004), who stated in a speech delivered at Nanyang Technology University in 1996:

Nonetheless we are still both a society of distinction. Let us  
rid ourselves of our self-centered, selfish overly  
materialistic streaks. Let us be more cultivated and refined

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<sup>63</sup> The Substation. Sept Fest. Program guide. Singapore: The Substation, 2001.



with a keener sense of the beauty in human relationships,  
music and our cultural heritage.<sup>64</sup>

It was in this cultural climate endorsed by the Singapore government that contemporary dance experienced a boost. Furthermore, contemporary dance in Singapore saw itself aligned with expressions of Asian-ness which coincided with the Asian values discourse in the political realm.

The Asian values discourse signaled a shift in the way Singapore perceived its cultural identity. Instead of simply a Singaporean identity, there were imaginings of a broader Asian identity. It was a little more than ten years after the 1989 report when MITA produced another document called the *Renaissance City Report* in 2000 to make public the new vision of Singapore as a “global arts city”.<sup>65</sup> It was Singapore’s call to address the “spirit of creativity, innovation, multi-disciplinary learning, socio-economic and cultural vibrancy”<sup>66</sup> through film, literature, visual as well as the performing arts like dance. The *Renaissance City Report* states:

Our culture, arts and heritage is the common language  
through which Singaporeans can express and share their  
Singapore stories. Local artists, be they writers, film-  
makers, directors, dancers, painters, sculptors or architects,  
help to create shared perspectives that will be a decisive  
factor in nurturing the Singapore Heartbeat.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Goh Chok Tong quoted in “Chapter Five: The Vision for Renaissance Singapore”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Executive Summary”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Chapter Five: The Vision for Renaissance Singapore”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Chapter Five: The Vision for Renaissance Singapore”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 4

While the report acknowledged that through the performing arts like contemporary dance was the possibility of realizing a uniquely Singaporean voice, it also mentioned, “Local artists are encouraged to produce works from a Singaporean perspective and clear, internationally recognized Singapore and pan-Asian voices will begin to develop.”<sup>68</sup> Not only was contemporary dance now accepted and viewed as an essential expression of Singapore’s cultural identity towards its vision in becoming a world-class city, the term “pan-Asian” becomes key in signifying that other Asian cultures were now embraced as its own. The following passage from the *Renaissance City Report* also encompasses Asian heritage as part of the Singaporean identity:

This will be a society that is clear about its identity, confident and at ease with itself. Awareness of our Asian heritage is enhanced even as we evolve a Singaporean identity. In this regard, artists play a key role as they can base their artistic efforts on the experience of being Singaporean and living in Singapore, thereby helping to create shared perspectives that are distinctly Singaporean.<sup>69</sup>

With the other dance forms firmly represented in Singapore and infrastructures and structures like Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, a world-class entertainment performance venue that opened in 2002, the new Drama Centre in 2005 as well as new premises for tertiary arts institutions NAFA in 2004 and LASALLE-SIA (scheduled completion in 2007) built to support further

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<sup>68</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Chapter Five: The Vision for Renaissance Singapore”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Chapter Five: The Vision for Renaissance Singapore”. *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 2.

developments in the arts, it was an opportune climate for contemporary dance to progress.

Contemporary dance began to proliferate in the late 1990's into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Singaporean dance artists who went away to study returned to form their own contemporary dance companies – such as Danny Tan, artistic director of Odyssey Dance Theatre; Tammy L. Wong, artistic director of Tammy L. Wong Dance Company and Aaron Khek Ah Hock, executive director of AHPY, or to join local dance companies on a part-time basis, like Joey Chua and Susan Yeung. Kuo Jing Hong became the vice-principle and Head of Dance of Practice Performing Arts School, a theatre/dance school established in 1965 by her late dramatist father Kuo Pao Kun and choreographer/dancer mother Goh Lay Kuan. Most recently, Lim Mei Chian formed a multidisciplinary company in 2006 with American choreographer/educator John Mead called Moving Image Arts.

Throughout this period, contemporary dance activity increased through the initiatives of Singapore's government and agencies. The National Arts Council's annual Singapore Arts Festival featured more local contemporary dance companies and independent artists. The Ministry of Education Co-Curricular Activities Branch saw more schools in Singapore submit contemporary dance items under the international dance category for the Singapore Youth Festival. Government subsidized institutions such as LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts expanded its dance program to include a Bachelor of Arts degree in dance with honors (B.A. Hons) and NAFA is set to offer a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree in 2007 in conjunction with Purchase College, a state university of New York renowned for its dance program. Also, two more dance festivals featuring contemporary dance emerged: Dance Reflections presented by National

University of Singapore's Centre for the Arts and Dance organized by Esplanade in 2006.

Singapore's government and its agencies have been closely involved in shaping the contemporary dance scene in Singapore. Aside from the structures and infrastructures discussed in this section, the contemporary dance artists in this thesis all have been supported in some way by the government such as through annual or project grants, arts housing, study grants, etc. Furthermore, all of the Singaporean nationals in this research are recipients of the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award. However, accepting assistance and acknowledgement from Singapore's government means different things to these dance artists. Some appear to be accommodating while others do not wish to ask for anything more or are indifferent. This being said, these dance artists create their Asian contemporary dance forms first and foremost as an artistic expression; there is no evidence that they strive to comply with Singapore's political agenda for funding and/or recognition. While their aspirations may not be completely aligned with governmental rhetoric or ideals, they are social commentaries within an accepted range. They are interested in reflection rather than reacting through radical protest in their productions. Unlike theatre, there has not been any dance productions that have created controversy or met with government censorship. Although the direction and policies of Singapore's government have an impact on the production of their art in terms of funding and performance opportunities, the NAC does not overtly influence artistic direction and generally supports:

viable strategic arts organizations that serve as hallmarks of excellence in the artistic landscape of Singapore, providing quality programs, contributing substantially and critically to

the development of artistic practices, professional expertise  
and audience engagement in Singapore and beyond.<sup>70</sup>

The artistic direction and approach is left to the dance companies to decide. In this regard, the artistic agency or independent spirit sees them taking their own directions in contemporary dance and exploring themes that matter to them as individual artists.

It is against this background that my study must be read and understood. This thesis aims to show how contemporary Asian dance artists through the auspices of their dance companies in Singapore have each taken their own the path in expressing a Singaporean identity that is defined by an Asian identity through their Asian contemporary dance forms.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary dance in Singapore arrived from the West by way of relocated expatriates as well as locals who have studied and brought with them Western modern dance techniques and styles. Like the emergence of contemporary dance in the West, contemporary dance in Asia as well as Singapore is a cultural response to pre-existing social conditions. In Singapore this means establishing an identity following its colonization by the British, occupation by the Japanese and merger with Malaysia. Although contemporary dance as a genre is viewed as a Western construct, its transference to Asia and Singapore sees it transformed into what will be called in this thesis Asian contemporary dance. The development of contemporary dance in Singapore in the

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<sup>70</sup> National Arts Council. "Major and General Grants". [National Arts Council. www.nac.gov.sg](http://www.nac.gov.sg). Accessed 3 December 2007.

late 1990's and 21<sup>st</sup> century at the same time saw itself aligned with expressions of Asian-ness that coincided with the Asian values discourse in the political realm.

Thus, this chapter has provided a background to understand what has been transformed, i.e. Western modern dance, and the context in Singapore in which it has been transformed. The next chapter will discuss an analytical framework, i.e. provide the concepts and ideas from which to view this transformation by artistic directors/choreographers and their Asian contemporary dance forms described in subsequent chapters.

## **Chapter Three: Analytical Framework**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I draw on theories of local identity and performing arts in Asia to formulate a theoretical framework towards the understanding of the various notions of Asian cultural identity represented by several artistic directors/choreographers under the auspices of five Singapore-based contemporary dance companies from 1994 to 2005. Sometimes the search for an Asian contemporary dance form becomes entwined with Singaporean nationalist politics yet sometimes it is beyond issues of Singaporean national identity. In spite of the nationalistic stance of the Singapore government, Asian contemporary dance artists represent a group who are proud to be Asian but look beyond the economic stability important to their parents.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section I present a survey of scholarships on Southeast Asia's local identity in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras in order to understand how current issues centering on expressing cultural identity in contemporary dance are linked to existing scholarship. I focus on the Asian values discourse, particularly in reference to Singapore, as an endeavor towards the establishment of an Asian or local identity different from the West. I further examine the varied constructions or meanings of Asian-ness associated with this discourse in order to formulate an analytical framework to articulate the meanings and expressions of Asian-ness via the productions/choreographies by the Asian contemporary dance artists studied in this thesis.

The second section is a comprehensive look at the performing arts with regards to interculturalism, multidisciplinaryism and body-centeredness as common approaches utilized towards the creation of various Asian contemporary dance forms and their usage and interpretation by the artists studied. Each approach is described and discussed with both wider examples and the case studies of this thesis, focusing on the various developments in Asia, particularly Southeast Asian contemporary dance. I argue that analyzing the Asian contemporary dance forms produced by artistic directors/choreographers in Singapore can reveal various conceptions of the Asian identity which are not easily reducible to being merely complicit with statist/elitist discourse or essentialist, i.e. a racial issue.

Contemporary dance becomes a medium through which Asian artists explore and express their Asian-ness. In doing so, they change a Western genre and create an Asian form – Asian contemporary dance with Asian themes, hybrid Asian/Western movement vocabularies, Asian/Western multidisciplinary artistic collaboration as well as Asian translations of Western technique and approaches in dance creation, i.e. Western modern dance, multidisciplinaryism and body-centeredness are used to articulate Asian body movements and sentiments. Contemporary dance in Asia is therefore not merely a Western category but becomes an equally significant expression known as Asian contemporary dance.<sup>71</sup>

Asian-ness as a discourse is part of the context within which contemporary dance forms flourish in Singapore. These contemporary Asian dance forms can be viewed as products of the contestation and negotiation with the Singapore state's

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<sup>71</sup> Towards the creation of an Asian contemporary dance form, the issue of cultural appropriation does not seem to be a problem in the West, i.e. I have observed that Western contemporary dance artists don't seem to have a problem when Asian dance artists utilize Western modern dance as one of the artistic disciplines in their creations. However, as this thesis highlights, Asian artists are often criticized by fellow Asians for their Western acculturation.



identity ideology which reflect the agency of individual artists. These variations of local identity or Asian-ness expressed in their dance creations are as much related to the personal biographies of individual artists as to their location in the political and social contexts of contemporary Singaporean society. Furthermore, the obvious utilization and translation of modern dance, a Western construct, in their choreography represents how a Western outlook is a part of their contemporary Asian identity.

### **Survey of scholarship and discourse on local identity: Asian values and Asian-ness**

The debate on local input in cultural translations has long existed in Southeast Asia's scholarship. Historical sociologist J.C. van Leur led the way with the idea of Southeast Asia's autonomy, promulgating that "Southeast Asian agency was required to 'write back' against any and all external 'influences,' including Indic and Sinic",<sup>72</sup> on which his student John Smail<sup>73</sup> developed the notion of an Asian-centric history based on cultural change through creative adaptation. Various scholarly theories have since developed on how Southeast Asian local identities are created from the ability to work change in spite of foreign cultural influences, including H.G.Q. Wales's concept called "local genius"<sup>74</sup> to explain why some foreign cultural elements survived while others seemed to be disregarded in Southeast Asia's history. How information, ideas and

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<sup>72</sup> Reynolds, Craig J. "A New Look at Old Southeast Asia". *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54.2 (May 1995): 287.

<sup>73</sup> John Smail's "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia", considered a seminal essay on the writing of Southeast Asian history, presents his ideas about the conception of an autonomous history of Southeast Asia, i.e. an Asia-centric rather than Eurocentric history, as well as the notion of cultural change through "creative adaptation".

<sup>74</sup> While scholars like Craig Reynolds have said that much of the work of H.G.Q. Wales is not taken seriously today, Wales's term and concept of "local genius" which he used to describe how pre-Indic civilizations responded and survived Indic cultural influences, is still referred to.

values underwent a discriminate diffusion process, viewed by Wales as characteristic of Southeast Asian cultures, was expanded upon by Southeast Asian historians Oliver Wolters<sup>75</sup> and Craig Reynolds.<sup>76</sup> Wolters used the term “localization” to signify “a purposeful and discriminating aptitude that wants to make local sense of something foreign”.<sup>77</sup> Reynolds saw these processes as evidence of the “Southeast Asian will, or the capacity of Southeast Asian societies to shape change”.<sup>78</sup> Thus, the concept of cultural transfer and adaptation was, for the most part, accepted when there was no one dominant culture and the interfaces were between Asian cultures during the pre-colonial era.

Today the complexity of recognizing Western dominance and attempts to overcome it has become a debated issue in examining the arrival of European hegemony via the age of colonialism or imperialism. Thus, the politics of representation focusing on what has been termed “cultural imperialism” or the totalizing force of Western dominance in which the West is all-defining knowledge and power thereby leaving no room for individual consciousness or experience have been argued by post-colonial writers such as Edward Said,<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> O.W. Wolters expanded on the concept of localization first introduced by John Smal. In his book History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives, Wolters argued for a regional history, i.e. a Southeast Asian history consisting of cultural commonalities and intra-regional relationships.

<sup>76</sup> Craig Reynolds was teaching at the Faculty of Asian Studies of the Australian National University when he was commissioned by the Southeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies to write about the scholarship on Southeast Asian history prior to AD 1300 for non-specialists. His essay “A New Look at Old Southeast Asia” was his response.

<sup>77</sup> Reynolds, Craig J. “A New Look at Old Southeast Asia”. The Journal of Asian Studies 54.2 (May 1995): 288.

<sup>78</sup> Reynolds, Craig J. “A New Look at Old Southeast Asia”. The Journal of Asian Studies 54. 2 (May 1995): 431.

<sup>79</sup> Edward Said discusses in his book Orientalism his theory on Orientalism as one in which the West, as the only dominant power, defines knowledge and therefore places the non-West in a subservient position. However, the problem with his theory is that it is totalizing and, therefore, when he later tries in his book to recuperate individual agency he is admitting that there are possibilities outside of the binary system.

Gayatri Spivak<sup>80</sup> and Homi Bhabha.<sup>81</sup> For instance, Said has argued on the possibility of new alignments that “provoke and challenge [the] fundamentally static notion of identity that [was] the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism”.<sup>82</sup> Spivak focused on imperialism and the difficulty of recovering the subaltern identity saying that it was “in fact better to preserve subaltern experience as the ‘inaccessible blankness’ which serves instead to reveal the horizon and limits of Western knowledge”.<sup>83</sup> Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry” talked about a “colonial subject who [is] recognizably the same as the colonizer but still different: ‘not quite/not white’”,<sup>84</sup> while his concept of “hybridity” is defined as “the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that the other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of authority”.<sup>85</sup> The issue about local agency becomes more difficult when the possibility of asserting difference involves a dominant Western culture, which has been pervasive since the advent of colonization and seen by many as a form of neo-colonialism in its transmission via globalization today. In the face of a dominant global design or hegemony, how agency is recuperated is a theme explored in much of post-colonial scholarship with new and interesting perspectives on ways to escape discursive Western power and imaginings developed by scholars who work on post-colonial societies. Many of these works come out from Latin America and

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<sup>80</sup> Gayatri Spivak criticizes the experience of recovering the subaltern whereby the subaltern has no chance of speaking because he/she has already been spoken for by the dominant other. The subaltern cannot represent themselves because they are already defined.

<sup>81</sup> Homi Bhabha explains ambivalence in colonial discourse as two sides of the same coin. He utilizes Freud’s psychoanalysis of “fetish” to explain this ambivalence. From fetishism he also formed theories on “mimicry” and “hybridity” to explain colonial resistance.

<sup>82</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 1991. xxviii.

<sup>83</sup> Moore-Gilbert, Bart. *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. London and New York: Verso, 1991. 91.

<sup>84</sup> Young, Robert. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 147.

<sup>85</sup> Young, Robert. *White Mythologies Writing History and the West*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 148.

Africa and the trend is also picking up in Southeast Asia. I will be drawing on some of these works to develop an understanding of the constructions of Asian contemporary dance forms. Thus, the scholarships discussed above argues for Southeast Asia's unique cultural identity, i.e. different from East and South Asia.

The emergence of the Asian identity, i.e. when the issue of local identity is taken up in the discourse of Asian values in Southeast Asia, began with the rise of Asia and eventually Southeast Asia. While Southeast Asia has been conceptualized as derivative of Japan and China, the debates on the region have always tried to disassociate it from the larger Eastern traditions. This explains why Southeast Asian scholarship on history and social science has always sought to search for the authenticity of a Southeast Asian regional identity. The search for the local and indigenous has always characterized Southeast Asian scholarship. Hence, the shift to identify with an Asian identity, in particular with the rise of the Asian values discourse since the 1980's, finds many scholars reacting critically to this trend. Inevitably instrumentality has been seen as the main cause for this turn to take on an Asian identity in Southeast Asia. The context to the rise of the Asian discourse is of course the economic rise of the Asia Pacific region, with Japan leading the way as a non-Western economic superpower challenging the dominance of the West. The shift to asserting an Asian identity is largely understood in terms of the instrumentality of an Asian identity as a potent symbol of counter-culture to the West. In other words, an Asian identity is viewed by many scholars as strategic identity politics, i.e. to denote difference from the West backed by new material conditions in the rise of the Asia Pacific economic rim. The rise of Southeast Asia as an "economic success" during this Asia Pacific century in the 1990's "has bred an atmosphere of confidence and the beginnings

of a sense of region”.<sup>86</sup> As many scholars such as Khoo Boo Teik have pointed out, the assertion of an Asian identity, difference from and resistance to the West becomes important in the political realm towards nation building during this period.

However, the rise of this Asian sentiment cannot be simply reduced to government rhetoric or strategy alone. The popularity of the Asian identity discourse at the everyday level signals that this discourse is also backed by a larger public. In trying to explain this wide support, Khoo is amongst a few scholars who acknowledge that there are valid geo-political and cultural sensibilities in the context of the historical experience of colonialism and a marginal location in contemporary globalization amongst Southeast Asian countries, which explains the popularity and adoption of an Asian identity by the wider public. This wider adoption cannot merely be understood as simply being duped by government/nationalist ideologies. Rather, the Asian identity discourse has a meaningful dimension albeit being an ideology used by the state, i.e. it expresses the deeper historical and cultural sensibilities of being marginalized in the world shared by people in Southeast Asian countries. This meaningful aspect of the Asian identity discourse has not received much attention in social scientific studies.

Rather, the many instrumentalist dimensions of the Asian identity discourse by Southeast Asian states have been well documented. Even Khoo himself has pointed out that in the late 1980's and 1990's when “the ruling elites in some Asian states appeared to be striving for a regional consensus on what

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<sup>86</sup> Mohammed Habib and Tim Huxley. An Introduction to Southeast Asian Studies. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996. i.

‘democracy’ should mean in Asia”<sup>87</sup> they drew from the Asian experience to formulate a system of governance to counter “Western liberal democracy”. Defining “Asian-ness” or “Asian values” was a key issue towards the possibility of understanding democracy on Asian instead of Western terms. Towards the construction of governance preferred by many Asian societies was the underpinning of “traditional commonalities and shared attitudes presumed to reside in diverse ‘Asian’ moral and religious systems”<sup>88</sup> or what has been termed as “Asian values”. These included what was commonly thought to be distinctive of Asian cultures such as the following:

predisposition towards strong and stable leadership rather than political pluralism; respect for social harmony and an inclination towards consensus as opposed to a tendency towards dissent or confrontation; acceptance of broad and penetrating state and bureaucratic intervention in social and economic affairs; concern with socio-economic well-being instead of civil liberties and human rights; and preference for the welfare and collective good of the community over individual rights.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, “Asian values” became an umbrella term for what Khoo describes as shared “moral values, social norms and cultural attitudes said to be derived from Asian

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<sup>87</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. “Nationalism, Capitalism and ‘Asian Values’”. Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 51.

<sup>88</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. “Nationalism, Capitalism and ‘Asian Values’”. Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 51.

<sup>89</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. “Nationalism, Capitalism and ‘Asian Values’”. Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 52.

philosophical traditions and historical experience”<sup>90</sup> such as those centering around the ideas of harmony, consensus, collectivity and community. This was of keen interest in the political realm and the Asian values discourse was basically borne out of the concern of some Asian countries to establish a regional consensus on the meaning of “democracy” in Asia.

In Singapore, the Asian values discourse became associated with the Singapore state agenda and its developmental paradigm through its then prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who had his own take on “Asian values” and purported them through the political tendencies associated with it such as “elitism, authoritarianism and cultural relativism”.<sup>91</sup> Lee translated “Asian values” towards his vision of the “remaking of Singapore in the Confucian image”,<sup>92</sup> i.e. “imposing work discipline, fostering social harmony and imposing political order [in Singapore] in times of rapid industrialization”<sup>93</sup> but also Chinese ideology, i.e. traditional Chinese values and cultural roots including language. Later, Confucian or Chinese ethics, the original precept of Asian values, evolved into “shared values” to reflect a broader East Asian communitarianism. Lee also believed that Asian values were “superior to and infinitely more desirable than, ‘Western values’, a byword for all that was bad about modern society, associated with individualism and the counter-culture”.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. “Nationalism, Capitalism and ‘Asian Values’”. Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 51.

<sup>91</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. “Nationalism, Capitalism and ‘Asian Values’”. Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 71.

<sup>92</sup> Pan, Lynn. Sons of the Yellow Emperor. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 265.

<sup>93</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. “Nationalism, Capitalism and ‘Asian Values’”. Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 71.

<sup>94</sup> Pan, Lynn. Sons of the Yellow Emperor. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 262.

Although the Asian values discourse is thought of as elitist and artificially constructed, as mentioned earlier, it resonates with the sentiments and aspirations for many Southeast Asians given the region's weaker geo-political standing in global politics and economics in comparison to the first world. While Asian-ness is an elitist discourse by political leaders in the region we must also remember that it also embodies and draws on local sentiments of marginality and location in the contemporary world. Hence, the discourse on Asian-ness embodies historical and social experiences and locations which explain its potency as a counter-culture impulse to the West, i.e. as a meaningful way to signify difference from the West. The meaningful dimensions of Asian identity are perhaps best observed amongst artists – a site for the unfolding of Asian expressions which has received less attention in social scientific debates.

In fact, Singapore with its historical, geographical, political and demographical particularities becomes an active site for artistic creations to express Asian-ness. In Singapore, the Asian identity discourse takes on another dimension as a place for sojourners such as Asian Americans who have come to Singapore to stay, for Singaporeans who have left and returned as well as a refuge for Asians from Southeast Asia and Asia such as the migration of Indonesians, particularly Chinese, to Singapore prompted by the Indonesian riots in the 1990's. The peculiarity of Chinese immigrants is linked to Singapore's national politics, i.e. while meritocracy is the rhetoric, implicitly and silently it is a place of Chinese leadership and dominance. Therefore, yet another dimension of the Asian values discourse is Asian contemporary dance artists of Chinese ethnicity who have come to locate themselves in Singapore for one of the reasons described above, as one particular group who express a search for an Asian identity in their Asian



contemporary dance forms. While they have each found Singapore as conducive for art making for various reasons, nation-state policy has helped to pave the way.

The peak of the Asian values debate in the 1990's coincided with the rise of the promotion of arts in Singapore. The performing arts, including Asian contemporary dance, began to thrive in Singapore through regional and global as well as local conditions and policies like the 1989 report produced by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, "regarded by [Singapore's] policy makers and the arts community as a watershed in the development of the arts, heritage and cultural scene in Singapore".<sup>95</sup> However, in the social scientific debates on Asian values not many referred to what was going on in the arts world in Singapore to address the issue. Voices to debunk the notion of Asian values appeared to dominate in social scientific analysis, dismissing it as rhetoric and drowning out arguments, while no one recognized the sentiments behind it. While the elitist accusations are valid to an extent, they do not explain the sentiments and wide support of an Asian identity.

The search for an Asian contemporary dance form attests to the fact that discussions about the Asian identity should not be completely dismissed as false constructions but that there are historical, cultural and emotive sensibilities involved and meanings attached to it because Asian-ness is a means for expression of not only local experiences but also global ones including Asians from other countries such as Asian Americans who have come to locate in Singapore as their home or base as well as Asians who have left Singapore then returned.

This thesis aims to show that there are also meaningful local dimensions, i.e. significant and meaningful constructions of Asian-ness outside of politics such

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<sup>95</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter One: The 1989 Report – Ten Years Hence". Renaissance City Report. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 1.

as in dance. While at one level the Asian values discourse is linked to political strategy, not all constructions of Asian-ness can be reduced to its instrumentality. There is also a need to understand that there are other meaningful dimensions to the Asian values discourse not necessarily linked to identity politics but are nevertheless taken seriously.

Therefore, discussions centering on the contemporary Asian identity and Asian values are also of interest in the cultural realm among social scientists. At times Asian-ness is understood as identification with a single culture often associated with ethnicity such as the case with many Chinese located throughout the world. Lynn Pan,<sup>96</sup> author of *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* reasons that “one only [has] to be born a Chinese to exhibit Chinese cultural behavior – that Chinese traits, in other words, were somehow intrinsic to Chinese racial descent”.<sup>97</sup> In her book *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, Alice Yang<sup>98</sup> adds that aspects of Chinese tradition “embodied in such ‘feudal’ things as Confucianism, Buddhism, and literate forms of aesthetic contemplation [are also sources] of continuity and legitimization”<sup>99</sup> of Chinese culture. Yet, the Asian identity may merely be about ethnicity. For example, being an ethnic Chinese is the extent of a person’s Asian-ness and not necessarily about embracing Chinese culture. In other words, it is possible to be born a Chinese but identify with another culture – the one he/she was raised in or acculturated in life.

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<sup>96</sup> Author Lynn Pan is part of the Chinese diaspora who eventually settled in England. Her book *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* is largely about how overseas Chinese have adapted to life abroad.

<sup>97</sup> Pan, Lynn. *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 265-266.

<sup>98</sup> Although Alice Yang wrote on Asian visual artists, their expressions and their location in American exhibitions, her observations on various understandings of the Asian identity are applicable in this thesis.

<sup>99</sup> Yang, Alice. “Why Asia?” *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 109.

The upholding of Asian tradition in a general sense or in a culturally specific way such as Chinese, and resisting the totality of the West, does not necessarily mean that the Asian identity or Asian-ness is the antithesis of Western identity. As a result there are “tensions and challenges that arise in the negotiation of disparate cultures [i.e. Asian and Western]”<sup>100</sup> as there is both a desire to preserve Asian tradition and to incorporate Western ideology/aesthetics in light of contemporary relevance, i.e. Western is equated with contemporary. In other words, the acceptance of Westernization is largely due to the notion of the contemporary linked with Western ideology/aesthetics. In this instance the dominance of the Western is accepted and incorporated with the local to arrive at Asian contemporary dance forms. The interface of dominant Western design and local particularities as a creative site for new knowledge has been argued by post-colonial scholar Walter Mignolo<sup>101</sup> who works on Latin America. Using the concept of “border thinking” whereby new forms are produced through the concept of expanding and de-territorialized frontiers is useful in contemporary dance. In other words, Asian contemporary dance becomes a site for creating new forms through “border thinking”. While Asian-ness is sometimes viewed as an Asian and Western interface, or completely Asian such as Asian culture linked to Asian ethnicity, there is also another construction that divorces Asian ethnicity from culture and looks at Western acculturation.

Therefore, another construction of Asian-ness embraces Western ideals and aesthetics which are sometimes uncritically taken as universal even to the

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<sup>100</sup> Yang, Alice. “Why Asia?” *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 103.

<sup>101</sup> On Latin American scholarship Walter Mignolo argues for “border thinking”, a breakaway from Eurocentric thinking whereby local histories and perspectives transformed by new forms of knowledge are articulated from the subaltern rather than projected upon by European local knowledge and histories.

point, as Asian American art curator and writer Alice Yang states, of “resistance or indifference to tradition”.<sup>102</sup> In this instance an Asian ethnicity does not dictate Asian cultural identification. Rather, a Westernized Asian identity is embraced, due to increased exposure and links with the West. Furthermore, Westernized Asians find this identity as a way to articulate difference in the West and are afforded the opportunities and recognition that come with belonging to this racial group.

Similar to the various constructions of Asian-ness, there are varying understandings of what Western-ness means to Asians. In one sense, Western is equated to contemporary, i.e. the same as processes of modernization in the West. Western-ness also sometimes means a broad identification with the ideals and aesthetics of Western societies be it American, British or European, while at other times it is associated with a particular Western culture such as American. Therefore, when Western-ness is understood as American, notions such as individualism, freedom, independence and liberalness are embraced.

However, it has been difficult for social scientists to argue for difference and not sound ethnically or culturally chauvinistic. While the debates in the social sciences seem unresolved, contemporary dance is an area where the various constructions of Asian-ness discussed above takes on real life as an expression. This thesis aims to show how contemporary dance is an active medium that can contribute to the debate of Asian-ness.

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<sup>102</sup> Yang, Alice. “Why Asia?” *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 111.

## **Asian contemporary dance: approaches in creation**

Asian contemporary dance in this thesis refers to a dance form created in Asia, as explained in the preceding chapter.<sup>103</sup> It is the form through which the various constructions of Asian-ness are explored and expressed and may be constructed with a variety of artistic practices and art forms, including modern dance, comprised of movement techniques and styles from the West. This section looks at three practices or approaches identified in the construction of Asian contemporary dance forms: interculturalism, multidisciplinaryism and body-centeredness. While other approaches exist in the creation of contemporary dance forms, such as minimalism, these three approaches are significant in that they have a history in the traditional dance or somatic practices in Asia. While Western court dance has also been constructed through multidisciplinaryism, the other two approaches of interculturalism and body-centeredness are relatively new. Towards a comprehensive understanding, all three approaches will be discussed in relation to Western as well as Asian contemporary dance, with a focus on how they translate in the creation of Asian contemporary dance in Singapore.

### Interculturalism

Interculturalism is the new wave of dance creation in contemporary dance throughout the world that involves the mixing of Western and Asian dance genres, whether traditional or contemporary. The interface often involves the collaboration of choreographers and/or dancers from different cultures and the combination of artistic expressions of different cultures based largely on the training and exposure of the choreographer. It is often practiced in tandem with

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<sup>103</sup> This chapter also explains the distinction made between Asian contemporary dance and Western modern dance for this thesis.

multidisciplinary, where collaboration is not only between artists from different cultures but from different artistic fields including dance, discussed later in this chapter. Thus, interculturalism in Asian contemporary dance appears often as artistic collages and new movement vocabularies.

In Southeast Asia, interculturalism is not a new concept. It has been evidenced in traditional dance forms since the establishment of Indianized kingdoms around AD 100 and as *Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia* author Jukka Miettinen says that “over the following thousand years a number of kingdoms – which were Hindu, Buddhist, or syncretist, with features of both of them – flourished”.<sup>104</sup> The following description by Miettinen of a dance relief explains the influence of the Indian civilization in Java but also the simultaneous existence of an indigenous Javanese culture. While the movement vocabulary appears to be Indian the themes are thought to be Javanese, as he describes:

While the basic concept of both Borobudur and Prambanan is Indian, both monuments have many features of both indigenous [Javanese] and Indian traditions forming a unique synthesis. ...At both Borobudur and Prambanan, numerous reliefs with dance themes have been preserved, reflecting strong Indian influences. Most of the reliefs depict the postures of Indian classical dance. Alongside the dancers are bearded figures who appear to be directing the performance. These have been interpreted as Indian Brahmans invited to the Javanese courts, who, along with other duties, taught Indian dance techniques. The reliefs

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<sup>104</sup> Miettinen, Jukka O. *Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992. 4.

also reveal many local features of the culture. For example, some dance themes have been interpreted as depicting purely indigenous traditions.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, local Indonesian traditions have adapted Indian dance movement but maintained its own local dance conventions such as the performance of dances in slow tempo and group formations. For example, “[s]olo forms and dance-drama dominate in India, while South-East Asian traditions also include many slow, processional group dances”.<sup>106</sup> Indian dance movement and choreographic devices “fused with local dance styles, have creat[ed] numerous related dance forms, among them Indonesian Legong and Wayang Orang, Cambodian Lakhon Kabach Boran, Thai Lakon Fai Nai and Malaysian Mak Yong”.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, it is possible to see in these traditional dance forms “many of the postures, gestures, and movements [that] still echo their Indian prototypes from over a thousand years ago”.<sup>108</sup>

Therefore, historically in Southeast Asia, Asian identity is understood and accepted as a mixture of Asian cultures through interculturalism in traditional dance forms. Today, the emergence and ongoing evolution of Southeast Asia’s distinctive traditional forms – identified apart from South Asia and East Asia through “localization”, or the region’s “purposeful and discriminating aptitude” continues. For example, in Singapore, interculturalism in traditional dance was encouraged as part of the nation’s multicultural strategy in the 1960’s. As such,

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<sup>105</sup> Miettinen, Jukka O. Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992. 75-76.

<sup>106</sup> Miettinen, Jukka O. Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992. 3.

<sup>107</sup> Brandon, James R. “Introduction”. The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 4.

<sup>108</sup> Miettinen, Jukka O. Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992. 11.

traditional Chinese, Malay and Indian dance were not only promoted separately but there were concerted efforts to mix the various ethnic dance forms with the aim of demonstrating cultural tolerance and unity. Traditional dance artists such as Som Binte Mohamed Said, Artistic Director of Sri Warisan, a Malay dance company in Singapore, explains her view of interculturalism in traditional dance, i.e. incorporating Javanese dance movement with Malay dance movement and structure:

I have no intention of staging authentic Javanese dance [in Singapore] but I will adapt some traditional Indonesian dance steps for my choreography. Even Indonesian [dance] itself has gone through the process of absorption and fusion of Islamic and Hindu cultures with the local one. Is Singapore not the same, a melting pot?<sup>109</sup>

However, it was in theatre and music and not dance that the first visible and internationally recognized contemporary intercultural productions in Southeast Asia appeared. The difference between traditional intercultural and contemporary intercultural theatrical productions was the injection of Western traditional/classical or contemporary genres. For example, Singaporean theatre director Ong Keng Seng's *Lear* (1997-1999), a regional cultural collaboration reinventing Shakespeare as an "Asian myth",<sup>110</sup> has become a legacy in contemporary Southeast Asian theatre. It has been described as "[b]ased loosely on Shakespeare's *King Lear*"<sup>111</sup> in which actors from the theatrical traditions of

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<sup>109</sup> Som Binte Mohamed Said quoted by Chua Soo Pong in "Singapore". *The Dances of Asean*. Ed. Zainal Abiddin Tinggal. Brunei Darussalam: Asia Printers, 1998. 191.

<sup>110</sup> Lim, William S. W. *Alternatives in Transition: The Postmodern, Glocality and Social Justice*. Singapore: Utopia Press, 2001. 50.

<sup>111</sup> Peterson, William. *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 214.



Noh (Japanese), Beijing opera (Chinese), Pencak Silat (Indonesian), Thai and Malay cultures, stayed true to the linguistic and movement characteristics of their respective forms. Theatre academic William Peterson<sup>112</sup> describes one of the scenes of the production:

Beijing opera star Jiang Qi Hu, playing the role of the eldest sister, sang to her father, Noh actor Naohiko Umewaka, in the highly inflected Mandarin of her tradition, while Umewaka responded in Japanese using the characteristic vocal utterances of a Noh actor.<sup>113</sup>

Ong is regarded as one of Singapore's exponents of the "new Asia". Coupled with Rio Kishida, a Japanese playwright, *Lear* was "positioned very much as a reflection of a pan-Asian vision".<sup>114</sup> His ambition was to awaken an Asian consciousness, i.e. to address the need for defining a "worldview without referring to a European or a western position and which would entail the struggle with the reinvention of history, heritage and cultural traditions".<sup>115</sup> More recently, Ong brought together different Southeast Asian countries together in his intercultural theatre production *Insomnia Season: Transcending Jet Lag in Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Jakarta and Singapore* (2005). As part of Singapore's London showcase he wanted "to convince the world [that Singapore] has soul too"<sup>116</sup> but also to express his understanding of Asian-ness. He says, "Let's face it, ... you can't really talk about Singapore culture today without setting it in the context of

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<sup>112</sup> William Peterson helped create and implement the Theatre Studies program at the National University of Singapore.

<sup>113</sup> Peterson, William. *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 215.

<sup>114</sup> Peterson, William. *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 214.

<sup>115</sup> Lim, William S. W. *Alternatives in Transition: The Postmodern, Glocality and Social Justice*. Singapore: Utopia Press, 2001. 50.

<sup>116</sup> Li Xueying. "Singapore Spins, Sings and Swings Too". *The Straits Times*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 5 March 2005.

Southeast Asia.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, Ong is of the view that Asian-ness means embracing different Asian cultures but also accepting Western culture.

In Southeast Asia, Asian contemporary dance forms produced through interculturalism, like its theatrical counterpart, also demonstrates the continuance of the region’s unique predilection and ability to adapt foreign elements on local terms towards cultural reinvention not formulated solely on Western ideals yet not totally resisting it. Local agency has evolved into a new regional consciousness – “a sudden discovery that we can be ourselves in search for our own modernity and at the same time, actively participate in the emerging contemporary global pluralistic culture”.<sup>118</sup> Thus, “hybrid” or what Singaporean architect/scholar William Lim<sup>119</sup> calls “glocalized” art forms “embraces and defines both the internalist-localization and the externalist-globalization perspectives”.<sup>120</sup> Asian contemporary dance has become the third space, argued by Mignolo, whereby new creations are produced through the interface of dominant and local cultures.

Through intercultural explorations, Asian contemporary dance artists in Southeast Asia endeavor to express their contemporary Asian identity as defined by diverse Asian cultural aesthetics in combination with Western ones. For example, *RE: Lady White Snake*, choreographed by Chinese Malaysian choreographer/dancer Mew Chang Tsing interfaces several traditional Asian dance genres together with modern dance towards the creation of a new

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<sup>117</sup> Ong Keng Sen quoted by Tan Shzr Ee. “Enough About Chewing Gum Already”. The Straits Times (Life!). Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 25 February 2005.

<sup>118</sup> Lim, William S.W. Alternatives in Transition: The Postmodern, Glocality and Social Justice. Singapore: Utopia Press, 2001. 50.

<sup>119</sup> William S.W. Lim, graduated from London’s Architectural Association and continued his graduate studies at Harvard University. He has written on a broad range of subjects relating to architecture and urbanism as well as current issues surrounding the post-modern, glocality and social justice related to culture and art in Singapore.

<sup>120</sup> Lim, William S.W. Alternatives in Transition: The Postmodern, Glocality and Social Justice. Singapore: Utopia Press, 2001. 126.

movement vocabulary. The merging of movement vocabulary and performance conventions is possible through Mew's as well her dancers' study of the various dance genres involved. The dancers do not perform in the style of only one dance genre but instead move through several dance genres linking different and, sometimes conflicting, cultural aesthetics. Dance critic/author Marcia Siegal writes:

The movement included gestures, steps and body postures from Balinese, Indian, Chinese and Western modern dance, but all the characters were allowed a more naturalistic basic stance than any of the antecedent forms. The Scholar, for instance, would beckon to the White Snake with codified gestures from Bharata Natyam, released both rhythmically and spatially from the prescribed formatting of the original context. White Snake would angle and sidestep like a Hindu temple dancer but smile flirtatiously, against the rule of the Thai, Burmese, Cambodian or Balinese dancers she was evoking...(the work) didn't preach or instruct, but evoked themes known throughout time.<sup>121</sup>

However, Indonesian choreographer Boi Sakti, a rising luminary in the frontier of Southeast Asia's contemporary dance scene, understands and expresses his Asian identity as his own ethnic/cultural heritage, and not that of other Asian cultures, combined with a Western outlook. Thus, Boi draws from his Minangkabau cultural heritage such as traditional dance movement, music and martial arts as well as his exposure to the aesthetics often associated with modern

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<sup>121</sup> Siegal, Marcia. Urban Anthropology, The Hudson Review 51.1 (Spring 1998): 220-221.

dance, i.e. expansiveness and openness in body shaping and use of space, towards the creation of his Asian contemporary dance expression. His endeavor to merge his cultural heritage with a Western one is viewed by *Ballet Tanz International*, a contemporary dance magazine, as one way to preserve tradition in contemporary times. An excerpt from the publication reads:

Indonesia could also be on the way to maintaining the rich tradition and deep roots of dance in everyday life, while remaining open to contemporary movement. Boi Sakti is a paradigmatic example of such a promise.<sup>122</sup>

The exploration of the creative possibilities of cultural crossing and merging between Asian cultures as well as with Western cultures is facilitated by the processes of globalization, i.e. increased communication and mobility. Cultures are no longer seen as territorialized and Indrajit Banerjee adds that “distinctive structures of meaning and meaningful form usually linked to territories”<sup>123</sup> are not necessarily the case. Globalization has opened up boundaries for artists from different cultures to work together on intercultural artistic projects like never before.

Therefore, many Asian contemporary dance practitioners see globalization as facilitating cultural interrelationships and integration towards the production of new creations or choreography. In spite of the dominance of the West inevitably felt through the processes of globalization, contemporary Asian dance artists have been awakened to cultural difference and see the chance to expand upon their artistic expression. For example, Hong Kong dancer/choreographer Daniel

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<sup>122</sup> Ballet Tanz International quoted in *Reminiscing the Moon*. Brochure. Singapore: Singapore Dance Theatre, 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Banerjee, Indrajit, “Cultural Autonomy and Globalization”. *Cultural Rights in a Global World*. Eds. Goonasekera, Anura et al. Singapore: Times Media Private Limited, 2003. 69.

Yeung's journey to Holland revealed to him that as a dance artist, the intercultural encounter was viewed as an opportunity to explore the possibility of combining movement vocabularies in his artistic expression. Daniel says:

When I found that the body has no border, no matter East or West, by applying the various techniques, or exchanging the methods and philosophy of different cultures with each other, the capacity of each dance form (either modern dance theatre or oriental dance skill) can always be expanded. After experiencing this culture clash in Holland I attempted to explore stylistic diversity in my piece, ranging from East to West both in terms of physicality and mentality, and let the work speak with many faces and many voices.<sup>124</sup>

Although many performing artists appear to have negotiated or even embraced other cultures, particularly the West, in their intercultural artistic creations, there is no denying the possible tensions and complications that surround such collaborations. One criticism is “cultural imperialism” that argues a one-way flow, or the imposition and domination of Western ideals often over less developed people resulting in the homogenization of world cultures described by the terms “McDonaldization” and “Cocacolization”. Theatre director, writer and cultural critic Rustom Barucha argues that this phenomenon has much to do with neo-colonial attitudes where in much of Asia artists as well as audiences still look

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<sup>124</sup> Yeung, Daniel. “Cultural Clash: The Making of Contemporary Asian Dance Work”. Asia Pacific Dance Bridge Academic Conference Papers & Abstracts. Singapore: World Dance Alliance, 2001. 181.

at their colonial ancestors as having authority due to their colonialist histories.

Barucha explains the imbalance favoring the colonizers over the colonized:

Colonialism, one might say, does not operate through principles of 'exchange'. Rather, it appropriates, decontextualizes, and represents the 'other' culture, often with the complicity of its colonized subjects. It legitimizes its authority only by asserting its cultural superiority.<sup>125</sup>

Interculturalism achieved through neo-colonialist attitudes is further complicated when Asian artists become Westernized. They take on the dominant posture of the West resulting in unequal partnerships and uneven cultural representation. Furthermore, Westernized Asians who have distanced themselves from their inherited culture sees them conjuring a romanticized vision of their Asian culture. Thus, a curious inversion of the Asian gaze results and Asian audiences are often impressed by the same Orientalist exoticism that has fascinated Westerners. Theatre scholar William Peterson says, "... Asia has been made alluring to an Asian audience, an audience that sees the Asian part of its own identity as having a kind of 'otherness'... [T]he Other would appear to have 'otherized' itself."<sup>126</sup>

Further to cultural homogenization and neo-colonialist attitudes is what Associate Professor Cheryl Stock points out, "...some interculturalists espous[e] the commonalities of cultures and the validity of a search for universals, whilst others insist on the retention of cultural specificity and the celebration of cultural difference. Some believe this is

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<sup>125</sup> Bharucha, Rustom. Theatre and the World. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1990. 2.

<sup>126</sup> Peterson, William. "Interculturalism and the Big, Bad Other". Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2000. 209.

the major philosophical and indeed ethical question of interculturalism.”<sup>127</sup>

Thus, intercultural productions are primary sites where the ethics of universalism versus specificity are often debated. For example, *The Mahabharata* (1986) a theatrical production based on the Indian epic The Mahabharata adapted by Jean-Claude Carriere and directed by Peter Brook attempts to universalize Indian culture. Patrice Pavis, author of *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, examines how Brook, a Western director, achieves universalism by tracing the intercultural transfer of *The Mahabharata* from its “source culture” through artistic adaptation to its “target audience”. He explains:

Brook takes into account all the possible artistic modelings of Indian civilization, but he integrates them into a vision of rural India at once eternal and contemporary. It is not India, but it has all the flavor of India! The set designer and costume designer have no geographical, economic or ethnological pretensions. India is suggested by the beaten earth, the sea-green water, the fires lit to attract the protection of the gods; it is both the real earth of the Indian subcontinent and the symbolic terrain of humanity as a whole. Brook looks for a balance between rootedness (as in the *Iks*) and a universalizing imaginary (as in *The Conference of the Birds*). The acting style of this ‘immediate theatre’ creates a direct link with the audience. No cultural references are essential to an understanding of

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<sup>127</sup> Stock, Cheryl. “Views on Interculturalism”. [Making Intercultural Dance in Vietnam](#). Australia: Queensland University of Technology, 2000.

the performance, or rather – since cultural references cannot be avoided – the references to the source culture are easily understood by the audience because universal transcultural factors have been considered.<sup>128</sup>

However, Bharucha is more critical of Brook, saying that:

If Brook truly believes that *The Epic* is universal, then his representation should not exclude or trivialize Indian culture, as I believe it does. One cannot agree with the premise that ‘*The Mahabharata* is Indian but it is universal’. The ‘but’ is misleading. *The Mahabharata*, I would counter, is universal *because* it is Indian. One cannot separate the culture from the text.<sup>129</sup>

Another criticism of intercultural productions, particularly by Western interculturalists, is cultural borrowing whereby “context is rendered unimportant as the ‘raw materials’ of the East are reworked by the creative geniuses of the West”.<sup>130</sup> For example, *I La Galigo* (2004), based on a 14<sup>th</sup> century epic poem of the Bugis people of Sulawesi, premiered and was co-produced by the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in Singapore. Robert Wilson, an internationally acclaimed theatre director, weaved Western design with Indonesian performance, design and craft. *I La Galigo* is described as featuring:

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<sup>128</sup> Pavis, Patrice. Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture. London : Routledge, 1992, reprinted 2001. 187.

<sup>129</sup> Bharucha, Rustom quoted in William Peterson, “Interculturalism and the Big, Bad Other”. Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 207.

<sup>130</sup> Peterson, William. “Interculturalism and the Big, Bad Other”. Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 207.



a cast of Indonesia's finest performers who form a company of 50 actors, dancers and musicians. Coming primarily from South Sulawesi, the cast also includes artists from other islands in the vast Indonesian Archipelago... The music has been researched and composed by Indonesian master Rahayu Supanggah. The creative team is comprised of Robert Wilson and a group of international artists collaborating with performing artists, designers and craftsmen from all over Indonesia.<sup>131</sup>

Born, raised and schooled in America, Wilson is described by *The New York Times* as "a towering figure in the world of experimental theatre".<sup>132</sup> Wilson views his work as formal, i.e. he is interested in creating forms and frameworks, saying:

What fascinates me about *Sureq Galigo* is its scale, the fact that this is an epic poem and yet it is a simple story. Staging it brings me back to my earlier work where I always tried to create the vision and feel of an epic rather than a literal translation. The epic poem is classical in its nature, and the avant-garde is often the rediscovery of the classics.<sup>133</sup>

Although he employs traditional artists, the combination of abstract representation through liberal adaptation of classic stories and real characters through theatrical performance is representative of cultural borrowing. Wilson has no interest in translating the content of the epic and pronounces, "To me

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<sup>131</sup> "Project". *I La Galigo*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, 2004.

<sup>132</sup> "Artist profiles". *I La Galigo*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, 2004.

<sup>133</sup> "Director's Notes". *I La Galigo* program booklet. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, 2004.

interpretation is not the responsibility of the director, the author or the performer: interpretation is for the public.”<sup>134</sup>

Discussed so far has been how intercultural productions reflect the artistic intentions as well as the criticism that surrounds the concept of interculturalism in performing arts productions. However, artistic agendas are also often influenced or coincide with nationalist agendas where intercultural collaborations become an attractive site towards the promotion of nationalistic aims including economic gain, “cultural vibrancy” as well as establishing diplomatic relations with other countries. However, the result of such engineered experiments is “‘superficial internationalism’ – artists deliberately creating works that are international in flavor but with no rooting in any tradition”.<sup>135</sup> Other buzz terms include “zoos”, a metaphor for an “artificial [environment] that brings very separate things together”<sup>136</sup> and “cultural jamming” describes an overcrowded creative space of disparities. Platforms have been created with the intent of fostering mutual exchange of ideas and expression between artists. For example, *Double Happiness – Little Asia Dance Exchange Network 2004*, presented at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore saw solo dance artists from the Asia-Pacific region come together in “artistic dialogue in a multicultural arena”<sup>137</sup> to forge a cultural and artistic alliance by “pushing national boundaries and striving for arts beyond one country.”<sup>138</sup> Choreographers/dancers Natalie Cursio (Australia), Jung Young-doo (Korea), Daniel Yeung (Hong Kong), Chan Yu-chun (Taiwan),

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<sup>134</sup> “Director’s Notes”. *I La Galigo* program booklet. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, 2004.

<sup>135</sup> Nayar, Parvathi. “Taking to the world”. *The Business Times*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 5 April, 2002.

<sup>136</sup> Oon, Clarissa “Wake up to idea of global zoo”. *The Straits Times*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 7 December, 2000.

<sup>137</sup> Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. *Esplanade Diary*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, October-December 2004.

<sup>138</sup> Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. *Esplanade Diary*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, October-December 2004.

Motoko Ikeda (Japan) and Cheryl Quek (Singapore) presented a thirty-minute collaborative work at the Esplanade resulting from two weeks of intensive rehearsals at Taipei's Artist Village. Part of the production featured a work that was simply structured with sections that each of the dancer/collaborators took their turn in leading the others. There was no sense of hierarchy but neither was there any cohesion, simply transitions that linked disparate movement sequences.

While intercultural productions such as the above are often supported by countries to promote nationalist agendas through artistic platforms that encourage collaboration between cultures, support is largely evidenced through significant funding. Singaporean theatre director Ong Keng Sen's *Lear* (1997-1999) serves as an example. The Japan Foundation was the production's initial source of funding and with it came the "mandate to bring to Japanese audiences new Asian plays that transcend national styles and forms."<sup>139</sup> Ong worked with Rio Kishida, a Japanese playwright. Hence, "Lear was positioned very much as a reflection of [Japan's] pan-Asian vision."<sup>140</sup> Later, Ong's intercultural production *Insomnia Season: Transcending Jet Lag in Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Jakarta and Singapore* (2005) with a budget of \$800,000 was underwritten by Singapore's Ministry of Communication and the Arts as the launch of a \$1.83 million *Singapore Season* showcase. It was the "first of a six-part six-week Government project to introduce Singapore arts to Londoners".<sup>141</sup>

However, in spite of the criticism that surrounds intercultural productions such as the effects of cultural imperialism, the ethics of universalism, cultural

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<sup>139</sup> Peterson, William. "Interculturalism and the Big, Bad Other". *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 214.

<sup>140</sup> Peterson, William. "Interculturalism and the Big, Bad Other". *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 214.

<sup>141</sup> Tan Shzr Ee. "Enough about chewing gum already". *The Straits Times*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 25 February 2005. 8.

borrowing and nationalist agendas, it is still a vibrant space where Asian-ness is explored and exerted through cultural representation in artistic expression.<sup>142</sup>

Interculturalism through artistic collaboration is not just a cliché but is taken seriously by artists where Asian cultural confidence can and does exist.

This thesis will show that for contemporary Asian dance artists located in Singapore interculturalism has also become a trend towards the creation of Asian contemporary dance forms. Like many of their Asian contemporary counterparts in dance as well as theatre, as discussed above, they assert their understanding of the Asian identity or Asian-ness as one that embraces Western influences yet seeks to preserve their Asian heritage which is understood as a single Asian culture, like by Chinese Singaporean Danny Tan, artistic director of Odyssey Dance Theatre, who understands his Asian identity very much in terms of Chinese culture, or it is understood as a composite of Asian cultures, such as by Chinese Indonesian Elysa Wendi who straddles both Indonesian and Chinese cultures. Their explorations include the combination of both traditional and contemporary Asian as well as Western artistic disciplines including dance. In spite of the integration of foreign forms and elements, especially Western, most intercultural explorations in Singapore by dance artists like Angela Liong, Elysa Wendi, Danny Tan, Tan How Choon, Lim Chin Huat, Aaron Khek Ah Hock and Ix Wong Thien Pau are anchored in local agendas, issues, concerns and dilemmas. Thus, Southeast Asia's history of cultural merging expressed in its artistic forms, including dance, continues today in Asian contemporary dance in the region and Singapore. While Western influences are strongly felt through globalization, most

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<sup>142</sup> The exception is Tammy L. Wong who aside from her employment of contemporary Asian dancers does not express Asian-ness through themes or components.

contemporary dance artists located in Singapore are able to embrace yet resist its totality in their artistic expressions.

### Multidisciplinarity

The concept of multidisciplinary – also called total theatre, cross arts, dance theatre, spectacles and *gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>143</sup> – is found in both traditional Asian and Western theatre. Traditional theatre is precisely about combination of different fields of artistic components including literature, performing arts (e.g. dance, music, theatre) and technical theatre (e.g. costumes, sets) into a single form to express a narrative as form of social entertainment. Asian theatre academic James Brandon<sup>144</sup> uses the term “total theatre” to describe the concept of multidisciplinary in which various elements are synthesized and the focus of attention is somewhat democratized and ultimately produces an entity that would not be complete if any of the elements were absent. Examples include 16<sup>th</sup> century court ballet where singing, recitation and dance were featured collectively by court amateurs as well as Chinese opera where the “‘singer’ speaks, dances and does acrobatics as well as sing (sic)”<sup>145</sup>.

In Southeast Asia several traditional theatre forms were also conceived as a combination of music, acting, dance and sometimes included masks and puppetry and utilizing performers who were often versed in more than one medium, i.e. performers sing, speak and dance. For example, Indonesian wayang

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<sup>143</sup> *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a German term attributed to German composer Richard Wagner to describe operatic performance as a “total work of art” or “complete artwork”, i.e. consisting of music, theater, and the visual arts. It has since been translated mainly by German artists, including contemporary dance artists, to generally mean a synthesis of art forms or elements.

<sup>144</sup> Brandon points out that most theatre forms in Asia combine music, dance, acting and sometimes masks and puppetry.

<sup>145</sup> Brandon, James. “Introduction”. *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*. Ed. James Brandon. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 7.

kulit, or puppet theatre, combines puppetry with gamelan (Indonesian gong) orchestra, choral singing and sound effects. In traditional dance forms, training and production have now become predominantly dance specific. However, in traditional theatre, multidisciplinary or the combination of song, dance and recitation for the sake of the drama is still alive in Southeast Asia. Thus, the contemporary Asian identity is understood as still connected to multi-faceted traditional conventions or traditions.

Today, multidisciplinary is still practiced but its components or artistic fields/disciplines and purpose have changed to reflect the interests of contemporary Asian artists. This being said, it is particularly useful to look at multidisciplinary in Western contemporary dance in order to understand its transference and subsequent development in Asian contemporary dance. In other words, what happened in the West was often later emulated in Asia. For example, the interest in working with a plethora of sources and materials available rather than just dancing, singing and recitation, is characteristic of multidisciplinary in contemporary dance. Generally speaking, works often resembled “collages combining music for full orchestra, often electronically amplified, with dialogue, singing, film, sound, slide projections, dance episodes and scenes from conventional dramas”.<sup>146</sup> However, less transferred were specific multidisciplinary experiments of Western post-modern choreographers such as Merce Cunningham who, through collaborations with other artists, treated the various production elements such as sound, décor and movement as independent entities. Alwin Nikolais did not collaborate with other artists but instead choreographed, composed and designed the costumes, scenery and lighting for his

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<sup>146</sup> Reynolds, Nancy and Malcolm McCormick. No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. 607.

abstract multidisciplinary production himself in which the “energies and dynamics of motion, light, color, sound, sculpture, architecture, design, and voice, all [became] part of his creative palette”.<sup>147</sup> Pina Bausch, from Germany, created multi-media collages of disparate elements – “animistic borrowings, mime, spoken texts, bizarre vocal effects and occasional slapstick”.<sup>148</sup>

The trend towards multidisciplinary in the creation of Asian contemporary dance has become popular with contemporary Asian dance artists reflecting either a forward thinking Asian identity through the incorporation of new innovations and/or an Asian identity rooted in the past through the incorporation of traditional artistic forms. Therefore, different to traditional theatre, where acting, singing and dancing were combined, multidisciplinary in contemporary dance incorporates various artistic fields and disciplines, traditional or contemporary, as well as new forms of technology, such as performing arts (music and physical theatre), technical theatre arts (costumes, lighting, sets and projections), visual arts (installation art and performance art) and somatic practices (martial arts). For example, Japanese contemporary dance artist Kosei Sakamoto experiments with bringing together contemporary dance with other artists including composers, architects, painters and photographers in his company Monochrome Circus. His work *Refined Colors* (2004) combined computer technology, LED lighting, and modern dance movement.

In Singapore, Lim Chin Huat and Tan How Choon, artistic director and associate artistic director of Ecnad Project Ltd, approach multidisciplinary similarly to Kosei Sakamoto. However, stage sets and costuming are other significant components and their modern dance technique and style endeavor to

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<sup>147</sup> Louis, Murray. *Inside Dance*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980. 141.

<sup>148</sup> Reynolds, Nancy and Malcolm McCormick. *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. 639.

emphasize linear body positions and shaping as well as technical virtuosity related to that of ballet, which is different to Kosei's style that is based on "release technique".<sup>149</sup> Tammy L. Wong, artistic director of Tammy L. Wong Dance Company, is less interested in computer technology as a component in her multidisciplinary dance form. Instead, she experiments with combining her self-written poetry with Western artistic disciplines such as modern dance and ballet as well as Western classical and folk music.

Other contemporary dance artists in Southeast Asia today have an interest in incorporating different traditional artistic disciplines together with modern dance, thus combining interculturalism with multidisciplinarity. For example, Indonesian contemporary dance artist Boi Sakti conceives his works in terms of modern dance in combination with traditional artistic forms such as traditional Indonesian dance, silat (an Indonesian martial arts form), gamelan music as well as costumes inspired by traditional Indonesian clothing. Therefore, multidisciplinarity has become one of the approaches utilized by contemporary Asian artists like Boi Sakti in the assertion of an Asian identity that straddles tradition and the contemporary.

Likewise Angela Liong in Singapore signifies her interest in connecting and preserving her Asian/Chinese heritage through traditional Asian/Chinese disciplines yet moves forward with new Western technological developments and innovative Asian and Western expressions. Thus, Angela's creations for her company, The Arts Fission Company (TAFC), bring together Asian forms such as classic Asian literature, Chinese opera, tai chi, Asian contemporary mediums (e.g. Korean modern dance and Japanese art form Butoh) as well as Western

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<sup>149</sup> Movement produced through release technique emphasizes the lack of tension and is facilitated through the use of breath and momentum.



contemporary forms (modern dance, installation art, contemporary painting, video and projections). Her Asian contemporary dance form that resembles a collage brings the various components mentioned above in a democratic fashion, i.e. without focusing on one more than the other. T AFC assistant artistic director Elysa Wendi also links multidisciplinary with interculturalism. However, the mix of components in her Asian contemporary dance form differs from Angela's and includes traditional Indonesian folk theatre, martial arts and singing traditions along with traditional Chinese prayer, poems and music as well as modern dance, installation art and media.

In summary, many Asian dance artists are combining predominantly Asian traditional artistic forms while others are bringing together mostly contemporary Western mediums, including artists located in Singapore like Lim Chin Huat, Tan How Choon and Tammy L. Wong. Angela Liong represents an exception as she strives to combine traditional and contemporary Asian disciplines with contemporary Western ones while her colleague Elysa Wendi experiments with merging traditional Asian and contemporary Western forms. Besides interculturalism and multidisciplinary, body-centeredness is another approach utilized by contemporary Asian artists to display Asian difference in their Asian contemporary dance form.

### Body-centeredness

The concept of an empowered body or body-centeredness considers the body as not just a specimen of muscles, bones, skin and organs to be dissected, treated, trained or conditioned. The body does not just have faculties that perform life functions such as eating, breathing and moving. Instead, the theory of multiple

intelligences developed by Howard Gardner<sup>150</sup> recognizes and values the contributions of the body and is an important step towards the understanding and development of body-centered practices. Furthermore, it is possible to understand culture through the use of a body-centered approach, i.e. the body is the vehicle and dance is the expression that embodies culture. “[S]ociety is never a disembodied spectacle. We engage in social interaction at the very start on the basis of sensory and aesthetic impressions,” notes sociologist John O’Neill.<sup>151</sup> The body and movement cannot be separated from culture. Butoh artist Katsura Kan states, “Stare at your tradition, your culture, your local region, your weather, your music, your history, your society, cooking, family etc. etc. something belongs to you, because they are a part of your body.”<sup>152</sup> In other words, the wellspring of life is embodied in our bodies.

Throughout the history of dance in the West the body has often been treated as an object or referred to as an instrument. The organs of the body are presumed to be instruments in the service of different ends and purposes of the “[mental] ‘faculties,’ on the one side, and the ‘senses,’ on the other”.<sup>153</sup> While more innovative dance practice promulgates listening to the body, the body is typically subservient to the mind. In the West the notion of body-centeredness became associated with somatic practices or movement therapies like the Alexander technique and Feldenkrais. However, contemporary Western dance

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<sup>150</sup> Howard Gardner developed the theory of multiple intelligences based on the belief that everyone has a tendency to learn in their own way. The Bodily/Kinesthetic intelligence was identified as one of eight tendencies.

<sup>151</sup> O’Neill, John quoted by Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull in “Looking at Movement as Culture: Contact Improvisation in Disco”. Moving History/Dance Cultures: A Dance History Reader. Eds. Dils, Ann and Ann Cooper Albright. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004. 405.

<sup>152</sup> Kan, Katsura. “Global Butoh as a Dance: Body in Asia”. Asia Pacific Dance Bridge Academic Conference Papers & Abstracts. Singapore: World Dance Alliance, 2001. 161.

<sup>153</sup> White, Hayden. Choreographing History. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 232.

artists discovered that the body's knowledge and experience could be used in choreography.

Therefore, body-centeredness was established as a Western technique used to assert a Western identity. For example, Western modern dance pioneer Martha Graham proposed the notion of "blood memory" where instinctive and spontaneous movement is explained as memories passed from one generation to another. Later, post-modern American choreographer Murray Louis asserted that everyone can claim a heritage:

The body is an incredibly wise and knowledgeable source...the artist knows how far back and how deeply his tap lines must reach. The body knows a great deal more about the human experience than anyone could possibly learn in a lifetime.<sup>154</sup>

Today, Western contemporary dance incorporates established body-centered practices such as body reflexivity whereby the body "becomes an ear and an organ for listening"<sup>155</sup> as well as mind-body dialoguing which is based on the premise that the body is able to speak, listen and respond and, therefore, it is possible to engage in dialogue. Through body reflexivity and mind-body dialogue a new movement/dance genre has been created – contact improvisation utilizes the body's acute awareness and responsiveness to the forces created when bodies come into contact.

Although these practices were established in the West, contemporary Asian artists have incorporated them in their endeavor to explore their Asian identity. For example Asian contemporary dance artist Daniel Yeung from Hong

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<sup>154</sup> Louis, Murray. *Inside Dance*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980. 124.

<sup>155</sup> Tusa, John. "William Forsythe, Director. Ballet Frankfurt". Transcript of interview on BBC radio. *Ballet.co Magazine*. February 2003. [www.ballet.co.uk](http://www.ballet.co.uk). Accessed 22 April 2007.

Kong employed mind-body dialoguing as a way to negotiate his Chinese cultural heritage with his present Western encounter in *Dance Exhibitionist – A Paradise for Natural Body* (1999). Daniel describes his experience:

[It] was originally set by exploring the different possibilities of the dancer/choreographer's body and its relation to projected video images in the theatre space. It was about an individual performing a duet, a dummy dancing, and a pure body swaying through the reality and virtual space. The piece eventually turned out to be conversations between the choreographer/dancer's soul and his own body.<sup>156</sup>

Another example of employing a Western body-centered practice is Butoh which was founded on the Japanese philosophical practice of “emptying the body” to arrive at a new form and aesthetic, i.e. a uniquely Japanese art form seeking to express a contemporary Japanese consciousness during post-war Japan when established Japanese values were criticized and destroyed. Pioneer Tatsumi Hijikata based his experiments on the philosophy “stare at your body first then start with it”<sup>157</sup> and employed the principles of imbalance, discontinuity and disorder. Thus, he created movement suitable to the Japanese body whose proportions, particularly the lower body, differed from Westerners.

Another contemporary Asian artist that utilized a Western paradigm is Chandralekha, an Indian contemporary dance choreographer. She utilized a body-space paradigm to investigate where bodies interact with space, i.e. when and

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<sup>156</sup> Yeung, Daniel. “Cultural Clash: The Making of Contemporary Asian Dance Work”. *Asia Pacific Dance Bridge Academic Conference Papers & Abstracts*. Singapore: World Dance Alliance, 2001. 181.

<sup>157</sup> Kan, Katsura. “Global Butoh as a Dance: Body in Asia”. *Asia Pacific Dance Bridge Academic Conference Papers & Abstracts*. Singapore: World Dance Alliance, 2001. 160.

where the body meets space and the limits of that encounter and explores the body's circulation, mobility and access to space. She investigated the Indian classical dance form Bharata Natyam through a body-space paradigm in order to retrieve the time, space and line aspects of the dance form as well as focused on the "understanding of space [in Bharata Natyam as] not merely negative or numerical, but [as] poetic, organic and harmonic and express[ing] the relation of the individual with his environment".<sup>158</sup>

Other contemporary Asian dance artists prefer to utilize Asian body-centered practices, such as Liou Shaw-lu, co-founder/choreographer of contemporary dance company Taipei Dance Circle. Liou developed a contemporary dance style based on "Ch'i, Body and Mind",<sup>159</sup> i.e. the Taoist principle of non-action and other Chinese vocabularies such as yin and yang, tai chi, chi kung and Zen together with improvisation in his signature "baby oil series" which he has been developing since 1992. Another example is contemporary Asian dance choreographer Lin Hwai Min, founder/artistic director of The Cloud Gate Theatre of Taiwan, who incorporated traditional Asian body-centered approaches such as yoga and other Asian meditation practices as well as tai chi, aikido and other Asian martial arts forms, Chinese opera movement together with modern dance and ballet.

In both Asia and the West, Asian body-centered practices are combined with Western body-centered practices or Western dance genres to create new forms of contemporary dance that are concerned with exploring the body's organic movement potential towards the development of an intelligent body<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Chandralekha. "Choreography in the Indian Context". Publisher and date unknown.

<sup>159</sup> Taipei Dance Circle. Publicity packet. Taiwan, 2003.

<sup>160</sup> Move to Learn. "About: New Dance". Move to Learn. [www.movetolearn.com](http://www.movetolearn.com). Accessed 28 January 2007.

through a combination of body-centered practices including release technique, contact improvisation, various Asian martial art forms (e.g. tai chi, aikido), meditative practices such as yoga and Western body sciences or therapeutics (e.g. Alexander technique, Feldenkrais method and Ideokinesis). These new forms have been named New Dance in an attempt to mark a new development phase of modern dance and to supplant the term “post-modern dance”, but this has not been widely accepted by the dance community who regard the new forms as a continuing evolution of contemporary or modern dance.

In Southeast Asia as in greater Asia, there is some evidence of contemporary Asian dance artists utilizing body-centered practices. As discussed above, many Asian dance artists are interested in employing body-centered paradigms in exploring traditional forms such as Chandralekha’s exploration of Bharata Natyam or incorporating traditional Asian body-centered disciplines such as tai chi in their dance creations such as Lin Hwai Min’s choreography for Cloud Gate Theatre. Towards the assertion of an Asian identity, Aaron Khek Ah Hock and Ix Wong Thien Pau, contemporary Asian artists located in Singapore, are interested in studying what is culturally intrinsic about the Asian body similar to the way Japanese artists investigated the body in the creation of Butoh. However, Aaron and Ix understand their Asian-ness as Chinese and utilize body-centeredness to explore how the contemporary Chinese body moves in everyday situations and negotiates tradition. Furthermore, unlike the Japanese who have developed a method and produced a unique movement expression called Butoh, Aaron and Ix have yet to arrive at a sophisticated development, i.e. they are still at beginning stages of experimentation – looking at daily movement, extracting it

from its typical context and incorporating it into their choreography with some abstraction.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, historical as well as current scholarships on Asian identity in Southeast Asia including the discourse on Asian values provide a framework towards understanding the diverse expressions of Asian-ness through contemporary dance which will be discussed in this thesis. Furthermore, the identification of interculturalism, multidisciplinary and body-centeredness as approaches provides a means to analyze the creation of the various Asian contemporary dance forms studied.

Based on the framework set in this chapter, this thesis focuses on how Asian identity is taken seriously by artists located in Singapore as manifested in their search for an Asian contemporary dance form and shows how Asian contemporary dance artists in Singapore have endeavored to express their particular notions of Asian-ness in their Asian contemporary dance forms. Although the notion of identity may not be entirely complicit with the statist project of “Asian values”, for some artists an Asian identity becomes a useful collective identity while for others it is a way to stretch their identity to encompass regional and global aspirations. Asian expatriates who have become Singaporean permanent residents also have a claim on an Asian identity that is about a dance form outside the West but happens to be located in Singapore. The case studies presented in subsequent chapters discuss the personal biographies and aspirations of contemporary Asian dance artists located in Singapore endeavoring to create an

Asian contemporary dance form and in the process of doing so reveal various conceptions Asian-ness.

This thesis explores how each artist has come to be concerned about creating an Asian contemporary dance form, i.e. a dance form that expresses the identity of contemporary Asians. How their expression of Asian-ness has to do with ethnic background, cultural upbringing and experience as well as how their locations and sojourns have shaped their take on an Asian contemporary identity and creation of a particular contemporary dance form that expresses Asian-ness. How each artist constructs their own notions via different ways yet all using similar approaches such as multidisciplinary – incorporating a variety of artistic fields beyond dance; interculturalism – merging various dance and other cultural artistic forms, both Western and Asian; as well as body-centeredness – acknowledging the body as embodying culture and unleashing it by listening and responding to it. How each artist has developed a particular dance vocabulary towards the realization of his/her particular vision of Asian contemporary dance.

This thesis looks into the identity aspirations of contemporary Asian dance artists in the context of social and political dimensions in Singapore and assumes that contemporary dance forms are a reflection of the Asian identity. However, we must remember that there is always a tension in art between art-for-society and art-for-art-sake. Attempts to interpret social and political meanings from artistic practices must almost always be cautious about over-interpretation as there can be no single rendition but competing views of art, its aesthetic and social roles. Both art critics and sometimes powerful authorities such as the nation-state may bring their own purposes to shape the public comprehension of an artistic work with each seeking to establish validity and authority of their interpretations. As



anthropologist Shelly Errington<sup>161</sup> cautions us, “Meanings are not intrinsic to objects [or dance] but are attributed to them in the course of human thought and practice.”<sup>162</sup> Therefore, we need to be careful not to flatten out the dimension of non-intent in the creation of artistic forms. Despite being significantly motivated by a search for Asian expressions, it must be said that the dance artists studied in this thesis are as equally inspired by the creation of art-for-art’s sake and it is not the intention of this thesis to deny this dimension. This being said, however, this thesis focuses on and recognizes the significance of the search for expressions of various dimensions of Asian identity amongst dance artists located in Singapore.

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<sup>161</sup> Kenneth George refers to Shelly Errington in his article about the problems of interpretation surrounding an Indonesian painting.

<sup>162</sup> George, Kenneth. “Some Things That Have Happened to the Sun after September 1965: Politics and the Interpretation of an Indonesian Painting”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39. 4 (October 1997): 624.

## Chapter Four: The Arts Fission Company

### Introduction

The Arts Fission Company (TAFC)<sup>163</sup> was Singapore's first modern dance company and was established in 1994 by choreographer Angela Liong Pui-Yin (born 22 November 1951) and visual artist Chandrasekaran, with both as co-artistic directors. Chandrasekaran resigned soon after for personal reasons. TAFC began as a project-based company, i.e. the dancers were engaged on occasion for specific projects and performances. Later, in 1999 Angela transformed TAFC into a non-profit company limited by guarantee with charitable status and employed dancers and administrative staff on a full-time basis. It was at this time that Elysa Wendi (born 24 April 1976) joined TAFC as a dancer and project manager. In 2003, she was promoted to assistant artistic director and also began choreographing for the company.

This chapter discusses how Angela, artistic director, and Elysa, assistant artistic director, of TAFC express an Asian identity which is rooted in Singapore society yet is also acutely conscious of Chinese heritage as well as links with other Asian cultures in a particular form of Asian contemporary dance produced and staged under the auspices of TAFC. Both Angela, a Chinese American, and Elysa, a Chinese Indonesian, represent the Chinese diaspora – a group of ethnic Chinese artists, who through their sojourns have eventually located in Singapore where they found a government in support of their artistic pursuits and search for a contemporary Asian identity. They explore their ethnic Chinese background as

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<sup>163</sup> See company profile in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

well as acculturated influences, while embracing other, particularly Asian, cultures towards a broader definition of Asian-ness.

Distinctive to this Asian contemporary dance form is the connection of interculturalism and multidisciplinaryism that essentially combines Western modern dance techniques with other performing arts, technical theatre arts, visual arts and the literary arts from different, often Asian, cultures. This is reflected in collaborations with artists from a variety of contemporary artistic fields and cultural backgrounds, such as those in Korean modern dance, Japanese Butoh, Chinese tai chi, Chinese opera and classical music and Indonesian theatre. The complex and evolving Asian identity explored through an interculturalism approach is in part shaped by Angela's personal search, shared by her colleague Elysa, for a contemporary Asian identity as they locate themselves within Singapore's art world. Angela's location in Singapore and her role as a pioneering modern dance figure in the local art scene saw her and her colleague Elysa also taking on local concerns in their productions. These concerns revolve around the issues of urbanization such as remembering the past and coping with a stressful and ever changing present in Singapore as well as topics such as the aged, cultural riots, social memories and terrorism.

### **Angela's personal search**

Angela's bid to create an Asian contemporary dance form is very much shaped by her personal search for what it means to be a contemporary Asian. Representative of the Chinese diaspora worldwide, Angela's relocation to America from Hong Kong, then to Singapore, where she took up permanent residency, compels her to find a sense of belonging. Born and raised as a child in

Hong Kong, Angela immigrated with her family as a young adult to the USA where she worked in her family's Chinese restaurant and attended university. Later, when she was about 29 years old she moved with her professor husband to Singapore where she has remained for the past 23 years. She became aware of being Asian when she relocated to America where she felt different and isolated from the demographic "white" majority. Larry N. Naylor, an anthropology professor, states:

Historically, and despite the repeated promise (ideal) of America, many people who have come to the United States have found it very difficult to achieve the American Dream, or experience American equality or equal opportunity. Some of this is due to traditions immigrants have brought with them and continue to maintain in some fashion.<sup>164</sup>

Angela's sense of being an Asian American was realized when she came to Singapore where she says "gave [her] the opportunity to re-orient [her] Asian identity and what it also means to be an American".<sup>165</sup> She likens her personal search to that of painter Paul Gauguin who, Angela says:

had to go all the way to Tahiti to find out from the noble savages the burning questions that changed his life drastically: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? These questions are still relevant today and it's definitely the perennial concern even in this mobile urban age.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Naylor, Larry. L. American Culture: Myth and Reality of a Culture of Diversity. Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1998. 117.

<sup>165</sup> Liong, Angela. E-mail interview. 22 March 2006.

<sup>166</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

Angela's sense of displacement and personal search for what it means to be an Asian find expression in her work as a choreographer. Her Asian contemporary dance form is inevitably shaped by the shifting conditions of both personal life as well as larger social milieus around her as she traverses across territorial boundaries, from Hong Kong to the United States and eventually Singapore. Angela describes her search as a feeling of "ambivalence – the sense of wanting to look for the sense of belonging and identity on a personal level. But also on a larger level trying to find out what is this 'contemporary Asian'. So the intercultural element inevitably presents itself in the work."<sup>167</sup> Moreover, through her relocations, as well as being married to a Chinese Indonesian, Angela's expression of the contemporary Asian is drawn from a complex mix of cultural influences. Angela's identity as an Asian artist is hence a complex one – she is located in Singapore but also holds connections with Hong Kong and America because of her sojourns as well as with Indonesia due to her marriage. Apart from drawing on these influences, as Angela encounters other Asian cultures such as Japanese and Korean, her expression of the contemporary Asian also becomes expanded.

Angela's view of Asian-ness as intercultural, and reflected in her dance form, resonates well with her location in Singapore. Her reconciliation of her Asian identity through intercultural explorations is encouraged by Singapore as envisioned in the *Renaissance City Report*: "This will be a society that is clear about its identity, confident and at ease with itself. Awareness of our Asian heritage is enhanced even as we evolve a Singaporean identity."<sup>168</sup> In other words, the government supports and encourages Angela as well as other

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<sup>167</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

<sup>168</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter Five: The Vision for Renaissance Singapore". *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 2.

Singapore-based artists to undertake intercultural artistic projects with other Asian countries to better understand Asian heritage as part of Singapore's inheritance but also how Singapore may contribute to the larger Asian cultural legacy. Furthermore, Singapore's role in Asian cultural collaboration is also explained by Singaporean actor Lim Yu Beng in the *Renaissance City Report*: "We as Singaporeans are not as close to our traditional art forms as other societies. So I see us as the middleman, to harness different art forms and mix and match."<sup>169</sup>

Hence, Angela's personal search for the meaning of contemporary Asian-ness coincides with Singapore's pan-Asian vision. While she receives governmental aid for her company and project, it does not dictate her artistic vision but gives her the opportunity to pursue her interest in interculturalism and has allowed her to explore and create the intercultural work she chooses to engage in.

### **Interculturalism linked with multidisciplinaryism**

For Angela, interculturalism is achieved through multidisciplinaryism. She views multidisciplinaryism as inherent in dance production and also an important practice in providing multiple layers besides modern dance to communicate her ideas. Angela says that her productions are multidisciplinary in a sense that they are "like life itself [where] you interact with so many different elements so it always influences us".<sup>170</sup> She believes that dance in itself is a multidisciplinary art form and suggests that this artistic philosophy may have been borne out of her family background. She explains:

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<sup>169</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter Four: "Culture and Creativity in the Future Economy". *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 5.

<sup>170</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

The moment we put on a production we need the backdrop, the set, music, lighting – we cannot do it alone. Unlike the visual arts we cannot do it alone as performing artists. It's a natural direction that we go down. The difference lies in how we look at the multidiscipline practice. It helps me to articulate my idea in a more in-depth level because of the different disciplines or elements involved. To me it is very important that I provide many layers of entry for my audience. If an audience only relates to a more conceptual level I want to provide that part. And if an audience really responds to physical happening, just the movement, I also want to have that part. Sometimes I feel like I'm throwing a dinner party. I'm the host and I have to take care of my guests. It has something to do with my first job as a professional waitress. My family ran a Chinese restaurant. So, it's important for me to take care of people. I want to be a good host and take care of my guests. I don't know if it has anything to do with dance making. I said I want my art to be firmly ingrained or to come from living or life itself. So every aspect reflects that. The multi-media elements help me provide the different layers of entry to enrich the communication process with my audience or enable myself to explore the dance making process. It's something that is

always there when I start to create art. It's never just dance  
per se or just the movement itself.<sup>171</sup>

Angela first made the connection between multidisciplinary and interculturalism such as combining modern dance with other fields like Asian literature when she studied classical and contemporary Chinese literature besides English literature as a college student in America. A particularly memorable experience where she saw the virtue of combining dance with literature was at an international writers' workshop she participated in as an undergraduate student where she recalls an Indian playwright who was also a painter. Later, when she established TAFC, this artistic outlook influenced her to actively combine Asian literature and dance in her productions. This connection saw Asian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana interpreted through modern dance techniques and other artistic fields towards uncovering the meaning of Asian-ness. Angela says, "I believe we need to respond to this wealth of literature in a very active way, physical way. I believe that this literature captures the essence of Asian-ness and perhaps could help me in my process of finding what is 'contemporary Asian'."<sup>172</sup>

For instance, in collaboration with visual artist Chandrasekaran, Angela created TAFC's inaugural production, *The Mahabharata: A Grain of Rice* (1995)<sup>173</sup>, commissioned by Singapore's National Arts Council (NAC) for the Festival of Asian Performing Arts. It is an example of recuperating classic South and Southeast Asian literature through modern dance and contemporary installation art<sup>174</sup>, which highlights understanding our present ideals through

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<sup>171</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

<sup>172</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

<sup>173</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

<sup>174</sup> Installation Art is a term used to describe art created with a variety of sculptural materials as well as new media. It is not confined to art galleries but also may be site-specific as well as incorporated into staged dance works.



portrayals of our past. Asian literature also motivates many of Angela's productions suitable for family audiences like *Manora's Wings* (2002) based on Thai folklore and *Doctor in a Teapot* (2005), a dance drama inspired by a Taiwanese folktale of a doctor who lived in a teapot.

Thus, literature from different cultures often provides the inspiration or source material for the themes of Angela's works. Beyond this, Angela's multidisciplinary and interculturalism philosophy has resulted in works that include other artistic fields from various parts of Asia as well. However, her productions appear like collages combining separate expressions with little or no attempt to fuse. Modern dance technique is the primary medium of expression, and layered onto this are other performing arts such as music, theatre; the technical theatre arts such as costumes, lighting, stage sets and properties, photography and video; the visual arts such as installations, sculpture and painting; the literary arts such as literature and poetry; and martial arts often from Asian cultures or by Asian artists.

For example in *Little Lee II: Is Today Really Yesterday?* (2004)<sup>175</sup> Angela integrated a video by artist Ching Jing Ying together with performances by Cantonese opera actress Joanna Wong, yoga practitioners Teresa Hsu and Sharana Rao, tai chi master Chong Swan Lek as well as Western-trained modern dancers. While the various arts forms were integrated into a cohesive work, the individual artists each performed and retained the integrity of their own specialty fields. It was not a case where the movement language of these other forms was fused with modern dance techniques and styles.

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<sup>175</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

In *Lost Light I: Syonan Jinja Shrine* (1999)<sup>176</sup>, a work about the effects of war on people's memories and psyche, Angela collaborated with other artists from different cultures who each examined their own understanding of "how personal experience was altered by the force of violence through the sweeping torrent of historical events"<sup>177</sup> and sought to "appease the memories of those who had died in the war, to re-enact those memories on stage and to make peace with them in the process".<sup>178</sup> Phillippe Laleu, a French contemporary videographer, attempted to "locate traces of roots and fragments of personal identity" by superimposing maps on the portraits of people from the war while Japanese electronic music composer Koki Shinada created an "urban soundscape [of] modern time incongruity and irreverence to the lost light of a bygone era".<sup>179</sup> Angela choreographed six of the seven modern dance solos in collaboration with the dancers portraying the altered lives of ordinary Singaporeans by the advent of war: "The Walker", "Shining", "Hush-a-Bye", "Young Girl with Paper Crane", "Stained Chrysanthemums" and "Permandi (The Bather)". I was one of the guest modern dancers/choreographers and performed my own solo "Lady with Parasol" portraying a lady of means on an afternoon stroll driven to madness when war strikes. Japanese Butoh<sup>180</sup> artist Katsura Kan performed a haunting solo and was joined later by the other dancers in the finale, "In a Benighted Forest", with primal screams, searching blindly with only the whites of the eyes showing and pressing bamboo poles against the sides of Katsura's face and body to create a chilling

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<sup>176</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

<sup>177</sup> The Arts Fission Company. *Lost Light I: Syonan Jinja Shrine*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 1999.

<sup>178</sup> "It's Time to Heal Battle Wounds". *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 11 March 1999.

<sup>179</sup> "It's Time to Heal Battle Wounds". *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 11 March 1999.

<sup>180</sup> The emergence of a form called Butoh in the 1960's is credited to Japanese avant-garde artists Tatsumi Hijikata (1928-1986) and Kazuo Ohno (1906- ). Influenced by Ausdrucksanz, or German Expressionism, Butoh became known for its grotesque imagery performed in white-body makeup.

scene of pain and grief. Angela combined these artistic mediums in a collage, including two genres of dance, to produce a single entity but kept each separate with no attempt to merge them.

### **Current issues as themes**

Angela's understanding of the contemporary Asian is not only motivated by her personal search and rooted in her training and background but is also concerned with present realities such as her ambivalence towards the rapid urbanization of Southeast Asian centers. Angela says:

The new urban centers that sprouted in major cities like Jakarta, Bangkok, Manila, Singapore, etc. left me with some very ambivalent feelings that I find difficult to resolve: abandon traditional ways in order to 'progress' into the new economy, milk the old culture as tourism cash cow, use techno-aided communications to replace human relationship, etc. <sup>181</sup>

She created several productions depicting the ambivalence of location and environment resulting from Singapore's rapid transformation from a colonial port into a modern state from kampongs to HDB flats, shop houses to mega malls, green spaces to concrete buildings. While this intense development is all part of the modernization process, Angela is concerned with "the resolved tension in the uprooted traditions".<sup>182</sup> In *The Floating Stage Series I: Urban Sanctuary* (2000)<sup>183</sup>, a site-specific<sup>184</sup> production on the 35<sup>th</sup> storey rooftop of Centennial

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<sup>181</sup> Liong, Angela. E-mail interview. 22 March 2006.

<sup>182</sup> The Arts Fission Company. "Cross Disciplinary Collaborations". *The Arts Fission Company*. Press packet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2003.

<sup>183</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

Tower, an office building in Singapore, the theme of urbanization relates to towering concrete structures highlighting the ambivalence of location for Singaporeans. The production began with an alienating experience in the lift lobby of the building where the audience was tagged and herded into a goods lift. Later, in the segment “Corridor of Epiphany” the audience was led through two rows of pipes which were aurally enhanced to awaken then audience’s realization of their urban surroundings, while other segments such as “Moment of the Rose and Perching” evoked feelings of instability and uncertainty.



1. *Urban Sanctuary.*

In *Imagine Forest*, a core event at the 2001 Singapore Arts Festival, Angela relates urbanization to the disappearance of the natural environment and its replacement with an artificial one, i.e. the replacement of diminishing green spaces and depletion of natural resources with concrete structures and man-made products. Urbanization means a utopia for Singapore’s citizens through an artificial environment. It appears to be a safer, cleaner and more efficient

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<sup>184</sup> Site-specific productions refer to performances created to suit the particular properties and character of the space. TAFC is known for its several site-specific productions.

environment but this urban existence is fragmented and the once close-knit kampongs gone, heritage buildings torn down and families dispersed. Angela paradoxically features a contrived environment or “imagined forest” of real soil and grass growing atop six plexi-glass pillars in the glass atrium of the Ministry of Information and the Arts building. Angela’s penchant for irony also prevails in a segment which finds a dancer costumed in a paper sculpture moving cautiously in front of the screen made of synthetic material conveying the message that natural resources are becoming rare yet humans continue to exploit it, even to wear.



## *2. Imagine Forest.*

Also, classical Singaporean string musicians T’ang Quartet change their positions in space and split their ensemble up visually and audibly throughout the production symbolizing the fragmentation found in urban society.

The topic of aging is also taken up by Angela as it relates to urbanism and how memories of Singapore’s past are reflected in the ambivalent psyche of Singaporeans today. As society is caught in the current of modernization, the commitment to family such as caring for the elderly is not prioritized. The elderly, particularly women who usually outlive their husbands, are often lonely and left to cope on their own. While Singapore purports looking after its senior citizens,

the importance of moving forward with a young society poses a dilemma. Angela, therefore, says that she created *Little Lee I* and *Little Lee II* to “make individual stories into a dance mosaic of collective memory that gives new meaning to the perennial anxiety of aging, and hopefully make peace with [her] own aging process as well”.<sup>185</sup>

*Little Lee I: The Forgotten Journey Home* (2003)<sup>186</sup> was the first in a series of productions inspired by Angela’s elderly aunty endearingly called “Little Lee” whom she found embracing the simple routine of daily life when she visited her in a nursing home in America. In the production Angela contrasted old and young, tradition and contemporary, today and yesterday by featuring six Samsui women, i.e. retired construction workers originally from Kwang-tung province in China, along with four children and five young adult females. She incorporated the everyday pedestrian movements of the elderly performers to collectively convey their strength, wisdom, dignity to endure a hard and frugal existence. Singapore’s past is recuperated through their performances that conveyed their exceptional ability to “live for a single vision and endeavor even into their mature age. Their unwavering courage and determination transcend the perennial anxiety of aging. Retirement is irrelevant for these non-conformists.”<sup>187</sup>

*Little Lee II: Is Today Really Yesterday?* (2004)<sup>188</sup>, the second in the series, was inspired by and dedicated to “three grand old ladies”<sup>189</sup> who passed on: Angela’s aunty, the original Little Lee (91 years), Samsui woman Yap Say Mui (89 years), and Angela’s grandmother Kwan King Fong (99 years). As in

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<sup>185</sup> Liong, Angela. E-mail interview. 22 March 2006.

<sup>186</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

<sup>187</sup> The Arts Fission Company. *Little Lee II: Is Today Really Yesterday?*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2004.

<sup>188</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

<sup>189</sup> The Arts Fission Company. *Little Lee II: Is Today Really Yesterday?*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2004.

*Little Lee I, Little Lee II* featured three generations of performers. The elderly performed in vignettes interspersed among transitional dance sequences by T AFC's young adult resident dancers and teen guest dancers, juxtaposing nostalgic moments of wisdom and mastery through traditional artistic forms and stage sets of personal mementoes with present transitory realities in modern dance technique and video projections. For example, in the segment "Sound of Wind and Rain", senior tai chi master Chong Swan Lek eloquently performed a tai chi sequence with a folding fan while the younger Elysa sat atop a ladder plaintively singing a Hakka (a Chinese dialect) folk song. At the end of the song Elysa descended the ladder to join master Chong who passed her a fan and led her around in a circle performing tai chi as she followed along.

Angela is also concerned how major changes in life occur because of wars and drastic technological advancements in Asia today. She attempts to capture life's ambiguities and the sense of ambivalence and helplessness that arise from these encounters. Angela explains:

We choose, a lot of the time, in my work or the members' work to find the pathos in the situation. We see more the ambivalent nature than the black and white situation, yes and no, do or don't. We see the irony. In fact the word 'irony' has become more and more important in creative work for me because the whole post-post modernism is all about irony. Everybody sees the irony in life. It's no longer like in the old days when you have your integrity and fight for it. Or, a good person means being conservative. There's no such thing as a pure evil person or a pure good person.

In our times, our life is so much affected by the sense of irony. Sometimes how it affects people, the sense of irony makes people very ambivalent. It comes with a sense of helplessness and it depends on how people allow this irony to affect them. It's neither good nor bad. So, I'll go along with the flow, I suppose. Being an artist I thought it would help me on a personal level to explore this 'irony' and to present it on stage then step back and look at it together with my audience. Artistically, the sense of irony propels the work.<sup>190</sup>

For example, *12 SMS Across the Mountains* (2005),<sup>191</sup> a collaborative effort between TAFC and Dance Theatre CcadoO, a South Korean contemporary dance company, explores the ironies of modern technology by focusing on geographic landscapes and how the restrictions of natural topography are overcome by mobile phone technology and consumerism such as in Korea and Singapore where it is intensely promoted. Ironically, Angela takes advantage of modern telecommunication technology, i.e. the short messaging service (SMS) capability of mobile phones, to undertake the collaboration with Park to create a production that would not be feasible otherwise. Their choreography consisted of modern dance vignettes of movement conversations that transpired through SMS numbered SMS #1 to #12 in a call-and-response structure featuring TAFC's female quintet and CcadoO's male quintet alternately. Angela explains how the collaboration came about:

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<sup>190</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

<sup>191</sup> The production premiered at Seoul Arts Centre, Korea, in 2004 and was restaged at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2005. See excerpt of this dance in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.



I received an invitation to collaborate with South Korean choreographer Park Hobin and his company. The cultural and geographic differences between South Korea and Singapore made me start to think of how we could communicate, and possibly create dances together, across mountains and oceans. My mobile phone savvy dancers promptly showed me an indispensable and inexpensive way of communicating via SMS. So Hobin and I began a series of text messages that cumulated into 12 brief dance vignettes. These movement conversations sometimes respond to each other directly, and at times overlap each other.<sup>192</sup>

Angela further highlights the irony of landscapes surmounted by modernism by translating them metaphorically. She poetically states in her program notes for the production that “the islands around us have all turned into Roy Lichtenstein’s digital-like dots swirling in misty Chinese landscape pictures”<sup>193</sup> and the mountains of Korea, represented by a moveable bonsai-like mountain range set created by Elysa, are easily navigated by the dancers. Angela explains:

In this show you’ll see people running around a mountain – a little bonsai set... We can move it around – it’s a sense of irony. We think we can move everything around. It’s modern technology. We can engineer genes to make humans. Earlier on when I created my work based on the

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<sup>192</sup> The Arts Fission Company. “Choreographer’s Notes”. 12 SMS Across the Mountains. Program booklet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2005.

<sup>193</sup> The Arts Fission Company. “Choreographer’s notes”. 12 SMS Across the Mountains. Program booklet, Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2005.

9/11 terror attacks, *Shadowhouses*, it had more of a sense of pathos. And now the sense of irony is more about humor and funny experience. Dancers move around on stage like hamsters, like busy bees.<sup>194</sup>



### 3. 12 SMS Across the Mountains.

Towards understanding the contemporary Asian, Angela also explores the pathos, cosmic dualism and ironies of war and its related acts such as imprisonment and terrorism towards understanding the Asian psyche and constructions of Asian-ness as well as resolving personal feelings of ambivalence. *Lost Light I: Syonan Jinja Shrine* traces the Singaporean people's memory of the Syonan Jinja Shrine, a place of peace and refuge for Japanese soldiers, built by prisoners-of-war during the Japanese Occupation, although Angela says the production was "more inspired by the ironic location of the lost temple than a conscious effort of commenting on the war", even though she grew up listening to the atrocity of the Sino-Japanese war through recollections by her grandmother and parents.<sup>195</sup> The shrine, therefore, uncovers memories of colonization related to the Japanese Occupation in Singapore's history and highlights the ambivalent

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<sup>194</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

<sup>195</sup> Liong, Angela. E-mail interview. 22 March 2006.

psyche of Singaporeans. Through a history of foreign intervention such as the Japanese and British occupations, the Singaporean psyche is somewhat reluctant to embrace foreign ideals made possible through its location and present demographic flows. It stands strong on its multi-cultural identity of its Chinese, Malay and Indian citizens; at the same time it recognizes the value of accepting other foreign cultures and is highlighted in productions like *Lost Light I: Syonan Jinja Shrine* which are forms of requiem rather than indictment.



4. *Lost Light I: Syonan Jinja Shrine*.

However, Angela aims to explore issues that are faced by contemporary Asians, as her concerns are about identity, rather than to consciously comment and actively fight social causes in her works. She says:

You cannot say that I use my work to fight a social issue. I noticed my work or company's repertoire which, unlike some other arts companies who are very much identified with picking up a social cause, isn't that. We always maintain a distance. We feel passionate about an issue but it isn't really a cause we want to pick up and fight for it. A lot

of the time, in my work or my company member's work we sense more the pathos of the situation.<sup>196</sup>

### **Elysa's background and shared vision**

Although most of TAFC's fifty full-length productions<sup>197</sup> are credited to Angela, her vision of an Asian modern dance form is also shared and expanded by her colleague, Elysa, who was previously a student of Angela's at LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. When TAFC changed from a part-time to full-time status, Elysa joined as a dancer and project manager to administrate the company's various projects. Later, in 2003, Elysa had a more active and influential role in shaping Angela's Asian contemporary dance form when she became the assistant artistic director and began choreographing for the company. Their relationship, therefore, moved from teacher/student to professional colleagues and is exemplar of how like minds are found and alliances built among artists, i.e. those whose artistic philosophies resonate and complement one another in talent and skills. Angela says, "Elysa admires and shares Arts Fission's aesthetics. It was also natural that upon graduation she turned to join the company full-time. Her boundless energy in organizing and creating impresses me."<sup>198</sup>

Angela and Elysa are also drawn together by their similar experience of geographic mobility. Elysa, a Chinese Indonesian, is also part of the Chinese diaspora – a sojourner who relocated to Singapore to study and eventually work and take up permanent residency. She explains her mobility:

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<sup>196</sup> Liong, Angela. Personal interview. 22 April 2005.

<sup>197</sup> A full-length production is a single production based on one theme. All of TAFC's productions are full-length choreographies rather than a presentation of separate choreographies within a production.

<sup>198</sup> Liong, Angela. E-mail interview. 22 March 2006.

I moved a lot since I was a child. When I was a baby I moved from Indonesia to Singapore, for primary school I was in Malaysia, for secondary school I moved back to Indonesia, then back to Singapore for O-Levels and college.<sup>199</sup>

Her personal encounters with different cultures as an ethnic Chinese including learning other languages has influenced her to create intercultural dance works. Like Angela, she has found Singapore to be conducive for her intercultural aspirations in dance creation parallel to the government's policy on "[c]ultural diplomacy, or the enhancement of country to country relations through cultural exchanges".<sup>200</sup> As such, she traveled to Solo, Indonesia on a National Arts Council Artist Training Grant investigating the possibility of creating "dance works in collaboration with other Indonesian choreographers that explore the tension between intercultural assimilation and suppression".<sup>201</sup> As a Singaporean permanent resident originally from Central Java, Indonesia, she was eligible for arts funding. Thus, she was in a privileged position to explore what Richard Schechner, a leading theatre critic, describes as "a model of behavior which non-artists can use in their actual lives....The experiment in art of bringing [cultures] together and saying, we can create something out of our differences that is positive".<sup>202</sup> However, other critics see the imbalances involved in intercultural projects such as the initiation by and dominance of one culture over another.

While it is uncertain of the dynamics that transpired in Elysa's intercultural

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<sup>199</sup> Wendi, Elysa. Personal interview. 6 October 2005.

<sup>200</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter Four: "Culture and Creativity in the Future Economy". *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 4.

<sup>201</sup> The Arts Fission Company. *Siau Ling – Timeless Living*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2003.

<sup>202</sup> Richard Schechner quoted by Oon, Clarissa. "Wake up to the idea of global zoo". *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 27 December 2000.

productions, it is unlikely that she intentionally assumed a dominant position, especially when it involved the country she was born in and familiar with, i.e. Indonesian society.

Further to a common interest in interculturalism, Elysa, like Angela, is also attracted to multidisciplinary. Angela says of Elysa, “I also like her idea of dance being informed by her interest in the visual arts and other disciplines. I believe that dance should not be everything. Rather dance is part of a larger scheme of things.”<sup>203</sup> Elysa’s encounter in another artistic field, i.e. her experience in painting as a youth, before studying dance as an adult, has influenced the multidisciplinary conception of her productions. For example, in *Intimate Letters* (2005)<sup>204</sup> she featured the music score of popular contemporary Chinese composer Tan Dun as well as installation art works created by artists located in Singapore in different mediums such as origami with light, thread and box, textured wall and a mannequin.

Like Angela, Elysa also sees multidisciplinary as a means of expressing interculturalism, both trends being entwined. For example, in *Siau Ling – Timeless Living* (2003)<sup>205</sup> she collaborated with dancers/vocalists Hery Suwanto and Ari Kuntarto from Solo, Indonesia. The production also featured Western modern dance and music, Chinese prayer performed at the beginning, before Act 3 and at the close of the production; a text collage in English and Mandarin; and a live music interpretation of Tang poems from Tu Pu weaving the sound of Indonesian seruling with Chinese erhu and Western instruments.

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<sup>203</sup> Liong, Angela. E-mail interview. 22 March 2006.

<sup>204</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.

<sup>205</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company.



### 5. *Siau Ling – Timeless Living.*

Elysa seeks to understand the contemporary Asian through present-day, often personal, experiences and issues. For example, she takes up the effect of the urban condition on human lives and relationships in *Intimate Letters*. Elysa and her collaborators recuperate Singapore's past through handwritten love letters which are reminders of a less complicated and more innocent life when there was more time to experience and reflect on things in contrast to the present instantaneous expectations of Singaporeans brought about by technological advancements in mass communication (e.g. short messaging service or SMS). Old love letters written to Elysa by her former boyfriend, to which she never replied, provided the inspiration for the production and ironically, years later she chose to respond to them with other artists collectively through contemporary interpretations such as modern dance, installation art and recorded music.



### 6. *Intimate Letters.*

Elysa's concern with social unrest is dealt with in *Siau Ling – Timeless Living*, which saw her address the racial riots between the Chinese and Indonesians in Indonesia in a scenario of “them” and “others” based on an original novel, *Siau Ling*, written by Remy Sylado, an Indonesian political journalist, “set in 15<sup>th</sup> century Java about the descendents of the Eunuch Cheng Ho as an allegorical response to the 1998 Indonesian racial riots and intercultural clashes that led to prosecution of the Chinese-Indonesians”.<sup>206</sup> Elysa, therefore, chose to highlight in this dance work the “tension between intercultural assimilation and suppression”<sup>207</sup> resulting in mob violence, oppression and victimization.

### **Conclusion**

Compelled by their personal search and influenced by their geographic mobility, both Angela and Elysa seek to understand what it means to be a contemporary Asian explored through their Asian contemporary dance forms.

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<sup>206</sup> The Arts Fission Company. *Siau Ling – Timeless Living*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2003.

<sup>207</sup> The Arts Fission Company. *Siau Ling – Timeless Living*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Arts Fission Company, 2003.



Both women are representative of the Chinese diaspora – ethnic Chinese immigrant artists who have found them searching for their Asian identity in Singapore. Angela and Elysa’s understanding of Asian-ness is Chinese but also embraces other Asian cultures, is largely influenced by their cross cultural sojourns.

The link between interculturalism with multiculturalism, influenced by their training in and exposure to multiple artistic disciplines across cultures, is the nexus of both Angela’s and Elysa’s artistic expressions – collages that frequently combine Western modern dance with traditional Asian as well as contemporary performing, visual, literary, and technical theatre arts. Hence their work for T AFC, which often relies on regional cultural collaborations, is encouraged by the Singapore government whose vision is to be the “Gateway of Asia”.<sup>208</sup>

Although Angela claims that she is not interested in utilizing her work to fight social issues, her work is highly reflective of an ambivalence with both local and global realities of today, i.e. an Asian identity steeped in the pathos of war and terrorism, the human condition and psyche, social and environmental phenomena. Angela’s intention is shared by her colleague Elysa, who is also interested in portraying the ambivalences of life experiences. Their common vision resonates well with the aspiration of Singapore as a pan-Asian society with uniquely Singaporean stories as well as connected to the rest of the world through global issues as themes.

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<sup>208</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. “Chapter Four: “Culture and Creativity in the Future Economy”. Renaissance City Report. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 5.

## Chapter Five: Ecnad Project Ltd

### Introduction

In 1996, Dance Dimension Project (DDP)<sup>209</sup> was established as the only other modern dance company in Singapore besides The Arts Fission Company formed two years earlier in 1994. Lim Chin Huat (born 11 May 1969) and Tan How Choon (born 4 September 1970) first formed DDP as a society, engaging artists on a project-by-project basis. In 1998, DDP was registered as a non-profit organization with full-time administration staff and artists. Then in 2001, the company was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee and was renamed Ecnad Project Ltd. Ecnad, the reverse spelling of “dance”, “symbolizes the company’s very different and unique ways of presenting its dance as a multidisciplinary movement theatre”.<sup>210</sup>

The approach that Chin Huat (artistic director) and How Choon (associate artistic director) take in their art tends to be art-for-art’s sake. They are not interested in consciously asserting Asian-ness, i.e. they do not have an agenda of promoting or constructing an Asian identity. At the same time, their artistic expression through multidisciplinary takes on a solely Western aesthetic. However, the themes of their works reflect or respond to the issues of contemporary Asians which are simultaneously Singaporean as well as global. A key reason that Chin Huat and How Choon embrace Western aesthetics is their training in art forms such as modern dance, ballet, physical theatre,<sup>211</sup> graphic arts and gymnastics. Because of this, they link the notion of contemporary with

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<sup>209</sup> See company profile in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>210</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Seven Years in a Night*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2003. 16.

<sup>211</sup> Physical theatre is comprised of primarily body and movement exploration from a variety of origins such as mime, theatrical clowning and contemporary dance.

Western aesthetics. Inevitably this Western aesthetic is expressed by their artistic direction or the art forms they choose to explore as well as the artists they collaborate with. The opportunity to produce their multidisciplinary works is enabled by various forms of government funding received by Ecnad. This financial support does not influence their contemporary dance form or themes as the National Arts Council (NAC) does not overtly dictate or prescribe a company's creative approach.

As Chin Huat's and How Choon's multidisciplinary art form draws from Western aesthetics, the absence of traditional and cultural art forms in their productions is apparent. Essentially, they are interested in exploring a contemporary multidisciplinary art form, or what they call a "multidisciplinary movement theatre"<sup>212</sup> form, that integrates contemporary approaches such as modern dance, contemporary ballet and music, physical theatre, installation art, as well as current technical theatre arts practices in costuming, set design and projections. Collaboration with other artists is central to their approach to multidisciplinary art. There is also strong incorporation of and emphasis on visuals that support their choreography and this has much to do with the influence of Chin Huat, a trained contemporary visual artist and "main creative force of Ecnad".<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, their art form reflects the use of resources such as computer technology that are so much a part of contemporary life today.

Notwithstanding the fact that Chin Huat's and How Choon's artistic expression is Western and does not deliberately make a statement about being Asian, their works are often based on issues that they face as Singaporeans living

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<sup>212</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Seven Years in a Night*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2003. 16.

<sup>213</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Fantasy Creatures and Other Things*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2001.

in today's urban society which also face many Asians. They express their ambivalence towards Singapore's rapidly changing environment and way of life, which see people either accepting and adapting or rejecting and reacting to it. Their art form is a vehicle through which they either depict urban life or offer an escape from the urban condition. Many of their productions featured site-specific performances, i.e. works that were created and performed in specific urban spaces in Singapore. Chin Huat and How Choon may therefore explore a multitude of art forms beyond dance purely as artistic agents but the topics of their works often situate them as social commentators.

### **Chin Huat's influences and approach**

Chin Huat is a Chinese Malaysian who came from Malaysia to Singapore in 1988 where he attained his permanent residency status in 1998. He comes from a working class family with typical expectations for him to do well in school and find a mainstream job. However, even though he did well enough to enroll in one of Malaysia's best schools at secondary level, his interests lay in the arts.

Chin Huat's artistic development began in the visual arts before expanding into dance. His interest in painting at age 12 was inspired by an uncle who "did a lot of preservation work of old buildings, old temples, etc [and managed] to recover the original look. If there was a fantastic dragon on the rooftop then he could recreate it".<sup>214</sup> Chin Huat became a self-taught visual artist in his youth, painting in his own spare time and volunteering for various projects in school to hone his skills such as transforming a classroom into a natural environment with

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<sup>214</sup> Lim Chin Huat. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

trees and water painted on its walls as well as creating a banner that spanned across the entire surface of a building.

In his final year of secondary school Chin Huat rebelled against his parents' wishes and the advice of his teachers and friends. Instead of continuing in the science stream he decided to pursue his strong inclination towards the arts and switched to the arts stream. After graduating, without the consent or support of his parents, he left Malaysia for Singapore and took up formal training in Western contemporary visual arts at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA).

It was in NAFA that he became interested and trained in other Western contemporary art forms such as modern dance, and later also learned physical theatre during his employment with a theatre company called Toy Factory. As an outcome of his contemporary artistic training, Chin Huat's understanding of contemporary is from a Western perspective and his ensuing artistic development and expression is centrally rooted in a contemporary and Western aesthetic.

His background in visual arts remains a strong influence in his dance works, which typically feature highly visible design elements in costumes and sets. Chin Huat's penchant for costume design is largely inspired by his mother whom he regards as an accomplished seamstress. He says admiringly:

My mother as an artist is really very good. She's very good in craftwork. When I was young I admired how she made many fantastic things... For example, she knew how to sew very nice things, even embroidering flowers. I would say that she's the best in the whole town. Every year young people would try to learn from her but up until today no one can master her skills. She can make a three-dimensional

flower on a piece of fabric with needle and thread. That's all. This experience really allowed me to enjoy a lot of things that others don't.<sup>215</sup>

However, instead of pursuing the traditional sewing craftsmanship of his mother, he channels this interest and flair through a Western contemporary expression. When creating costumes he is interested in experimenting with materials such as plastic and knitted fabrics and exploring “movement based and casual”<sup>216</sup> costume possibilities as well as those that distort the human figure. Even though he was exposed to traditional Chinese arts and crafts through his mother and uncle, his artistic expression is Western contemporary.

### **How Choon's influences and approach**

A Chinese Singaporean, How Choon had an upbringing by a father who worked as a building painter and mother who was a cleaner, both who had very little education, and this saw him search for and develop his personal interests on his own. A shy but curious, self-directed and determined person, he pursued his artistic aspirations largely within Singapore beginning with gymnastics as a youth then modern dance as well as ballet studies at NAFA. He was also introduced to the concept of multidisciplinarity through his dance studies at NAFA, under the direction of Angela Liong, whom he remembers taught the creative process of integrating dance with the visual arts.

Similar to Chin Huat, How Choon's training in contemporary forms was from a Western perspective and he equates contemporary with Western aesthetics.

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<sup>215</sup> Lim Chin Huat. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

<sup>216</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. Underground Works. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2001.

Though he is personally rooted in traditional Chinese values, he is interested in creating art from a contemporary perspective. How Choon reasons:

It seems that if someone comes from a traditional background a person tends to explore the contemporary. Asian people our age come from families that have migrated and have brought many traditional things with them. But from our grandfathers to our fathers to us, things are very different.<sup>217</sup>

When he formed Ecnad with Chin Huat, he looked outward for a contemporary art expression which saw him responsible for developing what he calls “line-based movement” featured in and characteristic of the works of Ecnad. This emphasizes linear body positions and shaping as well as technical virtuosity similar to that of ballet, a dance genre established in the West.

### **Artistic expression through Western forms and multidisciplinarity rooted in Western practice**

Chin Huat’s and How Choon’s approaches and contributions have collectively created Ecnad’s unique multidisciplinary art form. They each brought their training in different fields – dance, gymnastics, theatre and visual arts. When they established Ecnad, these multiple Western contemporary forms were combined in their artistic expression. Due to their understanding of the contemporary as being Western as well as the outcome of their training and experiences, their multidisciplinary art form is solely based on Western practices and does not attempt to incorporate Asian art forms, which are conspicuously

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<sup>217</sup> Tan How Choon. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

absent. Instead, Western contemporary practices like minimalism, physical theatre and How Choon's exploration of "line-based movement" that features clean lines and linear movement prevail. Their artistic exploration is primarily driven by the desire to create art rather than an agenda to promote and construct an Asian identity.

Ecnad claims to be "Not just a dance company... [It is a] multidisciplinary movement-based arts company"<sup>218</sup> and their productions focus on movement exploration, drawn from modern dance, ballet and physical theatre, and also highlight costumes, sets, projections, installation art (art created with sculptural materials as well as new media) and music. The productions are characterized by a highly visual approach while their use of computer technology for music and visuals reflects a close association with contemporary life. Chin Huat and How Choon often serve as composers/music editors and technical theatre arts designers, in addition to being choreographers and performers. Central to their multidisciplinary approach are collaborations with other dance artists or artists from other fields. Indeed, the establishment of Ecnad as a multidisciplinary movement-based company grew from the increasingly frequent collaborations with other artists.

How Choon says that the formation of Ecnad "wasn't so much about being a company – it was more of a place of understanding".<sup>219</sup> Chin Huat adds, "It was more about preferring a more creative environment. It's not just a person doing a creation [but] everyone is supposed to contribute and have a part to make things happen."<sup>220</sup> For example, *B-Cycle* (1996)<sup>221</sup>, the company's first collaborative

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<sup>218</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Seven Years in a Night*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2003. 14.

<sup>219</sup> Tan How Choon. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

<sup>220</sup> Lim Chin Huat. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.



production, featured Chin Huat's and How Choon's choreography together with other modern dance choreographers.

Chin Huat and How Choon view artistic collaboration as “a more open concept. [They] have allowed visual artists and performing artists to talk to [them] – to give [them] a proposal”.<sup>222</sup> They believe that for the collaborating artists, this arrangement allows for individual artistic growth gained from interacting with others. Chin Huat explains:

Through a lot of communication, sharing and exploration, artists work with other dance artists so they grow faster.

They learn from each other and at the same time they can try out what they have in mind, i.e. their own creation.

They can create something and we have showing sessions for them to share.<sup>223</sup>

For example, *Spy* (2004)<sup>224</sup> and *Ego Flamingo* (2004)<sup>225</sup>, two separate works in response to the urban condition, staged one after the other on the same evening at The Arts House, saw How Choon working with set, lighting, graphic, photography and video designers to produce material for *Ego Flamingo* while Chin Huat decided to work with a young installation art designer, graphic artist, lighting designer and photographer as well as another choreographer/dancer Kon Su Sam for *Spy*. Chin Huat explains the approach taken for *Spy*, about “individual isolation in a crowded world”<sup>226</sup>:

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<sup>221</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>222</sup> Lim Chin Huat. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

<sup>223</sup> Lim Chin Huat. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

<sup>224</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>225</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>226</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Spy*. Postcard. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2004.

The choreography is a challenge, because we are using the same installation to inspire two different individuals [Su Sam and Chin Huat]. The interesting thing about this is that we are not supposed to communicate with each other. We only have [a] dialogue about the idea and we work individually on it. The outcome may be a surprise but we learn something new about each other and ourselves. This is how our work becomes more and more interesting.<sup>227</sup>

Underscoring their firm belief in multidisciplinaryism, How Choon says that dance leads to exploration in other areas or fields and vice versa, “I like to explore different things, even if my first love is movement. From there, I get ideas that inspire movements that add on different layers of meaning to the dance.”<sup>228</sup>

He further explains:

The process of exploring will lead you to cover every aspect. You can specialize in one thing first but if you have an open mind, sooner or later you will discover other things. This is the better path to take because one medium will reinforce the other. You will understand it at a different level when you explore it through another medium.<sup>229</sup>

It can be seen that much of Chin Huat’s and How Choon’s artistic exploration is mostly about developing themselves, and with other artists, artistically. There is little evidence of any other motivation such as constructing an Asian cultural identity. Consistent with their dance form, which is based on Western aesthetics, their multidisciplinary approach through collaboration with

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<sup>227</sup> Lim Chin Huat. Personal interview. 21 September, 2004.

<sup>228</sup> Tan How Choon. Personal interview. 21 September 2004.

<sup>229</sup> Tan How Choon. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

other contemporary trained artists comes from what is commonly practiced in Western performing arts and is not rooted in Asian multidisciplinary practices. This reflects their interest in the contemporary, which is understood by them as meaning Western. Collaborations are typically with Western contemporary trained artists such as music composer Earl Norman (trained in America), Philip Tan and Adam Collis (in the United Kingdom) and lighting designer Tommy Wong (in America), among many others.

Throughout the years, Chin Huat and How Choon have also presented other choreographers and provided them with creative and production support such as costuming, music, set and lighting design. *Across Oceans* (1999)<sup>230</sup>, *Talking Dance Series* (1999), *Underground Works* (2001)<sup>231</sup>, *Fantasy Creatures and Other Things* (2001)<sup>232</sup> and *March Spin* (2003) are examples of Ecnad's numerous productions that saw choreography by others instead of Chin Huat and How Choon. The multidisciplinary event *Fireball* (2005) is a recent example of Chin Huat's and How Choon's growing interest in presenting and supporting various artists. It featured a program of dance works by independent artists on a range of topics that included unconditional love, trapped in a labyrinth in a world of excesses, loss of innocence, the impossibility of attaining an ideal body, etc. The works were performed in various spaces around The Arts House. In addition there were outdoor performances of music, dance and a costume parade as well as two photo exhibitions, an art installation and a costume installation. While Chin Huat and How Choon participated in the event as artists, their main role was more as presenters of other artists. Chin Huat says, "...today, Ecnad is not just a dance company – it is a station for dance related activities; always a home for artists

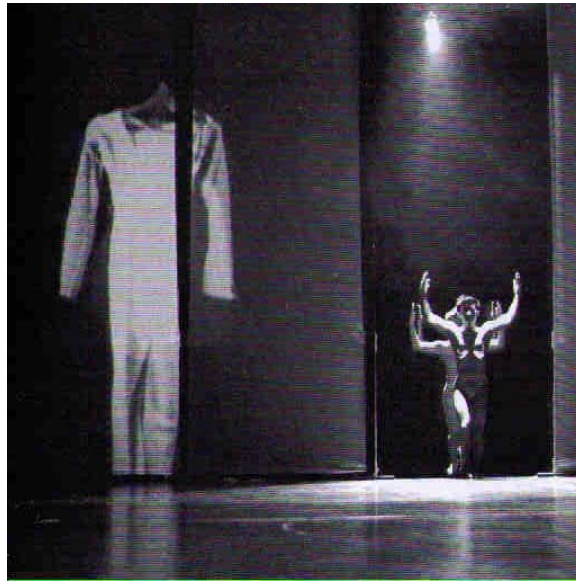
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<sup>230</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>231</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>232</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

from different disciplines. We are sharing our resources with the dance and arts community.”<sup>233</sup> Even as Chin Huat and How Choon fashion themselves more and more as presenters and mentors of other artists, their mission is not centered on an exploration of Asian-ness or any deliberate moves to embrace Asian art forms. Rather, their focus is on the contemporary and for them this means Western art forms.



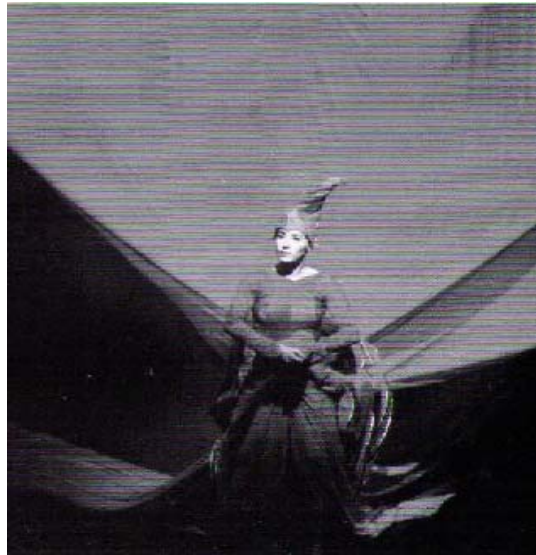
*7. Crazy Naked World.*

Likewise, their artistic expression in costumes, sets, music, installation art and video projections in their productions are based on contemporary Western aesthetics and modern practices. Highly distinctive of their productions are the prominent visuals, often conveyed through captivating costumes and sets. This is attributed to the visual art background of Chin Huat who often serves as designer for these components besides being choreographer and dancer.

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<sup>233</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. “Message from Artistic Director/Founder”. Fireball: A Production of Dance, Music and Exhibitions Centred on the Art of Dance. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2005.

For example, for the stage set of *a-the bird* (2000)<sup>234</sup>, Chin Huat translated a “longing for freedom” contrasted with an “instinctive urge to protect oneself”<sup>235</sup> through “some stunning design elements” such as a “sea of white that struck the audience upon entering the performance space”.<sup>236</sup> In *Fantasy Creatures and Other Things*, Chin Huat created the whimsical costumes for the vignettes from a fictitious children’s book “To Jac, Love, Laugh and Dream. Mom”, which I choreographed, such as the Fairy Queen’s large circular red skirt that almost covered the entire stage operated on a pulley system.



8. *Fantasy Creatures & Other Things*.

The fanciful costumes were also evident in other segments of this work such as in the “romantic duet Beauty and the Beast, monsters prance around the stage in elaborate half masks while another segment, titled “The Mermaid”, has its main dancer crowned with long strips of yellow sponge. The ‘blond tresses’ of the mermaid are designed to float and flirt with the green and blue waves of the

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<sup>234</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>235</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *a-the-bird*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2000.

<sup>236</sup> Carino, Caren. “a-the-bird”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, November and December 2000. 80.

sea”.<sup>237</sup> In *Crazy Naked World* (2003)<sup>238</sup> Chin Huat explored clothing or costuming not only as essential but also magical through “textures, fabrics, weights, colours, volumes, sizes, appearances and functions [that] re-define or restrict the body movement”<sup>239</sup> thus creating a huge Cookie Monster pair of trousers, an extremely short dress and a heavy two-kilogramme costume. Chin Huat comments, “At times, it’s almost like our dancing partners are the costumes. They become characters themselves.”<sup>240</sup>



9. *Fantasy Creatures & Other Things.*

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<sup>237</sup> Suhaila Sulaiman. “Dances with Large Skirt”. *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 19 December 2001.

<sup>238</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>239</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. “From the Choreographer”. *Crazy Naked World*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2003.

<sup>240</sup> Hong Xinyi. “Clothes Make the Dance”. *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 14 July 2003.



10. *Crazy Naked World*.

Besides making use of design as a key feature in his productions, Chin Huat also approaches choreography from a visual perspective. This is also, in a sense, multidisciplinary. He explains:

I see movement rather than I move. I see the movement before I move. I draw the movement before I do the movement. I used to draw a lot of skeletons of different movement sequences before I applied it in dance. I could illustrate my dance while I was on the bus. I kept drawing a lot of sketches.<sup>241</sup>

For example, his visual approach to choreography is seen in *a-the-bird*, “a dance composed of picturesque images”<sup>242</sup> that were contrasting metaphors for an inescapable situation and sense of freedom. It was described in a review:

[T]he Harmony section in which the dancers created an eddy in the white fabric by emerging through its openings, wrapping it around themselves then circling, creating a feeling of spiraling towards the center of the universe...an

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<sup>241</sup> Lim Chin Huat. Personal interview. 9 November 2005.

<sup>242</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *a-the-bird*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2000.

especially enthralling moment was when the dancers ran around the fabric causing it to billow, before skillfully unleashing the fabric, setting the stage for Loneliness.<sup>243</sup>



11. *A-the-bird*.

Besides costumes, other technical theatre forms like video projections are often integral aspects of Ecnad's productions. For example, Singaporean videographer/video editor Chew Tze Chuan has collaborated with the company on several projects such as in *Missing in Tall Pillars* (2002)<sup>244</sup> that saw a dancer interacting with his own screen image produced live. In *Floating Mirror* (2001), Tze Chuan produced intriguing projected images including bubbles on a translucent screen and silhouettes of a hippopotamus.

Computer-generated music designs, another component of many of Ecnad's productions, is credited to How Choon often in collaboration with other composers such as Lim Lay Choon, and Atman and Angelina Ho such as for *The New Adventures of Little Prince* (2000)<sup>245</sup>, Ecnad's dance sequel to the famous

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<sup>243</sup> Carino, Caren. "a-the-bird". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, November and December 2000. 80.

<sup>244</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>245</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.



novel *The Little Prince* by French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Other music composers like Earl Norman have utilized computer technology to create scores for the company such as his electronic score improvised live for *Sheep* (restaged in 2003)<sup>246</sup>, an interactive performance for children.

Other artistic explorations include physical theatre practices like How Choon's "basic vocalization; showing [the dancers] how movement and breathing can translate into sound"<sup>247</sup> as well as body sounds created by the dancers. For example, *Missing in Tall Pillars* saw the company dancers experimenting with the sound of their clapping and stomping echoing in the vast gallery space at the Asian Civilizations Museum. Installation art is another form often found in Ecnad's multidisciplinary productions. In *Spy*, Chin Huat and Su Sam first worked separately with the same art installation without communicating with one another on their creative process and then joining up to perform together with the art work as an integrated creation. In *Cost-Tune-Mean* (2004)<sup>248</sup> larger than life fantasy creatures came alive through installation art merged with dance.

In summary, Chin Huat and How Choon have established their own artistic style and form through multidisciplinarity, which usually involve collaborations with other artists. However, they do not explore multidisciplinarity as an expression of Asian identity or to consciously express Asian-ness but simply for artistic development. They are not in search of a contemporary Asian identity expressed through their art. Rather, they are interested in producing contemporary art that is founded on Western aesthetics because of their training.

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<sup>246</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

<sup>247</sup> Tan How Choon. Personal interview. 21 September 2004.

<sup>248</sup> See excerpt of work in Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd.

## **Dance as an expression of contemporary issues**

Notwithstanding their Western aesthetics, Chin Huat and How Choon reveal their concerns as contemporary Asians in the themes of their works, which are often about what contemporary society is experiencing. While they express these topics as Singaporeans, the issues examined are also faced by other modern societies including those in Asia. In a magazine interview, Chin Huat had once said:

Contemporary choreography is always a statement and reflection of people, culture and life in a specific place. Local contemporary choreography is still finding its own identity and individuality as each artist expresses his/her different life experiences.<sup>249</sup>

For example, in Singapore where its independence from Malaysia and subsequent development is seen by much of the world as an achievement to be proud of, people like Chin Huat and How Choon see the adverse psychological effects it has had on the local population. As artists they sometimes choose to portray this urban condition and other times offer an escape through fantasy in their productions. They explain:

City life is highly technological and commercialized. Urban dwellers are often lost in the fast-paced and materialistic lifestyle. The pressures of living and jobs are increasing with time. People need an avenue for releasing their suppressed energies and feelings.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Deng Fuquan. "Moving the Agenda". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, September - October 2001. 19.

<sup>250</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Underground Works*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2001.

While they are located in Singapore, their urban experience is also shared by many citizens of modern societies. *Floating Mirror* was a comment on urbanized lives conveyed through the collaborative efforts of Chin Huat as choreographer, music composition by How Choon and Samsudin Bin Majid, and visual projection designer Yap Tyng Shiuh. It portrayed the destructive effects of urban living on human existence, as described in a review:

The misalignment of the walking dancers depicted the mundane life of city dwellers; tucked-under hips and jutting heads were a clear sign of society's pressures. Movements were repeated to enhance the idea of the city dwellers being in a vicious cycle. Routine lifestyles were depicted as hard to endure, as Lim's distorted body illustrated when he turned on the shower and endured the cold of the theatre and water of his half-naked body.<sup>251</sup>



12. *Floating Mirror*.

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<sup>251</sup> Yong, Vincent. "Floating Mirror". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, November and December 2001. 79.

Also, *Spy* directed by Chin Huat looked at the urban condition through the experience of one individual's experience described in publicity materials, "Unlock the heart and soul of urban living, as longing and secrets are played out amidst ultra chic fixtures and gadgets."<sup>252</sup>

Chin Huat and How Choon are interested in connecting to the Singaporean community through "unconventional outreach site-specific projects"<sup>253</sup> or work created for a particular space such as fountains, courtyards, parks, galleries, car parks, museums, atriums and roads, which are a reflection of and response to the state's intense urbanization. For example, *Missing in Tall Pillars* in the vast gallery space at the Asian Civilizations Museum commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival saw the company dancers experimenting with and around the ten colossal columns and sharing the space with the audience who was free to move around. For Chin Huat and How Choon being lost or going missing were metaphors for the urban experience of "individual isolation in a crowded world".<sup>254</sup>



13. *Missing in Tall Pillars*.

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<sup>252</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Spy*. Postcard. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2004.

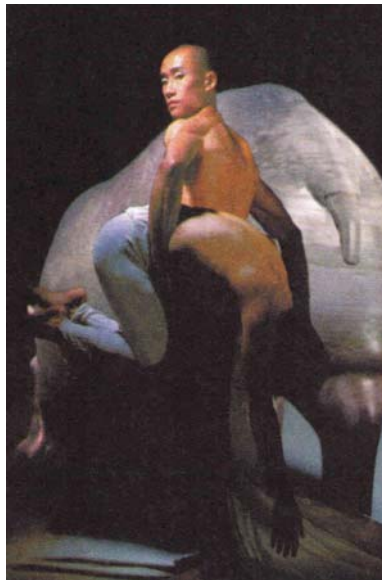
<sup>253</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Seven Years in a Night*. Program booklet. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2003. 17.

<sup>254</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Spy*. Postcard. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2004.

Other Ecnad productions offer an escape from urbanization through fantasy. For example, *Ego Flamingo* directed by How Choon explores the “beauty and irony of existence through the eyes of a flamingo that thinks it is a man. Or is it a man who thinks he is a flamingo?”<sup>255</sup> Chin Huat was inspired by a vision he had of a hippopotamus “with a single tear rolling down its cheek”<sup>256</sup> in one segment of *Floating Mirror*.



14. *Ego Flamingo*.



15. *Floating Mirror*.

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<sup>255</sup> Ecnad Project Ltd. *Flamingo*. Postcard. Singapore: Ecnad Project Ltd, 2004.

<sup>256</sup> Lim, Gary. “Dancing Outside the Box”. *Streets*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 16 July 2003.

## **Conclusion**

Chin Huat's and How Choon's understanding of their identity is not one that is anchored in ethnicity or cultural traditions but rather in the issues of contemporary life. As artists who prioritize art-for-art's sake they nevertheless become social commentators as they take on themes of society in their dance works.

Their interest in contemporary forms corresponds to a Western aesthetic and is influenced by their artistic training that views contemporary from a Western perspective. They do not feel the need to overtly feature any traditional Asian art form as part of their works even though they may have been exposed to Chinese traditional practices when they were growing up. Characteristic of Chin Huat's and How Choon's contemporary art form is multidisciplinaryism that combines kinesthetic, aural and visual forms – specifically Western contemporary forms such as modern dance, contemporary ballet, music, physical theatre, costume and set design as well as projections and installation art. They usually collaborate with other Western contemporary trained artists and often serve as choreographers, performers and designers themselves. Recently, they have been increasingly interested in presenting other choreographers and providing them with design and production support. Chin Huat and How Choon look upon multidisciplinaryism as a means of artistic exploration for art's sake rather than a statement of a contemporary Asian identity.

Their sense of Asian-ness, however, is found through the themes of their works, which saw them either depicting or offering an escape from the urban condition. Some are issues specific to their Singaporean experience, with many site-specific productions staged in various unconventional spaces such as

museums, fountains and nightspots in Singapore. Others are global issues that are present in modern societies. Chin Huat and How Choon therefore explore multidisciplinaryism mainly as artistic agents from a Western perspective but they are nevertheless making a commentary about issues of contemporary Asians as they express the social conditions they experience through their productions.

## Chapter Six: Tammy L. Wong Dance Company

### Introduction

In 1998 Tammy L. Wong (born 24 July 1970) formed her company called the Tammy L. Wong Dance Company<sup>257</sup> following her production *Child* (1998), presented in Singapore by Dramaplust Arts, a community arts education organization headed by Rodger Jenkins.<sup>258</sup> Tammy had just returned to Singapore from the USA where she lived for eight years. During the two-year gap between Tammy's company's emergence and Ecnad Project Ltd's formation in 1996 (initially named Dance Dimension Project), no new contemporary dance companies were established in Singapore. The Tammy L. Wong Dance Company received funding and support primarily from the National Arts Council (NAC). Then in 2002, four years after her company was established, Tammy dissolved it following an unsuccessful Seed Grant application to the NAC. In that same year, Tammy received the Young Artist Award from the NAC.

This chapter discusses how the Asian contemporary dance form created by Tammy Wong, artistic director of Tammy L. Wong Dance Company, is one that is ardently tied to Western – particularly American – ideals and aesthetics, and her expression of a contemporary Asian identity draws very little, if any at all, from her Asian roots. A Chinese Singaporean, Tammy has taken on a Western world view due to her Westernized upbringing and having lived in the USA for eight years. Her personal ideals and artistic aspirations are embedded in a strong

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<sup>257</sup> See company profile in Appendix III: Tammy L. Wong Dance Company.

<sup>258</sup> Dramaplust Arts was founded in 1992 by Rodger Jenkins, who serves as artistic director, in Singapore with a focus on arts education and community outreach as well as providing opportunities for artists of various arts disciplines to collaborate in both Asian and Western traditions. Prior to this, Jenkins was director of STARS Community Theatre and was founder and artistic director of Hi! Theatre which featured hearing-impaired artists.



identification with America and Asian Americans. Tammy represents an Asian identity that embraces Western ideals and perspective or, more simply put, a Westernized Asian identity. Her Westernized Asian identity is also shared by a segment of Singaporean society and is generally accepted due to an increased exposure and links with the West. However, Tammy believes that as an artist she is not totally supported by the dance community and the government in Singapore because of her Westernization. In spite of this she perseveres with creating Westernized dance forms. The obvious absence of Asian-ness in her dance reflects her resistance to a culture she doesn't identify with. Tammy is of the view that contemporary dance is a Western construct and expression, i.e. it is a form that originated and developed largely in the West, namely America. This understanding is different than her counterparts in Singapore who endeavor to create and define contemporary dance on Asian terms. Distinctive of Tammy's artistic form is multidisciplinaryism that is linked with Western culture and aesthetics. She imports largely from the West including the incorporation of poetry recited in English, Western music as well as ballet and modern dance. Furthermore, she often draws from the American experience including tragic events, intimate relationships and childhood memories identified with that society for choreographic themes.

Tammy feels more accepted in America as an artist where she has articulated her difference through an Asian ethnicity and thus has been afforded the recognition and opportunities given to Asian artists there. Even when she moved back to Singapore, she drew inspiration and demonstrated her loyalty to America in her choreography as well as choice of places to perform with her company. As Tammy is physically and domestically in Singapore but is located

culturally and artistically more in America, she finds herself in disparate roles as wife/mother on one hand and artist on the other, and tries to bridge two worlds.

Tammy is the only contemporary Asian dance artist in Singapore that clearly embraces a Western, particularly American, orientation in her contemporary dance form. The prominence of the Western/American aesthetic and cultural experience is reflective of her strong identity with the West, namely America. She is representative of the effect of Western or American hegemony on Singaporean citizens.

### **Influences on Tammy's identity and artistic approach**

Tammy's Westernization represents a form of the Asian identity that is termed "banana", a contemporary Singaporean slang that denotes a Westernized Chinese – yellow on the outside but white inside. She says, "Unlike the other [Singaporean] dance artists, I am a 'banana'. I do not come from the strong Chinese upbringing that many of [my counterparts have] enjoyed,"<sup>259</sup> meaning that she wasn't raised in a traditional Chinese way but rather a Westernized way. As a result, Tammy's "banana" identity, i.e. her affiliation and identification with the West, particularly America, is reflected in her artistic work.

Though born and raised in Singapore, Tammy views her Asian-ness only as being of Chinese ethnicity. Her Western aspirations are rooted in her upbringing by a third generation Western-educated Straits Chinese mother. Her Straits Chinese (Peranakan) ancestors, i.e. Chinese-Malay hybrids who were the descendents of Chinese immigrants in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, viewed the adoption of the Western

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<sup>259</sup> Wong, Tammy L. E-mail interview. 15 October 2004.

culture of their British colonizers as a means to achieve higher social and political status. Tammy followed in the footsteps of the Straits Chinese in the past who “went to missionary school where they acquired not only...English but a modern European consciousness”.<sup>260</sup> Her mother spoke English at home and also exposed Tammy to Western art forms like ballet, a cultural product of Singapore’s British colonizers. Tammy describes the influence of her mother:

[She] went to a Methodist school and was English-educated. We never spoke Chinese at home. My mother’s second language is Malay. Because she was the youngest of seven children she was the most spoiled. She was physically very beautiful so she was my grandmother’s favorite child and had ballet and piano lessons.... So, there was always a lot of art in the house because of what she liked. She [would] always [say to me] ‘you have to be reading.’ She loved poetry.<sup>261</sup>

Her mother encouraged Tammy to take up ballet but it wasn’t until Tammy saw a ballet performance in primary school in 1980 when she was 10 years old that she was inspired to pursue training. Tammy’s interest in text began when as a child when her mother encouraged her to read. She recalls:

[M]y mother never bought me toys – she only bought me books. These experiences really shaped who I am today and shape the nature my work... I remember I started reading at three years old and if I read a book really quickly I would get a new book. So, I always read really fast so I could get a

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<sup>260</sup> Pan, Lynn. *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 169.

<sup>261</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.

new book. Still today I still have every book from my childhood – my most treasured possessions.<sup>262</sup>

Tammy's interest in dance and literary text was thus greatly influenced by her mother. This was fuelled when she was living at her maternal grandmother's house for eight years where she grew up since she was 10 years old, upon her mother's divorce from her father. It was a difficult time for her as she lived in a house with cousins who were more sociable than herself. She took to ballet because it offered discipline yet a sense of freedom she felt missing at home. This led her to study ballet from age 10 which included taking a term off from school when she was 17 years old to attend a summer ballet program at the Royal Academy of Dancing in London. Her time at her grandmother's house additionally cemented her love for reading and writing which became her solace, being the quiet person that she is. Text would become an important part in her multidisciplinary approach to dance, as discussed later.

Tammy also identifies more with Western ideals and aspirations surrounding the notions of individualism and freedom instead of purporting Asian values such as conformity and temperedness largely because of the impression her mother made on her while growing up. She describes her mother, who is only 20 years older than Tammy, as "radical in the sense that she had Afro-American friends"<sup>263</sup> in the 70's in Singapore and also a gypsy in the sense that she wasn't territorially bound. Her mother had lived in Singapore until she was 16 when she left for school in Australia. After several years there, she returned to Singapore and since 1999 has been living between Singapore, the USA and Australia before settling in New Zealand one or two years later. It appears that Tammy's family

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<sup>262</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.

<sup>263</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.

background gave her little or no exposure to Chinese culture or values. Her involvement with ballet further reinforced her Western cultural identity.

Although she studied Chinese in school in Singapore, she says that she “never really learned to be Chinese until [she] lived in the States”<sup>264</sup> and began by learning the Chinese language again. In fact, she had deliberately failed her Chinese language exam at A-Levels so that she could not be admitted into the National University of Singapore to study Law, which is what her mother wanted her to do. Instead, she wanted to go abroad to pursue her ballet training more seriously and since her mother remarried a British man from the United Kingdom who was living in Singapore at the time and relocated to the USA, Tammy followed her at age 18.

In the USA, Tammy embraced an Asian American identity as she had found a place that resonated with her Western ideals and aspirations and says that she “felt an immense sense of community there. Every society is political and has people make a lot of noise (sic) and make it difficult [meaning that there are people who openly voice opinions on societal issues] but maybe there is more space there”.<sup>265</sup> Furthermore, she did not feel unwelcomed as an Asian person. She found that Asians living in America enjoyed a unique place in its multiracial society as “one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the US, reaching a critical mass that has registered its effects not only on the US census but economically, socially, and politically on the very foundations of US society”.<sup>266</sup> She observed that the Asian American community retained to a certain extent aspects of Asian culture such as language, cuisine, celebrations, as well as

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<sup>264</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.

<sup>265</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

<sup>266</sup> Yang, Alice. “Why Asia?” *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 103.

purported characteristic behavior. Asians were stereotyped as thrifty, conscientious and hard-working thus earning them the title “model minority”<sup>267</sup> which set them apart, often positively, from mainstream America.

Tammy’s place in American society as an Asian, i.e. Asian American, was a way to articulate her difference in the West. As an Asian American artist she was afforded the opportunities and recognition that came with belonging to this racial group. At the same time, she could express herself artistically without the pressures of being Asian as she was not expected to fulfill a certain expectation of producing “a kind of art with shared concerns, vocabularies, and histories that imply the combination of Asian and Western modes”.<sup>268</sup> Thus she was able to explore and pursue her passions through various platforms for Asian American artists. She experienced affirmation as a writer through an invitation to participate in an event for Asian American writers in 1993. Later, Tammy and her company, Tammy L. Wong Dance Company, were invited to participate in the 2001 American Dance Festival International Choreographers Residency and 2001 New York International Fringe Festival. She believes that is important and necessary that as an artist she is accepted, supported and validated by the society where she practices. In saying this, Tammy’s cultural identity is tied to “where [she feels her] art makes the most sense”<sup>269</sup> and America is where as an artist she feels understood and comfortable. Tammy says that her company “went to real platforms of dance that matter in the real dance world, or I suppose, in the American dance world, for here [in America] are my roots as a modern dance

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<sup>267</sup> Yang, Alice. “Why Asia? *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 103.

<sup>268</sup> Yang, Alice. “Why Asia?” *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 104.

<sup>269</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

artist”.<sup>270</sup> She believes America is where the dance scene is well known and respected worldwide as mature and vibrant and she views America as *the* place to validate her work, albeit according to Western standards and norms.

Tammy explains that her identity as an Asian American artist is analogous to the notion of Kung Pao chicken in America where it is a popular Chinese dish which is a bit “exotic” to mainstream Americans. It is served in Chinese restaurants but it is not really authentic Chinese cooking. In the same way Tammy believes her artistry is viewed with interest by the American public. She is an Asian artist who appears “exotic” in mainstream America but her work is not really reflective of traditional Asian culture. In her words:

I find that in America is where I feel most at home. And when I present my work in America I am different enough to be exotic. It fulfills their exotic focus – Asian American. At the same time I’m not so exotic or so foreign that it’s a threat to the predominant aesthetic or taste. So, we are like Kung Pao chicken, which Singaporeans don’t eat. And it’s OK – I feel comfortable with that. I feel safe there.<sup>271</sup>

Tammy’s emotional bond and loyalty is with America and has remained even after she returned to Singapore in 1995 when she was 25 years old with her Chinese Singaporean husband John, who has an established medical practice, to live and later raise their daughter Summer who was born in 1996. When she learned of the tragic terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, known in history as “9/11”, she was devastated. She remembers returning to Singapore with her dancers from a performance in New York only three days

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<sup>270</sup> Wong, Tammy L. E-mail interview, 15 October 2004.

<sup>271</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

before the catastrophic event. She says, “When I heard about it, it really broke me. I fell apart. It was where my dancing took shape. It was where I traced my dreams with my dance company. I was devastated and I was a difficult person to live with for a while.”<sup>272</sup> In response to 9/11 she choreographed *Alone* (2001), a solo work, to vent her feelings of grief. She remembers how an American man in the audience was moved to tears. She recalls:

At the end of the show, an American couple came to speak to me. They had been dragged to the show by friends.

Anyway, this man, a six-foot tall New Yorker, blue eyes, banker type who has zero interest in dance, was very moved by the solo and couldn’t stop crying. It turned out that he lost an uncle and a neighbor during the horror. They were both working at the World Trade Towers (sic).<sup>273</sup>

Tammy’s affinity with America and affirmation in its society as a contemporary dance artist saw her and her company making many trips between 1998 and 2002 to perform in America, such as in California, Montana and New York. She says that the Tammy L. Wong Dance Company was the only Singaporean company to have been invited to the American Dance Festival and New York City International Fringe Festival.

In addition to her own personal influences and experiences, Tammy’s Western values as well as her view that contemporary dance is a Western construct and is understood through a Western perspective is also reflective of a Western, particularly American hegemony. She represents a segment of Singapore society who has uncritically taken Western outlooks as universal perspectives.

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<sup>272</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

<sup>273</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.



Nonetheless, this represents one of the forms that Asian identity takes. It is one reinforced through English as the lingua franca and perpetuated through Singapore's increased links with the West such as largely evidenced and accepted in the business community that employs Western models and standards. It follows then that "[t]he government's vision of an artistically vibrant Singapore owes much to what it believes are Western standards; in fact, the fixed markers are frequently those set by the international business community, making Singapore a model society in terms of its ability to enshrine the values of global capitalism".<sup>274</sup>

Herein lies an ambivalence, on one hand the government employs Western standards to measure Singapore's arts yet it also encourages a Singaporean artistic identity such as highlighted in the *Renaissance City Report*:

Our culture, arts and heritage is the common language through which Singaporeans can express and share their Singapore stories. Local artists, be they writers, film-makers, directors, dancers, painters, sculptors or architects, help to create shared perspectives that will be a decisive factor in nurturing the Singapore Heartbeat.<sup>275</sup>

This could also be the reason that even though the Singapore government validated her artistic contribution through a National Arts Council Young Artist Award in 2002 and utilized her in public relation stints because of her Western acculturation, they were less forthcoming with regard to monetary support for her artistic endeavors as they did not provide sufficient funds to sustain her company.

Tammy explains:

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<sup>274</sup> Peterson, William. *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 17.

<sup>275</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter Five: The Vision for Renaissance Singapore". *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2001.5.

I do feel that sometimes in Singapore I'm in a tricky place. I'm always the one they use as a 'face' when it's time to meet the director of the Melbourne Arts Festival or a youth publicity campaign.... when it's convenient they send me because I am intelligent and I speak grammatically correct English and to the Western outsider I am not too foreign or exotic. But when it comes to putting in the money – dollars and cents – I have to support myself.<sup>276</sup>

Moreover, in Singapore's dance community Westernized Asians and the dominance of Western perspectives in their work are viewed more critically. Thus, Tammy found that being a Westernized Asian creating a Westernized dance form in Singapore was “an alienating experience within the local [dance] community”<sup>277</sup> because she felt she was not “Chinese enough or local enough”.<sup>278</sup> She believed that the wider dance community could not connect with her nor could she “relate to their pursuits/manner of work, etc.”<sup>279</sup> In other words, she felt that her estrangement was owed to her choice of a Westernized artistic expression that was not concerned with expressing particularly Asian or Singaporean themes and incorporating traditional Asian elements.

In spite of feeling unsupported and out of place in Singapore, Tammy still adheres to her Westernized form of dance and through it, asserts her Westernized Asian identity. Unlike most other contemporary dance artists in Singapore she was not interested in expressing concerns about Singaporean society and its problems as well as utilizing any Asian elements in the creation of a contemporary Asian

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<sup>276</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

<sup>277</sup> Wong, Tammy L. E-mail interview. 15 October 2004.

<sup>278</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

<sup>279</sup> Wong, Tammy L. E-mail interview. 15 October 2004.

dance form. Nor does she find the need to address her feelings of rejection of foreignness in Singapore in her works. She finds validity and universality in her Westernized and Americanized mode of expression and identity.

As Tammy's artistic fulfillment comes from America while her company and family are in Singapore, this is an inconvenience she has had to deal with. She strives to straddle both and oscillates between accepting the difficulties of practicing her art in Singapore, sometimes reasoning, "No complaints, as I am a loner!"<sup>280</sup> or otherwise considering a more divisive move that "maybe Singapore is where I come to be Mrs. Chan, John's wife, but America is where Tammy works. I'm very happy with the different set-ups or environments".<sup>281</sup> Since her return to Singapore in 1997 she tries to reconcile her life between Singapore and America and philosophizes, "I feel that life is fleeting. I don't believe in permanency,"<sup>282</sup> and says, "I learned that you can have certain plans but they need to be fluid, kind of like dance – entrances and exits. You never know what will happen."<sup>283</sup>

In summary, Tammy's identification of the contemporary Asian is paradoxically a Western one, drawn through her relocation in America as well as being raised by a Western acculturated mother. Her Asian-ness merely comes from being Chinese and Singaporean by birthright as well as citizenship but it is also from a lineage of Straits Chinese who have historically, i.e. when Singapore was a British colony, been characterized as aspiring to be Western. She also represents a segment of society in Singapore who share a similar Westernized Asian identity that has resulted from a Western, particularly American hegemony,

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<sup>280</sup> Wong, Tammy L. E-mail interview. 15 October 2004.

<sup>281</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

<sup>282</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

<sup>283</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

whose values are taken to be universal. It follows that she views contemporary dance as a Western construct and assumes that this is understood. Therefore, when she found herself in Singapore because of family obligations she maintained a Westernized approach in producing her work even though she did not feel she was wholly accepted by the government and the dance community in Singapore as compared to in America.

### **Western-centric artistic expression**

Because Tammy's cultural identity is tied to the West, her artistic style and themes are convivially Western. She represents a form of Asian identity that is Westernized. There is nothing Asian about her choreography except for the ethnicity of the dancers, including her. Tammy says that she is "not interested in creating a Singaporean company nor searching for a Singaporean identity or dance form".<sup>284</sup> She just wants to "create good work on par with the rest of the world".<sup>285</sup> Tammy translates this in terms of Western aesthetics and ideals which she views as universal because it is her cultural experience and identity.

Distinctive of Tammy's contemporary dance form is multidisciplinaryism linked with Western art forms. Modern dance and ballet movement are both Western dance forms and, together with Western music and poetry, are the basis of her style of contemporary dance and artistic expression. Herein is her point of difference from other Singaporean contemporary dance artists: she translates and validates contemporary dance in Western terms while her counterparts seek to define and endorse it in consideration of their Asian heritage. Essentially, her Western-centric artistic expression reflects a perspective which is largely

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<sup>284</sup> Wong, Tammy L. E-mail interview. 15 October 2004.

<sup>285</sup> Wong, Tammy L. E-mail interview. 15 October 2004.

attributed to an identity cultivated through a Western orientation, i.e. upbringing in a Western way including speaking English and exposure to Western art forms such as ballet as well her location in America for eight years. Her Western-centric perspective is particularly American where she experienced an affinity with its society, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, her Western-centric art form is validated through her Western, specifically American acculturation.

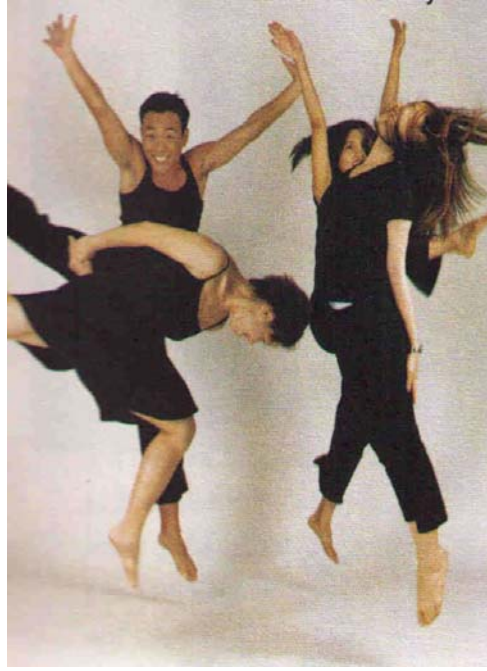
Characteristic of Tammy's movement style is the combination of Western dance forms such as the clean lines and codified movement vocabulary of classical ballet, especially in the lower extremities of the body such as legs and feet with the more creatively expressive upper extremities of the body such as the torso and arms typical of modern dance. I have, for example, in a review of her work *Remembering Jesus* (2000) that is described as “‘a prayer of thanksgiving and a sinners plaintive cry’ transpired though dance, text and song”,<sup>286</sup> said that:

Wong's movement vocabulary synthesizing a precise lower body with a qualitatively expressive upper torso was evident. She was successful at blending classical technique and contemporary movement concept explorations. Her movement signature was an eclectic concoction contrasting vibrating extremities; a fluent torso versed in hinging, curving and releasing; blocky whole body action; archetypal ballet positioning; and quirky nonsensical movement indications and combinations.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Carino, Caren. “Well Remembered”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May-June 2000. 70.

<sup>287</sup> Carino, Caren. “Well Remembered”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May-June 2000. 70.



#### 16. *Remembering Jesus*

The incorporation of ballet in her choreography is a reflection of her Westernized upbringing and her earlier training. By the time Tammy studied ballet, it had been established in Singapore since the 1930's by Western foreigners. Thus ballet, particularly the system developed by the Royal Academy of Dancing from the United Kingdom, a Western cultural signifier, influenced her artistic aesthetic prominently. When Tammy was about 20 years old she incurred an injury that prevented her from pursuing a career in ballet. Later, when she began choreographing, she incorporated ballet movement vocabulary such as in *Folk Song* (2001/2002) which featured “spirited pas de chats [like the springing movement of a cat], stag jumps [a jump with one leg lifted to the front and the other to the back, both well-turned out, the knees bent and the feet lifted as high as

possible] and grande jetes [big leaps forward]”<sup>288</sup> and in *Cry* (2002) in which the “precise movement motifs”<sup>289</sup> were characteristically ballet influenced.



17. *Cry*.

While in the USA Tammy discovered that modern dance movement, an American invention, rather than ballet was more conducive to communicating her ideas about real life experiences. Therefore, her location in America, with it being a place of validation for modern dance, influenced her to choose modern dance as one of the primary artistic components in her multidisciplinary form. Her first exposure to modern dance was a performance in 1990 when she was 20 years old by Sankai Juku, a Japanese contemporary dance company with its foundation in Butoh named after its choreographer, performer and artistic director. Typical of its works is offered in the following description by Brett Johnson, “A lone dancer enters, body taut, hands formed into talons, a mass of potential energy. Soon his slow contortions usher in four skeletal fishermen, all gleaming skulls and protruding bones.”<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Tey, June. “September September”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January-February, 2002. 57.

<sup>289</sup> Carino, Caren. “Rain”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May-June 2002.76.

<sup>290</sup> Johnson, Brett. “Sankai Juku: Butoh Dance From Japan”. *The Journal of the International Institute* 4.2 (1977). [Quod.hb.umich.edu/j/jii](http://Quod.hb.umich.edu/j/jii). Accessed 22 April 2007.

Sankai Juku explained that “as human beings we have much in common among different continents – the universality of human feelings; awe, hope, desires, approaches to beauty”.<sup>291</sup> Tammy remembers how it “completely blew [her] mind. [She] then thought ballet was very trite and wondered why [she] was interested in this artificial prettiness when [she] should be talking about human life?”<sup>292</sup> After obtaining an undergraduate degree in dance from the University of California, Los Angeles, she moved to New York in 1993 to study with Murray Louis, a prominent American post-modern dance pioneer, both as a dancer and choreographer. Post-modern dance emerged in America in the 1950’s as an artistic reflection of post-modernity and favored exploration of movement. Choreography during this time abandoned narratives or the telling of stories in favor of reflecting the diverse and pluralistic condition of Western society through the utilization of approaches known as deconstruction and fragmentation. When Tammy began to choreograph, she understood and investigated the dance form from a Western perspective rather than an Asian one because her body was trained in Western modern dance and the fact that it was a form that originated in America. Moreover, her own Westernized identity meant she did not see post-modern dance as anything but Western. Reviewer Brenton Wong observed in his review of *September Sean* (2001), a production comprising two dance pieces, one of which was choreographed by Tammy, that her choreography has been:

further refined by increasing scientific knowledge of how the human body moves, it [was] not about costumes or lavish sets – nor the illusion of lightness. Movements [were] instead more earth-bound and dancers usually emote

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<sup>291</sup> Yoshida, Yukihiro. “Sankai Juku-Japan”. *Shifting Sands: Dance in Asia and the Pacific*. Ed. Stephanie Burridge. Australia: Australian Dance Council-Ausdance Inc, 2006. 101.

<sup>292</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.



with contractions. Prettiness does not come into this very personal idiom, where pieces are usually choreographed for particular dancers, and mirroring contemporary life.<sup>293</sup>

Tammy's other choreographies also incorporated idiosyncratic movement often characteristic of modern dance such as her solo work *Alone* which "enmeshed fluttering, crab-like movements, and frantic quivering of the limbs"<sup>294</sup> and in *Goodbye, Goodbye* (2002), a dance about a couple's parting of ways, where "[t]wo characters, in the pain of parting, expressed the need for dependence and independence through a hug, large leaps, lifts, and falls".<sup>295</sup>

Tammy's contemporary dance form not only embodies her Western dance training and exposure to Western artistic fields but often reflects a personal response to American events and experiences. For example, her works for Tammy L. Wong Dance Company were inspired by American tragedies such as 9/11, the "LA riots, and the plight of Aids affecting the arts world in the 1990's, and seeing the people you know fall very very sick. My hope for the company was always to create work that 'heals, provokes and inspires'".<sup>296</sup> Childhood from a Western perspective is another theme that Tammy explores in her works. For example *Folk Song*, a dance that featured several young performers, Tammy depicted images of a typically Western childhood such as children donning "frocks with white aprons" and scenes like a "Golden Retriever bouncing across the stage to 'Cock-a-Doodle-Do'".<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Wong, Brenton. "September Sean". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January-February 2002. 68.

<sup>294</sup> Tey, June. "September September". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January-February 2002. 58.

<sup>295</sup> Tey, June. "September September". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January-February 2002. 58.

<sup>296</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.

<sup>297</sup> Tey, June. "September September". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January-February 2002. 57.



18. *Folk Song*.

Music and text are also given significance in Tammy's works. The incorporation of ballet and prose/poetry comes from her early interest in these areas whereas modern dance and music were later but equally important discoveries. Tammy also wrote in her journal as a youth which she developed as an undergraduate student in America where she published and read her poetry. Later when she began to choreograph, she explored how prose/poetry could translate into Western modern dance movement as well as how English-language prose/poetry, often about her American experience, could be incorporated as one of the artistic components in her art form. In Tammy's first dance work dedicated to her daughter Summer, *Child* (1998), about childhood experiences, Tammy interpreted the childhood anecdotes of each dancer through Western modern dance movement. She explains, "I had no movement in my head. I didn't know what I was going to do. So, I had each individual tell me a story of their childhood. Somehow, or other, those stories became the movement."<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

Tammy's prose/poetry is also frequently about her intimate experiences in America such as in *Journal* (1998/2001) based on her New York journals, one of the works in the production *September Sean*. In this dance Tammy performed to a recording of herself reading a page from her New York journal: "The door ajar/I peep in,/Knowing that I would find my/Love, eyes shut, loose limbs/Asleep".<sup>299</sup> Her poetry extends beyond the stage and often appears in the program notes of her works such as for *Rain* (2002), a moody piece that "reveal[ed] itself as if a dream –fragmented and at times incongruous".<sup>300</sup> It consisted of five sections set to music by Ravel played by Singaporean pianist Shane Thio, of which she writes, "A rain has begun. It is moving toward me all my life. Perhaps I shall know it. Perhaps it is you arriving on legs of rain, arriving, returning, you"<sup>301</sup> and described as "a soft song, an illusive echo, a fleeting glimpse of lives unraveling in the rain".<sup>302</sup>



### 19. *Journal*.

<sup>299</sup> Wong, Tammy quoted by Brenton Wong. "September Sean". The Arts Magazine. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January-February 2002. 68.

<sup>300</sup> Carino, Caren. "Rain". The Arts Magazine. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May-June 2002. 76.

<sup>301</sup> Carino, Caren. "Rain". The Arts Magazine. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May-June 2002. 76.

<sup>302</sup> Carino, Caren. "Rain". The Arts Magazine. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May-June 2002. 76.



20. *Rain*.

Tammy's Western aesthetic is also evident in her music selections for her works. Her choices often were songs that reflect the American culture with English lyrics. For example, *Child* was set to American music classics such as "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", "Hiddy Ho" and "Lullaby" and *Folk Song*, a dance described as an "enchanted celebration of song and dance",<sup>303</sup> was choreographed to music such as "Yankee Doodle" and "London Bridge is Falling Down" from the album *American Folk Songs for Children* by American folk minstrels Mike, Peggy and Pete Seeger. Other times Tammy found inspiration through Western music forms such as Christian church songs (e.g. "Amazing Grace"), Irish jigs, tangos (e.g. by Piazzolla) and Western classical music (e.g. Bach's Cello Suite No. 1).

Tammy believes the themes of her works are universal although they transpire through Western art forms from a Western perspective and are mainly about the American experience. She feels that her work "appeals to themes of the

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<sup>303</sup> Tey, June. "September September". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January-February 2002. 57.

human heart and it's anybody's heart".<sup>304</sup> Thus her credo to "create work that provokes, inspires and heals" is intended to connect with people across cultures. For example, she says that her first production of *Child* "was effectively a bridge between different people because we all know what it's like to be a child. We have all had that experience so I wanted to explore that".<sup>305</sup> In her second staging of *Child* (2002)<sup>306</sup> she incorporates the pledges of different countries, thus reflecting her multi-national cast. However, as discussed, the artistic disciplines she chooses to bring together in her contemporary art form such as ballet, modern dance, poetry and Western music, reflect a strong Western preference.

It can be seen that her Asian contemporary dance form is wholly Western-centric, both in the artistic styles and in the themes explored. Her Western acculturation sets her apart artistically in the Singapore dance community and her productions offer a different choice to Singaporean audiences.

## **Conclusion**

Essentially Tammy is the only contemporary Asian dance artist in Singapore that explicitly expresses a Westernized, predominantly Americanized, identity in her art form. Her Westernized Asian identity, i.e. acculturation in Western ideals and aesthetics, is one form of Asian identity that is largely due to her upbringing, geographic relocation and artistic exposure. She is among a group of people called "bananas" in Singapore who have embraced the West due to their background and experiences reflecting a Western, specifically British colonial past and present American alliance. She comes from a lineage of Straits Chinese who have internalized the values and practices of their British colonizers. As a

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<sup>304</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 11 November 2002.

<sup>305</sup> Wong, Tammy L. Personal interview. 14 November 2005.

<sup>306</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix III: Tammy L. Wong Dance Company.

young adult, Tammy's sojourn to the USA also saw her identifying with American ideals. She found herself a place in its society as an Asian American where she pursued her passion as an artist. She feels that America has embraced her and her artistry because of her Asian ethnicity yet without the expectation of any integration of Asian and Western artistic forms or concerns.

Tammy finds herself straddling America as well as Singapore since Tammy, the artist, feels accepted in the USA but Tammy, the wife and mother, lives in Singapore. Although she aspires to pursue her art in America the pragmatics of her family life saw her in Singapore. She epitomizes a Western aesthetic in her art that simultaneously distinguishes as well as alienates her from her dance counterparts in Singapore. Her Western orientation and preference clearly expressed in her art form pose the dilemma of being a practicing artist living in Singapore. On one hand she accepts how she is viewed but on the other hand she feels estranged. Despite her feelings of not being accepted by the dance community and not being fully supported by the government, this has had no effect on her choice to pursue her dance form that is rooted in her Westernized Asian identity nor does she explore this estrangement in her work.

Although she is of Chinese ethnicity and her birthplace is Singapore, Tammy sees contemporary dance as a Western construct that is universally understood. Thus, her Asian contemporary dance form is the embodiment of her Westernized identity and expresses a Western aesthetic that is linked to Western artistic disciplines. Therefore, key components in her multidisciplinary artistic expression are Western imports such as Western music, modern dance, ballet and poetry as well as themes and subjects that are personally significant to her, rooted in her Western acculturation and reflective of the American experience.

## Chapter Seven: Odyssey Dance Theatre

### Introduction

Odyssey Dance Theatre (ODT)<sup>307</sup> was the fourth out of five contemporary dance companies to be established in Singapore between 1994 and 2003. It was founded by artistic director Danny Tan Koon Meng (born 18 November 1972) in 1999 when he returned to Singapore after obtaining his Masters of Fine Arts degree from the Queensland University in Australia. This was 10 years since the Singapore government turned its attention to developing the arts in the 1989 report produced by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts and about the same time the Asian values discourse was developed and debated. Danny entered Singapore's art scene at an opportune time when the state-of-the-arts was under review since the watershed report was written and the government was on the verge of producing the *Renaissance City Report* in 2000 that imagined Singapore as a "culturally vibrant society".<sup>308</sup> Later, with Danny's wife Ann Tan as General Manager, ODT was registered as a company limited by guarantee in 2001 and obtained its charity status in 2002.

This chapter discusses how Danny, in his endeavor to create an Asian contemporary dance form, expresses the contemporary Asian identity very much in terms of Chinese culture. As a Chinese Singaporean, he sees himself as a Singaporean that is rooted in being an ethnic Chinese, embracing all Chinese culture and traditions. Thus, his Asian contemporary dance form reflects the

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<sup>307</sup> See company profile in Appendix IV: Odyssey Dance Theatre.

<sup>308</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts. "Chapter One: The 1989 Report – Ten Years Hence." *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2000. 2.

continuity of Chinese tradition embodied in Chinese dance, Confucianism<sup>309</sup> and Buddhism.<sup>310</sup> Danny additionally draws from other Chinese influenced cultures in East Asia. His contemporary Asian dance form simultaneously exemplifies and is legitimized by Singapore's stand on the Asian values discourse, promoted by Singapore's prime minister then, Lee Kuan Yew, as fundamentally Confucian ideals as well as other aspects of Chinese culture. Furthermore, Danny is compelled to promote his Asian-ness, seen as his Chinese Singaporean heritage anchored in Chinese traditions, through productions for his company ODT.

Distinctive to Danny's dance creations under the auspices of ODT is his endeavor to forge a hybrid Asian contemporary dance form through interculturalism that essentially merges the movement of Chinese classical dance, characterized by focused energy flow and quietude, with Western modern dance and classical ballet, characterized by expansiveness and indulgence. This is a reflection of his background and training. However, he resists the totality of the West through a tendency towards Chinese-ness which he understands as both an inner landscape and world view embedded in Confucian and Buddhist ideals. In other words, he interprets a Chinese cultural identity through "religion, introspection and aesthetic experience".<sup>311</sup> Thus, his choreography expresses Asian sexual/sensual behavior as well as life philosophy as different from the

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<sup>309</sup> Confucianism developed through the Chinese sage Confucius. Its complex system of religious, moral, social and political thought has significantly influenced the history Chinese civilization and is found in wherever the Chinese have settled such as China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore.

<sup>310</sup> Although Buddhism originated in India through the teachings of Gautama Buddha in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, after his death it has propagated throughout Asia over two millennia and developed three traditions including Mahayana Buddhism that utilizes Chinese scriptures and is practiced in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam and well as Chinese communities worldwide.

<sup>311</sup> Yang, Alice. "Modernism and the Chinese Other in Twentieth-Century Art Criticism". *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 138.



West. At the same time, the imagery/symbolism based on Confucian and Buddhist ideals selected for his works are felt to be those universally understood.

### **Danny's personal identity and vision**

Danny's personal identity as a Singaporean is equated to being Chinese, i.e. he is Singaporean Chinese. When he speaks about being Singaporean he does so based on his personal experience as a Chinese. In other words, Danny views his Singaporean identity as inherently Chinese – although he is located in Singapore, was brought up in Singapore and his understanding of his Chinese heritage was acquired here, he appears to identify with being merely Chinese rather than being specifically Chinese Singaporean.

Danny's understanding of his Singaporean identity as Chinese is based on the belief that "one only [has] to be born a Chinese to exhibit Chinese cultural behavior – that Chinese traits, in other words, were somehow intrinsic to Chinese racial descent".<sup>312</sup> The certainty that Chinese ethnicity is linked to Chinese culture was instilled in him during his upbringing in Singapore under the autocratic governance of Lee Kuan Yew through "elitism, authoritarianism and cultural relativism",<sup>313</sup> i.e. political tendencies associated with the Asian values discourse. Although unspoken, a Singaporean identity anchored in Chinese ideology was cultivated through the politics of Lee who envisioned the "remaking of Singapore in the Confucian image".<sup>314</sup> For Lee, Asian values rooted in Confucian ideals were the "prerequisites for imposing work discipline, fostering social harmony

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<sup>312</sup> Pan, Lynn. Sons of the Yellow Emperor. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 265-266.

<sup>313</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. "Nationalism, Capitalism and 'Asian Values'". Democracy in Malaysia. Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 71.

<sup>314</sup> Pan, Lynn. Sons of the Yellow Emperor. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 265.

and imposing political order [in Singapore] in times of rapid industrialization”.<sup>315</sup> Lee also purported other aspects of Chinese culture including the learning of Chinese language, specifically Mandarin, as a “transmitter of ‘traditional values’... that were Asian values, superior to, and infinitely more desirable than, ‘Western values’, a byword for all that was bad about modern society, associated with individualism and the counter counter-culture”.<sup>316</sup> In this regard Danny, of Chinese ethnicity, literate in Chinese language, trained in Chinese dance, educated in Chinese religion and philosophy (Confucian as well as Buddhist teachings), understands his Asian-ness to be a Chinese identity cultivated through the political strategy of Lee Kuan Yew. Therefore, Danny claims with confidence:

I have a sense of belonging and, therefore, a greater sense of fulfilling the dream of Singapore’s cultural identity. If I weren’t a pure Singaporean then I think I’d have a different expression. How you represent yourself is your cultural identity. It also has to do with your generation. I’m 33 – born in the year 1972. The 70’s is strong because we lived in kampongs with strong family ties.<sup>317</sup>

Danny believes his contemporary Asian dance form is legitimized by a strong cultural identity. His creative work has integrity because it expresses his assuredness of a Chinese cultural heritage promulgated through doctrines such as the Asian values discourse. Danny says that “artists have something to share if

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<sup>315</sup> Khoo, Boo Teik. “Nationalism, Capitalism and ‘Asian Values’”. Democracy in Malaysia. Discourses and Practices. Eds. Francis Loh Kok and Khoo Boo Teik. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. 71.

<sup>316</sup> Pan, Lynn. Sons of the Yellow Emperor. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 262.

<sup>317</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005. Danny’s reference to being a “pure Singaporean” means early immigrants who made Singapore their home as well as those who were born and raised in Singapore. His mention of kampongs or villages in Singapore is significant in that it is a dying phenomenon and hence, a site of nostalgia or past and community.

they have cultural assets”,<sup>318</sup> i.e. having a clear sense of cultural identity is necessary for an artist because art should represent his/her culture. Therefore, “every work has something to do with [his] background. It has some informed idea about where [he comes] from.”<sup>319</sup> He explains:

If an artist is not clear who he is, where he comes from, then there’s nothing for him to present. He may have a voice but everyone has a voice. I always tell myself it doesn’t matter where you come from, you have to have your roots, your origins. I always have an international cast and I say to them that if you cannot differentiate or distinctively tell people where you come from then I think something is wrong with you. Something is wrong with your background, your heritage, your upbringing because you got to have a sense of belonging.<sup>320</sup>

Stemming from his strong sense of his Chinese identity, when Danny collaborates he chooses to partner with other East Asian artists, i.e. he draws from other Chinese influenced traditions and cultures when creating his works for ODT, as discussed later in this chapter.

As an artist, Danny both actively constructs and reproduces a Chinese identity through his contemporary dance form, thus fostering continuity of Chinese tradition. In Singapore, traditional dance is considered one of the vehicles to perpetuate the Chinese community’s cultural roots. This was and still is largely supported by clan association and amateur dance companies. In the 1980’s the establishment of the National Theatre Chinese Dance Company (NTCDC) and the

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<sup>318</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>319</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>320</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

Chinese Dance Artistes' Association, and later Frontier Danceland and Dance Ensemble founded by former NTCDC dancers Loh Mei Yoke and Yan Choong Lian<sup>321</sup> respectively, have been instrumental in the preservation and promulgation of traditional Chinese dance. Danny also sees himself as upholding Chinese culture but he does it mainly from a contemporary perspective. He says, "I'm not selling Chinese dance. I'm selling contemporary culture but in my contemporary culture I have my roots."<sup>322</sup> While Danny may speak of representing Singapore's culture, he is really speaking of the Chinese culture. As noted earlier, though he is a Chinese Singaporean (his Chinese culture is set geographically in Singapore and his works make reference to specific Singaporean locations), the values that he conveys do not refer to Chinese beliefs that are specifically Singaporean but are characteristic of Confucianism and Buddhism, i.e. the religion and philosophy entrenched in Chinese culture.

Indeed, Danny has made it his mission as artistic director and choreographer to promote his Chinese Singaporean heritage through his company. He believes that his company, more than other contemporary dance companies in Singapore, embraces and overtly expresses a contemporary Asian identity and does so by being the only contemporary dance company in Singapore that explicitly promotes the Chinese Singaporean heritage like a cultural ambassador locally as well as internationally. He explains:

It's important for the company and me as an artist to ensure that we not only represent ourselves as a company but to also represent Singapore's culture. Wherever we're invited

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<sup>321</sup> Both Loh Mei Yoke and Yan Choong Lian were young emerging Chinese dance choreographers in the 1980's in Singapore. They are currently still choreographing and teaching with their companies/schools which remain at the forefront of Chinese dance in Singapore.

<sup>322</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

to perform, like Korea, we are an ambassador for Singapore. You cannot deny the fact that when we travel we are representing a certain culture. We have to be at least a little concerned about our own true artistic mission.<sup>323</sup>

While Danny's artistic vision and approach to choreography coincided with the government's interpretation of Asian values, he does not receive major funding from the government. It appears that he has adequate business proficiency to sustain his company, i.e. he managed to obtain corporate sponsorship as well as income from education as well as outreach programs to realize his company's productions and support its operations. Notwithstanding the absence of government funding, he remained committed to his artistic vision and Chinese Singaporean identity in his productions.

### **A hybrid dance form through interculturalism**

Danny aims to create a hybrid Asian contemporary dance form through interculturalism whereby the original form, i.e. Chinese dance, has almost disappeared. His approach of marrying traditional Chinese dance with Western modern dance and ballet in his choreography is aimed towards creating new movement rather than bringing them together as separate expressions. Danny is of the view that if specific movement can be identified as clearly belonging to a particular form such as Chinese dance then it means that it hasn't been integrated fully. He believes that it is the cultural identity that is innate in him that enables him to create a signature dance language that seamlessly blends the movement of both Chinese and Western dance. While he attempts to integrate movement from

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<sup>323</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

Western and Chinese dance towards creating a unique entity, he purposely emphasizes Chinese-ness, i.e. Confucian and Buddhist ideals, in the choreographic structure and devices as well as topics of his works in order to maintain a difference between Western and Asian culture and expression. A Chinese aesthetic still prevails primarily in the structure and content of his works. Thus, Danny escapes the criticism that surrounds intercultural productions, such as cultural imperialism, because he is conscious to not allow Western input to dominate in his choreography.

For example, Danny believes that his work *Odyssey to the Sublime* (2000) “is very closely related to the Chinese way of moving in and the usage of space”.<sup>324</sup> He endeavors to integrate the elements and aesthetics of two contrasting dance forms by combining Chinese dance choreographic structural aesthetics such as “stillness, silence, movement”<sup>325</sup> while at the same time exploring movement possibilities allowed in Western modern dance such as full-bodied movement execution and inventive lifts developed from and embellishing upon basic dance elements. Therefore, this work was described as “a journey of contrasts ranging from tumultuous abandon to that of meditative serenity highlighted with interactive moments and the seamless evolvement of lifts”.<sup>326</sup>

It is thus evident that both his personal identity and his training in Chinese and Western dance have all contributed to his approach to an Asian contemporary dance form. His intercultural dance form is shaped by his extensive training in Chinese classical and folk dance forms of which he has mastered about half of

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<sup>324</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>325</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>326</sup> Carino, Caren. “A Ulysses Embarking”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May and June 2000. 71.

thirty-six styles<sup>327</sup> as well as modern dance and ballet which he studied in Singapore with Goh Lay Kuan<sup>328</sup> and several lecturers at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. It has been observed that:

Tan's training in ballet plays an important role as another source of movement... he adores the line and shapes of ballet. It is especially obvious in his slow combinations such as adage-developpes [i.e. the slow sustained unfolding of the leg into an open position off the ground in any direction] of ballet [which] are often used with the arms of Chinese dance [and] the movement of the spine is freer and more flexible than in ballet which requires a straight spine all the time. The curved and straightened spine comes with the breath and feeling.<sup>329</sup>

He derived a movement motif from the Chinese "water sleeves" for *Odyssey to the Sublime*:

It is very obvious that Chinese dance is one of the sources of his movements. The beauty of Chinese dance can be always observed in his slower movements as he adores the use of breath which plays an important role in classical Chinese dance. In *Odyssey to the Sublime*, shapes of Dun Huang Chinese dance (inspired by the ancient paintings of fairies and gods in the caves in China) act as part of the

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<sup>327</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>328</sup> Goh Lay Kuan, wife of the late Singaporean theatre director Kuo Pao Kun, is considered one of the pioneers of modern dance in Singapore.

<sup>329</sup> Choo Ting. "Analysis of Dominant Aesthetic Characteristics". Class paper. LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 27 February 2003.

movement elements, however, the ‘end product’ is completely fresh from the Dun Huang.<sup>330</sup>

Danny’s intercultural approach in creating new movement has been reviewed favorably in Singapore. For example, *The Roots*, one of three works presented in the production *One* (2001), which sought to express the dilemmas of an evolving complex Asian identity, was hailed as a “marvelous marriage of Chinese classical dance form with contemporary dance technique”.<sup>331</sup> Also, *Innocent Light* (2002)<sup>332</sup>, a work in which Danny explores the metaphor “light”, was viewed as:

relatively organic and was not a pastiche of Oriental-looking steps interspersed by ‘modern’ movements. Nothing looked particularly like it was borrowed from any particular Asian dance, though a strong Chinese dance component was apparent.<sup>333</sup>

Furthermore, Danny’s strong conviction in his Chinese identity is reflected in his choice of collaborators. Although he presents performances of dance artists from a variety of cultures including Western ones such as Finland and Australia, when he partners on creating a dance work he chooses to do so with East Asian artists whose cultural backgrounds have been influenced by Chinese traditions. For example, in *Synesthesia* (2005), a large-scale work presented at the Singapore Indoor Theatre investigating “the stimulation of one sense alongside another; the evocation of one kind of sense impression when another sense is stimulated: the

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<sup>330</sup> Choo Ting. “Analysis of Dominant Aesthetic Characteristics”. Class paper. LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 27 February 2003.

<sup>331</sup> Wong, Brenton. “One”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May-June 2001. 62.

<sup>332</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix IV: Odyssey Dance Theatre.

<sup>333</sup> Jamaludin Jalil. “Innocent Light”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, November-December 2002. 91.



two facets of a person's emotions",<sup>334</sup> Danny collaborated with Seo Dong Hyun and his company from South Korea. Danny explains that the relationship was an experiment in synthesizing their contemporary dance styles. The movement style of each choreographer was introduced in the opening when both entered the stage space from opposing diagonals in a call-and-response duet. Danny's dance style involved "subtle and transient movements while Seo Dong Hyun's contemporary dance style [was] fast and dynamic, with swift moves that display[ed] equal technical brilliance".<sup>335</sup> Although both Danny's and Dong Hyun's movement styles were distinctive, there were glimpses of stylistic overlapping, performed by the other dancers they assembled, often in linear dance formations highlighted by dance club lighting and accompanied by a live mix of Korean pop sound. *Synesthesia* as a collaboration suggests Danny's willingness to experiment with another artist whom he feels comfortable with, if none other than, because as contemporary Asians they both come from cultures with a shared Chinese heritage.



## 21. *Synesthesia*.

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<sup>334</sup> Odyssey Dance Theatre. "Programme Synopsis". *Synesthesia*. Program booklet. Singapore: Odyssey Dance Theatre, 2005.

<sup>335</sup> Odyssey Dance Theatre. "Programme Synopsis". *Synesthesia*. Program booklet. Singapore: Odyssey Dance Theatre, 2005.

## **Aesthetics, sentiments and beliefs**

Although Danny's contemporary Asian dance form is an integration of Western with Chinese dance, the emphasis is still on Chinese aesthetics, sentiments as well as values connected with Confucianism and Buddhism shaped by Danny's education in both compulsory subjects in secondary schools when he was a student. Danny therefore applies Confucian values such as harmony and order as well as meditation, the contemplative practice of Buddhism, in the choreographic structure and aesthetic of his dance form. Danny explains, "Instead of outwardly expressing ourselves, for us art starts as something small and is slowly developed. So, you can see this in all of my works. It has certain connections, links, patterns that try to bring the audience from the start to the end."<sup>336</sup> *The Origins* (2000)<sup>337</sup>, set to the music "Ghost Opera" by Tan Dun,<sup>338</sup> which utilized "silence as sectional transitions" and "quiet movement".<sup>339</sup> Also, other Chinese characteristics evident in Danny's choreography include the dancers' flocking floor patterns, slow motion movement and the infinite unfolding of a narrative, albeit abstract.

Buddhism's spiritual cultivation and investigation of the true nature of reality has also inspired and has provided the topics of Danny's creative work. For example, *Odyssey to the Sublime* was a work in which Danny said he sought to explore "our intrinsic spiritual and mutual needs, [understand] our own inner

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<sup>336</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>337</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix IV: Odyssey Dance Theatre.

<sup>338</sup> Tan Dun is a Chinese contemporary composer/conductor who gained popularity with audiences through his score for the film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (2000).

<sup>339</sup> Carino, Caren. "The Origins". The Arts Magazine. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January and February 2001. 68.

realm of impulses, instinct and attitudes toward life, and [question] our wisdom and vision of life”.<sup>340</sup>

*Innocent Light* was based on Danny’s own real life story during the time of his wife’s difficult pregnancy and communicated its message of hope through Buddhist “symbolic rituals” such as the cleansing with water, and the stage properties which consisted of platforms and calligraphy of Buddhist quotes projected on screens.



## 22. *Innocent Light*.

Danny says of *Innocent Light*:

People understood the symbolism. They could see baby Buddha. They could see the Kallang River because they know that Singapore’s Kallang River is a place where they go when people die or when they’re looking for hope. In the [Chinese] seventh month, the ‘ghost’ month, they float

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<sup>340</sup> Carino, Caren. “A Ulysses Embarking”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, May and June 2000. 71.

paper lanterns down the river. I have embodied these Asian symbolic gestures in my dance. They reflect my Asian culture but I have also elaborated on them to express my culture more in depth. The calligraphy is because of my Buddhist background. Four, five words mean so much. It could take a textbook to explain just two characters. Only Buddhist Chinese people would know these things. There is a huge capacity to learn their meaning.<sup>341</sup>

Furthermore, *Innocent Light* is an example of the importance Danny places on Buddhist values such as “utmost truth” and “rites of passage” which aims to differentiate Chinese from Western thought in the creation of dance. Danny moreover believes that “[o]nly those works where the artists have gone through this human passage then their work will reveal real wisdom and will stand through time”.<sup>342</sup> He relates:

Ann was carrying two babies. Ann was going through a hard time. One baby was dying and if we aborted it, the other one would have problems. So, we didn’t want to abort. We really wanted to have hope. So, from my perspective, Asian values [are] about Asian artists producing something of utmost truth.<sup>343</sup>

In addition, Danny’s Asian contemporary dance form expresses the Chinese perspective of emotions such as gender intimacy and asserts that Chinese men and women express the notion of physical relationships differently from

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<sup>341</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>342</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>343</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

Westerners. He explains that the approach in his work *Passion.Love* (2003)<sup>344</sup> expresses the “sensitivity and sensuality between men and women in an Asian context” and elaborates, “You don’t see a Western contemporary dance duet performed with that kind of energy or kind of expression. It doesn’t mean I use Chinese dance music, vocabulary or methods of choreography.”<sup>345</sup>

*The Origins* also expresses “the importance of touch with sensibility, sensuality and sensitivity”<sup>346</sup> from a Chinese perspective. Danny achieves an Asian sentiment by using “basic movement materials from [his] dancers, in relation to their interpretation of human relations that connect lives. [He] was extremely interested to explore how humans react to the sensitivity of touch.”<sup>347</sup> In this writer’s review of *The Origins*, it was observed that intimacy, particularly in the sections “Closet?” and “Affection?” were quite conservative and restrained, i.e. “...it seemed that both sections were tempered for the Singaporean audience.”<sup>348</sup> In the opening section called “Origin”, this writer may have observed a “stunning opening... a carnal scene – a heap of bodies – flesh exposed, skin touching skin”,<sup>349</sup> but when the dancers began to move their bodies skimmed over each other like snakes rather than caressed, hugged or embraced.

Even as Danny draws from his Singaporean Chinese heritage, he feels that it is possible for his dance works to be understood by other cultures. Cultural connectivity or the understanding of Asian or Chinese ideology across cultures is important to Danny not only economically, i.e. work that is accessible by other

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<sup>344</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix IV: Odyssey Dance Theatre.

<sup>345</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

<sup>346</sup> Odyssey Dance Theatre. “Director Notes”. *The Origins*. Program booklet. Singapore: Odyssey Dance Theatre, 2003.

<sup>347</sup> Odyssey Dance Theatre. “Director Notes”. *The Origins*. Program booklet. Singapore: Odyssey Dance Theatre, 2003.

<sup>348</sup> Carino, Caren. “The Origins”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January and February 2001. 68.

<sup>349</sup> Carino, Caren. “The Origins”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, January and February 2001. 68.

cultures thus enables it to be presented beyond Singapore, but also because it reinforces his own Chinese cultural identity. He believes that “only work that is universally accepted is well informed of their [own] cultural identity”.<sup>350</sup> For example, he believes that the Buddhist symbolism of “light” in *Innocent Light* is possible for audiences to relate to because “light” as a metaphor for hope as well as the cosmological dichotomy of darkness versus light is understood across cultures.

## **Conclusion**

Danny’s Singaporean identity is primarily rooted in his Chinese ethnicity, which he believes is intrinsically connected to Chinese culture owed to the inculcation of “Asian values” through the political strategies employed by Lee Kuan Yew, the former Singapore prime minister, during Danny’s youth. Thus, Danny conveys Asian-ness in his artistic expression as one that is primarily drawn from Chinese cultural traditions and values constructed through Chinese dance, religion and philosophy. While he is interested in the contemporary form in his productions for ODT, his traditional cultural experience is central to his identity and artistic expression.

Distinctive of Danny’s Asian contemporary dance form is interculturalism that integrates Western modern dance, classical ballet and classical Chinese dance into a unique movement expression. Although he strives to integrate the specific dance movements of these genres, he emphasizes Chinese-ness through Confucian and Buddhist values and practices in the structure and topics of his choreography. No other dance company in Singapore has explored creating a hybrid form in the

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<sup>350</sup> Tan, Danny. Personal interview. 7 September 2005.

same way and to the extent that Danny has. This has much to do with his strong Chinese cultural experience and identity which he believes is different from a Western one, including his training in Chinese dance as well as upbringing in Chinese religious beliefs and philosophies. Thus, while he aims for a well integrated dance form, Chinese traditions are predominant. This is seen in his hybrid contemporary dance style inspired by Chinese classical dance, choreographic structure and performance of gender relations reflective of Confucist order and discipline, as well as profound themes and sentiments characteristic of Buddhist practice. As a result of his focus on embracing a Chinese identity, his collaborations are so far only with contemporary artists from East Asia such as Korea, cultures that have been strongly influenced by the Chinese.

His strong cultural pride sees him, like a cultural ambassador, expressing and promoting his Chinese Singaporean identity through his company more overtly than any other Singaporean modern dance company. Most importantly, as predominantly exemplified in the productions of ODT, Danny is the only Singaporean contemporary dance artist that equates and explicitly expresses Asian-ness as Chinese.

## Chapter Eight: Ah Hock and Peng Yu

### Introduction

Both Aaron Khek Ah Hock (born 22 January 1973) and Ix Wong Thien Pau (born 3 July 1974) had met when they were modern dance students at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) and together they joined The Arts Fission Company (TAFC) in 2001. They stayed for over a year and at the end of 2002 left to form their own company called Ah Hock and Peng Yu (AHPY).<sup>351</sup> The company's name is derived from "Ah Hock", Aaron's Chinese name, and "peng yu" meaning friend(s) in the Chinese dialect of Hokkien. AHPY represents the fifth and last contemporary dance company to be formed in Singapore in the period covered by this research, 1994-2005. No companies were formed between 2003 and 2005.

The dance form explored by Aaron (executive director) and Ix (artistic director) of AHPY deliberately asserts an Asian identity that is primarily understood as Chinese due to their own ethnicity and cultural heritage. At the same time, through their training and exposure, they embrace Western aesthetics. Modern dance is particularly viewed as a universal movement language and much like English is the lingua franca of the world. While its Western origins are recognized, it has been incorporated into a local contemporary dance form that is imbued with local meanings. Thus, the Asian contemporary dance form of Aaron and Ix becomes an exemplification of "border thinking"<sup>352</sup> or the possibility of new creations arising out of the interface of dominant and local cultures that characterizes many Asian countries such as Singapore.

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<sup>351</sup> See company profile in Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

<sup>352</sup> Border thinking is a concept argued by post-colonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo.



Distinctive of their contemporary Asian dance form is the exploration and incorporation of a movement vocabulary derived through body-centeredness, i.e. investigating movement that is conscious of how Chinese bodies move intrinsically, as another way to comprehend their Asian-ness. Furthermore, they locate their body-centered explorations in urban Asian settings, given the centrality of the urban in the city-state of Singapore, investigating how the contemporary Chinese body moves while performing activities typically found in an urban Asian environment. In addition, they study how the contemporary Chinese body relates to objects imbued with Chinese tradition.

Multidisciplinarity is another characteristic of their Asian contemporary dance form consisting of performing arts, technical theatre arts and visual arts, such as Chinese music and costumes as well as Western modern dance, performance art (a conceptual art form that grew out of the visual arts), lighting design and music all of which are later influences through their exposure and training as adults. In spite of their incorporation of Western artistic forms, they consistently express their Asian-ness as Chinese through themes based on inherited as well as socially acquired traditional Chinese rituals and language, whereas their contemporary Asian experience is a reflection of their present encounters, i.e. personal lived experience as urban artists in Singapore, an Asian city.

Aaron's and Ix's belief that culture is embodied in dance is highlighted in their contemporary dance form that aims to simultaneously preserve their Chinese heritage, particularly the Hokkien dialect for Aaron, as well as present contemporary Chinese perspectives on life in urban Asian societies. They also recognize and incorporate their Western exposure as part of the contemporary

experience relevant to their artistic expression. Their contemporary dance form becomes a site where what is happening in the Singapore community such as the speaking in dialects and urbanization is highlighted against Singapore state policies such as its national language and cultural policy. Thus, the tensions arising from negotiating tradition with the contemporary are evident in their dance creations.

Aaron and Ix take an independent view to their artistic approach and how AHPY is run. AHPY often secures commissions by arts venues such as the Esplanade, which gives them artistic freedom, as well as supports its own productions and operations from money earned through teaching and choreographing for other organizations. Although the National Arts Council (NAC) does not impose any criteria on the artistic direction of arts companies, AHPY has made a conscious decision not to rely on government grants as this allows them to operate their company apart from any attached conditions such as requirements for community outreach and audience development. Furthermore, they believe: “It’s not that we do not want government funding but we feel that nobody owes us a living. It’s not right for us to stick out our hand to NAC and say, give me the money.”<sup>353</sup> The rest of this chapter discusses how Aaron’s and Ix’s artistic approach and themes in their Asian contemporary dance form reflect their own beliefs, experiences and views on identity.

### **Aaron’s background and influences**

Aaron, a Chinese Singaporean, was raised by his Peranakan paternal grandmother until she died when he was eleven years. He attributes his familiarity

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<sup>353</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 12 February 2004.

and acceptance of a Western aesthetic to the colonial influence on her which impressed him as a child. However, his reference to Chinese traditions, customs as well as language in his work is largely owed to the influence of his Hokkien father who preferred a Chinese rather than Westernized way of life. The status of Hokkien in Singapore is one of several dialects spoken by the country's Chinese population whom Lee Kuan Yew, then prime minister, aimed to unify through one common Chinese language, Mandarin, the language of Beijing, China.

According to Lee:

[Mandarin] was to be lingua franca of the Singapore Chinese, bridging the gulf between Hokkiens and Cantonese, Cantonese and Teochius [i.e. Teochews], Teochius and Hakkas, and so on, and therefore augmenting their sense of community.<sup>354</sup>

The government saw that “Chinese was the transmitter of ‘traditional values’”<sup>355</sup> and that Mandarin was to be the official Chinese language to generally preserve a Chinese civilization emulating China. However, contrary to this policy of encouraging Singaporeans to speak Mandarin, Chinese dialects continue to be used in everyday life. In Aaron's case, his father's generation is an example of how groups persist in using dialects like Hokkien in daily life. Hence Aaron's choice of using Hokkien in his dance creations could be read as harboring a radical impulse to subvert the nation-state's imposition of Mandarin as the sanctioned Chinese language. As an artist Aaron believes that the appropriation of Hokkien into his contemporary dance performances is an important reflection and comment on this linguistic control in Singapore. For example, Aaron's adoption

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<sup>354</sup> Pan, Lynn. *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*. London: Secker & Warburg. 1990. 262.

<sup>355</sup> Pan, Lynn. *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*. London: Secker & Warburg. 1990. 262.

of Hokkien, his father's Chinese dialect, is noted in *Stigma* (2003), the third work in AHPY's Whispering Cities I–IV series presented at the outdoor theatre at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in Singapore, in which Aaron chose to speak in Hokkien as part of the performance art aspect of his dance creation. Aaron's Teochew mother also adopted the Hokkien dialect as well as shared the same strong Chinese sentiment and linguistic pride as his father. Aaron relates that the company's name, Ah Hock and Peng Yu, was inspired by his mother's reference to Ix as "peng yu" or "friend" in the Hokkien dialect. In Aaron's work, *Bowl of Containment* (2002), which was one of two selected by the Singapore Dance Theatre for their Young Choreographer's Platform, he was inspired by "the imagery of a phrase, in Hokkien, that [his] mother nags at [him] till this day: 'Ah Hock, let the flower bloom at its own pace, don't you start peeling off those petals!'"<sup>356</sup>

While Aaron's parents were instrumental in inculcating a sense of Chinese customs and traditions in him, it was his grandmother who was responsible for introducing him to performance and theatre which eventually led him to study modern dance as a young adult. When he was seven years his old grandmother sent him to a National Day Parade audition at the People's Association (PA), a Singapore government organization formed in 1960 to foster social cohesion towards nation building, which proved to be successful. Although the government's intention was to "promote citizenship and multiracial harmony"<sup>357</sup> as well as bring Singapore's "people closer to one another and to government",<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Singapore Dance Theatre. "A Containment of Contentment, The Contentment of Containment". *On Pointe 2<sup>nd</sup> Issue*. Singapore: Singapore Dance Theatre, 2002.

<sup>357</sup> People's Association. "Mission Statement". *People's Association*. [www.pa.gov.sg](http://www.pa.gov.sg). Accessed 18 January 2007.

<sup>358</sup> People's Association. "Mission Statement". *People's Association*. [www.pa.gov.sg](http://www.pa.gov.sg). Accessed 18 January 2007.

Aaron's grandmother, whom he describes as a "free spirit",<sup>359</sup> simply saw the audition announcement during a cultural news segment for young dancers to participate in the National Day Parade as an opportunity for Aaron to spend his school holidays learning to dance for free and to enjoy performing. Aaron also saw it as a privilege to perform rather than for nationalistic reasons. He recalls:

My grandmother sent me to an audition at the PA and I was selected as one of the new artists...I performed on National Day every year but it was fun. As a kid it was a platform for me to perform. I was singled out from school. I was allowed to leave because of the PA. I didn't have any training. I would sing songs. It was fun.<sup>360</sup>

Aaron's participation in a nationalist platform led him to discover his love for dance and represents how government ideologies can exist as an undercurrent of artistic expressions such as Asian contemporary dance forms. In other words, artistic production is often unwittingly supported by government platforms which have a national agenda rather than promoting art for art's sake.

When Aaron's grandmother died, he returned to live with his family and his 11 other siblings. Even years later he found it difficult adjusting to life back with his family and therefore, as a diversion, became very active in organizing events at his school, Outram Secondary.<sup>361</sup> He explains:

There was a period in my life when I was fully absorbed in my secondary school and church. Going home was not one of my options. I didn't feel like going home because I

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<sup>359</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Telephone interview. 4 January 2007.

<sup>360</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>361</sup> Outram Secondary is a neighborhood school where Aaron spent seven years, including three years of pre-tertiary education.

didn't feel like I belonged there. For eleven years of my life I was the only one. Then when my grandmother died and [when I] moved back with my family I was one of 12 children. I refused to accept this...I wanted to live in my own world until I went into the army.<sup>362</sup>

It was also during secondary school that Aaron was impressed by the Singapore Dance Theatre which he saw perform often through the National Arts Council's arts education program.<sup>363</sup> When he was 13 years old he became more involved in the arts such as undertaking production work, studying acting and singing as well as performing with local theatre companies Singapore Repertory Theatre and the Young People's Theatre. Then, after serving in Singapore's National Service, obliging his parent's wishes to fit into the Singaporean development and progress ideology, he acquired a degree in Economics at the London School of Economics in the United Kingdom. He also worked briefly at HBO and Price Waterhouse in Singapore as an auditor but found that he was not suited to office work saying, "I realized office work didn't suit me. I wanted to die. I loved the people and the pay but it was such a 'drag'. I questioned what life was all about."<sup>364</sup> At about the same time Aaron became involved in dance with Touch Arts, an arts initiative at his church. Although he had considered himself an actor and singer, the dance classes offered by his church interested him and when he began working professionally he realized he "was already experienced and quite good".<sup>365</sup> Contrary to Singapore's government national agenda at the time,

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<sup>362</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>363</sup> A primary way in which Singapore's National Arts Council advocates the value and importance of arts education and appreciation is by connecting the arts community with the schools through its Arts Education Program.

<sup>364</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal Interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>365</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

i.e. encouraging its citizens to be pragmatic and rationalistic towards the nation's economic development and strength, Aaron instead heeded his calling in the performing arts and chose to pursue dance, his newly discovered passion. He realized that the sensual and the expressive dimensions of being human rather than material goals were what that mattered to him most. Aaron's abandonment of his career as an auditor and the material comforts of a professional life in pursuit of his artistic aspirations could be considered rare in a material society like Singapore. However, the growing recognition of the arts by the Singapore government in the hope of making the city-state attractive to professional expatriates, an important human resource for Singapore's economic growth, has resulted in a younger generation of Singaporeans who seek to pursue the arts and perhaps also seek to define their personal happiness beyond economic prosperity.

Aaron decided to study dance more seriously and was accepted into the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), which at the time had the only Diploma in Dance program in Singapore. After only one year of his studies the full-time dance program was discontinued. At about the same time Angela Liong,<sup>366</sup> Head of Dance at NAFA, left to join LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts where she became the new Dean of Performing Arts and Head of Dance. Aaron was among other full-time students in the program who were offered to continue their studies at LASALLE-SIA under a special arrangement between the two institutions.

Aaron's experience at both NAFA and LASALLE-SIA not only underscored the start of his modern dance training, it was at these two tertiary arts institutions that he was exposed to other art forms and artists through collaborations, arranged by his teachers as well as personally initiated. He recalls the time at LASALLE-SIA,

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<sup>366</sup> Angela Liong is artistic director of her own company The Arts Fission Company discussed in the chapter by the same name.

“[I was] very interested in what other people were doing. [I] would hang around with artists and exchange ideas. [I] would help them out and they would teach [me] how to paint. It was very exciting.”<sup>367</sup> The concept of multidisciplinaryism which Aaron understands as a combination of performing, visual and technical theatre arts, later became an integral approach in the work of AHPY because of Aaron’s interest in working with other artists and artistic disciplines cultivated through the opportunities afforded by the two tertiary arts institutions he attended in Singapore.

Soon after transferring to LASALLE-SIA, during a summer holiday in Hong Kong with a friend, Aaron auditioned and was offered a scholarship at the HKAPA and continued to train in modern dance there. It was at HKAPA where he met Ix, who was in his final year of studies, and developed a personal relationship and partnership that he describes as “really about understanding each other as artists and as friends”,<sup>368</sup> and that eventually saw them move to Singapore to become members of TAFC and subsequently to co-found AHPY. While at HKAPA Aaron introduced Ix to the visual arts and later related the possibilities of bringing different artistic fields together such as contemporary and traditional Chinese music and costumes, Western modern dance, performance art, music and lighting design, influences from their community and tertiary experience as well as travels abroad. Therefore, multidisciplinaryism eventually became a key approach in their creations for AHPY.

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<sup>367</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>368</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.



## **Ix's background and influences**

Unlike his partner Aaron, Ix, a Chinese Malaysian, was introduced to Chinese traditional music and dance as a youth at the Chinese Association in his small community of Sabah, Malaysia where he was born and raised. Although he was not pressured by his parents, he was warned by one of his teachers about the difficulty of pursuing dance as a career in Malaysia and advised to find a job that would offer more stability. He persisted in his path and when he was a young adult he sojourned to Asian centers like Hong Kong and Singapore where opportunities in the performing arts were directly offered to him.

As an ethnic Chinese, both Asian metropolises with majority Chinese populations were comfortable environments for Ix yet offered the artistic viability and excitement he desired. In Hong Kong he studied modern dance as a full-time student whereas in Malaysia only occasional workshops were available. Also, in Hong Kong and later in Singapore he danced full-time with professional companies whereas he describes the situation in Malaysia:

Sadly, the dance companies [in Malacca, where he traveled from Sabah to dance] disbanded because of financial reasons. The dancers did other work like being salespersons and would get together to prepare for certain occasions. They [were] freelance dancers, i.e. danced out of interest. They had good ideas and were passionate.<sup>369</sup>

His Chinese identity is largely understood through his early introduction to Chinese performing arts. He first learned a Chinese musical instrument, then Chinese folk dance when he was 14 years old at a Chinese association in his

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<sup>369</sup> Wong Thien Pau, Ix. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

community. At age 16, Ix began choreographing when others recognized his talent and engaged him to choreograph for a primary school show in Sabah, which he still does today. Through choreography he realized he had a natural flair for movement saying, “I learned dance through choreography. I learned how to arrange movement.”<sup>370</sup> Later when he pursued dance more seriously he realized that he “had a natural sense of how to move and create beautiful lines. [He] knew how to copy. [He] could bluff people – [he] could make them believe that [he] was a good dancer.”<sup>371</sup>

His desire to train in dance led him to take dance workshops in West Malaysia. It was at one of these workshops that he met other dancers who had attended HKAPA and encouraged him to audition for a scholarship in the dance program. He had the opportunity to do so when he found that HKAPA’s Dean of Dance, Margaret Carlson, was in Sarawak. He remembers fondly:

In 1994, Margaret Carlson, the Dean of Dance at HKAPA, came to Sarawak for a sort of holiday. So, I flew down to Sarawak to audition at the resort she was staying at. I was the only one. My first dance class [referring to modern dance] was at HKAPA. I was about 20 years old.<sup>372</sup>

Upon his successful audition, Ix enrolled at HKAPA and began his training in modern dance.

Just after he graduated from HKAPA, Ix was invited to audition and was accepted into Transitions Dance Company, a Western contemporary dance company located in the United Kingdom. He also successfully auditioned for City Contemporary Dance Company (CCDC), a Hong Kong contemporary dance

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<sup>370</sup> Wong Thien Pau, Ix. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>371</sup> Wong Thien Pau, Ix. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>372</sup> Wong Thien Pau, Ix. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

company that aims to “create dance for contemporary China”.<sup>373</sup> He chose CCDC saying, “I didn’t want to go to a Western culture because I felt that I didn’t have enough of my own [Chinese] culture yet. This is why I chose CCDC. This is the only reason why I stayed back. I wanted to see how my own [Chinese] culture worked.”<sup>374</sup> Thus, given the choice, he decided to forego the opportunity to dance professionally in the West and instead experience dancing professionally as well as explore contemporary Chinese culture and how contemporary dance was produced by ethnic Chinese in a familiar Chinese cultural environment. Ix stayed for two years with CCDC after which, as mentioned earlier, he joined TAFC in Singapore with Aaron. Later, when Ix established AHPY with Aaron, Ix asserts his Asian identity based on his understanding of being essentially Chinese no matter where he is located – Malaysia, Hong Kong or Singapore. He discovered through his personal and social experiences traveling and crossing borders that Chinese culture is transmitted and similarly translated wherever a Chinese population exists.

### **Body-centeredness as an approach to understanding Asian-ness**

Often working collectively as co-creators, i.e. alternating as concept producer and choreographer, Aaron and Ix strive to recover Chinese traditions and at the same time reflect their contemporary Asian world view in their artistic expression. Furthermore, Aaron and Ix believe that contemporary dance is more than a collection of superficially acquired dance styles. It should express what is said of Indonesian contemporary dance choreographer Sardono Kusumo’s dance

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<sup>373</sup> City Contemporary Dance Company. [City Contemporary Dance Company](http://www.ccdc.com.hk). www.ccdc.com.hk. Accessed 18 January 2007.

<sup>374</sup> Wong Thien Pau, Ix. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

creations – a dancer’s “aesthetic sensitivity and personal identity”.<sup>375</sup> Thus, significant in Aaron’s and Ix’s endeavor to express difference through their Asian contemporary dance form is body-centeredness or a somatic approach described by somatic practitioner Malcolm Manning as an approach:

where the body is experienced from within rather than objectified from without. The implication is that when the body is experienced from within then the body and mind are not separated but experienced as a whole.<sup>376</sup>

The practice of paying attention to the body – both physical and biological conditions – is central to Aaron’s and Ix’s dance form in their exploration of their cultural identity as well as in their choreographic vocabulary, i.e. in their investigation of movement material for their multidisciplinary form that also includes Western modern dance, performance art, music, costumes and lighting. Utilizing a body-centered approach, Aaron and Ix investigate “the crucial basics: the body and physical movement”<sup>377</sup> and “rebuild ‘intrinsic movement sensibilities’”<sup>378</sup> they believe to be characteristic of Asians. They hold a view that body structures and their inherent movement potential as well as learned movement differ among races and cultures. Thus, as Asians, Aaron and Ix are interested in the Asian body and its natural movement potential as well as culture-specific or learned movement. Aaron observes and explains:

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<sup>375</sup> Murgiyanto, Sal. “Reinventing Tradition: New Dance in Indonesia”. *Shifting Sands: Dance In Asia and the Pacific*. Ed. Stephanie Burridge. Canberra: Australian Dance Council-Ausdance Inc, 2006. 43.

<sup>376</sup> Manning, Malcolm. *Move to Learn*. [www.movetolearn.com](http://www.movetolearn.com). Accessed 17 January 2007.

<sup>377</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron quoted by Tan Shzr Ee. “Put On Your Sunglasses”. *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1 July 2003.

<sup>378</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron quoted by Stephanie Burridge. “Fresh Faces 2003: We Showcase 10 of the Best in Local Arts – Aaron Khek”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: Esplanade Co Ltd, July-August 2003.

[Asians] find it difficult to move like Caucasians. There are certain gestures that Asians like such as a deep squat. The expression is different. When we look at the nuance and tonality in our work – it’s very different to teach someone how to hold chopsticks when they have grown up with a fork. It’s like ballet – I can learn ballet but my body doesn’t agree with it. My proportions are wrong.<sup>379</sup>

Although the belief in racial biological differences may be criticized as politically incorrect by social scientists, in dance this recognition forms the basis of organic movement exploration that cuts through layers of learned dance styles. Non-Western dance expressions take body corporeal difference seriously and develop this aspect in choreography as an important approach to express differences. This “corporeal exploration called *ziarah ragawi* [in Indonesian], literally [meaning] searching or pilgrimage into one’s own body”<sup>380</sup> strives to uncover inherent movement capabilities often prescribed by body type and structure.

Aaron and Ix extend body-centeredness in contemporary times to investigate how culture is embodied in the body and through movement. They say that Asian contemporary dance:

should not try to be Western but to investigate how the body behaves in its present environment, i.e. how lifestyle affects body movement. For example, if living in a Japanese tatami room [where people are expected to kneel

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<sup>379</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.

<sup>380</sup> Murgiyanto, Sal. “Reinventing Tradition: New Dance in Indonesia”. *Shifting Sands: Dance In Asia and the Pacific*. Ed. Stephanie Burridge. Canberra: Australian Dance Council-Ausdance Inc, 2006. 43.

on mats rather than sit on chairs] is not in my experience, my body would not know how to move in it. It would be very awkward if we went to a Japanese tea ceremony and had to kneel for two hours. We'd have pins and needles and couldn't get up.<sup>381</sup>

Furthermore, they say, "We learn from life – its entanglements and tensions."<sup>382</sup>

Thus, their movement studies involve looking at the movement of contemporary Asians in the "space of everyday life in order to explain [the] shifting, psychic as well as physical dimensions"<sup>383</sup> of their identity in urbanized Asian centers like Singapore. In other words, they see themselves as studying the daily lives of Asian people including their own to better understand culturally conditioned movements and to incorporate these movements in their dance form. For instance, as Aaron notes, "How we get into a car, how we invite people in and how our body naturally bows out of respect."<sup>384</sup> Aaron further observes:

It serves no purpose to do a pirouette [turn on one leg with the other foot touching the knee of the supporting leg] unless you're in a ballet company and want to show off. It's the language of a ballet dancer. When and how do we turn in everyday life? Basically, we only turn a few degrees everyday. Maybe in an office chair we could turn more.<sup>385</sup>

Towards the understanding of cultural identity, Aaron and Ix believe that movement can be linked to ethnicity and cultural ancestry. Through the

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<sup>381</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.

<sup>382</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>383</sup> Yang, Alice. "Why Asia?" *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and American Art*. Eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 117.

<sup>384</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

<sup>385</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 25 October 2005.

employment of body-centeredness, it is possible to understand culture by studying the body and the movement it produces. However, they are interested in exploring what the body creates naturally and in everyday situations instead of learning prescribed dance forms, which are reflections of culture and are not organic or familiar.

Aaron's and Ix's dance works for AHPY integrate the movement performed in activities common to Asians, particularly Chinese, largely because of their own ethnicity and cultural location, i.e. within Chinese majority populations like Hong Kong and Singapore. These movement experiences are then extracted from the context of real life, abstracted and choreographed. Aaron says, "When we create, it magnifies life itself. Most of the dances we created so far are magnified images of our sensitivities. We are very affected by the things we do and how we look at things."<sup>386</sup> Furthermore, they investigate the physical and psychological space which is ultimately about exploring the "inner and outer landscape of self and country"<sup>387</sup> in Asia's intensely developing urban centers. Their movement vocabulary is derived from body encounters within the limited and constrained physical spaces of Asian cities such as Singapore and hence their dance movements often project a sense of restricted psychological space.

In addition to movement in daily life, Aaron and Ix also focus on how the contemporary Asian body relates and responds to objects imbued with culture and tradition. Through body-object explorations, Aaron and Ix endeavor to understand tradition in contemporary terms based on the premise stated by dance researcher

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<sup>386</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.

<sup>387</sup> Burridge, Stephanie. "Fresh Faces 2003: We Showcase 10 of the Best in Local Arts – Aaron Khek". *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, July-August 2003. 34.

Yves Guilcher that the object reveals “the context and gives meaning to the movement which manipulates it, however, it is created or used.”<sup>388</sup>

The work *Tea.Moves.* (2005)<sup>389</sup> is an example of how the practice of body-centeredness was applied in relation to the exploration of objects and everyday movement. Aaron and Ix experimented with the ceremonious movement associated with the handling of tea cups, a traditional daily activity found in many Asian cultures. Aaron points out that “there are certain [tea] cups and certain ways to handle them. It may be a gesture developed into something bigger. We want to explore this movement development. It’s about daily functions.”<sup>390</sup> Aaron and Ix say:

[We] realized how even a simple thing like tea can be very refined or very basic. Every morning everybody drinks tea. It can range from 70 cents to 7,000 dollars. Why do we want do this performance and why tea? We realized that the way we create and study our body has a lot to do with our life experience. Meaning, if I were a farmer I would have a certain movement vocabulary. In a tea ceremony, such as a Japanese tea ceremony, they have concentrated and comprehensive gestures that have so many layers of meaning. For a layman watching a Japanese tea ceremony it may seem meaningless but after you’ve experienced it you get to know the meaning behind the gestures. We realized that movement as a language is so powerful especially in a Japanese tea house from the emperor to the samurai class.

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<sup>388</sup> Guilcher, Yves. *Choreography and Dance: An International Journal* 2.1 (1992): 77.

<sup>389</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

<sup>390</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.



It's actually to humble the samurai class, to balance violence in society. We are using [*Tea.Moves.*] to study how one of the elements like a miniature tea pot and tea cup restricts you. You know when you give someone a Chinese tea cup, especially an expensive one, they are very afraid of breaking it. It addresses movement creation and adaptability in a very different light – in a very social and functional sense.<sup>391</sup>

Besides enacting a traditional tea service, *Tea.Moves.* also incorporated movement from household chores, a typical activity for many people. In the choreography for this production Aaron and Ix integrated movement material from the daily lives of their company members. For example, Ebelle Chong, a Chinese Singaporean and one of AHPY's dance company members, remembers how Ix and Aaron were intrigued by her new role as a housewife when she was recently married. Her inexperience and discomfort with doing housework, a typical condition of Singaporeans due to the employment of domestic helpers, became the movement material for the first segment of *Tea.Moves.* Ebelle recalls:

Ix and Aaron were very inspired by my own contentions with housework. 'Mop the floor! How do you mop the floor?' So, we developed movement phrases... [W]e just filmed a segment [of me] cleaning up. I was so lost. You could tell from the film that I didn't know what to do. Aaron would say 'OK, wash the dishes.' It was second nature for him. I was lost. 'Where do you keep the plates?'

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<sup>391</sup> Khok Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.

It was interesting to watch in terms of movement. It was the whole juxtaposition – he was calm and I was all over the place. Ix found it interesting and extracted it out and made a movement phrase.<sup>392</sup>

A series of Aaron's choreography explores the notion of one's identity being linked to an ordinary object like a table beginning with *The Invisible Table* (2000) created by Aaron while he was a student at the HKAPA. *Wax Table – Dinner at the Invisible Cities* (2001), choreographed by Aaron when he was a member of TAFC, focused on the relationship of family members at the dinner table described as “[s]haring the same space, always together, but forever apart”<sup>393</sup> while *Sacred Table* (2004), presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Contemporary Dance Festival at LASALLE-SIA, dealt with his “memories of his encounter with tables in moments of worship”.<sup>394</sup> It is described by Aaron as follows: “A choreographic work that deals with the change in time, mindset and spirituality. A memory house dissolving through physical place, mental solace or spiritual refuge.”<sup>395</sup>

In this performance, Aaron physically related to the table, conveying mixed emotions from reverence to resistance. He moved towards the table with respect and veneration but also moved away from it, remembering it by inscribing linear floor patterns signifying the dimensions of the table and imagining the diminishing space it occupied. In the end he returned to the table for a brief reconciliation only to run away from it. *Sacred Table* was therefore about a

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<sup>392</sup> Chong Chia Rhun, Ebelle. Personal interview. 5 August 2005.

<sup>393</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron quoted by Law Soo Leng. “Aaron Khek”. Class paper. LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 27 February 2003.

<sup>394</sup> LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. “Sacred Table”. 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Contemporary Dance Festival. Program booklet. Singapore: LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 30 April and 1 May 2004.

<sup>395</sup> LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. “Sacred Table”. 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Contemporary Dance Festival. Program booklet. Singapore: LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 30 April and 1 May 2004.

relationship with and around an object, i.e. a table, which can be interpreted metaphorically as depicting the struggle of contemporary Asians to hold on to their heritage and traditions.

Aaron and Ix utilize a body-centered approach as one way to explore and understand their Asian/Chinese identity. Their investigation of everyday activities as well as traditional Chinese objects recovers their heritage from a contemporary Asian perspective but also reveals the struggle and anxiety encountered in the cultural and urban contexts of Singapore. Their experience with cultural/linguistic and economic policy orientations in Singapore are shared by other contemporary Asians living in Singapore. Therefore, the contemporary Asian identity is understood as one that negotiates tradition and contemporary through the body moving in and around present and everyday spaces.

### **Multidisciplinarity in the expression of the contemporary Asian identity**

In Singapore society where Westernization is a pervasive force, it is not surprising that Western ideals and artistic genres, including modern dance, performance art, lighting technique and design, and music prefigure in Aaron's and Ix's search for an Asian contemporary dance form. Their endeavor to understand what it means to be Asian in the contemporary Asian world also includes their discovery of Western forms. The approach to multidisciplinary taken by AHPY is an all-encompassing one, including combining both Asian and Western performing, technical theatre and visual art forms. Distinctive of their expression of Asian-ness is the use of Chinese traditional clothing as inspiration for their costumes and Chinese classical music as their main sound medium.

However, they also draw on Western aesthetics, modern dance and performance art (which developed out of Western visual arts) in their multidisciplinary approach. Lighting and music are the technical disciplinary components of their creations that draw from Western practices. Aaron and Ix see Western modern dance as universal and explain:

When we entered dance we were trained in a Western form. We realize now how relevant it is in our development. For example, I'm speaking English to you. It's a working language. It's therefore relevant for me to understand that language because it's a universal language, i.e. many people understand English.<sup>396</sup>

They believe that Western modern dance in combination with Western performance art, music, lighting and an emphasis of Asian corporeal movements or body-centeredness serves to express Asian-ness more effectively in their dance form. Although contemporary dance is often understood as Western in nature, to Aaron and Ix, their Asian contemporary dance creations represent their aims in expressing what it means to be contemporary on their own terms as contemporary Asians.



23. Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

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<sup>396</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.

Their recognition of modern dance as a useful and universally accepted movement vocabulary to communicate across cultures has much to do with their exposure at HKAPA where “through choreography and repertory work, students learn to synthesize traditional and contemporary elements of both Chinese and Western Dance arts”.<sup>397</sup> For example, Aaron recalls learning *Riding on Black Waters*, a contemporary dance work originally produced by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, which incorporated the Graham technique.<sup>398</sup>

Thus anchoring their artistic expression is Western modern dance, largely because both Aaron and Ix trained in modern dance at HKAPA. Their modern dance style is characterized by complex dance sequences of changing directional facings and movements that are earth bound yet extend and travel assertively through space with an outward focus. Law Soo Leng, a student of Aaron’s, observed of his dance style:

[The transition from] one step to the other is so smooth that...it is hard to digest the breaks in between them. This is especially so when it comes to traveling steps or sequences. [Aaron’s] directional compass is to him an inner facility that he possesses naturally and the space that encompasses him is never just another space. He makes full use of the stage area...<sup>399</sup>

Apart from costumes, music and modern dance, another characteristic of Aaron’s and Ix’s multidisciplinary art form is the incorporation of performance

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<sup>397</sup> Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. “School of Dance”. [Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts](http://www.hkapa.edu). www.hkapa.edu. Accessed 17 January 2007.

<sup>398</sup> See Chapter Two: Background.

<sup>399</sup> Law Soo Leng. “Aaron Khok”. Class paper. LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 27 February 2003.

art, an experimental form bridging the performing and visual arts. They were first impressed by performance art on a study trip to Berlin in 2004, representing Singapore at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asia-Europe Dance Forum. Performance art places importance on the situation that involves time, space, the performer's body and a relationship between performer and audience instead of focusing on an object as the case in visual arts, the artistic field from which it emerged. In performance art, the audience watches as the artist creates his work, i.e. the artist and the art that is being created is the performance. Aaron and Ix observed that the European dance artists were no longer interested in contact improvisation or movement explorations produced by bodies coming into physical contact with one another, but they had instead ventured into performance art. Aaron observed that "their idea about choreography [was] very wide – it could just be putting things together. The arrangement of furniture could be choreography to them."<sup>400</sup> The performance art approach made sense to Aaron and Ix, "Everybody puts things together every day. When you walk out of your house you have to put yourself together."<sup>401</sup> Thus, Aaron and Ix employed the processes of performance art in their dance form to explore and comment on the contemporary Asian's urban existence.

For example, in *L+R* (2004), Aaron's and Ix's first ticketed and indoor production for AHPY, one segment featured a couple dressed in contemporary clothes in an informal Chinese tea ceremony who "make and partake of Chinese tea – with all of its fancy accoutrements – on stage".<sup>402</sup> The painstaking tea-making process performed with all the tea-making paraphernalia taken out of

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<sup>400</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.

<sup>401</sup> Khek Ah Hock, Aaron. Personal interview. 18 January 2005.

<sup>402</sup> Tan Shzr Ee. "Maiden Show". *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 10 January 2004.

context and inserted between modern dance segments in *L + R* highlighted the preservation of an Asian tradition in contemporary times by contemporary Asians.

Another Western multidisciplinary characteristic of Aaron's and Ix's productions is the use of Western lighting technique and design. As the lighting designer for all of AHPY's productions, Ix's lighting concept is beyond basic illumination. He often uses lighting to create an environment or to delineate space such as pathways to be negotiated by the dancer(s). While lighting design is a Western technical theatre art form, Ix applies it to create another layer of expression to metaphorically portray the restrictions of the urban condition in Asia, a recurrent theme in their works.

For example, Ix designed the lighting for *[Excessive space. Constricted space]* (2003)<sup>403</sup>, a work he also choreographed and danced in, for LASALLE-SIA's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Contemporary Dance Festival. It was described as addressing:

the reality of physical space versus that of mind space.

Striking the tight cord of paradoxical tension between the excessive and the constricted in our daily spaces in Asia, choreographer Ix Wong Thien Pau creates hues of movement which respond directly to the architectural aspect of the given performance space.<sup>404</sup>

Through the outlining points, lines and planes created by the lighting, the limitations of both physical and mind space of contemporary Asians amidst the intense urbanization of Asia was highlighted. Since they are interested in reflecting and commenting on the contemporary Asian experience, the urban

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<sup>403</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

<sup>404</sup> LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. "[Excessive Space. Constricted Space]". 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Contemporary Dance Festival. Program booklet. Singapore: LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 2003.

condition is a common theme in their dance works because it situates the Asian body in the context of a present-day environment – physically and psychologically.

*Chroma* (2003)<sup>405</sup>, one of four short outdoor productions under the Whispering Cities I-IV series presented at Esplanade, featured lighting design inspired by the fluorescent lights in the corridors of Singapore’s Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. In the dance, “seven dancers, gliding in and out of sight lines like surreal beings, unpack and reassemble in sequences of matrix-like movements as if they were splintered colors of a rainbow prism”.<sup>406</sup>

Aaron’s and Ix’s multidisciplinary approach includes Western music selections, both classical and contemporary. The incorporation of Western music selections reflects a Western aesthetic but it is not an intention to assert Westernness. Rather, their choices simply reflect a Western cultivated music appreciation that transcends cultural boundaries and include compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach, Steve Reich, Puccini as well as Arvo Pärt. Aaron says:

I have used Pärt’s *Fur Alina* and *Spiegel Im Spiegel* before and I find *Fratres* [another one of Arvo Pärt’s compositions] interesting as it is a much ‘louder’ or ‘emotional’ piece as compared to the other two. The journey that *Fratres* brought me to is one that is rather like an urban sanctuary. I enjoy the sense of containment that prevails throughout Pärt’s work.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

<sup>406</sup> Tan Shzr Ee. “Put On Your Sunglasses.” *The Straits Times (Life!)*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1 July 2003.

<sup>407</sup> Singapore Dance Theatre. “A Containment of Contentment, The Contentment of Containment.” *On Pointe 2<sup>nd</sup> issue*. Singapore: Singapore Dance Theatre, 2002.



At the same time, Chinese classical music typical of Chinese opera as well as contemporary renditions played on Chinese instruments such as the erhu is often also utilized on occasion to convey Asian-ness. In *O'Moon!* (2004)<sup>408</sup>, a work created for Esplanade's mid-autumn celebration, a contemporary erhu player was featured. However, instead of playing the instrument in a typical manner, at times the musician strummed violently producing loud and thick chords.

The costumes used in the works of AHPY vary in style but several works feature traditional Chinese clothing as costumes in order to express and assert an Asian identity. For example, tunics with mandarin collar and trousers made from Chinese silk brocade fabric for both male and female dancers were used in *Sheng Bei* (2003), a work inspired by ancestor worship, commissioned by Esplanade for their Huayi Festival, as well as *[Excessive Space. Constricted Space]* among others.



24. Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

At other times, they choose to feature the long flowing sleeves, typically used in the classical dance style, known as “water sleeves” such as in *O'Moon!*.

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<sup>408</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

In summary, Aaron's and Ix's aspirations of an Asian identity are reflected in their Asian contemporary dance form through the incorporation of Chinese elements such as traditional Chinese clothing as inspiration for costumes and Chinese classical music whereas Western modern dance, performance art, lighting and music are seen as expressions of the contemporary experience. Highlighted in their Asian contemporary dance form is the negotiation between Asian and Western as well as traditional and contemporary forms. Furthermore, Aaron and Ix view modern dance as a universal artistic expression and in doing so attempt to disassociate its Western foundation from the creation of all contemporary dance forms. Therefore, in their endeavor to create an Asian contemporary dance form that encompasses Western, non-Western and universal artistic forms, new creations arise from the encounter between local and global experiences. Through the concepts of de-territorialized and expanding frontiers or "border thinking", argued by post-colonial scholar Walter Mignolo, contemporary dance becomes a site where the possibility of new forms are produced in a third space where the dominant and local intersect, are played out.

### **Consistency of Asian themes**

Through body-centeredness and multidisciplinaryism, which is about combining modern dance with other Western and Asian artistic mediums such as music, costumes, lighting and performance art, the assertion of an Asian identity prevails in Aaron's and Ix's dance creations that represent the preservation of their Asian heritage yet embracing Westernization. A strong sense of Asian-ness is evident as they draw from Chinese cultural practices and traditional values, noted earlier in works centered on the tea ceremony and objects of everyday life. The

themes and subject matter of their works are the most consistent and concerted effort towards expressing their Asian-ness. As mentioned earlier, in *Bowl of Containment*, Aaron “dealt with the notion of ‘holding onto things that have long been lost and visa-versa’”,<sup>409</sup> inspired by a Hokkien saying. Furthermore, the tensions produced from combining tradition with contemporary from both Chinese as well as Western cultures located in the context of Singapore, where particular Asian identities and expressions are forged, are brought into focus in Aaron’s and Ix’s Asian contemporary dance form. For example, besides investigating Chinese tradition and locating it in contemporary Asian society, Aaron and Ix highlight the everyday experience of contemporary Chinese through body-centered explorations but also the pressures of urban Asian living, such as in Singapore, reflected in the language and themes in their works. Thus, the tensions between tradition and the contemporary are conveyed in the themes of their dance creations. For example, *Stigma* (2003)<sup>410</sup> was “ultimately about growing up in Singapore, and explores the inner and out[er] landscape of self and country”.<sup>411</sup> At intervals an unnamed man wrapped Aaron’s body in plastic wrap while Aaron spoke in Hokkien, a Chinese dialect. The process of wrapping Aaron’s body was done functionally, i.e. without pretense, stylization or abstraction. The audience watched as Aaron’s body was progressively being restricted from moving as he was bound in cellophane up to his neck. His physical discomfort was palpable – it drew a kinetic and emphatic response from the audience. Through this production AHPY hoped to evoke questions about Singapore’s society, “What makes a good being? Have you ever been stigmatized? When we stigmatize, what standards do

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<sup>409</sup> Singapore Dance Theatre. “A Containment of Contentment, The Contentment of Containment.” *On Pointe 2<sup>nd</sup> Issue*. Singapore: Singapore Dance Theatre, 2002.

<sup>410</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

<sup>411</sup> Burrige, Stephanie. “Fresh Faces 2003: We Showcase 10 of the Best in Local Arts – Aaron Khok”. *The Arts Magazine*. Singapore: Esplanade Co Ltd, July-August 2003. 34.

we use? Perhaps we were born to stigmatize and be stigmatized.”<sup>412</sup> Thus, it was conveyed that citizens that did not fit the Singaporean ideal were stigmatized.



25. *Bowl of Containment.*

*Dolls* (2003)<sup>413</sup>, the fourth in the *Whispering Cities* series, saw Aaron and Ix liken the human existence in cities like Singapore to that of dolls. The program notes read, “Dolls are replicas of humans... We are treating humans around us more and more like dolls. Dolls are dolls. Are we dolls?”<sup>414</sup> The performance began with two men in orange workmen’s dungarees dressing and placing human ballerina dolls on stage. The dolls then came to life and danced in a mechanical manner. The men returned later to carry each of the dolls off stage to conclude the performance. Thus, utilizing the urban condition as a theme, Aaron and Ix depict Singapore’s society as a superficial existence – it appears idyllic, seems to function normally but it is nevertheless controlled.

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<sup>412</sup> Ah Hock and Peng Yu. *Stigma*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, 2003.

<sup>413</sup> See excerpt of this work in Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu.

<sup>414</sup> Ah Hock and Peng Yu. *Dolls*. Program booklet. Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd, 2003.

## **Conclusion**

Aaron and Ix represent a group of dance artists based in Singapore who strive to straddle between Chinese tradition and the contemporary. Their choices to become artists were largely due to influences such as their exposure and training in both Chinese and Western artistic disciplines. They represent a direction different to the economic strategy of Singapore's government. As artists, Aaron and Ix endeavor to create a dance form that preserves their Chinese customs and practices – specifically associated with the Hokkien dialect for Aaron, which represents a radical impulse at the community level to subvert the “Speak Mandarin” campaign by the Singapore state – yet strives to understand their Chinese heritage on contemporary terms. They seek to understand their Chinese ethnicity and cultural ancestry/heritage as well as the contemporary Chinese experience through explorations of the Chinese body and body movements as well as the experiences of urban life and urban spaces in Singapore. Their dilemma is a shared experience with other contemporary Asians. However, as contemporary dance artists, they choose to explore and express it through the creation of an Asian contemporary dance form. In doing so, contemporary dance is no longer associated solely with Western ideals and aesthetics but is understood on Asian terms.

In their Asian contemporary dance expression, they assert their Asian-ness through the incorporation of both corporeal as well as culturally conditioned movement of ethnic Chinese investigated through a somatic approach called body-centeredness. They study, abstract and choreograph into their works the movement produced by Chinese bodies engaged in everyday activities as well as in traditional practices and in relation to objects imbued with tradition in the

context of urban Singapore. Multidisciplinarity is another aspect of their Asian contemporary dance form that combines other artistic disciplines from the performing arts, technical theatre arts as well as visual arts. Costumes and music are occasionally utilized mainly to emphasize Chinese traditions but their form largely includes Western influences such as modern dance, performance art, lighting design and music. While they incorporate body-centered derived movement, and Chinese music and costumes establish an Asian identity in their work, the incorporation of Western performing, technical theatre and visual arts disciplines is not meant to assert a Western identity but these are simply considered as other elements of their contemporary expression. Western modern dance is viewed as a universal form that communicates across cultures much like the English language and challenges the assumption that because of its Western foundation, whenever it is incorporated in the creation of contemporary dance forms, all contemporary dance is therefore understood as being Western constructs. Rather, Asian contemporary dance is constructed from interface between dominant and local cultural products.

Aaron and Ix attempt to recover and understand Asian-ness by making body-centeredness central to their approach to dance, to explore how the ethnic Chinese body moves. They consistently express themes inspired by traditional Chinese beliefs as well as the Chinese experience in urban Asia centers such as Singapore. While both Chinese as well as Western performing, technical theatre and visual art forms are components of their dance form, they endeavor to create an Asian contemporary dance form different from a Western one, in that Asian elements, specifically Chinese, and the movement experience of contemporary Chinese bodies play a significant part.

## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

This thesis aimed to show that contemporary dance forms produced by Asian dance artists located in Singapore reflect various constructions of the Asian identity, i.e. it looked at how Asian identity is formed in Singapore's social and political context through the aesthetic representation of contemporary dance. Although dance scholar Helen Thomas recognized, "Just as there appears to be an emergent interest in dance as a topic of inquiry from several social and cultural critics, so there is a burgeoning interest among dance scholars in the themes and issues that have preoccupied more traditional disciplines in recent years,"<sup>415</sup> social scientific debates on nationalist or regional identities in Southeast Asia have rarely looked at dance as the repository site for national and regionalist identities. Somehow interest in the arts in much of recent social scientific debates has been more focused on theatre and other performing arts than dance per se. However, contemporary dance is a dynamic site where dance artists are active participants in both nationalist and regionalist imaginings and are certainly important producers/constructors of cultural identities. Hence, in an attempt to fill this gap this thesis acknowledges contemporary dance as an active space where complex and meaningful notions of Asian-ness have been explored and asserted by contemporary dance artists living in Singapore.

Towards the creation of the various Asian contemporary dance forms three approaches were identified: interculturalism, the collaboration of dance artists or the interface of dance forms from different cultures; multidisciplinaryism, a combination of several artistic components or elements that ultimately produces a

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<sup>415</sup> Thomas, Helen. *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 2.

complete artistic entity; and body-centeredness, a practice that investigates intrinsic as well as culturally learned body movement. Although these approaches have been utilized in Western performance creation or somatic practices, this study recognizes that these approaches also have a history in Southeast Asian performances. More significant was the way in which these approaches were employed by contemporary Asian dance artists towards the creation of Asian contemporary dance forms.

Towards the exploration of Asian contemporary dance forms, this thesis analyzed the various articulations of Asian identity through an in-depth account of the personal biographies, sentiments and aspirations of eight artistic directors/choreographers and their choreographies under the auspices of five Singapore-based contemporary dance companies from 1994 to 2005: Angela Liong and Elysa Wendi of The Arts Fission Company; Lim Chin Huat and Tan How Choon of Ecnad Project Ltd.; Tammy L. Wong of Tammy L. Wong Dance company; Danny Tan of Odyssey Dance Theatre; and Aaron Khok Ah Hock and Ix Wong Thien Pau of Ah Hock and Peng Yu. These dance artists were seen assuming a significant role in defining Asian-ness in their own way.

However, a broader and more collective Asian identity was not always used as the basis for Singaporean identity. While the assertion of local and regional identity has characterized Southeast Asian scholarship, it was strategic identity politics whereby the economic rise of the Asia Pacific region sought to differentiate itself from the West that prompted the use of an Asian identity. Hence, there was a shift to identify with an Asian identity that was supported by the Asian values discourse beginning in the 1980's. In Singapore, this meant that the Asian identity was used to define the Singaporean identity, echoing the nation-



state's doctrines on Asian values towards resisting the totality of the West. The then prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, interpreted "Asian values" to mean a "remaking of Singapore in the Confucian image",<sup>416</sup> i.e. embracing Chinese traditional values and cultural roots including language. In the Singaporean context Asian-ness became synonymous with Chinese-ness, i.e. Asian-ness was taken to mean identification with a single culture often associated with ethnicity such as the case with many Chinese located throughout the world.

This being said, not all constructions of Asian-ness could be reduced to the statist instrumentality of politics, i.e. not all Asian identity constructions served the manipulative goals of the state. Asian-ness was found to be meaningful to Asian contemporary dance artists as a way to claim contemporary dance on Asian terms towards representation and difference in today's world. As pointed out by William Lim, Singaporean architect and writer on post-modernism, the performing arts including contemporary dance became a space "not to be opposed to regularized, ordered space, but would indicate ways in which the unwritten spaces of possibility can emerge creatively alongside the orders that conspicuously prevail".<sup>417</sup> Hence, each of the Asian contemporary dance artists in this study were found to interpret Asian identity in their own way amidst the politics of "Asian values", i.e. expressing various dimensions of Asian-ness in their dance creations through themes, movement vocabularies, integration of other artistic disciplines and artistic collaborations.

In his Asian contemporary dance form, Chinese Singaporean Danny Tan prioritized cultural continuity and drew on his Chinese-ness which he understood through Confucian and Buddhist symbolism and aesthetics due to his upbringing

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<sup>416</sup> Pan, Lynn. *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1990. 265.

<sup>417</sup> Phillips, John. "Introduction". *Postmodern Singapore*. Ed. William S. W. Lim. Singapore: Select Publishing Pte Ltd, 2002. 1.

amidst the climate of Lee Kuan Yew's Asian identity politics. In his intercultural works produced by his company Odyssey Dance Theatre, Danny embraced Western expressions such as modern dance and ballet as well as claimed an interest in Chinese culture from a contemporary perspective. While he portrayed an Asian life philosophy as different from the West, at the same time, he felt that his work was universally understood through the Confucian and Buddhist images and symbolism he used. Thus, Asian-ness meant the negotiation of Chinese tradition with Chinese as well as Western contemporary dance towards an expression understood across cultures.

Angela Liong and Elysa Wendi of The Arts Fission Company reflect another view of the Asian identity. They represent a group of ethnic Chinese sojourners who came to locate themselves in Singapore, a place of Chinese leadership and dominance, and found a favorable environment for their art making.<sup>418</sup> Their search for the meaning of Asian-ness saw them straddling more than one culture and reflecting interculturalism achieved through multidisciplinary in their creative work. In her dance works, Angela, a Chinese American, tried to grasp with present realities, local as well as global, expressed through classic Asian literature, Chinese opera and tai chi, together with Asian contemporary dance forms like Korean modern dance and butoh as well as Western contemporary modern dance, installation art, contemporary painting, video and projections. On the other hand TAFC assistant artistic director Elysa, a Chinese Indonesian, fused Chinese music and traditional practices with Indonesian theatre and Western modern dance, largely due to her Chinese

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<sup>418</sup> Singapore is a place where sojourners of Chinese ethnicity such as Chinese Americans, Chinese Singaporeans who have left and returned as well as a refuge for Chinese from Southeast Asia and Asia have come to settle.

heritage, Indonesian exposure having lived there as a youth, and Western dance training.

While Aaron Khok Ah Hock is a Chinese Singaporean, his partner Ix Wong Thien Pau is amongst other Chinese Malaysian contemporary dance artists in Singapore such as Lim Chin Huat of Ecnad. As ethnic Chinese with Chinese upbringing, both Aaron and Ix expressed their Asian-ness as contemporary Chinese, particularly as Asian artists living in Singapore. Like Danny, Angela and Elysa, they also endeavored to bridge tradition with the contemporary. However, they did not explore existing movement vocabularies but instead chose to employ body-centeredness to investigate what was culturally intrinsic about the Asian body. They also utilized multidisciplinaryism consisting of Chinese music and costumes as well as Western modern dance, performance art, lighting design and music. Although they incorporated Western artistic forms, the preservation of their Chinese heritage such as speaking in dialects and present-day realities such as urbanization were highlighted against Singapore's national language and cultural policies.

At other times, the Asian identity was merely about ethnicity, i.e. the extent of Asian-ness was being ethnically Chinese and not necessarily about embracing Chinese culture. Thus, contrary to Singapore's efforts to embrace so-called "Asian values", ethnic Chinese like Tammy L. Wong who, through her upbringing and relocation in America for a time, was Western acculturated. She identified with Western culture and displayed an uncritical acceptance of Western outlooks in her dance works especially because her notion of contemporary was understood as Western. Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach Tammy combined modern dance with ballet, classical and American folk music as well as her own

poetry. She also drew from the American experience for choreographic themes. Thus, Asian-ness for Tammy was only about her Chinese ethnicity as she identified with the West more so than Singaporean society.

Finally, dance artists like Chinese Singaporean Tan How Choon and Chinese Malaysian Lim Chin Huat were found creating art-for-art's sake amidst Asian identity politics. Although both are from traditional Chinese backgrounds, their work reflected their training in Western art forms. It was not their intention to assert Western-ness. However, they translate the contemporary as Western and their choreographic approach combines modern dance with physical theatre, stage sets and costuming with a Western aesthetic. Additionally, characteristic of their dance production is collaboration with other Western-trained artists. While their artistic expression through multidisciplinaryism takes on a predominantly Western aesthetic, their themes reflect or respond to local as well as global issues, concerns and dilemmas of contemporary Asians. Hence, for How Choon and Chin Huat Asian-ness is portrayed solely through the content or topics and themes of their dance works.

In conclusion, the presentation of findings in this thesis considered contemporary Asian dance artists and their Asian contemporary dance companies as important social actors in the formation and reflection of Asian identity in Singapore. I argue that the concept of a contemporary Asian identity is not singular but instead consists of diverse and complex interpretations. The multiple contemporary dance forms produced by contemporary Asian dance artists in Singapore were seen to reflect, contest and negotiate national ideologies such as the government's take on the Asian values discourse. At the same time, how artists interpreted cultural identity was also influenced by their own personal

biographies – their ethnicity, acculturation, upbringing, artistic training, sojourns and exposure. Thus, the Asian identity as viewed through Singapore's contemporary cultural identity cannot be deemed status quo but must be seen as multi-faceted and constantly changing. As such, it is imperative to continue to study contemporary dance as a viable expressive form where a complex and continually evolving Asian identity is both revealed as well as constructed by Singapore's contemporary dance artist citizens.

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## **Appendices: Dance Company Profiles**

In this research, various translations of a contemporary Asian identity were highlighted through the Asian contemporary dance forms produced by eight dance artists under the auspices of five Singaporean contemporary dance companies.

The following is a brief description of each of the companies including their founding history, organizational components and structure, activities and funding information.

While the organization and size of the company, responsibilities of its members, rehearsal, office, teaching and performance space, type as well as scale of productions are, in part, a reflection of financial constraints, they are also decisions based on the artistic philosophy and style of the companies.

## Appendix I: The Arts Fission Company

The Arts Fission Company (TAFC) was co-founded by Chinese Singaporean Angela Liong (America), a modern dance artist, and Chandrasekaran (Chandra) (Singapore), an installation artist, in 1994 while they were colleagues at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore. The first works for TAFC that they collaborated on and produced were *Mahabharata: A Grain of Rice* (1995) in the Festival of Asian Performing Arts as well as *The Flower Eaters* (1996), the first of a series of site-specific dance works. Chandra has since resigned as a co-director but remained as one of TAFC's board of directors until the time of this research.

TAFC began as a project-based company, i.e. the dancers were engaged on occasion for specific projects and performances, in residence at LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. Later, in 1999 Angela transformed TAFC into a non-profit company limited by guarantee with charitable status and employed dancers and administrative staff on a full-time basis. Since 2001, the company has operated out of their office/studio at Cairnhill Arts Centre, provided under the National Arts Council's (NAC's) arts housing scheme.

Although the company's organizational structure and the individuals filling the various key roles changed throughout the years, members have always assume multiple roles. Advised by a board of directors, Angela is artistic director, choreographer and teacher; Elysa is assistant artistic director/dancer/choreographer/ teacher. The company dancers teach, administrate and direct rehearsals, choreograph, design and create costumes, sets and publicity materials. Scarlet Yu Mei Wah is rehearsal director/dancer/teacher, and Roseline

Bte Yusoff and Bobby Chen are dancers/teachers. The company's major operational duties are undertaken by an office administrator, marketing assistant and a general manager. Project artists, both local and foreign, are also engaged on occasion for particular productions and to alleviate the teaching load of the resident dancers. Project artists have included dancers, installation artists, musicians, photographers, poets, etc.

The three founding members of T AFC were Singaporean students of Angela's at NAFA who graduated with Diplomas in Dance: Rusman Rahmat, Wong Wai Yee and Alvin Tan. When T AFC became a full-time company, both Rusman and Alvin left while Wai Yee remained as a teacher. The next generation of dancers included a mix of dancers from various Asian countries: Elysa Wendi (Indonesia), Aaron Khek Ah Hock (Singapore), Ix Wong Thien Pau (Malaysia), Rose Lai Yeung-Jung (Taiwan) and Scarlet Yu Mei Wah (Hong Kong). Except Elysa, this generation of dancers were fresh graduates from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA). Unlike the other contemporary dance companies, T AFC had a stable of dancers at the time of this research, including Elysa, Scarlet and NAFA graduates Roseline Bte Yusoff (Singapore) and Bobby Chen (China).

T AFC presents several main performances as well as other smaller performances in the company's studio at the Cairnhill Arts Centre throughout the year. Their main performances are often collaborations with other artists performed on a proscenium stage, in a black box or may be site-specific, i.e. productions created for particular locations such as the Singapore Botanic Gardens, atop the 35<sup>th</sup> storey of Centennial Tower and the courtyard of the MITA



building. For the company’s programming called Garden Affairs, the studio serves as a platform for experimental work often in collaboration with guest artists.

<b>Title of Work or Production</b>	<b>Premier/Restage Year</b>
Mahabharata: A Grain of Rice	1995
Flower Eaters I: Immortal Vermin	1996
Flower Eaters II: Space Crossers	1996
Flower Eaters III: The Double Chamber	1996
Flower Eaters IV: Voyage to the Border	1996
Touching Earth: Sacred Dance	1997
In Season	1998
Camera Obscura: Scenes from the Invisible Chamber	1998
Lost Light I: Syonan Jinja Shrine	1999
Hexagram Dances	1999
Lost Light II: The Temple of Dawn	1999
Tread Gently on Grass: Dances of Healing	2000
Subterrestrials	2000
The Blue Border I	2000
The Floating Stage Series I: Urban Sanctuary	2000
The Blue Border II	2001
Wax Table: The Invisible Cities	2001
Imagine Forest	2001
Tales with Wings	2001
Nocturnal Lights	2001 & 2002 (restaged)
Shadowhouses – A Dance Requiem in 5 Reflections	2002 & 2004 (restaged)
White Banquet	2002
Borrowed Scenery I	2002
Borrowed Scenery II	2002
Manora’s Wings	2002
Garden Affairs Series – 001 “Apples”	2002
Little Lee I: The Forgotten Journey Home	2003
Garden Affairs Series	2003

Siau Ling – Timeless Living	2003
Little Lee II: Is Today Really Yesterday?	2004
Corridor of Another Time	2004
12 SMS Across the Mountains	2004 & 2005 (restaged)
Intimate Letters	2005
Scarlet’s Room	2005
Doctor in a Teapot	2005

Besides performance, TAFC is also committed to arts education activities and outreach programs for children and youth such as Studios in a Suitcase which are integrated dance and visual arts programs for children; Young Dancers Theatre consisting of creative movement and modern dance training for children and; Creative Arts Workshops facilitating creativity through the visual arts for youth.

In 2003 TAFC saw touring to international destinations as a way to grow and establish their professional experience and visibility. These included destinations such as Germany, Thailand, Indonesia, Denmark and Korea. The company was also formally invited to perform in the Laokoon 2003 Festival in Hamburg, Germany. Beginning in 2005 TAFC began collaborating with foreign contemporary dance groups from Korea and Canada.

Towards TAFC’s operations and productions the company has relied on revenue from production ticket sales, teaching fees from its various arts education and outreach programs, corporate sponsorship as well as foundation and NAC grants.

Today TAFC continues steadily in its path as a full-time company creating multidisciplinary/intercultural work with increasing collaborations with foreign artists and companies as well as tours overseas.

**Excerpts of work by The Arts Fission Company**

*This page contains a DVD that is not available through internet.*

## **Appendix II: Ecnad Project Ltd**

Ecnad Project Ltd (Ecnad), originally called Dance Dimension Project (DDP), was formed as a society in 1996 by Lim Chin Huat (Malaysia) and Tan How Choon (Singapore), operating from a rented space at the Drama Centre, at the time located at Fort Canning. In 1998, Ecnad was set up as a full-time company and secured their studio/office premises at Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre (TAPAC) through the NAC's arts housing scheme. In 2001 The company was registered as a non-profit company limited by guarantee and in that same year, Dance Dimension Project was renamed Ecnad Project Ltd. Ecnad is "dance" spelt backwards, thus, reinforcing the company's multidisciplinary approach with a focus on dance.

Throughout the years, the company's various artistic and administrative components and the individuals overseeing these areas have changed. However, since its registration as a company limited by guarantee, a board of directors, Chin Huat as artistic director/choreographer/performer and How Choon as associate artistic director/choreographer/performer have remained. In the beginning, Ecnad was made up of nine individuals: dancers Chin Huat, How Choon, Fung Kway Wah, Tee Guay Chiou, Jacklyn Chua, Ricky Sim and Choo Leh Leh, a graphic designer and a photographer. The dancers were either Singaporean or Malaysian and graduates of NAFA or former dancers with the People's Association (PA) Dance Company. Later, the resident dancers were individuals from Australia and Switzerland besides Singapore and Malaysia. Until the end of 2003, Ecnad's performers comprised dancers-in-residence, project dancers and, as noted below,

Team B dancers. By 2005 all but one of its resident dancers, Kon Su Sam, departed the company.

Early in its formation in 1997, Ecnad began with an outreach program which presented site-specific work, where the sites chosen are public areas like open plazas in shopping malls and commercial buildings. In fact the company claims to be the first to present an outreach series of site-specific works. As the company developed, its activities grew to consist of main performances primarily in proscenium stage and studio theatre venues while it continued to reach young audiences and families through arts education programs in the schools and productions such as *Sheep* (1997 and 2003) and *The New Adventures of Little Prince* (2000). In 1999, Ecnad established Fresh From the Oven (FFTO), aimed at developing young talent through classes in choreography, dance technique and performance and in 2001 the Ecnad Team B was initiated as a platform for young artists from FFTO to create and perform. Another initiative of the company was to increase exposure and contact with foreigners. Thus, it performed regionally as well as internationally to places such as Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Yugoslavia. The company has also collaborated frequently with foreign artists, primarily based in Singapore.

<b>Title of Work or Production</b>	<b>Premier/Restage Year</b>
Ecnad – Dance from the E Point	1996
B-Cycle	1996
Sheep	1997
Ontogenesis – Dawning on the Source	1997
Ontogenesis – A Wish to Utopia	1997
Ontogenesis – Genesis at Unknown Terrain	1997
Schizone	1998
Plastic	1998

Terrestrial Beings in Watercoloured Mirage	1998
Solo	1998
Terrestrial Beings in Three Wonders	1998
Terrestrial Beings in Spherical Analogy	1998
Frame	1998
Across Oceans	1999
Look-See @ the Fish in the Flower	1999
Talking Dance Series	1999
Four and a Half Rebels	1999
Visceral Vim	2000
Four and a Half Rebels	2000
a-the-bird	2000 & 2001 (restaged)
Fresh From the Oven	2000
Phylogenesis II- Tales from the Giant Blanket @ Chijmes	2000
Phylogenesis III – Dragon Tale @ Rendezvous	2000
The New Adventures of Little Prince	2000
Tales from the Giant Blanket II	2001
Tales from the Giant Blanket (Tour)	2001
Out-of-Site	2001
Phylogenesis I – Water Story	2001
Floating Mirror	2001 & 2001 (restaged)
Fantasy Creatures & Other Things	2001
Bottled Dances	2002
Missing in Tall Pillars	2002 2002 (restaged)
Sheep	2003
March Spin	2003
Crazy Naked World	2003
Crazy Excerpts	2003
The Language of Dance	2003
Cost-Tune-Mean	2004
Flamingo	2004

Spy	2004
Fireball	2005

In the beginning Ecnad received funding and support from the National Youth Council (NYC) but soon after the NAC became a major source. Besides the NAC the company is supported by ticket sales, revenue from education and outreach programs as well as foundation grants and corporate support.

In 2004 Ecnad decided to work with more non-dancers and to give more artistic freedom to its collaborators. It launched its associate artist scheme towards more multidisciplinary collaboration and, at the same time, the company was restructured to focus on offering creative services to corporations and the community and returning to its original commitment to connect with the public through outreach projects rather than staging performances in conventional venues.



**Excerpts of work by Ecnad Project Ltd.**

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### Appendix III: Tammy L. Wong Dance Company

Following Tammy L. Wong's (Singapore) creation of *Child* in 1998 for a local arts group Dramaplus Arts she decided to form the Tammy L. Wong Dance Company later that same year. Registered as a non-profit company limited by guarantee in 1999, the company operated from its office/studio located at Cairnhill Arts Centre obtained through the NAC's arts housing scheme.

Tammy L. Wong Dance Company's organization includes an informal board of directors, Tammy as artistic director/choreographer/dancer, Suyin Chew as a dancer and manager of the company and Elaine Chan as dancer and arts education program coordinator. Suyin and Elaine have been with the company since it was started and only left after it was dissolved and Tammy left Singapore in 2002. Besides Suyin and Elaine, Tammy also engaged several other dancers to work with her on a project basis: Choo Tse Yun, Melissa Quek, Grace Shinhe Jung, Lee Yeong Wen, Josephine Chiang, Darren Oh and Olivia Cain.

The company presented a number of main performances each year mostly in studio theatres and auditoriums in Singapore. It also took part in NAC's arts education program in which they conducted lecture-demonstrations in Singapore's schools. Besides performances at home in Singapore, the company also concentrated on tours to America such as California, Montana and New York and prides itself in being the only Singaporean company to be been invited to the American Dance Festival and New York City International Fringe Festival.

Title of Work or Production	Premier/Restage Year
Child	1998 & 2002 (restaged)

Journal	1998 & 2001 (restaged)
Seven Deadly Sins	1999 & 2002 (restaged)
Left Right, Right Left	1999
Remembering Jesus	2000
Ever After	2001
Folk Song	2001 & 2002 (restaged)
Goodbye, Goodbye	2001 & 2002 (restaged)
Alone	2001 & 2002 (restaged)
Cry	2002 & 2003 (restaged)
Rain	2002
Seven Love Songs and Child	2002

Apart from ticket sales and revenue from its arts education program activities, the company relied on the NAC for much of its funding. Although the company received project grants over the years, an unsuccessful application for a seed grant in 2002 prompted Tammy to disband the company.

**Excerpts of work by Tammy L Wong Dance Company**

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## **Appendix IV: Odyssey Dance Theatre**

After Danny Tan (Singapore) completed his dance studies at Queensland University of Technology in Australia, he returned to Singapore to establish Odyssey Dance Theatre (ODT) in 1999. In 2001 ODT was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. For a time the company operated from two locations: Northland Secondary School, which was the company's management and arts education programs base, as well as Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre (TAPAC), obtained through NAC's arts housing scheme, which served as a home for the company's community and outreach programs, production and artistic functions. Since 2003 the company consolidated its operations at TAPAC. The key organizational areas of the company include: artistic development and programming, Arts 4Youth, ODT International, operations, business development and partnerships, and communications. Arts4Youth is a training program while ODT International involves overseas touring and artistic alliances.

Danny attributes ODT's success thus far to good organization, its ability act quickly and responsibly, and the willingness to take risks. Although it is a small company it is run with an equal level of professionalism as larger more established ones. In this regard, ODT's organizational structure consists of a board of directors, board of advisors and various administrative and artistic components divided between Danny and his wife Ann Tan who is employed full-time by the company. As artistic director Danny oversees the artistic development of ODT's main company, its Young Artists Project performers and production services

while Ann, as general manager, oversees the executive office and administration, the Arts4youths program, marketing, human resources, finance and operations.

In the beginning, ODT's resident dancers included Sylvia Yong Chew Ee (Malaysia) as assistant to the artistic director and principal dancer, another principal dancer Albert Tiong (Malaysia) and artist-in-residence Zhuo Zihao (Singapore). The departure of Sylvia, Albert and Zihao marked the end of the first generation of ODT's resident dancers and the beginning of a new generation. The new generation of resident dancers included dancers from Europe. ODT also began collaborating with other foreign dancers such as from Australia and Korea.

ODT divides its main performances into full-length repertoires and short repertoires of Danny's own choreography. Besides these performances, throughout the year the company also promoted contemporary dance from other countries through the New Talent Presentation series in 2000, inviting choreographers from the Asia Pacific region to work with ODT dancers. Since 2001, Danny has invited choreographers/solo dancers and/or their companies from the Asia Pacific region to perform in his bi-annual festival, Xposition Contemporary "O" Dance Fiesta. To date Danny has presented artists from Australia, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Finland and the Philippines. Workshops and lecture-demonstrations conducted by these artists were also often offered to the dance community and general public in conjunction with the performances. DanzINC – International Dancers & Choreographers Residency Festival established in 2004 is another platform that engaged dance artists for eight weeks to present a series of dance events in Singapore. Apart from performances, ODT initiated arts education and outreach programs such as Young Artists Project (YAP) in 2002, ODT's youth performance company to groom young dancers for

ODT's main performance company and Dance @Heartlands, workshops and performances brought to welfare organizations, homes and communities. In 2003 YAP was developed into Arts4Youth, ODT's dance training division for youth conducted in schools as well as at the company's studio.

<b>Title of Work or Production</b>	<b>Premier/Restage Year</b>
The Roots (short repertoire)	1998 2001 & 2002 (restaged)
Wings (short repertoire)	1998, 1999, 2001 & 2002 (restaged)
Traces of Spring (short repertoire)	1999 & 2001 (restaged)
Odyssey to the Sublime	1999 2000 & 2001 (restaged)
I Wish (short repertoire)	1999 2000, 2001 & 2002 (restaged)
My Tender Love (short repertoire)	2000 & 2001 (restaged)
Xtreme	2000
The Origins	2000
Xtreme 2	2001
The White Sensation	2001
Me. I. Thank You (short repertoire)	2001
One	2001
Wavy Emotions (short repertoire)	2001
Innocent Light	2002
Xtrordinary Solos – A Season of Asian Contemporary Dancers	2002
Bold Moves	2002
In Love (short repertoire)	2002
Just 2 (short repertoire)	2002

M Bodies – Prelude (short repertoire)	2002
Passion – A Season of Duets	2003
Man-Power – A Season of Male Choreographers	2003
Passion.Love	2003 & 2004 (restaged)
Wild Moves 1 – Men in Glass	2004
“V” – A Celebration of Life!	2004
Dance In-Transit	2005
Synesthesia	2005

ODT’s international exposure overseas included tours to Taiwan, Hong Kong and Australia while cultural exchanges with Korea, Taiwan, Australia and Hong Kong also fulfilled an important part of the company’s marketing objective.

ODT’s full-time operation has been funded by major corporate sponsors such as Bel-Air and Seagate Technology International as well as grants from local foundations. Apart from funding for its projects, the company also received funding from the NAC to produce artist-in-the-schools programs and arts education programs.

Although ODT began with the presentation of Danny’s choreography of full-length works, which still continues today, the company has moved increasingly towards intercultural artistic collaborations and the promotion of foreign dance artists throughout the years, with the exception of the Arts4Youth program dedicated to developing local talent.



**Excerpts of work by Odyssey Dance Theatre**

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## **Appendix V: Ah Hock and Peng Yu**

Ah Hock and Peng Yu (AHPY), formed in 2003 by Aaron Khek Ah Hock (Singapore) and Ix Wong Thien Pau (Malaysia), derived its name from Aaron's Chinese name, "Ah Hock", and "peng yu" meaning friend(s) in the Chinese dialect of Hokkien. Aaron and Ix met while schooling at Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) and shortly after graduating joined The Arts Fission Company (TAFC) in 2002. One year later they left TAFC to form their company registered as a private limited company. Unlike the other contemporary dance companies in Singapore, AHPY did not apply for the various arts assistance schemes, including arts housing. Instead, they operated and rehearsed at their own home as well as at LASALLE-SIA, where Aaron was a part-time dance lecturer.

In AHPY's organizational structure, Aaron and Ix were executive director and artistic director respectively as well as dancers and choreographers in the company. While their roles have not changed throughout the years, the company has experienced major transformations. Initially AHPY had a core team of dancers: Ebelle Chong Chia Rhun (Singapore), Rose Lai Yeung-Jung (Taiwan) and Cheryl Quek Ai Lyn (Singapore), who also doubled up as administrators. Others danced with AHPY on a project basis, including local dancers who recently completed their dance studies overseas: Joey Chua, Susan Yeung How Way, Neo Hong Chin and Vivienne Tan, as well as students from LASALLE-SIA's Diploma in Dance. In 2005, the only full-time members remaining were Aaron, Ix and Ebelle, who besides dancing became production manager and choreographer at this time.

AHPY's activities consisted of main performances, many of which were commissioned works by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay and presented at outdoor performance areas. Later, the company also presented their work in studio theatre and blackbox venues. However, unlike the other contemporary dance companies, AHPY did not tour as a company.

<b>Title of Work or Production</b>	<b>Premier/Restage Year</b>
[Excessive Space. Constricted Space]	2002
How Small a Thought it Takes to Fill a Whole World	2002
Sheng Bei	2003
Whispering Cities 01: Whorls	2003
Whispering Cities 02: Chroma	2003
Another Long March	2003
Whispering Cities 03: Stigma	2003
Whispering Cities 04: Dolls	2003
L + R	2004
Big Daddy Says	2004
Peng Yu	2004
O'Moon!	2004
Singapore. Asia. Beyond	2004
The Blue Carousel	2004
Asunder	2005
Tea.Moves.	2005
The Admiral's Odyssey	2005

AHPY initially received its funding by creating commissioned work for Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, which they continued to do. Later, AHPY applied and received funding from the NAC to present their first indoor performance *L+R* (2004) at The Arts House. They also received income from ticket sales as well as teaching and choreography projects in both Singapore and Malaysia.

In 2005, after deliberating on the pros and cons of remaining as a non-profit organization or working as independent artists, Aaron and Ix decided to do both. As such the company became an umbrella for their collaboration with other artists on a project-by-project basis. At the same time, they worked and created as independent artists in partnership or individually in Singapore as well as Malaysia.

**Excerpts of work by Ah Hock and Peng Yu**

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