

香港舞蹈概述

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Hong Kong Dance Overview 2017

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The Hong Kong Ballet's Way to Cultural Industries?

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Throughout 2017, one needed not to be a regular ballet-goer to be once amazed by the Hong Kong Ballet's promotional campaign in the form of MTR lightbox advertisements and huge posters in public spaces. Flipping through the *Hong Kong Ballet's Annual Report 2017/18*, we get a glimpse of some of the images used in the posters; stylish with vibrant colours, and they highlight the contrast and fusion of graceful bodies and the local cityscape. The cityscape itself as the backdrop highlights 'characteristics' such as 'the East meeting the West', 'blending of the traditional and the modern', that are strongly orientalist, exotic, almost cliché (Plate 1). For Hong Kong, a commercial city that is particular to publicity and packaging with world-class designs, the images used in the Hong Kong Ballet's new campaign were somewhat mediocre. But if we dial back the clock to 2013/14 and compare the styling in 2013/14 and 2017/18 *Annual Reports*, it becomes obvious that the 'ugly duckling' had changed its skin in just four years. Gone was the humble appearance, and she is now quite a looker.



Plate 1: The cover of the *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2017/18*
(Dancer: Li Jiabo | Creative: Design Army | Photography: Dean Alexander |
Courtesy of Hong Kong Ballet)

It has been suggested that the Hong Kong Ballet began its strategic transformation on the way to cultural industries since Septime Webre took the helm as the Artistic Director; he has been praised for the results. Before joining the Company, Webre has been the artistic director of the Washington Ballet for 17 years. He was described by *The Washington Post* as ‘a “showman” who “established a populist, of-the-moment style” that attracted newcomers to ballet’.¹ **However, this essay is going to suggest that the so-called ‘way to cultural industries’ strategy of the Hong Kong Ballet did not begin with Webre’s appointment, but on its 35th anniversary (2013/14) when Daisy Ho and Paul Tam became the Chairman of the Board of Governors and Executive Director respectively.** It has launched with the slogan ‘Never Standing Still’ in the 2014/15 season.² Using the exact words from Chairman Ho, ‘To this end, the whole Company engaged in a strategic review and rebranding exercise throughout the 2014/15 fiscal year and dance season. The visual results, including the new logo that dons the cover of this *Annual Report*, were officially launched on 28 August 2015.’³ Indeed, the brand-new visual materials and style one saw in 2017 has already quietly appeared in the 2014/15 *Annual Report*. In other words, the Hong Kong Ballet’s ‘way to cultural industries’ was already underway during the reign of the previous artistic director Madeleine Onne. The new artistic director, renowned for having ‘established a populist, of-the-moment style’ was but the new executor of the Company’s ‘strategic rebranding’.

However, is Hong Kong Ballet’s ‘strategic rebranding’ since 2015 really driving the Company towards cultural industries? This essay further

suggests that, similar to other flagship performing arts groups funded by the Home Affairs Bureau (commonly known as the 'Big Nine'), a 'way to cultural industries' is out of the question under the HKSAR government's current cultural policy. **The so-called 'way to cultural industries' is often but a survival strategy in the face of the assessment mechanism in place since the reform of cultural funding policy in 2007.**⁴

New Management, New Style?

At first glance, Septime Webre did deliver new ideas and projects since he had been at the helm. In an interview with *dance journal/hk*, he pointed out that in the 2018/19 season, beside major productions such as *Giselle*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Le Corsaire* and *ALICE (in wonderland)*, the Hong Kong Ballet would collaborate with Tai Kwun for a free public performance in the heritage compound.⁵ As part of the 'Ballet in the City' campaign, Webre strategically promoted ballet, which used to serve a minority from higher social strata during the colonialization days, to the mass. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong Ballet would give pop-up performances in housing estates and launch 'Friday Night Barre' with MTR, in which dancers would go through 45-minute barre exercise routines accompanied by a live pianist, all to make ballet as fitting in the public space as the theatre. Such initiatives were indeed in line with recent cultural industries trends in Europe and the United States, namely, to take the initiative to perform in unconventional spaces for active public interference. However, as mentioned above, the HKB's 'cultural industries turn' did not begin with Septime Webre but commenced

when Daisy Ho and Paul Tam were appointed the Chairman, Board of Governors, and Executive Director respectively in 2013/14.

As a result, the entire Company engaged in a year-long strategic review and rebranding exercise, which culminated in the launch of the new branding 'Never Standing Still' on 28 August 2015. However, upon closer comparisons of the 2013/14⁶ and 2014/15⁷ *Annual Reports*, one notices that, 1. The Company's 'Mission' remained '(to be) a world-class ballet company that manifests the unique vitality of Hong Kong'; 2. The classification of activities throughout the year remained 'productions and touring, education and community outreach' and 'fundraising and sponsorship', without any structural reform. In other words, besides rebranding and new visual styling, there were no fundamental changes judging by the specifics in the 2014/15 *Annual Report*.

In comparison, the 2015/16 *Annual Report* was a more interesting read. First, there is a new item: 'Vision'. Similar to the 'Mission' in previous years, it is about being a par-excellence ballet company that fully reflects the unique vitality of Hong Kong.⁸ Meanwhile, there were seven 'Missions', namely: '1. Produce a repertoire that is exciting and reflective of the city's culture and energy, 2. Heighten our visibility within Hong Kong and overseas, 3. Cultivate interest in and appreciation of ballet through quality education, 4. Foster partnerships with other creative practitioners and organisations, 5. Connect with audiences and the community at large, 6. Nurture talent, 7. Create stars'.⁹ Obviously the seven 'Missions' were but a re-arrangement of the company's

existing principles and activities into bullet points as in a PowerPoint presentation for readers to quickly grasp the key points. As a matter of fact, a 'Snapshot' section was introduced in the 2015/16 *Annual Report*. It presented figures such as annual income and expenditure, the numbers of performances, and audience members of individual productions, with clear charts which gave readers a legible overview.¹⁰

Secondly, since the rebranding campaign and redesign of image in the 2014/15 season, the Hong Kong Ballet's annual 'fundraising, sponsorship and donations' income stayed at the seven to eight million Hong Kong dollars level and the weight of different income sources remained largely unchanged (Table 1), except for a notable drop in 'Fundraising, Sponsorship and Donations' in 2014/15 (down to five million-plus dollars from eight million-plus dollars in 2013/14; in terms of percentage: down to 9% in 2014/15 from 13% in 2013/14).

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Government Subvention	35,778,395 (58%)	37,961,255 (66%)	37,961,255 (63%)	38,053,271 (61%)	39,385,598 (60%)
Box office Income	15,991,347 (26%)	12,887,233 (23%)	13,252,824 (22%)	14,269,924 (23%)	15,089,238 (23%)
Fundraising, Sponsorship and Donations	8,338,125 (13%)	5,337,547 (9%)	7,708,467 (13%)	8,304,805 (14%)	8,295,503 (13%)
Interest and Sundry Income	1,740,598 (3%)	1,217,269 (2%)	1,628,693 (2%)	1,301,846 (2%)	2,430,548 (4%)
Total Income (HK\$)	61,845,465	57,403,304	60,551,239	61,929,846	65,200,887

Table 1: The writer's presentation of some of the financial data summarised from the Hong Kong Ballet's *Annual Reports* for the five fiscal years from 2013/14 to 2017/18. Data including Government subvention; Box office income; Fundraising, Sponsorship and Donations; Interest and Sundry income; Total Income.

The devil is in the details. Upon closer examination of the Hong Kong Ballet's development in 2014/15, sponsorship schemes that promote the Company's 'Social Impact' like the Dancers' Sponsorship Fund, the Accessibility Fund, the Development Fund and the Student Ticket Fund were introduced alongside regular annual fundraisers, i.e. The Hong Kong Ballet Ball and The Nutcracker Christmas Benefit.¹¹ In the 2015/16 season, 'Production Sponsorship Scheme' was introduced and China Everbright Limited became the first-ever Production Sponsor.¹² In 2016/17, the Company successfully received additional income from the Art Development Matching Grants Pilot Scheme and Contestable Funding Pilot Scheme of the Hong Kong SAR Government, in addition to the above fundraising and sponsorship schemes.¹³ It is clear that the company was looking to 'seek corporate and foundation sponsorships' and 'enhance social impact'. It is worth noting that 'Fundraising, Sponsorship and Donations' has been staying at seven to eight million dollars annually since 2013/14. The Company's effort since 2014/15 has devoted to the expansion of the number of financial sources but not the amount. While proportions of income sources remaining roughly the same, extending income sources did nothing to reduce dependency on Government funding. As such, the way to cultural industries was but an empty slogan.

Basically, ever since its rebranding in 2014/15, from visual styling, the presentation of the annual report to the nature of its events, **the Hong Kong Ballet's strategy was to make itself and its performances more 'visible'. The goal was to demonstrate the company's wide**

and sustained impact on the community. In terms of sponsorship, the key was diversity. These developments came together in a reciprocal relationship, explaining why the rebranding master plan was delegated to Webre. As the Chairman of the Board Daisy Ho pointed out, one of the objectives of the company was to popularise ballet; ¹⁴ the “showman” Webre who has established a populist, of-the-moment style that attracted newcomers to ballet’ was perfect for the task.

But the question is, with 60% of the Company’s income covered by Government subvention, and 13% contributed by major fundraisers like The Hong Kong Ballet Ball and The Nutcracker Christmas Benefit, why did the Hong Kong Ballet bother to rebrand itself, organise pop-up ‘In the City’ performances, apply various funding schemes and solicit individual corporates for sponsorship? Doesn’t that all seem too much ado about little gain? As will be shown below, the questionable strategic positioning (similar to the rest of the ‘Big Nine’) **was mostly a result of the HKSAR government’s neoliberalist cultural policy in the last 20 years.**

Chasing Numbers in the New Age

During the period of British colonial rule, the Hong Kong Ballet’s main audience was the elite, it did not need to cater for the mass. After the handover, ‘democratising ballet for the wider public’ became one of the objectives of the Company—it was probably prompted by the HKSAR government’s shift towards neoliberalism in its cultural policy, putting great emphasis on quantifying and auditing, after 1997.

In hindsight, the change in strategic planning began with a series of reforms in district-level organisation and cultural policy after 1997.¹⁵ After the reform, the two District Councils were dissolved. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LSCD) was established to take over their roles of providing and developing art and culture, sports and amenities, as well as the corporatisation of the four major performing art groups ('Big Four') at the time,¹⁶ which were, after corporatisation, required to actively seek out other sources of public funding, while most of their income was subventions from the HAB. According to the recommendations made in the Committee on Performing Arts Consultation Paper by the *Committee on Performing Arts*, formed later in November 2005, the four performing arts groups then receiving recurrent subvention from LCSD and the six performing arts groups receiving three-year grants from the HKADC were to be funded by one body. It 'would enable their performances to be assessed by one common set of criteria and provide a fair and open environment for these groups to compete for public funding resources.'¹⁷ The new assessment criteria and mechanism would examine the overall artistic standard and output, audience building and sponsorship, as well as the influence made on other sectors of the community and the international image of Hong Kong.¹⁸

After releasing the report and going through public consultation for about six months, the Committee on Performing Arts published the *Committee on Performing Arts Recommendation Report (I)* on 1 June.¹⁹ According to the Report, upon consideration of the opinions collected, it was recommended to establish a new funding body in the form of a

funding committee, which 'with administrative support from HAB, will be responsible for advising the Government on funding major performing arts groups (but not the budding and small-scale performing arts groups) and develop a common set of assessment criteria.'²⁰

The Government's formal response came on 20 November 2006. It accepted the Committee's recommendation to establish a Funding Committee for the Performing Arts, which would 'advise the Government on funding major performing arts groups currently receiving annual subvention from the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the three-year grant from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, including working out a consolidated grant, developing a new funding system and mechanism with reference to the parameters recommended in the *Committee on Performing Arts Recommendation Report (I)*; and considering the need to establish flagship performing companies in Hong Kong.'²¹ The ten 'Major Performing Arts Groups' (including the Hong Kong Ballet) would be directly funded by the HAB from 2007.²²

It is unknown to what extent the newly established Funding Committee for Performing Arts has taken the recommendations on assessment mechanism and criteria made by the Committee for Performing Arts. But the then Committee did propose assessment on audience building and sponsorship, the effects on other sectors of the community and the international image of Hong Kong besides artistic standard and output. That proposal seemed to be consistent with the Hong Kong Ballet's strategic shift towards 'increasing the visibility of the Company and its

output', 'demonstrating the Company's widespread and sustained impact on the community' and 'diversifying fundraising and sponsorship' since its rebranding in the 2014/15 season.

Within the context laid out above, what the Hong Kong Ballet did in the 2017/18 season remained to 'increase the visibility of the Company and its output', 'demonstrate the Company's widespread and sustained impact on the community' and 'diversify fundraising and sponsorship'. *The Gallery Walk for Charity*, co-presented with the Hong Kong Art Gallery Association, took place in around 12 galleries in the Central District. It certainly brought the Company and ballet into the community, making them more visible. As for *Ballet Classics for Children: Swan Lake* and *Relaxed Performance: Swan Lake*, which targeted respectively young audience²³ and autistic children (and their carers)²⁴, proved that the Company has not just increased its visibility and promoted ballet, but also had a widespread and long-term impact on the community. On the fundraising front, the Company continued the diversified approach since the reform. It secured multiple corporate production sponsors and successfully applied for the Dancers' Sponsorship Fund, the Accessibility Fund, the Development Fund, the Student Ticket Fund, and funds that were testaments to social impact. Rather than connecting the reform that began in the 2014/15 season to the 'way to cultural industries', it would be more accurate to say that the change in the mechanism and criteria of assessment in funding induced the above survival strategy. One would be tempted to ask, would the Hong Kong Ballet eventually get on the way to cultural industries, given its scale and clout? This is a question that requires no answer, as fundamentally the Company has no need to.

Endnotes

¹ Carla Escoda, 'Interview with Septime Webre, Artistic Director of Hong Kong Ballet,' in *dance journal/hk* Vol. 20 Issue 6 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Dance Alliance, 2018): 20-25, <https://www.dancejournalhk.com/single-post/Septime-Webre>.

² According to the UNESCO, 'Cultural Industries' is defined as 'industries that combine the creation, production and commercialisation of contents which are intangible and cultural in nature; these contents are typically protected by copyright and they can take the form of a good or a service. In terms of content, cultural industries can also be considered creative industries, which include printed media, music, video, multimedia, tourism and other industries that relies on creativity.' Quoted from 'Cultural and Creative Industries,' in *Winner at the Workplace* May 2006 issue (Taiwan, Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, Council of Labour Affairs, 2006): 8-9. By this definition, as a flagship performing art group that has been receiving large subvention from the government, the Hong Kong Ballet's strategic rebranding, re-styling and brand-new marketing campaign since 2014/15, which made the Company more visible to the public and boosted ticket sales, combined with Webre's brand of combining ballet with pop culture, appear to show that it is on the way towards cultural industries.

³ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2014/15* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, October 2015): 8.

⁴ For further analysis, see Damian Cheng, 'From the Big Four to the Big Nine: Changes and Constants of the Hong Kong Cultural Funding Policy,' in *Graduate Journal of Cultural and Creative Industries*, Vol. 2 (2016): 60-64, http://gjcci.weebly.com/uploads/5/4/0/1/54017633/07_%E7%94%B1%E5%9B%9B%E5%A4%A7%E5%88%B0%E4%B9%9D%E5%A4%A7%E8%97%9D%E5%9C%98.pdf; and Damian Cheng, 'Cultural Governance? Or Sharing City? An Analysis of the Phenomenon of Increased Programmes Number, Venues and Professionalisation in Performing Arts,' in *Hong Kong Theatre Yearbook 2016* (Hong Kong: International Association of Theatre Critics, 2018): 90-107, <http://www.iatc.com.hk/theatre2016/?a=doc&id=104875>.

⁵ See note 1.

⁶ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2013/14* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, October 2014).

⁷ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2014/15* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, October 2015).

⁸ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2015/16* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, November 2016): 2, the exact wording in the Report is 'to be the pre-eminent Ballet company, treasured in Hong Kong and lauded abroad for our unique productions, vibrancy and glamour'.

⁹ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2015/16* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong

Ballet, November 2016): 3.

¹⁰ Ibid: 16-17.

¹¹ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2014/15* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, October 2015): 13.

¹² The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2015/16* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, November 2016): 14.

¹³ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2016/17* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, October 2017): 15.

¹⁴ The Hong Kong Ballet, *Hong Kong Ballet Annual Report 2017/18* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet, October 2018): 10.

¹⁵ In June 1998, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau published *Consultation Paper on the District Council Appointment System*, initiating evaluations on district administration covering the two district councils. It was followed by HAB publishing *The Consultant Report on the Leisure, Art and Cultural Services in Hong Kong* and initial responses from the government.

¹⁶ The 'Big Four' were Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra and Hong Kong Dance Company.

¹⁷ Committee on Performing Arts, *Committee on Performing Arts Consultation Paper*, (Hong Kong, November 2005): 15, https://www.hab.gov.hk/file_manager/en/documents/policy_responsibilities/arts_culture_recreation_and_sport/asb/asb45_CPA_full_e.pdf.

¹⁸ Ibid: 12-13.

¹⁹ Committee on Performing Arts, *Committee on Performing Arts Recommendation Report (I)* (Hong Kong: June 2006), https://www.hab.gov.hk/file_manager/en/documents/policy_responsibilities/arts_culture_recreation_and_sport/asb/asb45newsreport/asb45report_full_e.pdf.

²⁰ Ibid: 38.

²¹ See the Hong Kong SAR Governmental Press Release, 'Appointment to the Committee on Performing Arts and Funding Committee for the Performing Arts', 20 November 2006, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200611/20/P200611200229.htm>.

²² Curiously, Theatre Ensemble, which was one of the 'Big Ten', decided to withdraw itself from the Government funding structure and became 'PIP Cultural Industries Ltd.' 'Big Ten' became 'Big Nine'.

²³ https://www.hkballet.com/en/meet-hkb/media/press_release/ballet-classics-for-children-swan-lake-hong-kong-ballet-presents-a-special-one-hour-family-production.

²⁴ https://www.hkballet.com/en/meet-hkb/media/press_release/hong-kong-ballet-hosts-special-relaxed-performance-swan-lake-a-meaningful-partnership-with-arts-with.