

# Hands Percussion of Malaysia: Performing Cosmopolitanism Built on Shared Philosophy and Artistic Values in Global Musical Alliances

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## ABSTRACT

*Hands Percussion is a percussion ensemble in Malaysia that integrates percussive rhythm, creative movement and spectacular choreography with diverse musical sounds. Founded in 1997, Hands Percussion has evolved from a Chinese drumming ensemble to a contemporary performing arts ensemble that embraces a myriad of local and global musical styles and movements. This article explores Hands Percussion's identity from local to cosmopolitan musicians, whose opportunities for musical alliances are enhanced through international connections and collaborations. While Hands Percussion is exposed to diverse global musical styles, I argue that their choices for global musical alliances are founded upon three shared philosophies and artistic values including: (1) virtuosity and skill, (2) philosophy of life and artistic values, and (3) openness, flexibility and passion toward learning. Through interviews with Hands Percussion artistic directors and performers, this article examines the shared philosophies and artistic values that enable successful global alliances, consequently constructing the "cosmopolitanism" in their performances.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese drumming, cosmopolitanism, interculturalism, identity, musical alliances*

## INTRODUCTION

From the visual images and video clips of Hands Percussion's concert promotion trailers and performances on the Internet, one may wonder about the origins of this performing group? Which country, ethnic group or cultural identity do these performers represent? The Hands Percussion performers' general physical appearance and the Chinese *shi gu* (lion drum) in their ensemble seem to point to ethnic Chinese origins. However, the group's performances also include musical instruments from other cultural traditions in Malaysia such as the *gamelan*, *gendang*, *kompang*, *rebana*, *tabla*, *sitar*, *rebab*, *guqin*, *sape*, *guitar*, *bongo* and *conga*. In their early years after the group's establishment in 1997, Hands Percussion fused Asian drums into their performances such as the Japanese *taiko* and *shimetaiko*, Taiwanese *tao gu* and Chinese *sou gu*. In recent years, Hands Percussion has been exploring global soundscapes through their musical alliances with performing artists and drummers around the world. They introduced sounds of the *djembe* and *kora* from the Manding Empire (West Africa), synchronised the complex rhythms of the African *tama* (talking drum) of Burkina Faso, explored music creations on the Swiss *hang* drum and used Balinese gamelan techniques in their musical creations. This article reflects upon whether a homogenous and essentialised identity is still important in this age of globalisation where cultural identity is fluid and mobile due to the blurring of national and regional borders.

Hands Percussion performances challenge established understandings of identity as cultural performing arts groups being bounded to "place" (location) and "presence" (people) (Massey 2003; McDowell 1997; Rose 1995; Stokes 1997). Today, the inspirations for Hands Percussion musical creations transcend those deriving from the performing arts traditions of the local Chinese and Malaysian soundscape. While they represent Malaysia, the group's performances manifest an identity beyond national and cultural boundaries. Hands Percussion may be compared with *taiko* drumming groups in the United States. According to Matsue (2016: 22–23), *taiko*, a Japanese drumming ensemble originally grounded on the concepts of an imagined Japanese diaspora is now made up of a "multiplicity of cosmopolitan musical practices and innovative techniques" that constantly absorbs ideas from diverse sources. Hands Percussion's movement from a Chinese to Malaysian identified group and subsequently more global musical ensemble, manifests the founders' courage to detach and break free from ingrained concepts of essentialised culture-derived regulations and protocols in performances

that are bounded by ethnicity, religion and belief systems. Hands Percussion moves beyond a "musical construction of place" (Stokes 1997) in which communities assert "social cultural differences (ethnicity, nationalism, class) by the mapping of particular places and understanding of their cultures vis-à-vis geographic sites" (Buchanan 1995: 427). Through intercultural compositions, Hands Percussion also challenges the discourse of multiculturalism promoted in Malaysia's *Bangsa Malaysia* (1991) through "unity in diversity" (Ooi 2006) and the "1Malaysia" (2009) concept (Mohd Yusof 2012).

In the early quarter of the 21st century, global mobility through ease of travel, touring, migration and the proliferation of immigrant workers have led to the emergence of complex heterogeneous identities that contest the notion that identity is stoic and stable, to identity that is mobile, in constant flux and flexible (du Gay and Hall 2013; Hall 2013). Hands Percussion catapults cultural performances from its function of propitiating supernatural forces to one that celebrates art in performance. The group represents cosmopolitanism of the early 21st century professional performing arts ensemble whose musical identity, while rooted in Chinese drumming, is also eclectic and mobile. In this article, I argue that Hands Percussion represents the identity of cosmopolitan Malaysians who are exposed to contemporary global trends, ideas and values. However, I also assert that the "cosmopolitanism" identity in Hands Percussion is selective and based on shared principles and artistic values between Hands Percussion and their alliances. This study explores the shared philosophy, principles and values that enable successful global alliances and new creations, consequently, the "cosmopolitanism" in Hands Percussion.

## **FROM 24 JIE LING GU TO HANDS PERCUSSION**

Since its formation in 1997, Hands Percussion has grown into three teams categorised by age and experience. Team A consists of Generation X (born before 1980s) drummers, Team B is comprised of Generation Y (born between 1984–1996) and Team C, Generation Z (born after 1997), the newly recruited members. Most Hands Percussion drummers grew up mastering Chinese drumming skills through the 24 Jie Ling Gu, also known as the 24 Festive Drums, as part of the curricula in the Chinese primary and secondary schools of Malaysia. The 24 Jie Ling Gu is a Chinese drumming ensemble genre that was created by the Chinese in Malaysia in 1988. Its music and choreography manifest the Malaysian Chinese romanticised imagination

of the agricultural activities, festivals and natural environment inherent during every *jie qi* (sub season) in the Chinese agricultural calendar in China (Chan 2002; 2006). In its early years of formation in 1988, 24 Jie Ling Gu performances essentialised "Chineseness" from the diaspora's imagination of China. The proposed concept of the Malaysian government's National Cultural Policy (NCP) in the 1970s may have triggered the formation of the 24 Jie Ling Gu. In the NCP, the criteria for producing national culture should be based on three components: indigenous culture (Malay) of the region, suitable and salient elements from other cultures may be accepted and that Islam is an important element in the formation of Malaysian national culture (Mandal 2008: 278). This concept posed a threat to freedom of cultural production and expression among the diverse ethnic groups in the Malay Peninsula (Tan 1989/1990).

After independence, many colonised countries felt the need to assert a national identity through symbolic representations such as the national flag, the national flower, national songs, dances, monuments, cars and other symbols. Citizens of heterogeneous ethnic groups were enthused to see themselves as part of "one nation", an "imagined community"—"imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). The nation-state represents what Giddens (1994) called a "power container" with a totalising, homogenising and formally equalising effect. This power container implies a bounded community and imposes a set of cultural norms and expectations to the principle, which binds the community together (blood or territory) and determines the incorporation (naturalisation) rules for the insider. Former and now current Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed promoted this "one nation" concept through the *Bangsa Malaysia* (*bangsa*: race) idea in 1991. The 24 Jie Ling Gu, representing the Chinese ethnic group, fit into the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept in 1991, a concept that paradoxically promoted "unity in diversity" through multiculturalism. In the early 1990s, the 24 Jie Ling Gu with its powerful, loud and dynamic sounds and physical movements, was part of an important strategy to unify the communal spirit of the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia. While the concept of the NCP failed to be enacted due to lack of support from Malaysian citizens, its early propaganda may have stimulated Chinese communities in Malaysia to assert their ethnic identity through traditional Chinese performances.

After many years of performing the 24 Jie Ling Gu in the primary and high schools, some of the drummers in Hands Percussion desired to explore performance beyond the musical sounds and movements of the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia. Their desire was hindered by the rules and regulations determined by the council of elders especially those who served as judges for the annual 24 Jie Ling Gu drumming competitions. Some teams found themselves disqualified for including local musical elements from other cultural traditions in Malaysia. Many of the Generation X drummers found that these limitations suppressed their creativity and discouraged them from exploring new music and movement. In 1997, Bernard Goh, the founder of Hands Percussion, broke free from these boundaries. He formed Hands Percussion as a percussion ensemble founded on Chinese drumming styles that also explored the soundscapes of Malaysia by collaborating with local Malay, Indian and indigenous artists. The next section discusses intercultural musical explorations between Hands Percussion and local communities in Malaysia.

## **INTERCULTURALISM IN HANDS PERCUSSION EARLY CONCERTS**

Interculturalism in the performing arts is a conscious interactive dialogue between two or more cultures in the construction of new performance pieces. Hands Percussion explores artistic possibilities through philosophical and musical dialogue among artists from various backgrounds in the construction of new pieces (Chan 2015: 30–31). Openness to learning, sharing and collaborating across cultures enables the creation of new artistic works of different aesthetic values. Interculturalism promotes cross-cultural dialogues and interaction across cultures and challenges the passive acceptance of multicultural communities coexisting effectively (Penas and López 2006: 15). "Multiculturalism" implies separate cultural traditions revolving around "race and failed to consider other forms and differences such as sexual orientation, gender, faith and sexuality" (Cantle 2012a: 41). Multiculturalism tends to "preserve cultural heritage while interculturalism acknowledges and enables cultures to have currency, to be exchanged, to circulate, to be modified and evolve" (Sze and Powell 2004).

Meer and Modood (2011) state that interculturalism is "something greater than co-existence, allegedly geared toward interaction and dialogue than multiculturalism". They define "interculturalism" as:

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

Cantle (2012a: 41) states that interculturalism "allows us to talk about race and diversity in a different way". It is the creation of a culture of openness that challenges the establishment of separate identities (Cantle 2012b: 144). Cantle (2012a: 38) asserts that interculturalism "tries to avoid the charge of assimilation, but recognises that heritage and identity are dynamic and that cross-cultural interaction in an increasingly globalised and diverse societies is inevitable and desirable".

During the early founding days of Hands Percussion, the group's members explored interculturalism through dialogues of sound and movement within "ethnoscapes" of Malaysia. "Ethnoscape" is one of five dimensions of global cultural flow and refers to the people who populate the land including tourists, immigration, refugee, exiles and guest workers (Appadurai 1996: 33). They worked with local musicians and artists such as Kamrul Hussin, Pak Nasir, Batteryheadz Percussions and Prakash Kandasamy, Samuel J. Dass and Friends to choreograph new pieces (Hands Percussion 2012). In Hands Percussion concerts titled Kaleidoscope 2 (2012), Hands Percussion combined *tao gu*, *kompang* and *tabla* with joget-style movements accompanied by intriguing drumming patterns (Chan 2013: 112). In the concert titled *Ri Yue Chu Yin: The Birth of Hands Percussion Gamelan*, Hands Percussion performed a piece titled *Makan (Eat)* which highlighted the variety of foods in Malaysia such as *nasi lemak* (coconut rice with fried anchovies and chili paste), *asam laksa* (spicy sour fish noodles), *kopi ping* (ice milk coffee) and *nasi goreng telur bistik* (fried rice with *bistik* egg) on the gamelan, trumpet, saxophone and trombone. A funky and jazzy rhythm accompanied the music on the gamelan (Chan 2013: 114).



**Photo 1** Hands Percussion exploring western classical music rearranged for the gamelan in their Tchaikovsky for Gamelan (2014) concert.

Source: Hands Percussion (2014).

In the Tchaikovsky on Gamelan (2014) concert, Hands Percussion made an ambitious attempt to rearrange and perform Tchaikovsky's compositions for classical ballets using the gamelan. The gamelan in Malaysia is a set of instruments intrinsically tied to the *Gamelan Melayu* genre, a musical ensemble that performs a musical repertoire inherited from the royal courts of the present-day Malaysian state of Terengganu (D'Cruz 1980). The group's percussionists were intrigued by the sounds of the gamelan. They did not learn the *Gamelan Melayu* repertoire but utilised the musical instruments to perform selected music

that Tchaikovsky composed for ballets. As percussionists, performing melodies requiring expressive phrasing was a new endeavour for Hands Percussion members. The heterophonic form of the arrangements on gamelan instruments proved another challenge for these percussionists. Hands Percussion explored the "gamelan's creative and rhythmic artistry, inspiring the group to push musical boundaries not only rhythmically, but also melodically" (Hands Percussion 2014). The choreography was presented through visual projections with 3D effects and graphic displays based on fine art elements such as calligraphy projected on cloth integrated with experimental lighting (as shown in Photo 1).

In Hands Percussion's concert titled *The Next* (2012), the Gong Trilogy deconstructed the five *kempul* (hanging gong) from its original hanging position to a horizontal position. Placed on five tables, Hand Percussion drummers in neon-lit suits performed interlocking patterns on the *kempul* using a variety of hand and drumming techniques. In their concert titled *The Next* (2014), Hands Percussion choreographed new musical patterns and choreography inspired by *randai* into a creative piece. *Randai* is a folk theatre tradition from the Minangkabau community of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia and Sumatra, Indonesia. Prior to the concert, group members learned to play percussive patterns that were created by slapping outstretched cloth beneath the performers' pants. Hands Percussion members designed a new look for the pants and also composed their own rhythmic patterns for "slapping the cloth" beneath their pants (Chan 2015: 31).

This article extends the discussion of Hands Percussion's early years of engaging in interculturalism among communities in Malaysia to "cosmopolitanism" through global musical alliances.

## **COSMOPOLITANISM**

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



(Skrbis and Woodward 2013: 99–100). Our social, cultural and political environments, especially in the urban areas provide a landscape for cosmopolitan encounters.

Cosmopolitanism is also an ideology that all human beings belong to a single community based on shared morality (*Stanford Encyclopaedia* 2013). During the era of the ancient Greeks, a cosmopolitan society was an imagined and idealised utopian society that was a topic of discussion and debate among Greek philosophers. In his famous phrase, "I am a global citizen", Socrates raised the idea of "community" through the incorporation of the "whole humanity" and the adoption of a non-hierarchical vision of cultural value. Socrates posited several perspectives whereby he: (1) rejected the polis as the absolute limit point to political belonging, (2) defined the idea of community through the incorporation of the whole humanity, (3) asserted that human rights were not constrained within geopolitical boundaries and (4) encouraged an attitude of self-awareness through genuine curiosity and open challenge with the other. Socrates' vision appears to be more realistic in this early 21st century due to ubiquitous access to information made possible by global connectivity through travel and communication. Ideas, values and trends from different parts of the world are easily shared among the global community through the Internet. A large part of society today is able to make choices, wielding some power to decide whether or not to subscribe to a monolithic religion, conventional values or other hegemonic habits such as consumerism and materialism.

Tyfield and Urry (2010) propose five components of "cosmopolitanism" that are connected as a socio-cultural force in the contemporary world. These components include: (1) extensive mobility, (2) global openness, (3) social reflexivity and imaginaries of alternative modernities, (4) social plurality and a "developed" civil society and (5) the presence of a global public sphere of space. These five components are observed in Hands Percussion behaviours and responses toward globalisation today. Hands Percussion members constantly travel for performances, tours and festivals and are open to new sounds and musical aesthetics. They are willing to engage in the risks of encountering the other and to face confusion, intimidation and incompleteness. While they remain grounded in Chinese identity, they embrace the positive in each new cultural encounter. This flexibility enables Hands Percussion members to embrace new sounds and musical aesthetics devoid of discrimination or judgement. The next section discusses how these concepts of cosmopolitanism have been integrated into Hands Percussion concerts.

## COSMOPOLITANISM IN HANDS PERCUSSION PERFORMANCES

In recent years, Hands Percussion has begun collaborating with artists from around the globe. In 2016, the group worked with French artists on *Opium* (2016), a concert that featured original French songs, Chinese-inspired melodies, ambient and experimental music (Lin 2016). *Opium* was inspired by Bernard's memories of his grandfather and the opium smoking days of the Chinese in colonial Malaya. British colonials in Malaya were also fascinated by orientalist images of romantic Paris including vintage posters, music boxes, ballet dancers and couples-in-love distributed through mass media. Hands Percussion met French singer Mathilde Limal, visual artist Anne Deguerry and cellist Florian Antier during their performance travels and tours in France. This friendship led to further communications and discussions that resulted in a concert collaboration in 2016. In *Opium*, *La Vie en Rose*, a popular French tune, was rearranged to include percussive drumming, singing and instrumental accompaniment. Malaysian musicians, Gideon Alu8khan Chen and Azli Taslim played on the guitar and accordion respectively in this French inspired production (as shown in Photo 2).

In 2017, Hands Percussion collaborated with Dafra Drums from Burkina Faso, USA to perform the *Wind of Nomads* (as shown in Photo 3). Together, both groups integrated the drumming styles of the Chinese *shigu*, Taiwanese drum, Chinese *erhu* and the Swiss *hang* drum with traditional African musical instruments such as the *kora*, *djembe*, *calabash*, *lolo*, *balafon* and *dun dun* (Lin 2017). According to Oliver Tarpaga, *Wind of Nomads* is a "spirit of adventure, one that you find not just within yourself, but in the soul of the great deserts in Africa and Asia" (ibid.). The intrinsic philosophy of life in *Winds of Nomad* lies in "human and cultural migration, drawing on the energy that emanates from many lifetimes of searching, exploring, finding oneself. It reflects a journey of discovery, a yearning to find out what lies beyond the horizon" (Lin 2017).

Hands Percussion learned about African cultural values as they sought to understand the embodiment of dance and soul in African drumming. They also discovered that rhythm does not necessarily have to follow a steady beat and that synchronisation between music and movement among musicians enables rhythms to emerge. For a Chinese drumming group that always keeps to a steady duple meter, this was a profound discovery for Hands Percussion.



**Photo 2** From left: French singer, Matilde and Malaysian guitarist and accordion player, Gideon Alu&khan Chen and Azli Taslim respectively perform a song to Chinese percussive drumming in the Opium concert.

Source: Ali, *Opium* (2016).



**Photo 3** Hands Percussion performing rhythms from Burkina Faso on the *djembe*.

Source: Hands Percussion.

In 2018, Hands Percussion members learned to play Balinese gamelan with Gamelan Yuganada, a group under the direction of I Wayan Sudirana. Members of Gamelan Jinggong are from the Banjar community of Ubud in Bali, Indonesia and have performed with renowned American composers such as Michael Tenzer and Andrew McGraw. The mastery of basic Balinese gamelan musical skills led to the concert collaboration titled *Taksu* in 2019. In Bali, *taksu* refers to the spirit of the arts, a state of performance that brings out the inner spirit in a person. The Balinese believe that "divine inspiration plays a part in motivating an artist to perform so passionately that moves her audience" (Hands Percussion forthcoming).

By integrating global sounds and musical styles into their music and choreography, Hands Percussion members have encountered criticism on their lack of a core identity and foundation. I argue that Hands Percussion actually represents the "cosmopolitan" identity

of many Malaysians of the early 21st century. In fact, Hands Percussion rekindles the spirit of "cosmopolitanism" that excited the nation prior to Independence in 1957. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the syncretic *bangsawan* or Malay opera presented the eclectic identity of the diverse communities of Malay, Chinese and Indian immigrants brought to the peninsula during British administrative years. Musical ensembles integrated Western and local musical instruments and styles that accompanied *bangsawan* shows (Tan 1993). Tan (2013: 457) posited that the *lagu melayu* (*lagu*: songs; *Melayu*: Malay) was the new hybrid music of the 1930s and 1940s that combined Anglo-American popular music idioms with Malay and other foreign musical instruments. *Lagu melayu* exemplified the identity of the Malays prior to independence, an identity that exuded a broader sense of Malayness and inclusiveness rooted in local culture, yet modern and cosmopolitan. The *Peranakan* community of Malacca that grew due to intermarriage between local women and Hokkien traders during the 17th century, exemplifies a "colonially elite" musical identity. The string orchestras and dance bands that formed at that time, played English and American popular songs that accompanied social dancing held at ballrooms and private clubs (Sarkissian 2012). Hands Percussion has revived the spirit of cosmopolitanism that was impeded by the movement toward affirming separate multicultural identities during the early years of post-independence (1957).

Appiah (1997) suggests the possibility of a cosmopolitan community in which individuals from varying locations (physical, economic, etc.) enter relationships of mutual respect despite their differing beliefs. He states that "cosmopolitanism" is a catchphrase for expressing the "duty" to live with all the other people in this world and the moral challenge that humanity should rise up. Appiah's concept is currently lived in specific parts of the world. There is a growing acceptance of gender differences and differing belief systems in many parts of the world today. There are also collective efforts to assist countries facing emergencies such as environmental catastrophes, famine and war.

Hands Percussion has developed many global alliances during their travels and performance tours at festivals and concerts. During these tours, Hands Percussion makes a conscious effort to develop friendships with performing artists. These friendships have led to performances by international artists in Hands Percussion concerts. Among these artists are Abbas Kosimov from Uzbekistan, Ben Walsh of the U-Hee Company, Korea, Majd Hass from Syria who performed in Hand Percussion's recent concert, Kaleidoscope 5: Unbeatable (2018). Collaboration with local Malaysian artists continues with the involvement of Prakash

Kandasamy, Dhol Alliance, Mat Din, Tan Su Yin, Arifwaran, Kathryn Tan and Yuan Leow Yunn.

While I listed the artists based on country affiliations, I propound that collaborations are not determined by country or ethnic origins but by mutual beliefs in artistic excellence. Goh comments on Kaleidoscope 5 (K5): Hands Percussion International Drumming Festival (2nd–5th August 2018):

A common thread that runs through all artists in K5 is that each of us believes in striving to be the best versions of ourselves. We have all failed countless times, but the lesson in that to always get up, dust off and keep moving forward. These guys deeply believe that our music and art is important enough to work hard for. Crazy enough to sacrifice everything that we've got to make it beautiful and brilliant to share. We know that a decision to move forward and do things differently can change our life forever. (Bernard Goh, *pers. comm.*, 20th May 2019)

While Hands Percussion presents a cosmopolitan identity, its alliances with global musicians and artists are founded on a mutually shared philosophy of life and artistic values. The next section discusses the three criteria that create "cosmopolitanism" in Hands Percussion's creations.

## **SHARED PHILOSOPHIES AND ARTISTIC VALUES**

In understanding the principles and values of Hands Percussion, we come closer to understanding the identity of musicians and performers in this early quarter of the 21st century. Matsue (2016) describes *taiko* groups in the United States as a "cosmopolitan musical movement in constant flux, combining diverse sources in innovative ways". Holt (2007) states that the "complicated nature of *taiko* may defy any categorisation, in turn challenging established understandings of genre itself". While this is true, Matsue (2016) states that humans nonetheless continue to rely on such systems of organisation to make sense of musical worlds.

The seemingly openness to absorbing musical ideas from global alliances invokes a critique of Hands Percussion's identity, values and principles. The eclectic identity of Hands Percussion raises questions on the identity and vision of the group. Therefore, this article seeks to understand the musical choices and choreographies made by Hands Percussion, hence an understanding of "cosmopolitanism" in Hands Percussion. The questions that are addressed include: (1) "What are the principles and essence of Hand Percussion?", (2) "How do Hands Percussion principles determine the group's musical alliances?" and (3) "How do these musical alliances influence the type of 'cosmopolitanism' inherent in Hands Percussion?".

From interviews with Goh, the artistic director, and Jimmy Ch'ng, the assistant artistic director and principle percussionist, I highlight three shared principles and artistic values of Hands Percussion:

1. Virtuosity and skill.
2. Philosophy of life and artistic values.
3. Openness, flexibility and passion for learning.

### **Virtuosity and Skill**

In order for a performer to achieve the standards of a Hands Percussion performance, one must have the basic knowledge of Chinese drumming skills, as many of their pieces are highly virtuosic and require high technical drumming skills. While technique and skills are learned and improved by performing in 24 Jie Ling Gu ensembles, Hands Percussion shifts the musician from being the drummer to being a performer. Hands Percussion members are not only musicians but also performers that play, dance and sometimes act. Some of the values binding Hands Percussion together are:

1. Chinese drumming patterns.
2. Chinese values of discipline and diligence.
3. High virtuosity and technical skills.

While Chinese drums and drumming provide the basics to Hands Percussion drumming, Chinese values, attitude and principles are crucial to the success of this group. The amount of training and discipline required to perform at the level of excellence in Hands Percussion requires the attitude of hard work, perseverance and diligence. This attitude transpired from the forefathers of the Chinese in Malaysia who had to work very hard in the tin mines, plantations and other industries during the early 20th century. Diligence and perseverance are highly observed in the teaching and learning style of Chinese schools in Malaysia. Training from the 24 Jie Ling Gu instils three important Chinese values including the rooting of discipline, respect for elders and perseverance (Chan 2006: 98). Children who learn the 24 Jie Ling Gu usually take part in competitions that require the synchronisation of rhythm and movement. In competitions, a single mistake by a drummer can cause the team to lose when their competitors are all equally good. While teamwork is important, the development of an individual who is strong willed and persistent is as important in building the foundation of the team (p. 98). To be a Hands Percussion performer, Goh states:

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

This virtuosic ability developed through discipline and diligence is important to master and grasp the various types of rhythmic patterns that Hands Percussion members explore in their pieces. While Hands Percussion embraces membership from all different origins, it is only those who are durable, strong willed and persistent who are able to sustain himself or herself as a performer in the group. Many have been recruited but many also failed to endure the training required from performing in this group.

On whether certain rhythmic patterns from different cultural groups are more difficult to master than others, Ch'ng, the principle performer and artist in Hands Percussion states:

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



Ch'ng makes an important point that challenges the assumption that music hybridity is only possible among musical cultures that merge with less complications. Ch'ng highlights that there is less of essentialism among this generation of Hands Percussion drummers, enabling them to learn and master the music of different cultures, consequently integrating each drummer to one another with their collective musical knowledge. Ch'ng emphasises the importance of the "mind" and the achievement of a psychological state that allows Hands Percussion drummers to collaborate with musicians from different cultural traditions.

### **Philosophy and Artistic Values**

All of Hands Percussion concerts are motivated by philosophies of life and artistic endeavours in their performances and members of the group are automatically attracted to groups that share similar principles. The shared background of hardships encountered during their childhoods to the early years in establishing their team and the challenges of surviving as a performing arts group are some of the elements that connect Hands Percussion with other percussion ensembles. Ch'ng states the following about the selection of collaborators:

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

The intercultural explorations by Hands Percussion members through travels, communication, friendships and networking expand their ideas and visions for new pieces. Although earning a substantial profit is important to support their livelihoods as full-time musicians, commercialisation is not the objective of Hands Percussion. Successive musical alliances are not formed overnight but developed during the process of materialising concert collaborations. Alliances are formed through transparency in communication, trust and integrity among the groups and solidified through perseverance and persistence in the creation and collaboration processes. Prior to any concert, the musical alliances involve lengthy periods of communication through live and online correspondences, workshops and training. Concert themes are founded on cultural philosophies and a commitment to artistic excellence.

On collaborating with Oliver Tarpaga for the performance of Winds of Nomad, Goh states:

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

A similar statement was mentioned to the press:

Oliver and I might be from what seems to be very different backgrounds – he's from Burkina Faso and is now based in Philly and I am from Seremban – but when working with each other, we realise that we have many similar ideas and opinions that are able to feed off each other. (Lin 2017)

Oliver's interest in collaborating with Bernard was the desire to spread his values and philosophy of life to others.

I would like people to come and leave with the new. Let yourself fly with us, let yourself free. Join us on this journey of discovery, and I promise you, you will go home richer than before the concert. (Lin 2017)

The statements above exemplify a process whereby musical alliances are developed through similar artistic directions and aesthetics, as well as experiences of hardships and challenges that have taxed the survival of the performing groups. Skrbis and Woodward (2013: 80) state that:

...identification with others is not automatic...there is an interactive relational dimension to the patterning of local and global interests, of home and away, which are structured by historical and political processes as much as media formats and personal psychologies of reception and interpretation, empathy and hospitality.

### Openness, Flexibility to Passion for Learning

When Goh first formed Hands Percussion, he had an open mind in learning new music and choreography. Since the formation of the group, Hands Percussion members have studied western percussion techniques, classical music, Balinese gamelan, African drumming, *sitar*, *gendang*, *hang drum*, *randai*, *miyake* and many other kinds of percussion music. Hands Percussion is also not bounded by any religious or cultural regulation that restricts them from constant exploration. Goh created many opportunities for these members to study music and drumming technique. Ch'ng took lessons in playing western percussion with Louis Pragasam, a local Malaysian percussionist. In the early years of the group's formation, they both joined a drumming workshop led by Bill Cobham from the United States of America.

In 2007, Hands Percussion purchased a gamelan set from Indonesia and utilised it as a percussion instrument. The group's members did not learn the traditional *Gamelan Melayu* repertoire but created their own music on the gamelan. They ventured into composing and adapting western classical music into the gamelan in their concert titled Tchaikovsky on Gamelan. For Hands Percussion, a group that is used to dynamic movements, concentrating and sitting still to focus on the melodic production was a challenge to each person's state of mind (Goh 2014).

The curiosity for learning different musical styles enriched their knowledge of diverse musical skills, rhythms and styles. On the question of whether they had specific cultural aesthetics in terms of selecting groups for collaboration, Goh replied, "No, as long as they are good artists, and they should be related to percussion and drum". On whether there are limits and boundaries of musical ideas that Hands Percussion would not explore, Goh states,

No.

...I just do, I just create, I just think it is good for us to try...we are free, we are free to explore...not held back. (Bernard Goh, *pers. comm.*, 20 May 2018)

This constant interest and openness to learning musical traditions that are highly virtuosic keeps Hands Percussion members alive and motivated in their performances. Their states of mind are constantly engaged with mastering new musical concepts that keep their spirits alive.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the interviews, I suggest that the Hands Percussion group demonstrates a cosmopolitan identity that is selectively based on shared principles and artistic values of virtuosity and skill, philosophy of life, shared artistic values along with openness, flexibility and passion for learning. Musical alliances based on trust, friendship, reciprocity and similar artistic directions are important. Hands Percussion's "cosmopolitanism" affirms Appiah's (1997) statement that "cosmopolitanism" is about individuals from varying locations (physical, economic, etc.) entering relationships of mutual respect despite their differing beliefs (religious, political, etc.). I return to the definition of cosmopolitanism by Socrates on the idea of "community through the incorporation of the whole humanity": while this is an idealised notion, Hands Percussion's "cosmopolitanism" is selective. One may be curious and fascinated by another culture, but the "chemistry" between Hands Percussion members and others may not work well enough to maintain working with each other. While Hands Percussion has met many percussion groups, the choices for collaboration are not random. The shared backgrounds of the artistic directors, including their hardships and struggles to survive in the performing arts world are some motivators for collaborations.

In learning to perform with and among others, Malay, Indian, French, African and Balinese music rhythms are intricately interwoven with cultural concepts such that Hands Percussion members gradually embody the "cosmopolitan" identity of shared morality and universal values. The group's identity is synergised with cultural values rooted in tradition yet eclectic, and that inculcates positive modern values of 21st century citizens of the world.

At the end, we realised that the production is not just about Malaysia or Africa or Africans or Chinese. It is about the balance of body, mind and soul. It is about deep connections and meaningful experiences leading to new creations and growing minds (Goh 2018).

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