

Searching Asian identity through contemporary dance: Case studies of dance composition students at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

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This project dialogue looks at how selected dance composition students enrolled in the Diploma in Dance course at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), a tertiary arts institution located in Singapore, explored their Asian cultural identity through contemporary dance creation. The students were mentored by Lim FeiShen, a Singapore Cultural Medallion recipient and NAFA Senior Fellow Lecturer. Lim's own work often explores the Asian psyche through Western choreographic structure and device, as well as the utilization of Asian elements. For example, Lim's "Toccata" (2009) was a creative dialogue between music and dance, centering on the idea of touch inspired by the Northern Thai dance, Font Leap. Lim explored, metaphorically, how the donning of long fingernails portrays power and sophistication, yet blocks the sense of touch.

Advanced dance composition, taught by Lim at NAFA, provides a dynamic space where dance students, influenced by their Asian cultural heritage, can sojourn and are encouraged to experiment. Lim guides students through a research approach consisting of personal reflections, site excursions, expert consultations, archival digs, as well as online rummages. The students typically explore stories and issues, as well as incorporate elements from their Asian cultural heritage, primarily using Western contemporary dance as a vehicle, since either they and/or their fellow student dancers lack in-depth training in a particular cultural dance or movement form.

Selected students' choreographies are performed in *The Third Space*, an experimental platform that features the diversity of contemporary Asian dance forms, and/or *Crossings: Dance Diploma Showcase*, which aims to present the best of student performance and choreography. This project dialogue includes three of Lim's students and their choreographies that were featured in at least one of these productions: "Red Bamboo" (2009) by Tham Luo Lin Laura, Chinese Singaporean, revealed the plight of the Samsui women in Singapore; "Rumah Tangga"(2010) by Marn Qin Pei Charlotte, Chinese Singaporean, uncovered the matrilineal society of her maternal Peranakan ancestors; and "Dao Cu Chi Tunnels" (2011) by Tay Shuwen Amanda, Chinese Singaporean, exposed the lives of thousands of people in the Vietnamese province of Cu Chi who lived in an elaborate system of underground tunnels during the Vietnam War.

The dance creations of NAFA's advanced dance composition students show the representation of Asian identity taking on complex and meaningful constructions. The emergence and development of contemporary dance in Singapore sets an exciting but thorny ground for artistic creation due to the dilemmas and complexities that surround it, due to its association with Western knowledge and aspirations. Nevertheless, contemporary Asian dance forms utilising contemporary dance techniques and styles as components in an expression unique to Asians are emerging. Contemporary dance is being defined on Asian terms, producing local forms where Asian values and ideals are asserted and inherent in these new contemporary dance forms is the search for Asian identity.

Keywords: contemporary, choreography, Asian, culture, identity

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