

Beyond Rhythm: Exploring Infinite Possibilities in Music, Movement and Choreography—Hands Percussion Malaysia

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Abstract

One of the similarities between the ideas and philosophies underlying the musical compositions of John Cage and Hands Percussion Malaysia (HANDS) is their desire to explore musical sounds beyond the conventional and cultural norms of their time. Cage utilised Asian philosophy as inspiration for his aleatoric and chance music compositions, while HANDS fused sound art with movement. Founded on shi gu (shi: lion, gu: drum) drumming, movement and choreography, HANDS now experiments with a variety of musical instruments from various cultures to expand on the sounds and timbres produced in their performances. They merge extracts of musical elements from selected musical cultures, rhythmic drumming, and synchronised creative movements into their concert pieces. Some aspects of HANDS compositions are based on interculturalism, but many are new creations that decontextualise the musical instrument from its essentialised cultural-musical context. Based on interviews with HANDS' artistic director and members, this article examines the socio-cultural context that inspired the themes and ideas embedded in the avant-garde music and choreography of HANDS' previous concerts. The background to the socio-cultural context of HANDS' Generation X, Y and Z musicians is supported by literature reviews.

Keywords *avant-garde, identity, Malaysian Chinese, interculturalism, new music performing arts*

While John Cage's (1912-1992) musical compositions challenged the Western perception of 'music' during the 20th century, HANDS (1997 until now) explores new sounds and timbres beyond the cultural tradition in which they are rooted. John Cage's concept of music triggered intense debates that stimulated Western society to redefine the meaning and ways of listening to music. Cage's lifetime spanned the 20th century, an era marked by the emergence of the postmodernist discourse, largely characterised by the movement of deconstruction. Cage was among the postmodern composers who challenged the metanarratives of beauty and aesthetics in atonal music, whose dissonant sounds were perceived superior during the era of Modernism. Postmodern composers opted for simpler sounds and relatively more consonant sounds (Gloag, 2012; Jameson, 1985; Storey, 2009). Cage's ideas paved the way for musicians to explore new dimensions in musical composition. These changes influenced the development of the contemporary art music and popular music styles that exist today.

HANDS' continuous experimentation with new combinations of sounds arranged into creative rhythmic patterns, their openness to different conceptualisations of music, and freedom to explore infinite possibilities in performance are important qualities that attract and captured the attention of the early 21st century's audience of the "spectacle" (Debord, 2012). HANDS' notable brilliance is in their fusion of sound art and movement. Unconnected to any rituals associated with religious beliefs, these features are crucial to the survival of this self-funded performing arts group in our time-compressed world, where speed and technology reign supreme (Harvey, 1990). In the spectacle, Debord posits that "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation," referring to the dominance of visual culture performed onstage for entertainment. HANDS' concerts manifest the postmodern condition – the collapse between the realm of culture and the realm of economic activity, they 'replicate and reproduce – reinforce the logic of consumer capitalism (Jameson, 1985, p.125). Unless groups are sponsored by the government, most private performing arts groups have to compete for audiences in the entertainment industry, therefore survival is dependent on their ability to read into consumer trends or even better, invent new trends. While visual aesthetics and spectacularism is emphasised to ensure sustainability in the performing world, HANDS asserts that meaning and cultural expression is of primary importance in each of their concert pieces. This is perhaps the central driving force that has sustained their popularity in the performing arts scene in Malaysia for 16 years.

In recent years, HANDS has incorporated contemporary theatrical drumming and additional musical instruments into the original *shi gu* (*shi*: lion, *gu*: drum) ensemble. Deconstructed from their function as merely the 'rhythm provider', theatrical drumming breathes new life into HANDS drummers' roles and capacity onstage who now assume the role of both musician and performer. Drummers now perform stylised movements that are manifested from musical gestures. The once static Chinese *shi gu* (lion drum), which was mounted on an unmovable stand, is now designed with wheels, increasing its mobility onstage. HANDS also explores the advantage of the lightweight single-headed hollow *shi gu* by creatively rearranging its positions in seemingly endless possibilities. New pieces begin with an inspired idea that is gradually expanded and developed. A process of experimenting, improvising, deleting and refining takes place before the artistic director approves of a new piece to be performed in a concert.

While Cage and HANDS both show interest in the music of other cultures, the reasons that stimulated their interest differ. Cage's interest in 'chance music' was inspired by his study of Indian philosophy, Zen Buddhism and Chinese philosophy. This interest led to his development of aleatoric and chance-controlled music. Cage also utilised the I-Ching, a Chinese classic text used for divination as a tool for composing many of his works (Cage, 1973). The I-Ching was an excellent medium for Cage's idea of 'indeterminate music' and 'chance music'. Cage noted that the events stimulating sounds in the environment occur by chance. Correlating to the notion of 'chance' is "natural interaction." He posited that the natural interaction among the environment, humans, plants, and animals trigger sounds that can be defined as 'music'. While it is not purposely structured or composed, these sounds occur in an ordered cycle of time or seasons. Pritchett (2009) affirms Cage's idea in the statement below:

It is like the ongoing cycle of the moon – new to full to new again – which unfolds in the sky. The activities of the people, for the most part, take place independently of it, although still within a grand time structure of this cycle (p.10).

Cage composed music based on a framework that allowed the occurrence of indeterminacy, unpredictability, and indeliberacy. He tried to evoke society to appreciate simple and natural interactions as music. Beverly (1990) affirms this in the statement below:

... those things that we associate with logic and our observance of relationships, those aspects of our mind are extremely simple in relation to what actually happens, so that when we use our perception of logic we minimise the actual nature of the thing we are experiencing (paragraph 3).

HANDS places interest in the musical instruments, music and sounds of the cultures in their homeland, and those encountered during their travels to perform at international festivals. Their interest in music beyond Chinese culture in Malaysia stems from various socio-political issues. For HANDS, incorporating musical instruments from the various cultures in Malaysia began with a search for a Malaysian Chinese identity. Growing up in a pluralist society, the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia has integrated some of the cultural practices of their neighbouring communities, inventing their very own localised culture in time. The hybridisation of music, dance, art, costume and colloquial languages is a result of the daily intercultural dialogues among the multicultural society. This interaction leads to newly “invented traditions” (Anderson, 1983) that represents the unique blend of the diverse cultures in Malaysia. According to Mohd Anis (2008), young Malaysian contemporary musicians and choreographers are interested in constructing their works based on the unique multicultural landscape of Malaysia. This young group of musicians, who were born after the 1970s, did not experience the chasm of the 1960 racial riots that spurred the formation of the National Cultural Policy (NCP). This generation of Malaysians is “more interested in the present state of intercultural experiences rather than indulging in re-creating the past to idealise separate cultural identities, which is often confronted with chasms of socio-religious divide.” (Mohd Anis, 2008, p.97). These musicians perform during music festivals, officiation of important events, opening ceremonies, concert halls, artistes’ spaces, community, or education events. They are the “new and emerging leaders of multiculturalism, pursuing intercultural experiments within the safety niches of their specialized performative areas” (ibid.).

HANDS: Background

Hands Percussion (HANDS) is a Malaysian Chinese percussion ensemble that was established in 1997 (Figure 1). Since then, HANDS has amazed audiences in Malaysia and across the globe with their innovative and avant-garde performances. They are well known in the Kuala Lumpur performing arts scene and have performed at numerous world-class international festivals. HANDS perpetuates the Malaysian Chinese musical

heritage, innovating and fusing it with contemporary percussion styles. While their core musical instrument is the *shi gu* (lion drum), HANDS has incorporated a variety of musical instruments from Asia and decontextualised them from their original cultural context. These musical instruments include the gong chimes and gongs from the Malay gamelan; Malay drums such as the *gedombak*, *gendang*, *kompang*, *rebana*, *rebana ubi* and *jidur*; the Taiwanese *tao gu* (small drum), Japanese *taiko* and *shimetako*; Chinese *jing gu* and *xiao tang gu*, Sarawakian sape, Indian sitar and violin, western drum set and others. This variety of instruments allows HANDS to experiment and explore a diversity of sounds with different timbral qualities in their performances. HANDS invents different ways of producing music on these instruments that is synchronised with movement and choreography.



Figure 1 Hands Percussion Malaysia (1997 till present) (Photo courtesy of Hands Percussion, 2013)

Many HANDS members developed drumming skills during their school days from their participation in the 24 Jie Ling Gu (24 Festive Drum) (*jie*: breath, *ling*: phenomenon) ensemble, a drumming group founded by the Chinese of Malaysia in 1988. The 24 Jie Ling Gu ensemble consists of 24 *shi gu* (lion drum) struck by 24 drummers to a variety of rhythmic patterns that is synchronised with dynamic body movements. The music and choreography of this ensemble are based on the concept of the 24 *jie qi* (*jie*: joints, *qi*: breath) in the Chinese Agricultural calendar. Each *jie qi* lasts 15 days and is marked by changes in natural weather phenomenon, agricultural activities, festivals and rituals (Chan 2002; 2006, p.103).

Annual 24 Jie Ling Gu competitions are held in Malaysia to select a team with the best drumming techniques, creative choreography and showmanship. The composition of movements and choreography was tightly bounded to the concepts, festivals, activities and phenomenon that occurred during every *jie qi*. The founding committee had created rules and regulations on how the *shi gu* should and should not be played. Failure to adhere to these specific regulations resulted in mark deduction during competitions. These rules hindered the more experienced high school drummers from extending boundaries of the tradition when composing new pieces for competitions.

In addition, the capacity for refined sound quality was hindered due to the physical structure of the 24 *shi gu* and the lack of timbral diversity in one homogenous drum type.

Liberating themselves from the restrictions associated with Chinese cultural taboos, superstition and conventions maintained by elder Chinese leaders in the 24 Jie Ling Gu ensembles, HANDS formed its own unique performing arts groups. Founded by artistic director Bernard Goh Seang Heong and assisted by Eric Ch'ng, their former managing director, HANDS began to explore new creative ideas that extended beyond music to movement, choreography, and theatre in their performances. HANDS constructs musical performances unique to the identity of the Chinese in Malaysia. They explored their multiple identities as Malaysian, Chinese, modern and cosmopolitan citizens through continuous experimentation with unconventional sounds and movements founded on the different themes and concepts during their annual concerts. Some of the themes of previous HANDS concerts were "Ritual of Drums" (2002), "Dialogue in Skin" (2004), "Drum Slices" (2007), "Chaos in Unisons" (2007), "Kaleidoscope" (2009), "Dreams in November" (2009), "Rhapsodrums" (2010), "Souls in Love" (2012), "The Next" (2012), and the most recent "LaFaz Gema" (2013).

Since its formation in 1997, Hands Percussion has been invited to perform as a world-class percussion in many countries during festivals such as the 41st International Folklore Festival, Netherlands (2006), 48th World Festival of Folklore, Belgium (2006), Doha Asian Games Cultural Show, Qatar (2006), Earth Music Festival, Greece (2008), International Folk Festival of Martigues, France (2009, 2013), Cracking Bamboo Festival, Hanoi, Vietnam (2010, 2012), East West Center 50th Anniversary Celebrations, Honolulu, Hawai'i (2010), and Groundbreaking Ceremony of the Olympic Complex, Ashgabat, Turkmenistan (2010). Hands Percussion has created a new musical legacy and heritage for the Malaysian Chinese of this era.

Statement of Problem

Many musical heritages attached to rituals and religious activities are on the decline today unless they adapt to new styles and sounds that capture the 21st century audiences' aesthetic preference today. This audience is characterised by a short-attention span, a desire for thrills, the bizarre, different, and a focus on the visual. While the nature of the audience sets standards for HANDS' performances, the vision and aims of this group also controls the trends and innovations in their performances. The performing arts in Malaysia is a space where the Chinese articulate, express and negotiate their identity as national and global citizens. As the Chinese adapt to their homeland in the diaspora, they select and perpetuate cultural traditions in their performing arts that serve as an emblem of their ethnic identity (Tan, 2007, p.64). Authenticity is less pertinent for the Chinese performing arts, which is simultaneously localised and internationalised by the different generations of Chinese in Malaysia. The Chinese in Malaysia are made up of multiple identities, these identities shift and transform according to the socio-political situation around them. Tan Sooi Beng discusses the shifting identities of the Chinese in Malaysia through the *Hua Yue Tuan* (Chinese Orchestra) (2001) and Lion Dance (2007). The Chinese identity in the diaspora is fluid and malleable, therefore "a

postmodern notion of ethnicity ... can no longer be experienced as naturally based on tradition and ancestry” (Ang, 1993, p. 14). This article explores the characteristics of HANDS musicians by associating them with the characteristics of Generation X, Y, Z. These characteristics influence the style of contemporary performances choreographed by HANDS.

Since 1997, the concepts and themes in HANDS concerts have evolved. Today (2013), HANDS have eight full-time performers, 18 part-time performers and 12 trainee performers. HANDS recently formed two separate groups as they began to grow in numbers. Hands 1 consist of the elder and more experienced performers (aged between 21-33) and Hands 2 comprised of younger drummers aged between 18-25. Hands also formed a HANDS gamelan group in 2007 when they bought a set of gamelan instruments.ⁱ In 2013, HANDS consisted of those born in generation X, Y and Z. Each generation experiences the emergence of various socio-political and technological advancements that shaped the characteristics and mindset of the generation.

Generation X includes those born in the years 1966-1974 after the Post-World War II baby boom in the United States. This generation is born into a generation where multiculturalism in their country has become a norm (Coupland, 1991). There is generally more openness to issues of race, ethnicity, gender ambiguity, sexual orientation and cultural diversity (Isaksen, 2002). Generation X is also commonly referred to as the MTV Generation, the early stages of media entry into Malaysia such as music videos, new wave music, electronic music, synthpop, glam rock, the spin-off pop punk, alternative rock, grunge, rap music and hip hop, disco and pop music.ⁱⁱ

Generation Y is also known as the Peter Pan or boomerang generation because they have a tendency to rely on and live with their parents for longer periods.ⁱⁱⁱ This generation is less religious compared to their parents and tends to be skeptical about institutionalised religions.^{iv} They grow up in an age where the Internet has gained prominence in societies. Through the Internet, they are exposed to a musical plethora.^v Unlike Generation X, the music common to this group are nü metal, thrash metal, indie rock, alternative rock, punk rock, new wave of American heavy metal, boy bands, teen pop, electronic music, hip hop, and contemporary R&B of the 21st century,^{vi} Generation Z is born into an era of media technology and the lifestyle of instant messaging, text messaging, MP3 players, mobile phones, interactive games and music is a norm. Dependent on technology to survive, they have been nicknamed as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001, 2012).

In general, these three generations are characterised by 1) a departure from monolithic religious practices; 2) enculturation in multi-cultural, pluralistic societies; 3) multiple identities; 4) exposure to multiple musical styles; 5) blurred gender roles; 6) digitally savvy persons.^{vii} The collective decisions and spirit among the three generations of HANDS members are fused together in their performances. Uniting these musical ideas is the artistic director Bernard Goh (2010) who states:

These youngsters are always telling me their views and sharing their new concepts. It is more than I could ever teach. They are exposed to so many different sorts of media these days, like YouTube, for instance. It has become my job to keep them grounded, to help them seek the meaning behind these new ideas so that

their intention is not just to wow the audience, but also to have a deeper and more purposeful objective.^{viii}

This article summarises the general characteristics of HANDS members born in generation X, Y and Z. It then examines how these characteristics influence and shape HANDS' musical compositions. I will only highlight how features 1 to 4 are manifested in selected HANDS pieces from their past concerts. Since Features 2-4 share similar characteristics, they are combined into one section. Features 5 and 6 require more research and will not be discussed in this paper.

Departure from Monolithic Religious Practices

Exposure to various alternative beliefs, value systems, and information systems has led to a decline in societies' attachments to monolithic religions that determined many inherited 'traditional' musical structures. Today, many subcultural, niche or cultural groups have adapted and reinvented new musical forms from religious or traditional musical heritage, sometimes relinquishing it from its religious connotations. These niche groups may be categorised as traditional contemporary arts, popular traditional groups, or world music groups. HANDS falls into the traditional contemporary arts category. The evolving ideas that inspire HANDS' concert themes each year show that music and dance performances today are more malleable and fluid compared to traditional performances performed for rituals in previous times.

Transcending traditional taboos and superstitions attached to traditional Chinese performing arts protocols and regulations, HANDS stand, sit, twirl, roll, toss and slide their hands or feet on the *shi gu* to enhance visual aesthetics and create a variety of timbral qualities (Figures 2 & 3). The once static *shi gu* mounted on a low stand is now mobile; it can be positioned and repositioned in diverse ways using stands with attached rollers. In 1996, a former HANDS member introduced the *Miyake* pattern from Taiko drumming into a HANDS piece. This piece required the *shi gu* to be tilted to a 40-degree angle. The drummers stretch out one leg, bending toward the right and striking the drums in rotating circular arm movements. The incorporation of Japanese drumming influences into HANDS performances signifies the influences of globalisation through migration, travel, and exposure to world cultures. In the piece titled *Drum Inferno and Emotions*, from the production *Drum Slices* (2006), the *shi gu* was tilted to a 90 degree angle and placed on higher stands compared to the lower ones on which the drums are usually mounted on.^{ix} In *Drum Inferno*, the drummers present the vigour, energy and intensity of fire in their rhythm and movement. Pak Nasir, a *rebana ubi maestro* and *guru* (teacher) inspired this drum position when he demonstrated to HANDS the various positions the *rebana ubi* can be played (Figure 4) (Goh, personal communication, 23 April 2013).^x



Figure 2 Sitting and striking the shi gu (lion drum) (Photo courtesy of Hands Percussion Malaysia).



Figure 3 Swinging and tossing the shi gu (Photo courtesy of Hands Percussion Malaysia).



Figure 4 Placing the drums on high stands at a ninety (90) degree angle. (Photo courtesy of the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia).

In the concert production, *Dreams in November* (2009), HANDS transcends taboo and superstition by requiring the lion dancers, which represent a lion, to be draped in white cloth. The colour white is associated with death and is taboo in Chinese culture. In this piece, a white lion rolls onto the stage in the form of a white ball; it dances, rolls, frolics, and finally reveals itself as a majestic white lion. Suspense and intensity is created among the audience, curious as to the identity of the ‘ball’. At the same time, a group of drummers wearing the ‘Laughing Buddha (*Da Dou Fu*)’ emerge to tease and disturb the white lion (Figure 5). In this choreographed work, the lion symbolises HANDS in the manner in which it attracts attention and is finally transformed into a successful unit. These drummers in the *Laughing Buddha* mask represent the elders who criticise the group’s new directions in drum performance. The utilisation of the colour white, associated with death and taboo in Chinese culture, now symbolises the courage to change and be different (ibid.)



Figure 5 HANDS drummers in *Da Dou Fu* (Laughing Buddha) masks teasing and making fun of a white lion (Photo courtesy of Hands Percussion, 2012)

In *Kaleidoscope 2* (2012), Jimmy Ch’ng combined the *tao gu* (Taiwanese small drum) with *kompang* and Indian drum inspired drumming styles. The *tao gu*, commonly used in Chinese temples to mediate between the natural and the supernatural world was added as part of the choreography. Detaching it from its traditional ritualistic function, the *tao gu* was tossed and twirled into the air by drummers who moved in choreographed circles and line formations to *joget*-adapted (Malay dance) movement patterns. Recontextualised from its association with superstition and taboos, the *tao gu* takes on a new image in HANDS’ pieces.

The *Gong Trilogy* piece from *The Next* (2012) concert production exemplifies a departure from monolithic religious systems or cultural ownership. In Malay culture, the gong is associated with mystical and spiritual ownership. It is taboo to step over the gong. In this piece, HANDS disassociate the gamelan instruments or gong chime instruments from its essentialised relationship with traditional Javanese, Balinese or Malay musical forms. In this piece, HANDS explored a different approach to producing sounds on the five-tone *kempul* (large knobbed gongs) from the Malay gamelan set. Changing the normal position of gongs, which are usually hanged on a wooden frame to

enable it to vibrate, HANDS explored an unconventional way of creating sounds from the gong. These five large gongs of different sizes were placed on top of a large sponge to mute its vibrating and ringing tone. Five players play on five gongs of different sizes. Each player interlocks in rhythmic patterns with each other, experimenting with numerous possibilities of producing different timbres on the horizontally laid gong. The drummers utilise different mallets to strike, scratch or scrape the gongs. They play on the rim, knob and side of the gong using different drumsticks, mallets and hands. These tools vary in size, shape and weight. The variety of mallets used increases the variables for sound production and enabled diverse sounds to be produced. The drummers cup and release the knob of the gong with their right palm to create a variation between a damp and bright sound (Figure 6). They also utilised variations in height such as bending and raising their bodies to create subtle timbral changes (Chan, 2013, Field notes).^{xi} They wear silver costumes designed with neon-lights that evoke a futuristic and ethereal effect when illuminated under the stage lights (Figure 7).



Figure 6 Striking the gong with a padded mallet held with the right hand and pressing on its rim with the left hand to dampen the sound (Photo courtesy of Hands Percussion, 2013)



Figure 7 Five HANDS drummers dressed in silver costumes designed with neon lights that illuminate under the stage lights (Photo courtesy of Hands Percussion, 2013)

Multi-cultural, Pluralistic Societies and Multiple Identities

In Malaysia, Generation X, Y, Z grow up in pluralistic societies, increasingly multicultural due to intercultural marriages and the influx of immigrant societies. HANDS embraces the notion of multiple identities in their performances exploring their identities as Chinese, Malaysian, global and cosmopolitan citizens. The 21st century Chinese in Malaysia comprise an inherited Chinese cultural heritage from China and a Malaysian identity constructed from their interaction with the plural societies in Malaysia. Exposed to global culture and values through the Internet, television and media, they have absorbed a different musical sense and taste. HANDS musicians and performers have travelled across the globe to perform during festivals. A sense of cosmopolitanism has been inculcated in these experiences. Exposure to performances of different ethnic groups from around the world opens up a new trajectory of ideas for HANDS, who embrace these unlimited possibilities as future possibilities for choreography and musical composition.

In 2010, HANDS featured a piece titled *Redha* in their *Rhapsodrums* production. In *Redha*, Tang Hui Kung, a female soprano sang a Hokkien song with tenor Stefano Chen, accompanied by live gamelan music and a violin solo played by Fung Chern Hwei.^{xiii} This piece combined Chinese and Malay influences, evoking an ethereal and exotic atmosphere. It was a highly effective example of cultural elements fused successfully. The *gu qin* (Chinese seven stringed zither) plucks a melodic introduction embraced by a slow introduction by the singer interspersed with accompaniment by pentatonic tones played by the bonang and sarun. The piece culminates to a tutti with the gamelan instruments, gendang and Chinese drums.

In the piece titled “Makan (eat)” from the *Ri Yue Chu Yin* (2011) concert production, Hands Gamelan Team collaborated with three musicians, Eddie Wen on the trumpet; Julian Chan, saxophone; Roger Chee, trombone to create a lively “modern” East meets West performance. This piece begins with a melodic motive played on gamelan instruments, namely the *bonang barung* and *sarun barung*, to a common church bell tune. This motive is melodically ornamented by the *sarun pekin*, *gambang* and *bonang panerus*. After the gamelan ensemble section, the trumpet, saxophone, trombone, bass guitar, conga, bongo, and Western drum set enter, breaking the ‘formal’ mood of the first section to a lively, jazzy and funky mood. The group improvises on another main melodic motive based on the theme “Makan ” which was improvised by each solo instrument and interspersed with *tutti* (together) sections. The musicians called out names of the favourite multi-cultural foods in Malaysia such as *nasi lemak* (coconut nut rice with hot chilly paste and anchovies), *rojak* (mixed fruits with shrimp paste), *nasi kandar* (banana leaf rice) *ayam goreng* (fried chicken), and *kopi ping* (iced milk coffee). Each instrument takes turns to improvise on a theme and the music mounts to an exciting frenzied climax.

The constant travels and interaction of HANDS has exposed them to music of various cultures around the world. This has inculcated a sense of flexibility and fluidity in their ability to perform different musics and a sporadic intuitive memory of melodies and rhythms from various cultures. In the piece “Ming” composed by Jack Wan and performed *Ri Yue Chu Yin* (2011) concert production, HANDS collaborate with the

“Eight Mallets Percussion,” a world-class percussion group from Beijing in China. This percussion group showcased excellent drumming techniques on the Chinese membranophones such as *da gu*, *tang gu*, *ban gu*, and bronze gongs such as *luo gu* and *xiao buo* (small cymbals). As HANDS, whose ancestors migrated from China, and Eight Mallet Percussion from homeland China perform side by side, a noted difference is observed in each group’s rhythm patterns and movements. The former performs the typical Chinese rhythm comprising of symmetrical duple metered rhythms while HANDS has incorporated a variety of rhythmic characteristics of Western and other Asian musical forms into their drumming.

Conclusion

HANDS continues to compose avant-garde music, movement and choreography in their annual concerts. They represent a new niche group whose concepts and definitions of music are structured upon frameworks of stories, poems, and themes inspired from their daily encounters and experiences in Malaysia and beyond. The themes are dependent on HANDS’ encounters, they do not follow a sequential order and often are unpredictable and spontaneous. As the encounters and experiences of HANDS evolves, so too do their concepts and definitions of music over time. Mohd Anis (2007) states:

Awareness towards diversity as discourses for new works in contemporary performances has continued to provide the avenue for many young artists to showcase their newest works, which are often inspired by the works of others from diverse cultural backgrounds contesting long held assumptions of indigenous hegemony and subaltern acquiescence to the assumed hegemony (p. 96).

HANDS concerts manifest a group less attached to religious belief systems and more exposed to diverse musics and movements through the global media and their travels around the world. This article asserts that culture and identity are fluid and flexible. The changing identity of the Chinese in Malaysia is propounded in the statement below.

The Chinese in Malaysia are constantly creating and recreating their culture and identity as they adapt to the environment. The variety in the performing arts expresses the multiplicity in Chinese identity (Tan, 2000).

In traditional ethnic performance, change progressed gradually, sometimes subtly after decades or centuries. HANDS continues to grow and evolve through new experiences as Malaysian and cosmopolitan citizens. Their works embody the characteristics of our time-compressed world in this age of information technology. Their performances mark the dynamics, the socio-cultural phenomenon and aesthetics of the group at a particular point of time.

Endnotes

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- ^x Fieldnotes taken from Bernard Goh’s talk titled “24 Jie Ling Gu (24 Festive Drums) to Hands Percussion: The Malaysian Chinese Modern Identity Performed in Music and Choreography” during the “Talk, Play, Think” Seminar Series held at the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjung Malim, Perak. <http://fmsp.upsi.edu.my/index.php/events/talk-play-think>
- ^{xi} The author described the piece from viewing Hands Percussion “The Next” Concert performed at KLPAC and a showcase of the piece performed during the paper presentation, “Beyond rhythm: Exploring infinite possibilities in performance- Hands Percussion Malaysia” at the International John Cage 101 Conference (21-23 August 2013) held at the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjung Malim, Perak.
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Biography

Dr Clare Chan Suet Ching studied Ethnomusicology at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 2010. She is a recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship (2005-2007), the Asia-Pacific Graduate Fellowship in Ethnomusicology from University of Hawaii at Manoa (2005-2007), and the East-West Center Graduate Degree Fellowship (2008-2010). She is also the first recipient of the Sumi Makey Scholars Award for Arts and Humanities in 2008. Her research interest includes issues of identity, nationalism, tourism, globalization, and modernization in Chinese, Orang Asli (indigenous minorities) and Malay music in Malaysia. She has written on the 24 Jie Ling Gu (24 Chinese Festive Drums), P. Ramlee's music, and the impact of tourism and modernization on the music of the indigenous Semelai and Mah Meri of Malaysia. Clare is the Deputy Dean of Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts of Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia.
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