Choreographing Contemporary Dance with Objects in Asia: A Review of Literature and Performances

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Abstract

The use of stage objects as a dominant performative element in contemporary choreography has become increasingly significant due to its inevitable referentiality, which offers an essential understanding of materiality's potentialities. Five choreographies from China, Taiwan, and Singapore presented between 2015-2019 will be reviewed to anticipate these practices in East and Southeast Asia. This textual and performance review analyses the function of stage objects in chosen choreographies from the perspectives of their functionality, referentiality, signification, and subjectivation. This paper will foreground the marginalisation of objects used in choreographies and practice-based research in the Asia regions.

Keywords*:* Choreography, Contemporary dance, Objects, East Asia, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Contemporary dance is a form of dance introduced from Western dance traditions, explicitly derived from the notion of modern and postmodern dance in which artistic individualism in experimenting with personal choreographic styles and aesthetics is encouraged. Today's contemporary choreography no longer focuses on the American and European pioneering perspective but has found its place and development worldwide, including in Asia. In contemporary choreography, the use of stage objects as a supporting or dominant performative element is one of the choreographic trends due to the inevitable referentiality of the everyday objects, which offers an essential understanding of materiality's potentialities. Early choreographic theorists such as Humphrey, Blom and Chaplin recognised stage objects (commonly known as props or properties)

as the primary "supporting factors" (Humphrey, 1959, p. 40) and an "integral part of a dance" (Blom & Chaplin, 1982, p. 193). The established scholars such as André Lepecki, Sally Banes, and Melinda Buckwalter recognised objects as a dominant performative element in contemporary choreography with post-performance analysis that informs the functions of objects in Western contemporary choreographies. Thus far, Lepecki's article *Moving as Thing: Choreographic Critiques of the Object* is the only published material that places objects as the analytical subject and summarises its instrumentality, functionality, referentiality, signification and possibility to negotiate the subjectivity in between the object and dancing bodies. Based on the creations of Western-based choreographers between 2008 to 2012 in his analysis, Lepecki (2012) highlighted that today's contemporary choreographers have redefined "the status of the object in experimental choreography . . . [and it] deserves some scrutiny" (p. 76). Whilst the significance of objects in contemporary choreography has been recognised based on Western-based choreographers, the development of the established functionalities of the objects from the Eastern dance practices is not clear. In addition, little is known about the perspective of the present East and Southeast Asian practitioners in contributing to this choreographic trend due to emerging dance scholarship in those regions and a language barrier in accessing their performance resources.

This article will review five contemporary choreographies presented between 2015 to 2019 of the selected East and Southeast Asian choreographers. The review aims to establish the choreographic practices in East and Southeast Asia to contribute to the development of contemporary dance, precisely through the lens of three selected Asian regions. The term of stage objects is used in this article to indicate the existing everyday objects that are not specially created for theatrical staging purposes instead of the commonly known stage props that refer to both everyday objects and specially designed stage properties. This article will first review how everyday objects such as household furniture, accessories, compliances and trash are used in Western dance traditions and contemporary practices. It will be followed by a review of five East and Southeast Asian contemporary choreographies from China, Taiwan, and Singapore, namely ErGao, Gu Jiani, Luo Wen-Jinn, Su PinWen, and Daniel Kok. Finally, based on the choreographic theories reviewed, a conclusion will be drawn to address the concern of to what extent East and Southeast Asian choreographers explore the use of objects in reflecting the material world. Due to the extensiveness of choreographic practices, covering a mix of East and Southeast Asian countries, the review is limited to selected prominent East and Southeast Asian contemporary dance choreographers who have used objects as a dominant performative element in their contemporary choreography presented over the past five years (2015-2019). This article combines textual analysis (from historical studies, choreography handbooks, and post-performance analysis) and performance reviews of live or online performances (supported by performance reviews in English and Chinese from online performing arts review platforms).

Stage objects in the Western dance traditions and practices: A literature review

Traditionally, a stage object is used in modern dance to complement staging effects by providing references, acting as a signifier and displaying as the artistic components (Au, 1988; Blom & Chaplin, 1982; Humphrey, 1959; Krauss, 1981; Lepecki, 2012; Livet, 1978). To visually enhance the scenic design, stage objects are generally used "to provide clues about the personality and socioeconomic status of the inhabitants of

the set" (Gillette, 2004, p. 268). For example, in Kurt Jooss' *Green Table*, a long green table and flags were among the stage objects used to refer to the discussion table of politicians and things related to a war scenario and soldiers' characters. To signify authority, a rope is used in Doris Humphrey's *Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias* by transforming it "like a whip, a sword, a barrier, a lasso, [and] a symbol of power" (Humphrey, 1959, p. 146). Working with visual artists such as Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi in creating decorative objects in dance, Martha Graham often displayed stylistic sets to suit her nonliteral choreographic style (Au, 1988). In a search for expressive content and depth, stage objects were used to support the expressiveness of the movement composition rather than being used as the dominant performative element during the modern dance era.

To contest movement-oriented modern dance choreography, postmodern and contemporary dance choreographers extensively incorporated daily life objects into dance-making to explore alternative movement vocabulary (Banes, 2011; Buckwalter, 2010; Childs, 1978; Kirby, 1978; Livet, 1978; McDonagh, 1978). This artistic approach marks the beginning of using objects as the dominant performative elements in contemporary choreography. For example, to physically affect the movement of the *Camouflage*'s dancers, Kenneth King's dancers wear a military helmet that affects their balance while performing *en pointe* movement. Similar usage of objects is visible in Yvonne Rainer's choreography when Rainer replaces virtuosic modern dance technique with ordinary movement (Kirby, 1978). In her *Carriage Discreteness*, dancers were given instructions to manipulate objects that were scattered on the performance space. Rainer was interested in how different weights affect the transportation action of the object from one spot to another. Lucinda Childs is among the postmodern dance choreographers who have actively explored objects in challenging her art of making choreography (Banes, 2011; Livet, 1978). In Childs' choreographic experimentation, objects are used to affect movement, sound, and image production, generate movement materials, define a situation, and be an artistic element. In Childs' *Geranium*, Childs attaches herself with a padlock to one end of a hammock and the other end to the wall. Her movement is restricted by the attachment, which, therefore, limits her travelling to a semi-circular arc. In the same choreography, Childs uses a pole to generate the soundscape, wears a winter coat to set up a winter scenario, and uses dirt to create a line of footsteps.

Using objects as an inspirational tool in improvisation and improvised choreography, choreographers such as Lisa Nelson, Mary Overlie, and Simone Forti has developed their unique method of interacting with objects (Buckwalter, 2010). For example, Nelson's chosen a table, chairs, and other objects such as a bowl or stick for the choreography *GO*. During the performance, the performers are required to be motivated by the "shape, feel, look, or sound of the objects" (Buckwalter, 2010, p. 144) to make improvised actions. Objects are used as inspiration for an immediate response, and the improvisational response is the choreography. Working with a similar observational response, Mary Overlie developed a compositional technique entitled the Six Viewpoints, which allows her to "access the intuition" and "bringing out relationships" (Buckwalter, 2010, p. 146) of the objects she manipulated. Forti developed her approach to movements called Logomotion, of which the early phase is named *animate dancing*. In animate dancing, she chooses a random object and makes a quick sketch of the selected object "to create a link between what is seen and [the] felt

experience of the object" (Buckwalter, 2010, p. 147). She then allows the drawing experience to trigger visual and linguistic associations of the object to her physical memory of manipulating the object. She next explores movement based on this stimulus. Objects in Nelson, Overlie, and Forti's improvised choreography function as stimulation for impromptu movement exploration.

Going beyond the notion of the object which is "ontologically tied to instrumentality, to utility, to usage, [and] to means" (Lepecki, 2012, p. 77), Lepecki identified contemporary choreographers who bypassed the connections between functionality and object, as well as between manipulation and subject in the hope to explore the question of subjectivity between object and dancing bodies, as well as referentiality and signification. According to Lepecki's analysis, the choreographies of Chinese performance artist Yingmei Duan, Portuguese choreographer João Fiadeiro, and Spanish choreographer Aitana Cordero demonstrate how the object that humans produce shapes our perception, action, and, therefore, constitutes subjectivity. As Agamben (2009) argued, "today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modelled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus [objects, things, devices]" (p. 15). These three choreographers presented their work in 2008 in spaces full of objects. Duan filled an ample gallery space with tons of clean trash such as household furniture, machinery, papers, boxes, books, toys, and pianos, as well as five performers who are wandering (move like lifeless things) around the narrow and winding path in which the audience was required to pass through. In *Este corpo que me ocupa* (This Body that Occupies Me), Fiadeiro positioned objects and himself in an unusual context (upside-down furniture and unplugged home devices) and later in a proper placement (living room setting) that drew the audience to think beyond the functionality of the system of those objects. Cordero not only displayed objects on stage but went on to destroy those objects by throwing, stamping, and violently pushing her body onto the broken trash. The similarity between these three choreographies is,

> they not only proclaim, and perform, the need not to be moved by a self, they bypass even the desire to be moved *by* a thing - since this would still cast onto things a hint of instrumentality, of a thing's being *used* a necessary *means* to an aesthetic *end* (things would move a dancer and thus become representatives or substitutes of a self's will). Rather, these [. . .] works propose how to *move as thing* [emphasis added] and *how to become-thing* [emphasis added]. (Lepecki, 2012, p. 78)

For those contemporary choreographers who are inspired by material living and would like to express its multifaceted dimension, choreographing with objects has become a distinguishing trait in their choreographic experimentations. The distinguishable presence of objects as dominant performative elements can also be seen in most of Pina Bausch's choreographies, but also Jérôme Bel's *Name Given by the Author* and Maguy Marin's *Umwelt*, to name a few.

As the literature from post-performance analyses demonstrated, the varied and dominant functionality, referentiality, signification, and subjectivation of objects are widely recognised and inseparable in the Western contemporary choreographies reviewed. Despite this recognition, choreographing with objects is not a choreographic trend and compositional skill in most dance historical studies and choreography handbooks on

contemporary dance. Most post-performance analyses prioritise the review of movement composition and humanised labour than the potentiality of objects, which initiated Lepecki's call for scrutiny on the use of objects in contemporary choreography. Butterworth and Wildschut (2018) put forward the need to take "from a range of sources and contemporary practitioners" (p. 85) in contributing to the lack of choreographic theory that copes with the rapid development in choreographing the contemporary dance. Based on the literature, objects are no longer inanimate, silent and passive, but active entities that "can serve as dynamic vehicles embodied with the cultural, political and psychological [contexts]" (Sánchez-Camus, Hussein, & Peterson, 2008, p. 12). This embodiment deserves a shift from a Western-based perspective to other sources and other contemporary practitioners using objects in contemporary choreography. By incorporating voices and practices from East Asians and Southeast Asians, the following review analyses how the chosen choreographers use objects as dominant performative elements to reflect their material life's cultural, societal, political, and psychological aspects. The established functions of the objects from modern, postmodern, to contemporary dance, serve as a framework in reviewing the five contemporary choreographies from China, Taiwan, and Singapore's choreographers, respectively. The contemporary choreographies analysed are ErGao's *Kung Hei Fat Choy*, Gu Jiani's *Exit*, Luo Wen-Jinn's *Dripping*, Su PinWen's *Girl's Notes*, and Daniel Kok's (in collaboration with Luke George) *Bunny*.

The choreographic practices of East and Southeast Asian contemporary dance choreographers

i. China: ErGao's Kung Hei Fat Choy

Kung Hei Fat Choy, which means in Chinese wishing of prosperity, is a solo dance choreographed and performed by China choreographer He Qiwo (widely known as ErGao) in 2019. It explores the nostalgia of his motherland. His artistic team, Ergao Dance Production Group, is interested in the parody of aesthetic subculture, the hybridity of rural-urban amalgamation, and the cultural fluidity resulting from the techno and the digital culture in China. These choreographic interests led ErGao to incorporate everyday objects in this solo to represent his memories of home and the digital lifestyle. A live stream setup opened the solo with TikTok[1] playing the evolution of the Chinese New Year's song *Kung Hei Fat Choy*. It was followed by a recorded video of his father talking about his rural life in Yangjiang (a city in China's southern Guangdong province) and a monologue where ErGao spoke about his hometown and childhood memories of longing for going to the town. Digital gadgets such as mobile phones and trendy social media platforms are used to connect to today's generation who live with video streaming, e-commerce and virtual gift-giving (personal communications, August 22, 2021). Representing the digital lifestyle of millennials and the following generations, the opening TikTok video is one significant example where ErGao presents both his physical and virtual presences and brings virtual objects into focus. Witnessing Ergao' lip-synching the introduction of *Kung Hei Fat Choy* in his male appearance and the full-stage-sized projection of his virtual make-over TikTok (see Figure 1) -- "ox horns[2]" hairstyle with virtual pink ribbon (a typical girl hairstyle of Chinese children), exaggerated makeup effect, modified voice to artificial intelligence's mechanical tone, virtual coins as a picture frame, and regular appearance of animated virtual emoji and gifts -- ErGao presented the blurring of reality and virtual, past (un-

developed rural living) and present (highly digital lifestyle), and the surreal contradiction between artificial visual effects and natural being.

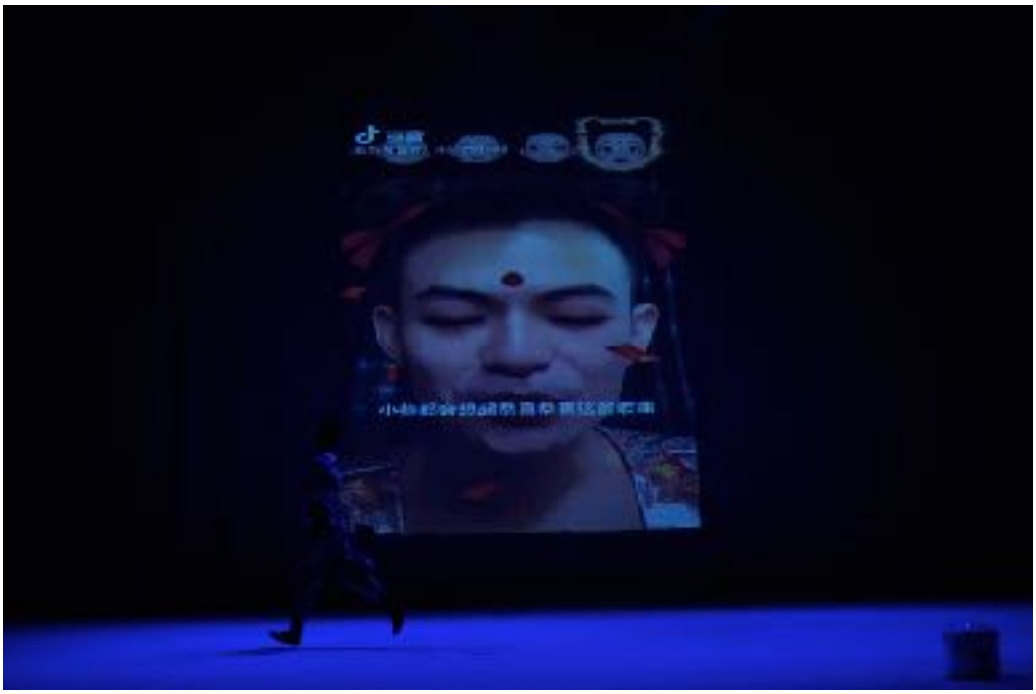

Figure 1**.** *Tiktok Playing the Evolution of the Chinese New Year's Song Kung Hei Fat Choy.* A virtual make-over Tiktok with ox horns hairstyles, virtual pink ribbon, makeup effect, animated virtual emoji and gifts. Reproduce with permission from Ergao Dance Production. Photograph by Huang Guang Yi (May 1, 2021).

While the technology-driven videos are projected on the cyclorama, two sets of everyday objects were set up inharmoniously on stage: cooking appliances (a rice cooker with bowls, spoon, and chopsticks) and a traditional Chinese festive dance prop (a flying dragon head with a folded dragon body). Due to their references and practical functions, these objects are the dominant performance elements in *Kung Hei Fat Choy*. The flying dragon is commonly associated with the celebration of Chinese New Year, as it is one of the good-luck festive dances. In traditional Chinese culture, the dragon symbolises auspiciousness, authority, nobility, wisdom and a person who has great ambition, outstanding abilities and extraordinary achievements (Liu, 2015). ErGao began interacting with the dragon by cautiously unfolding the dragon body and crawling mechanically on top of the dragon-scale motif body. He then gently shook the dragon head and turned on the LED blinking light set around the dragon. He continued shaking his arms with fists-holding gesture as if he was praying in anxiety while he walked along on the dragon body. This ritualistic interaction, that is the travel across the dragon body, as well as the increasingly frantic hand shaking, reflected ErGao's respect

and identification of his Chinese heritage, yet also his uncertainty about the unknown future. The focal interaction with the dragon happened when ErGao was performing a flying dragon dance. Danced with the instrumental music of *What a Wonderful World*, he swung the dragon with a rope attached to its head in a circular motion and yelled out all kinds of festive wishes such as Happy Chinese New Year and even Happy Farther and Mother's Day (see Figure 2). The non-stop spiralling dragon and shouted wishes signifies ErGao's hope for his motherland and the people. Moreover, the spiralling dragon body echoes the content of the videos and monologues surrounding the inter-twined relationship of living in the rural and city, generation gap between father and son, artificial and natural aesthetic culture. As a Cantonese who cherishes the soup culture, ErGao made a Cantonese soup with a rice cooker during the performance. He tasted the soup when the soup was ready and ended his solo with soup tasting for the audience (see Figure 3). The act of preparing and serving soup and the smell of food in the theatre setting brings the audience back to the basics of living (food for life) amidst the metaphorical symbols in this auto-ethnographical solo inspired by ErGao's personal histories.

Figure 2. *Flying Dragon Dance*. Manipulation of the flying dragon in a circular motion. Reproduce with permission from Ergao Dance Production. Photograph by Huang Guang Yi (May 1, 2021).

Figure 3. *Soup Tasting for the Audience.* Rice cooker was used to make soup for the dancer and an audience. Reproduce with permission from Ergao Dance Production. Photograph by Huang Guang Yi (May 1, 2021).

Utilising both physical and virtual objects, ErGao displays the everyday functions of the objects to make references and significations of the contemporary living impacted by the rapid modernisation in China. A Rice cooker and a handphone are essential for modern living: the former signifies the survival's need by referring to Cantonese food culture, and the latter signifies the present and future of China socialist modernisation's goal by referring to the digital lifestyle. The dramatic sociocultural and economic development in China affects the daily lives of Chinese people with "ever-increasing adherence to individualistic values" (lifestyle and aesthetics) and "increasing prevalence of depression [. . .] particularly in rural settings" (Sun & Ryder, 2016, p. 1) due to the disparity of rights, benefits, and privileges between China's urban and rural citizens. ErGao expresses the uncertainties and expectations of his generation by reminding us about the importance of knowing where are you coming from through dance with objects, especially the flying dragon. Contributing to the major use of the physical objects as performative elements in contemporary choreography, ErGao proposes a way to ex-

plore the performativity of virtual objects in dance making, which echoes today's materialistic possession of tangible and intangible objects.

ii. China: Gu Jiani's Exit

Gu's affection for objects can be seen in most of her touring choreography *Right & Left* (2013), *Exit* (2016) and *TRANSITION* (2021), where objects are used as the dominant performative elements. Recognising the powerful language sited in objects, Gu used white pillows (weighing seven kilograms each) and a long ladder as the significant stage objects in her female trio *Exit*. The pillows are either scattered or neatly stacked around the grey wall as an artistic component of the set design in the opening scene. This display component helps to extend the imagery of the audience when the pillows are used to hide the body parts of the dancers. For example, a pair of upside-down legs (the pillow was covering the dancer's torso and the head) created an image of winter withered branches (Wang, 2017) or the components of a dead tree (Mead, 2017).

Apart from the display function, Gu is specifically interested in extending the dance vocabulary based on the substance of the pillows and the ladder. Following postmodern and contemporary dance choreographers' footsteps searching for object-inspired movement, the pillows and ladders form a labouring body in *Exit*. Nevertheless, Gu is looking for virtuosic movement rather than everyday movement. Merleau-Ponty (1962) pointed out that "it is by taking things as our starting point that our hands, eyes, and all our sense-organs appear to us as so many interchangeable instruments" (p. 322). Gu's exploration with the objects is to first feel and move with it and later discover how a female body works, interrelates, and coordinates with the things that constitute a two-way dependence between the dancers' bodies and objects. In *Exit*, by repeating the actions of arranging and demolishing the neat arrangement of the pillows, as well as unsuccessful tossing and throwing off the heavy pillows -- which is unachievable due to the objects' heavyweight -- Gu kept alluding to the body in construction, a body that challenges physicality yet reveals the vulnerability of the human. As a result, the dancers skilfully performed the passing of the flying (see Figure 4) and falling pillows with speedy slide, swing, toss, leap, roll, off-balance, collapse, and hit. It was an intense choreography that made the audience hold their breath and worry about the unpredictability of this supercharged pass-the-parcel game. The weighty and immobile pillows somehow contrast the dancers' mobility and skill in negotiating their weight-transfers in this competing-like movement quality.

Figure 4. *White Pillows as the Dominant Performative Element.* Three dancers performed a supercharged pass-the-pillows game. Reproduce with permission from Gu Jiani. Photograph by Ta Su (Nov 8, 2019).

Incorporating the ladder in the movement execution elevates the risk-taking of the performance as the dancers' neck is used for manipulation. Hanging the ladder around their neck, the dancers buckled the ladder and dragged the ladder into the space. Besides climbing up and drilling down on the single ladder (the everyday functionality), the dancers' slide, swing, and spin the ladder (see Figure 5). In addition, they used the ladder to support the dancers' weight, sometimes hanging and suspending them and letting them fall. Gu also extended this virtuosic moment by replacing the ladder and pillows with the dancers' bodies and performed fast-paced manipulation. Instead of interacting with the objects, the dancers pushed, pulled, supported, and controlled each other. All these fast-paced interactions between the physical properties of the body and ordinary objects created tension and anxiety for the viewer, as what Wang (2017) claimed as "a strong sense of crisis in the theatre" (para. 5). Wang referred to this physical exhaustion and strength as the changing modernity where destruction repeatedly comes after creation, just like the arranging and demolishing pillow game that never ends.

Figure 5. *Elevates The Risk-taking Through the Use of the Ladder.* Adding ladder into the throwing and catching game. Reproduce with permission from Gu Jiani. Photograph by Ta Su (Nov 8, 2019).

When it comes to choosing a movement style to interact with objects, ErGao and Gu offer two distinct aesthetic preferences. ErGao is interested in the minimal and subtle interaction with the objects in *Kung Hei Fat Choy*. He attends to the ordinary function, referentiality and signification of the objects. In contrast, Gu shows aggressiveness in manipulating the objects and the dancers. Using pillows and ladder as a starting point, Gu turned this physical skill beyond the daily experience. She extended the necessity between the dancers' movement in working, interrelating and coordinating with the objects to a highly technical movement style either with or without the objects. In Gu's *Exit*, objects serve as the inspiration for movement development not only for everyday interactions but, more importantly, for explosive athleticism.

iii. Taiwan: Luo Wen-Jinn's Dripping

Employing objects as an inspiration tool, Luo, in most of her company's choreographies, including *Dripping,* are unique examples. The hardship of life is the central choreographic concept in *Dripping*, a female duo performed and choreographed in 2015 by Taiwanese choreographer Luo Wen-Jinn in collaboration with her company dancer Li Pei-Shan. The on-stage water leakage incident is designed to disrupt the expressive solos at the beginning of the choreography, and this is where interaction/manipulation of the object unfolds. Inspired by Nausea, a philosophical novel by the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, the leaking scenario that necessitated a resolution led Luo to use a hundred iron buckets to represent their existence (Luo, 2015, as cited in Zhang, 2015). Luo added by saying that there is a signification of the novel's industrial age backdrop with the iron bucket's metal texture. Furthermore, she preferred the

weight of the iron bucket (compared to other plastic buckets) and the sound made by the metal (falling and clashing). Interpreting the novel as a state of fear, both Luo and Li felt that in today's materialistic life, "the existence of objects is greater than the existence of humans [. . . .] People's living space is getting smaller and smaller now, but objects have become huge, more terrifying than the surplus of people" (Luo & Li, 2015, as cited in Zhang, 2015, para. 5). This perception convinces Luo and Li to use buckets and water as the dominant performative element in *Dripping*.

The buckets carry multi functions in the choreography: display set, reference, and signification. As part of the set design, it is being seen at first as an artistic component in the opening scene where the buckets form a wall at the upstage right corner. This display function is a typical choreographic structure that introduces the dominant performance elements before exploring the multifaceted potentialities of the objects, which is similar to the notion of exposition in plot structure. There is a clear shift from this display mode to the practical props when the leakage happens after the opening dance; it holds leaking water and sometimes becomes a container for vomiting (acting out by the dancers), representing the critical incident in the novel. Besides this practical function, buckets have been used in both literal and metaphorical ways. The substance of the bucket containing a holding volume allows the dancer to hide their head inside the bucket (see Figure 6) and cover their emotions such as embarrassment, anxiety, risk, escapism, and releasing anger. Metaphorically, this covered face is extended to the signification of a stateless, nameless, unknown person because of the unidentified facial identity. It created an image of detachment between the flattened and emotionless face (the bucket as the head) with the dancing body full of expression. This ironic juxtaposition emphasises the separation between body and mind and between liveliness and emotionlessness. A white coat with a painted white bucket is added to enhance an image of a mysterious figure wandering around the stage later in the choreography. This wonderer who came from nowhere signified the questions of existence: Who is this person? What constitutes existence? Similarly, Shen (2016) described that this mysterious figure is "like a key, opening the door [for the audience] of reflection [of their existence]" (para. 5).

Figure 6. *Multi-Function of the Buckets*. Used buckets to hide dancers' faces and scatteringly hold leaking water. Reproduce with permission from Scarecrow Contemporary Dance Company. Photograph by Chang-Chih Chen (June 25, 2015).

Luo is also interested in utilising hundreds of buckets in response to the various scales of leakage: single or multiple leaking spots with either bit of drops or pouring water and the substantial leaking that cover most of the stage. Besides walking to the leaking area to check and to place a bucket underneath, the dancers began to run in panic when the leakage became severe. There is a strong interdependency between the water drops to the urgency of placing the bucket and their emotional responses to this increased tension. The height of this leakage scene happened when the dancers approached the bucket wall to get more buckets, but it collapsed with a loud crashing noise. All iron buckets felt immediately, and flying buckets were being thrown out towards the dancer from the side stage. This moment caused an audience member's (Wong, the first author of this article) psychological position to shift from passive watching to engaging because of the crashing noise and the worry about the dancer getting hit by the flying buckets. In this seventeen-minute solo, Li has to run and pick up the falling bucket to place under a central leaking area, which then she decided to use her body to transport the remaining buckets instead of picking up one by one. She began to hang the buckets around her body and eventually formed a bucket creature that walked clumsily. Nevertheless, the dancer did not give up and decided to stack all the buckets into one long pile. Upon the completion and even celebration of the ability to keep hundreds of buckets closer to the leaking spot without falling, the leaking ironically stopped. The

dancer looked disappointed and helpless, therefore, reflecting the absurdity of reality at this particular moment.

Besides exploring everyday movement, water and bucket also serve as inspiration for symbolic movement development. In Li's solo, she allows the bucket worn on top of her head to affect her balance by leaning the head/bucket in every direction, similar to the function of a military helmet in Kenneth King's Camouflage. This imbalance-motion motif somehow triggers the isolation of the torso into curvy actions with the head leading and the torso as the follower. Luo expanded this lead-follow motif with motif manipulation methods such as changing the space, time, body parts and eventually formed Li's improvised solo with this imbalance movement style. Waterdrop is another source of inspiration where the motif of catching, flicking away and washing arms with the water were generated. These motifs and their development were used to express the dance's anxiety where panic flick, slap, tab of the body is performed. The outcome of the leakage causes the stage floor to be slippery. Luo expanded this movement quality in a struggling solo where dancers performed various falling techniques. Luo also explored movement with the soundscape of water droplets into a series of body shaking that amplified the intensity/volume of the water and its sound. The combination of representation and symbolic movements inspired by the objects are choreographed to express estrangement, confusion, anxiety, and emptiness, as Luo felt from the novel (Luo, 2015, as cited in Zhang, 2015).

Expanding the notion of objects as inspirational tools, Luo made full use of the objects to explore their multi-dimensional functionalities, referentiality, and significations. The same object could be both an artistic display component and a practical prop with which the dancers interact. The on-stage water leakage incident necessitates the buckets, and Luo explores everyday actions and imaginaries associated in literal and metaphorical ways. Based on the physical properties of the bucket and water, Luo was inspired to move away from daily-life function to emotional expression with symbolic movement. Expressing the absurdity of reality and the hardships of human beings, Luo demonstrates the possibilities of each object, especially the buckets, in connecting to the psychophysical of the viewers and performers. This connection is a state of "choreographing empathy" coined by Foster (2011), where viewers respond to dancers' motions, sense dancers' feelings, and dance along with the dancers. In *Dripping*, viewers kinaesthetically experience the dancers' interaction with the objects, thus generating their perception and connection to the water leakage incident and what the dancers felt and performed.

iv. Taiwan: Su PinWen's Girl's Notes

Girl's Notes is Taiwanese feminist choreographer Su PinWen's three-year project (2018-2020) on feminisms. Su focuses on an instructional book on female behaviour entitled *Sao Nu Xu Zhi* (What Girls Need to Know), published in 1984 to express her concern on the feminist issue and gender consciousness. This book is a guideline about how a girl or woman should behave appropriately on different occasions, which seems to be detachment from modern females in Su's perspective (Su, 2019, as cited in Taishin, 2019). The gap of having inappropriate gender expectations and patriarchal cultural thinking triggers Su to device her first solo of *Girl's Notes* in 2018. In this *Girl's Notes*, a hard-covered translated book written by Umberto Eco entitled *The History of Beauty*

is used to restrict her movement throughout the full-length performance. As one of the nominees of Taiwan's 17th Taishin Art Awards, Su elaborated this artistic choice by saying that,

> what I am looking for, is one thing that can directly affect movement. Once I balance the book on top of my head, my body immediately shifts to a different mode [of moving]. How I negotiate between this restriction, to still be able to finish my day [and] complete every daily life routine, I feel, is the situation of today's female. (Su, 2019, as cited in Taishin, 2019)

Following Lepecki's analysis of some European-based contemporary choreographers who bypassed the connections between functionality and object, as well as between manipulation and subject, Su demonstrates a similar tendency to question the subjectivity between object and dancing bodies and between the referentiality and signification. A book that is generally meant for reading, knowledge transmission, or even source of dancing and improvising (the general functions of a stage objects) has no longer tied to its convention functionalities in Su's solo. However, it is still a dominant performative element. The inanimate book shapes the movement quality by restricting the dancer's head, as closer to the intellectual mind, is similar to Childs's attachment to a padlock that limits her travelling pathway and space usage. In *Girl's Notes*, the limitation extends to the separation between what the body trying to accommodate and express with the immobile and restricted head motion.

Ambiguously, Su performed the solo with pleasant and welcoming smiles with a series of daily actions despite having such tension in her neck and head position. In the opening of the choreography, Su placed a suitcase on the floor and brought out tissues, a light bulb, her inspirational book (What Girls Need to Know), a vibrator, a karaoke microphone, a teacup, coffee blender, water boiler and a power cable (see Figure 7). At the same time, she placed all these objects to orderly form one straight line and then made herself a cup of coffee from grinding coffee beans, boiling water, making to drinking coffee—her daily routine. The organised and delicate manner in dealing with all the everyday life objects are Su's intention to present the idealistic girl expected generally by the society, a performance of *showing doing* resulting from "learning appropriate culturally specific bits of behaviour" (Schechner, 2013, p. 28).

Figure 7. *Opening Scene in Girl's Notes*. Placed everyday objects in an organised and delicate manner while balancing a book on Su's head. Reproduce with permission from Su PinWen. Photograph by Huang Jyong-Jhe (July 30, 2018).

Placing herself as the object of the gaze, Su delicately undressed and performed graceful model poses after her coffee-making as if she were in her private room with no one watching. Publicly showing a female's natural body is Su's choreographic strategy of questioning such expectations and perceptions. Chi (2018) shared the same viewpoint for feminist creation by saying that,

> As the object of desire and gaze, the female body is not new in the historical development and progress of the feminist movement, sexual equality, and feminist consciousness. From breaking away from traditional norms to criticising patriarchal cultural thinking, body autonomy and the flow of sex/desire, the female body has become the "base" for feminist discourse, possessing muscular tension and kinetic energy. (para. 1)

When Su seemed natural even after undressing herself, she went one step further to provoke the female body as the object of desire by elegantly picking up the vibrator after wearing a pair of black cloth, of course, in a graceful manner. She turned on the vibrator, placed it below her ear and felt the vibrator with a pleasing smile. At the same time, she used another hand to perform a poetic gesture of pumping, shaking, turning, twisting, wave and so on, basically all kinds of mode and speed of the vibrator. Performing and imitating vibrators' motion in public is already one way that challenges traditional norms of eroticism. Finally, Su picked up the book, *What Girls Need to*

Know, and read aloud the written content with the karaoke microphone. Altered by the internal voice modification function of the microphone, the projected sound is in a lower male-speaking tone (instead of Su's natural vocal) with white-noise quality of the handheld megaphone effect (referring to the public announcement and speaking). What Girls Need to Know is a book on how women should behave written from a patriarchal perspective. Su intended to use the projected male voice to signify the male's directive view and question the patriarchal cultural thinking behind this publication.

In *Girls' Notes*, Su exposes the female body of taboos and rules by presenting, positioning, and revealing her feminine figure and presenting various performative interactions with daily objects and her body. Like ErGao, Su uses the objects not to create highly-technical movement but the ordinary way of interacting with it. Su objectifies her female body and makes it a medium in which she relies on everyday objects to keep her moving as constancy and eventually become the subject written in What Girls Need to Know. Supported by Chi (2018), *Girls' Notes* "opposes gaze and anti-gaze, liberating the object (body) of the gaze from the object of desire, and also regaining the viewer's subjective viewing position, making the performance become main body" (para. 6). This approach marks the distinction between ErGao and Su's minimal interaction with the objects. ErGao explores the referentiality and signification of the objects, but Su lets the audience subjectively view the objects and her female body. By de-objectifying the objects and body, Su contemplates Taiwanese feminist issues with the removal of instrumentality, aesthetical means, and self's will of the objects/body in *Girls' Notes*.

v. Singapore: Daniel Kok, in collaboration with Luke George's Bunny

In this duo piece entitled, *Bunny*, Daniel Kok and Luke George's are not only interested in making the objects and that their bodies become things, they also explore how to move like a thing. Created in 2016, *Bunny* is a participatory performance where the audience is invited to complete the choreography with Kok and George. The rope is the dominant performative element in *Bunny*, where the choreographers explore its physical properties that tie to various knots and the extension to rope bondage. The title *Bunny* is named after the nickname given to the person being tied in rope bondage. Bunny is the restrained person; meanwhile, the rigger is the person doing the tying up. In the opening choreography, objects tied with neon rope were scattered around the centre stage on top of a blue floor mat, and the audience could choose to sit anywhere around it. There are rabbit dolls, pillows, kettle, traffic cones, fire extinguisher, vacuum cleaners, tables, mop, potted plants, a bucket of rope, and two tied up male performers: Kok is suspended in the air, and George is sitting on the ground. By placing themselves together with all these objects as artistic stage design components, the opening becoming-thing setting blurs the distinction between humans and objects and create a shared characteristic among them: inanimate, passive, harmless, the displayed object of the gaze. The choreographers intended to start the performance with restricted things as if they are the display objects in a museum (Kok, 2016, as cited in Taylor, 2016), a clear division between the viewer (audience) and the presented material (their art of roping on the objects and bodies).

The utilisation of bondage techniques such as Japanese rope and suspension bondage suggest an association to bondage which is part of BDSM, an acronym made up of

three term-sets: bondage and discipline (B&D), domination and submission (D/s), and sadomasochism (SM) (Weiss, 2015). In most popular representations of BDSM, objects of all kinds are meant for controlling or receiving attention, therefore referring to tension, pain, dark, or mysterious mood. Having said that, *Bunny* offers colourful tied up household products that suggest a daily-life and fun atmosphere with casual seating arrangements and upbeat music; as agreed by Chen (2019), it is a "playground that makes people relax" (para. 2). Kok intended to challenge the conventional roping practice and go beyond eroticism, gender and sexual representation because “there are a lot of psychological elements that become a lot more interesting" (Kok, 2016, as cited in Taylor, 2016, para. 10) besides the fact of being tied up. In the interview with Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore (2016), Kok declared that *Bunny* is about to give and take power by exploring bondage for pleasure, which is also the central notion of BDSM—the consensual exchange of power for pleasure defined by Weiss (2015).

In the choreography, the manipulation of the rope began with George. He tied up his thighs and calves, followed by an invitation that looked for a voluntary audience to help to tie his hands behind his back. George extended his invitation to an audience to spin the suspended Kok. This beginning allowed the audience to immerse themselves into different yet fluid roles and positionalities, such as being an observer or participator and a rigger or bunny. It makes the audience understand the dominant and submissive relation between two artists and all the audience in which everyone is responsible for building for that particular performance. As a result, more audience is willing to become the subject of the performance by voluntarily being tied with a knotted rope and other objects, folded their eye, played music, displayed all personal belongings from their bag, whipped Kok, suspended in the air like Kok, and so on. By giving the power to the audience with the openness and patience to listen and confirm their consent, *Bunny* creates a safe playground for every audience to build an unknown (what is this tying game leading to?) that challenges their limits and boundaries. Based on Kok's observation, he found,

> pretty quickly that people want to get tied up – or they want to see someone else get tied up [. . . .] One is the element of danger that comes into the room, not necessarily in a physical sense, but in crossing over audience boundaries. The other, I think, is a desire for spectacle [and a] desire for intimacy. (Kok, 2016, as cited in Sebag-Montefiore, 2016, para. 19)

Across this durational choreography, audience members publicly negotiated their level of comfort and risk-taking by accepting/rejecting the offer and giving/disallowing consent to be tied up, tied down, and even suspended in the air. Besides this broadly participatory choreography, there are sessions in the dance where the performers interacted with the objects on the floors, such as the delicate dance with the vacuum cleaner and the mesmerising moment when Kok made the fire extinguisher spurt. At that particular surprise moment, Kok reminded the audience that these inanimate objects have a life that may seem immobile but contain the power to be active when needed. There is also a dance of ecstasy session where George enjoys his spinning in mid-air accompanied by Kok's disco-like frenetic dance of pleasure.

In *Bunny*, Kok, George and the audience positioned rope with other objects and themselves in an unusual context (than the actual rope bondage) that draws the audience to

think beyond the functionality of the system of those objects, including the individual bodies. This tying up playground questions the subjectivity between participatory bodies and things and the manipulation and subject. From stimulating doubt to trust, personal to communal participation, passive to active actions, receiver to giver role, and restriction to freedom, Kok and George successfully made voluntary audiences as the bunnies. As the medium, the rope has "a sense of communication" that "carries a whole range of emotions that are as flexible as the material itself" (Kok, 2016, as cited in Sebag-Montefiore, 2016, para. 4). In Chen's opinion, *Bunny* provides a safe space for the audience to accept stimulation and reflect: as if an audience member "can know the *standards* of bondage and training through *safe* art performances, then he can identify and reject harmful. . . relationships" (Chen, 2019, para. 4).

Experimenting with the functions of objects in contemporary choreography, Kok and George establish the unlimited capacity of a single object—the rope—in a collaborative model. With the audience, a rope could function as a tied-up instrument, refer to rope bondage, signify power, and challenge the power-exchange relationship's subjectivity. Besides making the objects and bodies become things, Kok and George make themselves and the audience move as things such as suspending in the air and giving up self's will. Thus, the relationship of dancers and audience members became a meaningful bonding enabled by the rope. This bonding allows the audience to immerse their kinaesthetic and emotional experiences and reflect their material life's psychophysical aspects.

Conclusion

This performance review aimed to analyse the function and usage of objects as the dominant performative elements in the five contemporary choreographies presented between 2015 to 2019 by East and Southeast Asian choreographers. Supported by the established functions of stage objects in the Western dance traditions and practices, the review has revealed that the five choreographers from China, Taiwan, and Singapore demonstrated similarities and differences in establishing the varied and dominant functionality, referentiality, signification, and subjectivation of objects in their contemporary dance choreography. To anticipate societal, cultural, political, and psychological aspects of their material life, choreographers have chosen everyday objects to connect their concern for their country, people, and living. It was found that Gu Jiani, Luo Wen-Jinn, Daniel Kok and Luke George displayed their dominant objects as part of the scenic design in the opening choreography. Providing references and acting as signifiers were explored by empowering objects related to the choreographic intentions. The five choreographers presented a range of representational and symbolic movement styles to explore alternative movement vocabulary inspired by the objects. On the other end, choreographers such as Luo extended the inspiration of the objects to develop virtuosic movement. Bypassing the connections between functionality and object, manipulation and subject, *Girl's Notes* and *Bunny* were two examples that explored how to *move as a thing* and *become-thing* coined by Lepecki (2012). Alternatively, ErGao proposed an equal emphasis on physical and virtual objects in contemporary choreography to respond to today's digital living culture. Lastly, Luo, Kok, and George demonstrated the potentialities of a single dominant object to achieve the varied functionalities in one full-length choreography. As this performance review of the contemporary dance choreographies showed, choreographing with objects are widely practised

and inseparable in selected East and Southeast Asian dance practices, particularly from the five choreographers from China, Taiwan, and Singapore.

Having said that, bringing perspectives of the present East and Southeast Asian practitioners has its challenges in this analysis. This article is made possible as one of the co-authors has the language proficiency in accessing performance reviews and showcases from China and Taiwan presented in the Chinese language. This necessity of accessing non-English resources reflects the continuing challenges for the future dance scholarship to review other-than-English performance resources from the Asia regions such as Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, etc. Adding to the language barrier, there is insufficient research on choreographing contemporary dance with objects in East and Southeast Asia countries that limits the authors from including more Asian regions for this analysis. For example, Malaysia has emerging dance scholarship, not to mention practice-based research in performing arts which is still a newly-accepted and debatable academic discipline. Thus, this article serves as a preliminary study on practice-based research of contemporary choreography that calls for choreographic discourses of Asian practices, not only on the choreographing with objects but also the expanded field of choreography with diverse performative elements, choreographic styles and methods.

Endnotes

[1] Known as Douyin in China, TikTok "is a social networking app [developed by a Beijing-based company ByteDance] for creating and sharing videos . . . by which users can use a variety of filters, BGM (background Music) and lip-synching templates to communicate to the online community of viewers". (Bahiyah Omar & Wang, 2020, p. 121)

[2] "Ox horns" represents a typical style in which Chinese children dress their hair, therefore constitutes the stereotypical appearance of Chinese children. It is also widely depicted in Chinese paintings.

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