

香港舞蹈概述

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香港舞蹈概述2018

Hong Kong Dance Overview 2018

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Performing Arts: The ‘Good’ of Going International

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In recent years, organisations tasked with the allocation of public cultural resources have been progressively promoting performing arts internationally. In the year of 2018, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) organised three industry delegations to Classical:NEXT in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, the internationale tanzmesse nrw (tanzmesse) in Dusseldorf, Germany, and CINARS (Conférence internationale des arts de la scène/International Exchange for the Performing Arts) in Montreal, Canada. In addition, the Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama held in Japan featured three Hong Kong performing units, while representatives from HKADC and the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (WKCDA) participated in the conference. Together with the Seoul International Dance Festival and Yokohama Dance Collection, the City Contemporary Dance Festival formed a programme exchange alliance and assigned two pieces to be performed in Seoul in 2018.

For a long time, seeking performance or creative opportunities overseas has been one way for dance practitioners to develop their individual artistic careers. It was not until 2013 when Mui Cheuk-yin was elected as a council member of HKADC that delegations began advertising in the art market. Seeing the lack of support for independent dance practitioners in the face of global competition, Mui Cheuk-yin promoted

the use of delegations to increase the visibility of Hong Kong dance in the art market. In 2014, Chan Chun-ying Anna, the then Head of Dance (Performing Arts) of WKCDA, dedicated herself to promoting creative exchanges between Hong Kong and the international dance community, and 'Going International' ostensibly became part of the institutional blueprint. With the allocation of public resources, dance practitioners eagerly set out onto the world stage.

In 2018, I participated in the delegation to tanzmesse, co-organised by HKADC and WKCDA, and that of CINARS, organised by HKADC. Field experience informs me that when publicly-funded institutions systematically implement suggestions from the industry, a gap between the outcome and the original intentions often emerges: While to go international or not is supposedly a personal artistic choice and has no inevitable relationship with the creative concept and the quality of the work, when given a positive connotation by the institution, 'international' becomes a boundary stone. It then divides the industry into those 'capable' of going international and those who are 'incapable' of doing so, which often comes with the implication of the 'good' and the 'less good'. Does the 'good' advocated by the institution apply to the individual? And does it limit the definition of the individual's 'good' in a homogeneous sense? On what social and economic context is the inclination to equate 'going international' with being 'good' based on? How does it, initially an exception to an individual artistic career plan, become a necessity?

With its focus on the model of using a Hong Kong delegation to organise individual practitioners' participations in the overseas art market, this

essay discusses how the necessity of 'going international' is narrated and analyses the political context from which the positive meaning of 'international' is rooted as well as the role of individual practitioners in this narrative. The arguments put forward in this essay take into account the operational and formal characteristics of the art market, including:

1. Bringing such benefits to the host city within a short period of time in the form of venue rental, local staff hire, accommodation and catering for overseas participants;
2. Increasing the visibility of the city branding;
3. Even when different organisers entertain different criteria, performances on the art market are, in general, conformed to that of the rental booths; and
4. Audience in the art market is mainly players in the market instead of the general public. In this essay, 'cultural institutions' refer to groups that export creative industries, art, and popular cultural products with the support of public resources, while the 'intellectual goods' within the definition of 'culture' are called the 'arts'.¹

Hong Kong 'Needs' the International Market

Regarding the necessity of performing overseas, a popular proposition by the dance industry² is this — '**Since** the Hong Kong market is not large enough, performance venues and audience of dance insufficient, rerun of works are seldom possible. Hence it is **absolutely necessary** to strive for overseas performances to give the works a chance to develop.' How the causality in this narration is formulated is rarely discussed in detail and the proposition is almost taken for granted.

Once we deconstruct this statement, we may find many details to be further considered. For the statement that 'The Hong Kong market is not large enough', what does 'large' mean here? Is a city with a population of over seven million large or small? In 2015, the population of Melbourne, Australia was 4.5 million. A survey conducted at the time showed that 42% of the population were willing to pay to attend an art event, with the average amount at A\$41 per annum; ³ 91% of art audiences and 62% of the population agreed that 'art is a major component of Melbourne's domestic and international image'.⁴ Another report in 2019 stated that '[three] in ten Australians attend dance (29%, up from 24% in 2016). The most frequent attendees attending on average 16.3 dance events in 2019'.⁵ The report also analysed how art creators make a living in Australia and the role of the government, noting that Australians believe art helps promote their wellbeing and drive innovation in society.⁶ When we discuss whether the Hong Kong market is large enough or not, maybe we are not talking about the scale, but about the role of art in society. How do we straighten out the relationships between the artistic needs of seven million people, the practitioners produced annually by the academies and the investment of public resources? To solve the problem of the market size, going international is neither the only, nor even the best answer. On the contrary, by shifting the problem towards a solution that promises immediate results, it neglects the distance between art and the public.

What needs clarifying as well is, in relation to what are performance venues 'insufficient'? On the one hand, do professional and amateur dance practitioners have the same chances of using public theatres? Is 'insufficient' an impression caused by uneven distribution? On the other

hand, if there is a dire demand for public theatres, are we overstressing the connection between the presentation of dance and theatre space? If we indulge in this myth that says 'art is in the theatre', practitioners, whether mature or emerging, professional or amateur, would all engage in the competition for the limited theatre space regardless of their target audience. The politics of the allocation of space resources runs deep to the extent of embodiment in Hong Kong people's lives. On a daily basis, the public experiences the body through the lack of space, accept various kinds of restrictions on their actions by administrative regulations (such as being forbidden to walk on the grass or to sit on the streets), thus the generalisation of 'insufficient space' as the cause of different phenomena.

Whether performing overseas promotes the development of artists varies from person to person. However, performing in the art market must come up against audiences with a tight schedule, who may still be adapting to jet lag, as well as the concentration fatigue they suffer from watching a large number of performances a few days in a row, where there can be no room for exchange between performances. The willingness of overseas buyers to meet new friends instead of socialising with old acquaintances also affects artists' chances of receiving useful feedback.

The Market as the Raison d'Etre

For an argument to become a mainstream opinion, it needs the support of the majority. While it may seem like a personal preference to embrace this approach, it is deeply influenced by socially recognised values and behavioural patterns. Although Hong Kong is no longer an export-

oriented economy, the argument for 'dance going international' cannot but reference the export-oriented economy to which Hong Kong once owed its success, and to regard the favour of Western buyers as a proof of quality. On the one hand, we recognise the implied compliments in 'exporting' ourselves. On the other, a strong geographical preference prevails, as the idea of overseas often commonly refers to Europe, the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, rather than Southeast Asia or Africa.

Since export brings about economic growth and increase in the value of the self, when late capitalism brings about a shift in the object of consumption from goods to services that include culture, the addition of culture to the list of exported goods is easily justified. In his book *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, anthropologist and geographer David Harvey describes 'two trends of the arena of consumption', the second being '[a] shift away from consumption of goods into the consumption of services... if there are limits to the accumulation of turnover of physical goods... then it makes sense for capitalists to turn to the provisions of many ephemeral services in consumption.'⁷ The cultural turn of late capitalism is the attraction to cultural services, such as visiting art museums or attending concerts, or the 'short life-span' of cultural symbols, the ephemerality of which provides a rational ground for more intensive consumption.

At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference in Montréal in 1980, 'the term "creative worker" appeared for the first time, specifically proposing the thinking of an

economically-oriented cultural industry'.⁸ Tung Chee-hwa, the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong, mentioned the need for large-scale performing venues in the city in the 1998 *Policy Address*, and in 2003 proposed the establishment of the 'West Kowloon Cultural District Authority', a hardware plan that costed HK\$21.6 billion, sans corresponding software support. Ho Chi-ping Patrick, former Secretary for Home Affairs, explained in an article the decision against formulating a cultural policy – 'Hong Kong's cultural policy is embodied in specific forms, manifested scatteredly, and implemented in various policies and measures, including the construction of venues, art funding, venue management, etc. After a long period of operation, a set of administrative standards would gradually be formed.'⁹ According to Ho, administrative standards assume the role of policy. In 2009, Wong Ying-Kay Ada, the then member of the Consultation Panel of the WKCDA, stated that '[under] its hardware-driven strategic framework, the WKCD Authority is entrusted with the coordination of land planning and infrastructure of the cultural district while the Home Affairs Bureau is overseeing the overall cultural strategy.'¹⁰ With the exception of Leung Chun-ying, the Chief Executive at that time, who has once proposed the establishment of a Cultural Bureau in 2012, the cultural focus in the policy addresses since the 1997 handover has always been hardware-driven. The value of cultural landmarks and performances lies in its ability to increase consumption choices for tourists. What's more, it is the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau that is responsible for the development of the cultural and creative industries. The rein of Hong Kong's cultural matters is held by no one and everyone.

From the above picture, one can see that it is not for artistic reasons

that the government responds to the industry's demand for 'going international'; even if the reasons can be considered as cultural ones, this 'culture' only refers to lifestyle, i.e., consumption-oriented, instead of artistic creation that demonstrates human's spiritual achievements. As Fredric Jameson elaborates, 'What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural functions and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the institutional support of all kinds available for the newer art, from foundations and grants to museums and other forms of patronage.'¹¹ Harvey also points out that the claim of cultural uniqueness and authenticity justifies monopoly rent, where capitalists accumulate monopoly rent through the manipulation of taste.¹² The motivation for investing public resources in the art market lies outside of the arts. For example, in response to the competition among creative cities of the region, the international network of local art industry is utilised as a promotional channel.¹³ Although in the past the cultural industry (including performing arts) has constituted an insignificant portion of the GDP of Hong Kong, '[during] 2005 and 2015, the value added of CCI in nominal terms increased at an average annual rate of 7.6%, faster than the average annual growth rate of the nominal GDP of Hong Kong, at 5.4%'.¹⁴ So why not try out the potential for the growth of Hong Kong, which is nothing but mediocre in the global creative city competition?

When public resources are allocated to the cultural institutions out of non-cultural motives, they have to be 'well spent', according to the criteria of these non-cultural stakeholders. As noted in the study by Danish scholars Kann-Rasmussen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen, 'Instrumentalisation (of culture) is a threat to autonomy because it entails that actors outside of the cultural field determine the success of a cultural organisation on the basis of criteria of quality that are external to the field of culture.'¹⁵

Going International as a Kind of 'Good'

This connotation of international as 'good' is vague and general and, unfortunately in Hong Kong society, there is not much interest in the abstract. The two institutions that organised the tanzmesse and CINARS delegations do not come from the cultural departments of the government and have no say in the official discourse. Hence just as Patrick Ho says, the focus is on administrative standards. Both WKCD and HKADC have held briefings and cocktail receptions at tanzmesse and CINARS to facilitate exchange. The two delegations have spent HK\$1.69 million and HK\$1.35 million respectively¹⁶ on booth rental and set-up, subsidising practitioners' travel expenses and production costs (tanzmesse), holding events, making souvenirs, etc. To cover all these facets in the tumultuous art market environment, one can easily imagine how profundity might well be sacrificed. Under the two-fold restriction of not being able to afford curators and the inviolability of the principle of fairness, the 'Hong Kong' discourse can only resort to a historical narrative, or to a shifting of focus, hollowing out this 'Hong Kong' as a signifier devoid of any

connection with the current social and political realities, and contexts of dance history or aesthetics. In tanzmesse's list of dance practitioners, 'Hong Kong' is still 'a proud confluence of East and West' in the colonial discourse;¹⁷ while the theme of CINARS, 'Hong Kong at CINARS 2018', is more pragmatic, the selling point being 'everything you need' in that 204-page practitioner directory. British dance historian Ramsay Burt once quoted Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi that, 'this approach to the market merely points to capitalism's "power to produce variety — because markets get saturated. Produce variety and you produce a niche market."' ¹⁸ When these institutions fail to narrate a creative context in cultural terms, whatever cultural exchange they lay claim to is not worth discussing. That makes it difficult for practitioners to elucidate their position in the 'international' through a discourse, necessary for the achievement of self-reflection and introspection in their interactions with others.

While we believe that Hong Kong dance has the ability to move overseas audiences artistically, we must also recognise the fact that the art market itself is one institution, which the individual cannot bargain with on an equal footing, and institutions have a far greater say on how 'good' a work is than a creator does. What local institutions determine as 'good' requires the endorsement of others in the art market. The Hong Kong works performed in tanzmesse were first shortlisted by the WKCDA and submitted to the German organiser for screening. In the end, only *So Low* by Lai Tak-wai and *Contempo Lion* by Daniel Yeung were selected. One can hardly know what criteria the German organiser adopted in the

selection of programmes, but as an art market, both artistic and market considerations must be involved, the proportions of which are not easily distinguished. After these two works 'conquered the West', they were performed at the 'JOCKEY CLUB New Arts Power' art festival which is sponsored by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and organised by HKADC. In the marketing narrative of the art festival targeted at the local audience, that 'good' in terms of the art market was not mentioned however, only that the aesthetic worth of the works had been certified by the institutions and the art market. This is exactly what Harvey has pointed out in his book: 'What is really at stake here, however, is an analysis of cultural production and the formation of aesthetic judgements through an organized system of production and consumption mediated by sophisticated divisions of labour, promotional exercises, and marketing arrangements.'¹⁹ How should we treat the other Hong Kong works that do not aim at performing overseas or are 'touring unfriendly', i.e. works that are formally incompatible with the operation of the art market? Who is the biggest stakeholder that determines the 'good' of Hong Kong's artistic creation? Is it the institutions, the international, or the Hong Kong people?

Since the 'good' of 'going international', before having been carefully deconstructed and discussed, is blatantly taken to operation, the gap between institutional systematisation and personal career choices, the respective 'good' for each party, emerges. The two aforementioned directories adopt a uniform resume format, listing practitioners' academic achievements, creative works, and awards.²⁰ At the same time,

there are formal restrictions for the performance excerpt videos shown at the exhibition booths. To the institutions, it is wise to follow the conventions of the art market, although more in terms of means than the meaning of 'good'. How does this 'product catalogue' format promote artistic exchange? Is the value of the individual seen and narrated because it appears in the system? It is true that an individual must rely on institutional resources and execution to cross the threshold of the art market, but before art, he/she must first become an entrepreneur and strive to sell himself/herself. If sold, the success belongs to the institution; otherwise, the failure is the artist's. The notion of 'international' is therefore problematic. Practitioners who do not have 'international' ambitions are out of place, and those who go against the institutional 'good' should worry about the chances of future cooperation.

It stands to reason that the willingness of a foreign organiser to pay for the artists' presence is an acknowledgment to the value of the creative work (even if it is commercial, such as box office revenue). Before writing this essay, I conducted a small-scale public questionnaire survey on Facebook about overseas performances from 2016 to 2018, and received 17 replies, in which 53% of my subjects performed overseas once or twice a year, and 30% performed three to five times annually. 41.2% said that paid overseas invitations accounted for only 0 to 10%, and 82.4% said that income from performing overseas accounted for 30% or less of their total annual income. In Hong Kong, dance practitioners, especially freelancers, almost all rely on subsidies to cover travelling expenses for overseas performances. If performance fees reflect, to a certain extent,

the desirability of Hong Kong dance works for overseas organisers, what do these figures tell us?

Between Rupture and Compliance

In fact, the core of the problem is obvious: The mainstream discourse that proclaims the 'good' of going international becomes more and more essentialised in the process of institutional operation, resulting in a gap between the actual needs and experience of individual practitioners.

While I commend the industry's good intentions of advocating the formation of delegations and acknowledge that institutional resources and operational capabilities have paved the way for individual practitioners to the art market, the problem, I believe, lies in the lack of discussion regarding this 'good' of going international, hence the limited and oppressive narrative. For those of us who think that the international good is common sense, are we also aware that common sense is but a man-made narrative, used to perpetuate certain existing rules? 'The market [is] making more insistent demands than the art'²¹ in John Berger's terms is considered common sense by a certain class of people.

Among the survey responses mentioned above, 56.3% of practitioners said they received direct invitations to performing overseas and 43.7% were 'taken' overseas by institutions. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive, nor do they summarise the relationship between practitioners and the international. What needs to be considered is how institutions and practitioners should cooperate in an era when connections can be quickly established via the Internet. Seen from the specific context of

institutions organising delegations to participate in the art market, as well as the reality of the coexistence of institutions and practitioners, neither a total rupture nor compliance will change the individual condition within the institutional context. We need to seek a possible symbiosis in this gap between two levels of expectations, i.e., the understanding of 'good', and the operation of delegations. In other words, practitioners need to establish a critical interaction with the institution. French choreographer Xavier Le Roy described his creation as something 'to integrate with the economic dynamics of dance production while being careful not to be governed by its particular logic'. The rhetoric of 'creative freedom' of late capitalism is its justification for more new products to enter the market. When both institutions and individuals employ the narrative of 'contemporary dance is personal expression', practitioners should at least strive to establish the dimension of the experience of 'freedom': to exercise the freedom to go 'international' or not, free from fear of artistic or even moral judgements.

Endnotes

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