

# Theatre as Transitional Infrastructure: Flow, Freedom and the ‘Long Middle’ of Change in Hong Kong

JOANNA MANSBRIDGE

---

*In the aftermath of the 2019 pro-democracy protests and amid the pandemic, Hong Kong theatre collective Zuni Icosahedron staged two productions, *Bach Is Heart Sutra* and *2 or 3 Things about Interrupted Dream*. *Bach* draws on Buddhist concepts to retrain the senses and unlearn perceptions, inviting audience-participants to reflect on the forms and concepts that define Hong Kong. *2 or 3 Things* revises a section of the kunqu opera *Peony Pavilion* to revisit the protests and offer an explicit statement on censorship. Both productions provide a space for experimentation and reflection within a city that has seemingly foreclosed on practices of questioning, exploring and gathering. Situating these works in relation to the protests, as a distinctly infrastructural movement, and drawing on Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of infrastructure, this essay examines Zuni’s theatre as an infrastructure, of sorts, mediating a moment of transition and trying out new ways of moving within it.*

## Introduction: a city of flows

Hong Kong is often evoked through images of continuous movement: a quintessential city of flows. From its beginnings as a colonial entrepôt, it has functioned as a place through which people, capital and commodities circulate between China and the rest of the world. To optimize this economic function, movement is highly controlled in Hong Kong; from the ground up, a vast infrastructure ensures continual circulation and trains a disposition tuned to efficiency and productivity. An extensive system of walkways elevated above ground and tunnelled below connects mass transit railway (MTR) stations to business offices, malls and high-rise residences, minimizing the need to touch the street. Sidewalks, too, are regulated, with steel fences that corral pedestrians and prevent them from jaywalking. Malls, perhaps the most used ‘public’ space, orient movements through repeated spatial patterns and numb the senses with climate-controlled environments, scented air and hypnotic music. Moving through an urban environment designed to maximize productivity and stimulate consumption requires little thought and no reflection, only disciplined, compliant bodies. As Andre Lepecki writes, flow, in its conventional sense, appeals to ‘a general conformity to being-in-circulation’ and produces a ‘spectacle of its own consensual mobility’.<sup>1</sup>

Hong Kong’s economic function as a city of flows was radically upended during 2019 pro-democracy protests. As the largest series of political uprisings in Hong Kong’s history, the protests were initially a response to a proposed extradition bill, but

quickly grew into a youth-driven movement encompassing a spectrum of political positions and a longer list of demands.<sup>2</sup> ‘Free Hong Kong’ was the slogan of the movement, and ‘be water’ the strategy. Borrowed from Hong Kong icon Bruce Lee’s Daoist-inspired reflections on water’s capacity to assume the shape of whatever surrounds it, ‘be water’ was interpreted by protestors through a physical relationship with the city, as they flowed, dispersed and crashed through the streets, stations and malls to reclaim the city and defend its freedoms.<sup>3</sup> As a distinctly *infrastructural* movement, the protests involved taking over and taking apart an urban infrastructure designed to regulate movement: sidewalk fences were unbolted and stacked to block police; elevated walkways were used as tactical positions; sidewalk bricks were unearthed and remade into barricades; mall escalators were disabled with liquid concrete; MTR stations were turned into volatile sites of conflict between protestors and police; the airport was occupied, halting flights into and out of the city for days.<sup>4</sup> Employing tactics that mobilized and immobilized infrastructures of connectivity, consumption and circulation, the protests challenged Hong Kong’s role as a conduit of capital flows and asserted forms of life suppressed by an economic logic that privileges predictable, secure environments and compliant, productive bodies.

When the National Security Law (NSL) was passed on 30 June 2020, the streets were emptied overnight and all signs of the protests were covered up with hasty paint jobs, boarded-up windows and cement-patched sidewalks. The pandemic’s arrival in January 2020 aided the suppression of political activity, and dissent was swiftly replaced by an enforced obedience. Signs promoting unity against the virus – ‘Together we fight the virus!’ – pervaded public spaces, alongside posters in MTR stations encouraging residents to report terrorist activities to the NSL hotline. Politics and science worked together to control the population through bans on gathering, closed borders and an expanded data ecology that monitored the movements and measured the biological information of residents, who quickly learned a new repertoire of bodily habits necessary for navigating a ‘safe’ environment.

As Hong Kong is being transformed, socially and politically, it is also being remade physically through a vast infrastructure of bridges, tunnels and high-speed rail that integrate the city into the Greater Bay Area (GBA).<sup>5</sup> Modelled on Silicon Valley, the GBA is promoted as an ‘international innovation and technology hub’ that encompasses nine mainland cities, two special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau) and 70 million inhabitants in a dense network of technology production, maritime transport and financial services. Hong Kong is being primed for its role within the GBA as a hub of technology innovation, and the city’s youth are being groomed to be ‘innovators and entrepreneurs’ who are ready to compete and contribute to the prosperity of a unified nation.<sup>6</sup> In the weeks leading up to 1 July 2022, the twenty-fifth anniversary of handover, city officials proclaimed the restoration of social order, with posters and billboards celebrating a ‘new era’ of ‘stability, prosperity and opportunity’. The economic opportunities promised by the GBA, it seems, now stand in for the political freedoms lost under the NSL.

The NSL may have succeeded in suppressing certain forms of dissent, but the affects and impulses that galvanized millions of residents are not so easily eradicated. The

affective energy of the protests was an expression of attachments to the city – as an identity, a way of life and a political possibility. Barricades and blockages became concrete emblems of political divisions, but also literal expressions of the desire to participate in the making of the city and its future. Moreover, the protests involved more than just organized acts of resistance; they were also performative experiments in collective life. Scenes of comradeship, playful rebellion and creative collaboration among youth protestors were as much part of the movement as disruption and antagonism.<sup>7</sup> Despite changes in the city, experiments in collective life can still take place, albeit in different forms. One such place is the theatre.

In the aftermath of the protests and amidst the pandemic, Hong Kong theatre collective Zuni Icosahedron staged two works, during a brief moment in 2021 when theatres were allowed to open. *Bach Is Heart Sutra*, directed by Matthias Woo, and *2 or 3 Things about Interrupted Dream*, directed by Danny Yung, each offered a different approach to contemplating the city and re-evaluating perspectives on it and relations within it.<sup>8</sup> *Bach Is Heart Sutra* draws on Buddhist concepts and an immersive design to retrain the senses and reorient perceptions. Its focus on the body invited audience-participants to question the forms and concepts that define Hong Kong and to experiment with new ways of thinking, feeling and moving together. *2 or 3 Things* revises a section of the *kunqu* opera *Peony Pavilion* to reflect on the aftermath of the protests and offer an explicit statement on theatre and censorship. Both works improvise new ways of being-in-relation in a city where practices of gathering and questioning have been carefully contained. They animate theatre as a space where positions can shift, perspectives can change and collective life can continue to be lived as an experiment. In this way, Zuni's theatre acts as an infrastructure, of sorts, meditating a moment of transition and trying out new ways of moving within it.

### Infrastructural movements

There is another way of looking at infrastructure, not as a physical system of connectivity and flow, but as the movements *within* relations. In Lauren Berlant's sense, infrastructure is not an external system, but rather a way of describing the affective and material relations through which the world maintains its consistency and by which we maintain our attachments to the world and to each other. In their words, infrastructure is what 'binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself.'<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the fixity and solidity suggested by 'structure', infrastructure, Berlant writes, is 'the lifeworld of structure', or 'the living mediation of what provides the consistency of life in the ordinary'.<sup>10</sup> They develop infrastructuralism as a way to 'reimagine the transformation of living from within the scene of life'.<sup>11</sup> Infrastructure, in this sense, is always a transitional scene within which attachments are maintained but also where 'models of reciprocity' can be tested, without 'be[ing] sure of the outcome in advance'.<sup>12</sup>

Berlant's infrastructuralism attends to the ambivalence of our attachments to the objects (people, identities, places) that come to be felt as necessary for the

continuation of a lifeworld, and yet that also make demands on us to adjust to ‘the friction of copresence’.<sup>13</sup> Our desire to stay attached to the world and to the people and things in it is inevitably confronted by ‘evidence [we] were never sovereign – evidence the world forces [us] to face and a fact about which much genuine and confusing ambivalence ensues’.<sup>14</sup> The aim of infrastructuralist thinking is ‘to break open habits and naturalized forms of association’ and ‘induce transformations from within the relation to the object’, or what Berlant calls ‘unlearning’ or ‘loosening the object’.<sup>15</sup> They write, ‘To loosen an object is to look to recombining its component parts. Another way to say it: to unlearn its objectness.’<sup>16</sup> ‘You can’t simply lose your object if it’s providing a foundational world infrastructure for you’, Berlant points out, but ‘you can use the contradictions the object prompts to loosen and reconfigure it, exploiting the elasticity of its contradictions, the incoherence of the forces that overdetermine it’, to recompose the relations it makes possible.<sup>17</sup>

One of the strongest attachments in Hong Kong involves the overdetermined promise of freedom, with the economic and political connotations of that word entwined and conflated. From its beginnings, migrants from around the world have arrived on Hong Kong’s shores to pursue economic opportunity. Migrants from the mainland have also been drawn to the city for its promise of political freedom. Since handover, a distinctly Hong Kong ‘way of life’ has been defined by the democratic freedoms set out in the Basic Law – the freedoms of speech, religion and assembly, and the rule of law – and the promise that ‘the original capitalist society, economic system and way of life will remain unchanged’ in Hong Kong until 2047.<sup>18</sup> Universal suffrage – the freedom of the people of Hong Kong to elect the city’s chief executive – was held out as the ultimate promise. These freedoms, actual and promised, and the way of life they shape have formed an ever-elusive, yet ardently protected, ‘Hong Kong identity’, which many feel distinguishes the city, culturally and politically, from mainland China. The desire for autonomy from the mainland is coupled with and complicated by an ambivalent attachment to a colonial past (mis)remembered as more democratic than the present. Hong Kong’s function as an economic channel has, however, been the highest priority for both British and Chinese regimes, with policies made to protect that function. Indeed, even as the city’s democratic freedoms have been withdrawn, Hong Kong remains ‘the freest market in the world’.<sup>19</sup>

### **Another kind of freedom: three doors of liberation in *Bach Is Heart Sutra***

Founded in 1982 and led by co-artistic directors Danny Yung and Mathias Woo, Zuni Icosahedron blends theatre, video, sound experimentation and installation arts. They have created over 200 productions in their forty-year life as a collective, with experimentation and cross-cultural collaborations at the core of their creative process. They often stage multiple iterations of works, with each one responding to the particular social moment within which it is staged. Their artistic vision is guided by the following principles: “Reinterpret Classics”, “Reinvent Tradition”, “Recreate Theatre and Media Technology,” and “Reconnect Theatre with Social Movement”.<sup>20</sup> ‘Art Tech’ is the phrase Zuni use to define their approach to technology. For them,

technology is not a tool or overlay but a relational infrastructure that sustains and organizes our relations to the world and to each other, while keeping ‘the world practically bound to itself’. Zuni’s approach to technology corresponds with the work of philosopher Yuk Hui, who wonders how art might enable us to rethink technology. In a global imaginary dominated by Big Tech, technology is typically understood as a universal concept and a singular future. Hui, however, argues for art’s role in highlighting what he calls ‘technodiversity’, or ‘the irreducible difference of the multiplicity of modes of thinking (aesthetic, technical, moral, philosophical, etc.) in different cultures and territories’.<sup>21</sup> Technology, as Hui points out and as Zuni demonstrates, is not a universal concept, external system or unseen infrastructure, but an embedded and embodied diversity of practices informed by a ‘multiplicity of modes of thinking’ that emerge from within particular milieux. Art, perhaps especially performance, can model technodiversity and expand imaginations beyond the inevitability of a singular future.

Putting Chinese aesthetics and philosophies in dialogue with technological practices, Zuni’s Art Tech theatre imagines such a technodiversity. Their experiments with technology tutor an embedded sensibility and wire a sensorium tuned not to individual agency but to the body’s coexistence with the world. As Woo puts it, ‘Traditional technology in the East is about ... understanding the body, consciousness and the world; how the body can feel the world, space and the air around it. Eastern technology is the technology of the body, the inner self-knowledge, while Western technology creates an external system.’<sup>22</sup> In this way, he adds, ‘Art Tech is a deconstruction and mirror of Western technology.’<sup>23</sup> In Buddhist thought, body and technology are not separate. Rather, the body is itself a technology, a medium through which consciousness and the physical world are revealed. As Hui puts it, ‘the human is only a technical medium facilitating the realization of the cosmos’.<sup>24</sup> The body and senses are not something to transcend or overcome, in Buddhist thought, but rather instruments to be retrained and tuned to the reality of coexistence.

Woo designed *Bach Is Heart Sutra* to be a collective space for ‘reflection’ and ‘reinvention’, within which participants could become ‘aware of their breathing and rhythms, and develop a fresh understanding of [their] being’.<sup>25</sup> The *Heart Sutra* provides the conceptual centre of the work. Often summarized by the phrase ‘emptiness is form, form is emptiness’, the *Heart Sutra* is thought to express the core of Buddhist thought through its teachings on emptiness. Emptiness may seem to be a contradictory concept through which to view Hong Kong, a city famous for its urban density. However, emptiness enables a way of seeing the city not through its economic function or political divisions, but as an object that can ‘loosen’, ‘unlearned’ and inhabited differently.

Emptiness, the First Door of Liberation in Buddhist thought, describes the irreducible relationality of the universe. The Sanskrit word *śūnyatā*, which has been translated into English as ‘emptiness’, indicates a process of conditional causation, or the interdependent co-arising of everything in the cosmos. As Victor Fan puts it, Buddhism, in all its polyphonic diversity, is built on a single axiom: interdependent origination. He explains, ‘For Buddhist scholars, forms do not originate from an

essence or self-nature but are interdependently originated, and extinguished, from one moment to another, out of a layout of causes and conditions. Hence, forms are by definition empty of existential values.<sup>26</sup>

Not to be confused with nothingness or non-being, emptiness means the emptiness of a separate or autonomous self-identity. In a commentary on his new translation of the *Heart Sutra*, Thich Nhat Hanh clarifies this meaning, stating, ‘emptiness means only the emptiness of self, not the *nonbeing* of self.’<sup>27</sup> Emptiness is the realization of coexistence, or what Hanh calls ‘interbeing’: ‘The insight of interbeing is that nothing exists by itself alone, that each thing exists only in relation to everything else.’<sup>28</sup> All forms – a body, a sound, a thought – are empty of a separate identity but filled with everything that makes their existence possible. On a temporal level, emptiness indicates the impermanence of forms: ‘The insight of impermanence is that nothing is static, nothing stays the same.’<sup>29</sup> To realize emptiness is to reach ‘the other shore’, Nirvana. Neither a physical place nor a future state to be attained, Nirvana is the realization of the nature of reality as it is: as interbeing.<sup>30</sup> *Bach Is Heart Sutra* contemplates emptiness, as a way of seeing and being, to offer guidance to a city attached to a singular identity and way of life and anxious about a future that seems fixed.

*Bach Is Heart Sutra* is a two-part work that took place over two weekends in April and May 2021. The first round was staged in the Cultural Centre’s capacious 1,734-seat Grand Theatre. As the audience took their seats, a Bach concerto played softly, while screens onstage translated the *Heart Sutra* into both English and Chinese. Buddhist sutra chanting began to overlap with the Bach concerto, creating a religious atmosphere akin to being in a cathedral or temple. The sounds were not blended harmoniously but instead played out in dissonant relation, their similarities as religious compositions made strange by their differing tonal qualities and cultural associations. While the soundscape gestured to the multiple cultural influences shaping Hong Kong’s social and aesthetic life, the intermingling of Bach and Buddhism did not tell a binary history of ‘West’ meets ‘East’. It seemed, rather, to amplify a convergence of geographies, aesthetics and philosophies coexisting and transforming one another within a particular milieu.

The piece began with the six performers (Cedric Chan, Ellen Kong, Dan Tse, Luka Wong, David Yeung, Rebecca Yip) walking across the stage from left to right. A signature Zuni gesture, walking evokes the geographical directions of West and East and expresses the cross-cultural nature of Zuni’s aesthetic practice. Walking in this production, however, evoked a nervous restlessness, a sense of entrapment and a limitation of possibilities. After several minutes of walking back and forth, two young male performers (Dan Tse and Luka Wong) stopped to face the audience. They guided the audience through a breathing exercise intended to induce a state of relaxed alertness. As we became more aware of our breathing and attuned to our bodies, the words ‘Emptiness is form, form is emptiness’ scrolled across a screen hanging from the proscenium arch, introducing the core theme of the work. After the collective meditation, the six performers began to configure themselves in various tableaux, alternating between wordless encounters with one another, periods of solitude and collective recitations of the *Heart Sutra*’s final lines: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā* (‘gone, gone, everyone gone to the other shore, awakening’).

A video montage followed, depicting scenes of human progress: overbuilt urban environments, space missions, medical experiments, traffic jams, mining sites, animals in captivity, animals in a slaughterhouse, meat on a butcher's board. The juxtaposition between the theme of emptiness and images of a world too full and too fast encouraged an awareness of how our ways of life participate in a planetary infrastructure that engrains production, consumption and extraction as naturalized dispositions. The montage visualized a world built on what Buddhists call 'upside-down perceptions', such as seeing separation where there is only coexistence and mistaking sovereignty for freedom. The stage then went dark, and the theatre was filled with the polyphonic rhythms of a Bach fugue and floating digital Chinese characters (by Mak Kwok Fai) citing lines from the sutra. The lights came up and a male performer (David Yeung) stood centre stage and hummed the prelude to Bach's Cello Suite 1 in G Major. It was moving in its simplicity, with Yeung, as both instrument and musician, embodying the history of the melody. Sounds, bodies and images assumed an ontologically equal status and worked together in the first round to introduce the themes of the *Heart Sutra* and situate them within Hong Kong's culturally syncretic context.

The second round, a walking meditation, was more intimate and inwardly focused. The first twenty minutes involved a solitary analogue experience of copying the *Heart Sutra* in makeshift rooms just outside the theatre. Built with bamboo scaffolds (made by bamboo master Wing Kei) and black curtains, the small spaces gestured to the architectural environment of the city, where most residents live in micro-sized flats and where bamboo scaffolds are still used in building construction and maintenance. Inside was a simple desk on which sat a lamp, a pencil and a long sheet of paper with the *Heart Sutra* lightly printed on it. Participants wore headphones tuned to FM channels, through which Bach fugues played. We were told to copy the text of the *Heart Sutra* on the paper, going at our own pace and not worrying about whether we finished. Sitting alone in the small space evoked the isolation of the pandemic, although here screens and devices were replaced with the technologies of pencil and paper, and anxiety and distraction were transformed into focused concentration. Hand-copying the sutra forged a physical connection to the text and complemented the rhythm of Bach's counterpoint.

After this practice of calm attentiveness, the participants were then guided to the Studio Theatre for the walking meditation. Walking became an opportunity to quiet the mind, slow the body's rhythms and reflect, individually and as a collective, on the present. The theatre space was set up as a black box, mirrored on all four sides and illuminated with soft glow spotlights. After removing our shoes, we were left to roam freely in the open space, a rare experience in Hong Kong. We were told that we could walk or sit, stay for a long time or leave after a short time. We could take photographs and videos or just listen and inhabit the space with all our senses. Cushions were arranged on the floor for moments of stillness. The soundscape alternated between Buddhist chanting playing over Bach cello suites, the sound of sea waves and periods of silence.<sup>31</sup>

Temperature monitors also stood throughout the space at regular intervals, like stoic sentinels monitoring the behaviour of the human participants (Fig. 1). This





*FIG. 1* Temperature monitors reflected and multiplied on the mirrored walls of the Studio Theatre in *Bach Is Heart Sutra*. May 2021. Cultural Centre, Hong Kong. Photograph by Vic Shing. ©Zuni Icosahedron.

reminder of the pandemic and the proliferation of biometric technologies brought the city inside the theatre. Images of densely packed skyscrapers and the sea waves surrounding them were projected on the floor, bringing the city further into the space and evoking the physical topography of Hong Kong as an archipelago of over 200 islands. There was a feeling of being embodied by the city, rather than occupying it as an external environment.

Hanging from the ceiling of the Studio Theatre were pieces of white fabric with ‘Emptiness is form, form is emptiness’ printed in Chinese characters (Fig. 2). The same characters were also projected throughout the space as floating digital images. As the analogue and digital characters overlapped, they were also reflected on mirrored walls, creating a *mise en abyme* effect. The multiplication of real and virtual signs at once amplified the omnipresence of signs – objects, words, concepts – and reduced them to simulacra. In Buddhist thought, all signs, whether digital or analogue, are deceptive, since they give phenomena the appearance of a separate existence and stable meaning. Signlessness, the Second Door of Liberation, does not





FIG. 2 Chinese characters written on fabric reading 'Emptiness is form, form is emptiness', with their digital counterparts projected across the theatre space in *Bach Is Heart Sutra*. May 2021. Cultural Centre, Hong Kong. Author's photograph.

deny the existence of the words, concepts and ideas that organize our relationships with each other and with the world. Rather it means that 'we don't get caught up in their appearance'.<sup>32</sup> Signlessness empties signs of their appearance of solidity and separateness and sees instead interbeing. When seen with eyes of signlessness, for example, a piece of paper becomes the trees, sunlight, soil, rain and labour that go into its existence. Likewise, all objects are transformed from solid forms, singular identities and stable concepts into expressions of interdependent co-arising.<sup>33</sup>

With its reflective atmosphere and immersive dramaturgy, the walking meditation provided a space of concentrated awareness, where movements were freed from goals and instrumentalized action and yet were still focused and deliberate. In this way, it was also an exercise in the Third Door of Liberation: aimlessness. Aimlessness practices a form of action – in this case walking – that is not motivated by an objective or attached to a desired outcome, but instead responds to what each

moment brings. Hanh writes, 'Aimlessness means not running after things, not putting an objective in front of you and continually reaching for it'.<sup>34</sup> Aimlessness replaces achieving, striving and pursuing with an awareness that everything that is attainable is available in the here and now. Aimlessness is emphatically not encouraged in Hong Kong, and moving this way, rehearsing aimlessness as a disposition, felt somehow revolutionary.

Aimlessness is characterized by flow, albeit of a different kind. Often associated with artists and athletes, 'being in the flow' describes the merging of action and awareness.<sup>35</sup> The quasi-Zen phrase 'going with the flow' describes a surrender to what is, a yielding to the moment, and a relinquishing of one's personal agency. Flow, in Buddhist thought, liberates action from expected outcomes and liberates the actor from the notion that one acts as a sovereign self. To be in the flow is to understand that every action is part of, indeed dependent on, a web of infinite other actions – past and future, near and far, human and non-human. Not to be confused with smooth, uninterrupted movement, flow here means staying in a scene of transition while remaining open, even 'when that openness ignites insecurity about how to live otherwise'.<sup>36</sup>

To move from seeing a world of solid forms and separate identities to seeing a world of emptiness is to understand that transformation and impermanence – not stability and order – constitute lifeworlds. This way of seeing is not unlike what Berlant calls 'loosening' or 'unlearning' the objects that sustain us. To 'unlearn [the] objectness' of our objects – whether an identity, person, place or way of life – is to see that nothing is as solid or separate as we thought it was and that objects can be reconfigured otherwise. To unlearn our objects also means loosening our attachments to the fantasies of what our objects can give us, whether that is freedom or autonomy or something else. Unlearning does not resolve ambivalence and friction into unity and harmony. Instead, it creates spaces for change within scenes of life that seem static or broken. 'Transitional infrastructure' is Berlant's term for living within a period where crisis interrupts the reproduction of social life. During crisis moments, 'what passes as "structure" passes into infrastructure', they write, and 'we are compelled to understand that nothing from above or outside is holding the world together solidly'.<sup>37</sup>

Putting Berlant's social theory alongside Buddhist thought gives Buddhist concepts a social texture and extends Berlant's thought beyond its American inflection. While Buddhism can seem cold in its teachings on non-attachment, Berlant's infrastructuralism offers a way of admitting the force and necessity of attachments, while also emphasizing their elasticity within scenes of transition. Moreover, Berlant and Buddhism agree on the principles of coexistence and non-sovereignty, the understanding 'that no one was ever sovereign, just mostly operating according to some imaginable, often distorted image of their power over things, actions, people, and causality'.<sup>38</sup> Although emptiness, signlessness and aimlessness – as ways of seeing, thinking and moving – do not solve Hong Kong's political problems, they do help dissolve hardened identities, calcified concepts and habituated movements. There is a certain kind of freedom there. To loosen Hong Kong's object-ness is to unlearn the concepts associated with its urban form, economic role and political identity. *Bach Is Heart Sutra* provided a space within

which to unlearn familiar ways of seeing and inhabiting Hong Kong and to reflect on attachments to the city that have felt necessary for the continuation of a way of life.

### **Transitional scenes: 2 or 3 *Things about Interrupted Dream***

On 9 July 2021, just before theatres closed again, Zuni staged *2 or 3 Things about Interrupted Dream*. Conceived and directed by Danny Yung, *2 or 3 Things* is developed from an excerpt from the *kunqu* opera *Peony Pavilion*. Now considered a classic of Chinese opera, *Peony Pavilion* was banned in the early years of the People's Republic of China for its depiction of an erotic relationship between a female ghost and a young man, which was deemed inappropriate by the newly established communist regime. Yung has staged multiple versions of this work, often using it as a platform for collaborating with theatre artists across Asia and experimenting with new ways of interpreting the story. In China, *kunqu* remains highly conventionalized, with little room for experimentation. In Zuni's productions, however, the form has been abstracted, hybridized and combined with other performance traditions in Asia and Europe. From 2018 to 2021, *Interrupted Dream* was part of Yung's One Table, Two Chairs series, which brought together dancers and actors from Indonesia, Cambodia, Japan and mainland China to explore the work as a metaphor for cross-cultural relationships. For Yung, the use of a single table and two chairs points at once to the staging conventions of *kunqu* and to the generative possibilities of being in dialogue and being changed by that encounter.

In the 2021 iteration, Hong Kong was the 'interrupted dream'. Unlike *Bach Is Heart Sutra*, *2 or 3 Things* explicitly invoked the protests and the suppression and censorship that followed, conveying a sense of disorientation on the one hand, and a dream-like forgetting on the other. Staged in the Studio Theatre, the work began with five young performers (Martin Choy, Sylvie Cox, JH, Ellen Kong and Dan Tse) seated on chairs facing the audience. Dressed in black, they evoked the signature attire of youth protestors. There was one empty chair, suggesting an unfinishedness to the collective onstage. On a large screen upstage, a black-and-white video of the early days of the protests, when millions gathered on the streets in Central, played with no sound. It was jarring to see the once familiar scene now charged with such anxiety, as official recollections of the protests are forbidden under the NSL.<sup>39</sup> The video zoomed in to an extreme close up, blurring faces so that the image was no longer legible. A red line intersected the screen horizontally and red squares began to surround the faces (Fig. 3). The performers turned to face the screen, and the red squares faded into an image of waves lapping onto a shoreline. Chanting from the protests began to play over the waves, growing louder and louder, as the red squares appeared again, eventually saturating the screen and bathing the entire theatre in red light. The intensity of the sound and light suddenly gave way to silence and darkness, until the image of lapping waves returned. The sequence can be read as a metaphor for censorship, but the waves also suggested a continuation, however uncertain.

One male performer remained seated, staring at the screen, while another lay on the floor under the table, as if sleeping. The juxtapositions between awake and asleep, images

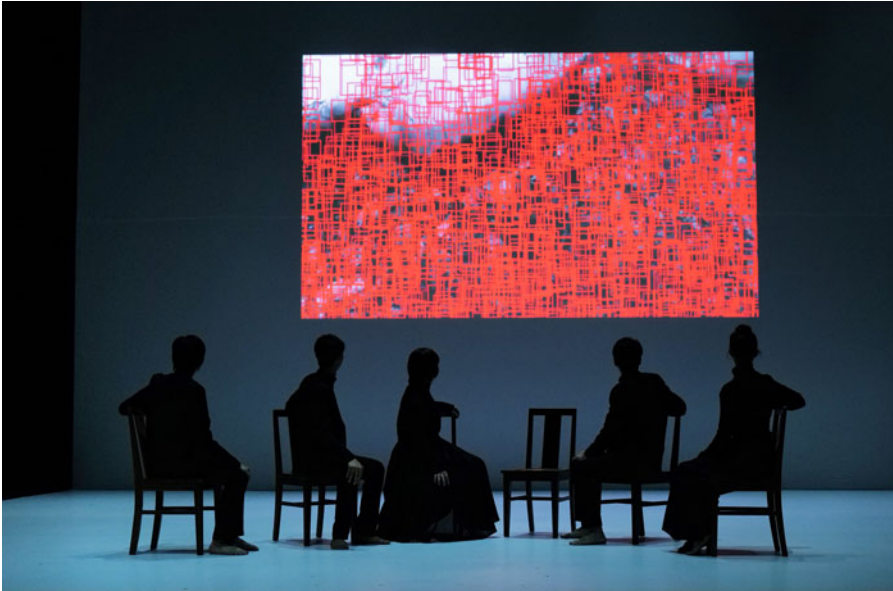


FIG. 3 Red squares fill the screen as the performers watch in silence in *2 or 3 Things about Interrupted Dream*. July 2021. Cultural Centre, Hong Kong. Photograph by Cheung Chi Wai. ©Zuni Icosahedron.

and dreams, implicitly positioned the theatre as mediating space, which is to say an infrastructural space, where relations between then and now, you and me, material and immaterial, can be seen as unstable and ‘dynamically related’ states.<sup>40</sup> A female performer came onstage and text from the ‘Interrupted Dream’ scene in *Peony Pavilion* appeared: ‘He was warned never to visit the back garden. It was springtime. He visited the back garden.’ In the opera, a young male scholar ventures to the back garden, where he meets the ghost of Du Liniang, the beautiful young woman whom he loved but who has since died from a kind of lovesickness. After a passionate encounter, the force of their love brings Du Liniang back to life, and the couple live happily ever after. As a male and female performer began to improvise the once-banned scene under the table, using stylized movements and abstracted gestures, the other performers interrupt their encounter, removing the blanket and table covering the couple. Two performers began running back and forth across the stage, carrying the chairs, while two others lay on the floor. They changed positions again and again, sometimes sitting in the chairs, sometimes running across the stage, sometimes sleeping under the table. The tableaux conveyed moments of confusion and uncertainty, capturing an atmosphere of dream-like disorientation that resonated in a moment where political suppression became indistinguishable from pandemic containment measures and political convictions and collective aspirations dissolved into silence and isolation.

The sequence, and *2 or 3 Things* as a whole, can be read as an ‘object/scene’, Berlant’s blend-word for scenes of life held together by affective attachments (to

people, ways of life, concepts) that ignite a sense of possibility, a sense that change is possible. The affective structure of these attachments involves a ‘sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way’.<sup>41</sup> Object/scenes are not static scenarios but rather ‘a convergence space of questions and interests that can be reorganized, walked around in, made incoherent, propositional, and part of a narrative, or not’.<sup>42</sup> They can seem to come apart when the attachments holding them together no longer sustain the aspirations invested in them, or when those aspirations ‘actually make it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving’.<sup>43</sup> The object/scene in the ‘Interrupted Dream’ sequence suggested broken attachments – to an idea of Hong Kong, to the promise of freedom – and the subsequent disorientation that arises when affects circulate in search of new objects to attach to. The lack of narrative coherence seems precisely the point. While official government narratives obsessively communicated messages of (political) stability and (pandemic) certainty, *2 or 3 Things* evoked instead a state of volatility that, while seemingly chaotic, was also for that reason open.

The narrative became increasingly fragmented in the next sequence. With the stage now empty, Chinese characters and their English equivalents flash on the screen, capturing the social and affective texture of an ongoing present: BODY, QUESTION, SELF, POLITICS, HISTORY, REVOLUTION, THEATRE, DESIRE, DREAM, DESPERATION, HUMILIATE, SMEAR, DENY, RULES, DISTANCE, SENSES, CENSOR, CONFINE, SUPPRESS, MEMORY, MASSACRE, BEGIN. If *Bach Is Heart Sutra* offered lessons in emptiness and signlessness, then *2 or 3 Things* confronted the force of signs and our attachments to the meanings they carry. Words evoking the protests (‘politics’, ‘revolution’, ‘suppress’) and the pandemic (‘rules’, ‘distance’, ‘confine’) combined with unresolved affective states associated with both (‘desire’, ‘desperation’). ‘Humiliate’ and ‘smear’ evoked scenes of violence against mainland students on university campuses and cross-border shoppers in malls during the protests, when political divisions between Hong Kongers and mainlanders intensified. ‘Memory’ and ‘massacre’ linked the suppression of political events in Hong Kong to broader Chinese history. ‘Begin’, however, refused closure. As the words appeared and disappeared, flashing up again in different configurations, they suggested not a finished script but ‘a convergence space of questions and interests that can be reorganized ... made incoherent, propositional, and part of a narrative, or not’.

The penultimate sequence foregrounded tensions between freedom and constraint and between remembering and repression. Wearing a formal white dress and theatrical mask, a female performer danced with precisely executed gestures before breaking into a frenetic improvised dance to a soundtrack of rock music and cheering voices. The juxtaposition of formality and improvisation implied the experimentation – in social life and in theatre – that has shaped Hong Kong and Zuni’s artistic practice. She then turned towards the screen, removing her mask to face a close-up image of the statue of socialist workers that sits in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. The 4 June memorial of the Tiananmen Square massacre, held every year in Victoria Park, has been one of the most symbolic events in Hong Kong. An exercise of the city’s relative freedoms and a

statement about its distinctiveness from the mainland, the memorial was banned in 2019, due to the protests, and again in 2020, 2021 and 2022, due to pandemic restrictions on public gatherings. In 2023, although all pandemic restrictions had been lifted, the event did not take place, as the organizers withdrew their request for a permit after being questioned by the authorities about their intentions. (Besides, a pro-Beijing organization had already booked Victoria Park for a shopping event.) In the weeks leading up to 4 June 2023, NSL officials ordered that all books relating to Tiananmen Square be removed from Hong Kong libraries, suggesting the end of an era. And yet this silent encounter between performer and image was itself a form of commemoration.

The final sequence confirmed theatre as a space still open for exploration and experimentation, despite prohibitions. One male performer dressed in black lay on the floor downstage as text appeared above him on the screen: 'He was warned never to visit the theatre. He visited the forbidden theatre.' The house lights came up, and the screen turned into a mirror in which we, the audience, were reflected and included in the action onstage. The five performers returned to the stage as the same words from the earlier sequence appeared and disappeared in rapid succession. The image of the protests returned, but this time projected on both the screen and the stage floor. Red lines appeared and accumulated once again, eventually saturating the screen before it faded to white, ambiguously suggesting an ending, a forgetting, or a beginning. Regardless, the production attested to the fact that no repression is ever total. The piece affirmed theatre as a space of continuation, not in the form of a seamless repetition of the past unfolding into a single, predetermined future, but as a series of recursive reflections and rehearsals for new scenes of encounter.

Significantly, the performers and Zuni staff involved in both *Bach Is Heart Sutra* and *2 or 3 Things* were mainly twenty-somethings, the demographic most involved with the protests and, arguably, most attached to the promises they sustained. From its beginnings Zuni has prioritized nurturing young artists and providing a space of experimentation and expression. With schools, universities, workplaces and the media enveloped in (self-)censorship, these productions gave young people, and their audiences, a space to explore new ways of gathering together and to reflect on concepts like self, identity and freedom. The dialogue signified by the table and chairs in *2 or 3 Things* did not seem limited to Hong Kong, but also implied relations between the city and China. That *Peony Pavilion* is a Chinese opera points to the coexistence of Hong Kong and the entity that constitutes its origins and its continuation. To mistake the Chinese Communist Party for the people of China is to assume naively that this or any regime is capable of representing and containing its vastly diverse population. Many young people from mainland China still migrate to Hong Kong. Some come for economic opportunities, but others come because Hong Kong still promises a kind of freedom – to speak, think, question – unavailable in the mainland. The political changes in the city present a possibility for using this transitional moment to loosen entrenched identities and find new ways of negotiating the 'friction of collaborative life'.<sup>44</sup>



### Moving through the 'long middle' of change

The protests and the pandemic offered potential 'moments of radical unlearning' within what Berlant calls the 'long middle' of change.<sup>45</sup> During the fifty-year period between handover in 1997 and Hong Kong's full return to China in 2047, the city's autonomy, it was promised, would be preserved and any changes to its way of life somehow suspended. The 2019 uprisings sought to protect these promises. Repeated claims by the government that order and stability have been restored in Hong Kong are part of a new narrative, a new object/scene, wherein change is dictated by the mandates of patriotism and national unity. The shape change takes, however, can never be fully determined in advance or limited to the narratives of institutions and governments. 'Institutions enclose and congeal power, resources, and interests, and they represent their legitimacy as something solid and enduring', Berlant reminds us, whereas infrastructures constitute 'the habits, patterns, norms, and scenes of assemblage and use'.<sup>46</sup> Infrastructures are enacted through the body. As a technique of the body, theatre can loosen 'the habits, patterns, norms, and scenes' that 'congeal' power and invent new infrastructures that bind us to each other and to the world, while remaining malleable and open to improvisation. Change involves *affective* unlearning, a retraining of the sensorium so that it can respond to and ignite new scenes of possibility. As Berlant insists, 'There can be no change without revisceralization'.<sup>47</sup>

Change emerges from unlearning the habits and patterns that sustain the familiar scenes of social life and devising other object/scenes of possibility. Unlearning Hong Kong might involve emptying the concepts – freedom, democracy, stability, prosperity – that have defined it, loosening its 'object-ness', and 'recombining its component parts'. To loosen the 'object-ness' of Hong Kong is to loosen attachments to what it means and even withdrawing from the promises that those attachments once sustained. Attachments to the city and its ways of life might be reimagined not in relation to a colonial past misremembered as freer than the present, or against a nationalist present–future assumed to be totalizing, but rather as the smaller practices of being together and experimenting with the variety of non-sovereign relations that constitute collective life. Zuni's productions themselves articulate attachments to a larger cultural infrastructure of a changing Hong Kong, which coexists with the dominant discourse and yet still finds ways of experimenting with and within it. The point is not to get rid of attachments altogether, but instead to release their fixity, unlearn them and reconfigure how they hold together lives and worlds. As Berlant writes, 'Such unlearning meanwhile allows for risking inventive flailing and experiments in thought and practice that might lead to something or nothing'.<sup>48</sup> The protests were one such experiment, Zuni's theatre another. If the protests were an expression of attachments to the promise of a free, autonomous Hong Kong, then Zuni's theatre offers an infrastructural space within which such attachments can be reconfigured within a scene of constraint. *Bach Is Heart Sutra* points to a different understanding of freedom, a freedom found not in the assertion of an identity or promise of autonomy, but in the realization of impermanence and coexistence. *2 or 3 Things* affirms theatre's role as a space where interruptions to the continuation of a



way of life become an opportunity to experiment with other ways of moving, gathering and remembering. In this moment of transition, ‘the question of politics becomes identical with the reinvention of infrastructures for managing the unevenness, ambivalence, violence, and ordinary contingency of contemporary existence’, in Hong Kong and elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> To see theatre as infrastructure is to imagine a process of world making, and unmaking, within which our attachments to each other and the worlds we inhabit can be tested, loosened and reinvented to support the myriad transitions – political, technological, ecological – involved in remaking the world.

## NOTES

- 1 Andre Lepecki, ‘Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: Or, the Task of the Dancer’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 57, 4 (2013), pp. 13–27, here p. 19.
- 2 The official five demands were: (1) full withdrawal of the extradition bill; (2) an independent commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality; (3) retraction of the classification of protesters as ‘rioters’; (4) amnesty for arrested protesters; (5) dual universal suffrage, meaning for both the legislative council and the chief executive.
- 3 Lee’s full comments on water’s formlessness are as follows: ‘Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it. If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves ... Empty your mind, be formless. Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.’ Quoted in Matthew Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), p. 285.
- 4 For a fuller account of the 2019 protests, as well as the history leading up to them, see Sony Devabhaktuni and Joanna Mansbridge, ‘Democracy’s Dislocations: Spaces of Protest and the People of Hong Kong’, *Public Culture*, 34, 1 (2022), pp. 99–121.
- 5 Since the pro-democracy protests was a youth-driven movement, the local and central governments have identified education as the primary mechanism through which dissent was propagated and also the primary mechanism through which it will be eliminated. In the past three years a number of measures have been taken to ensure ‘national security awareness’ among students. First, the introduction of a patriotic curriculum in schools will teach students the concepts of ‘succession’, ‘subversion’, ‘terrorist activities’ and ‘collusion with foreign forces’, all activities deemed illegal under the NSL. Second, liberal studies – a subject aimed at fostering critical and pluralistic thinking – has been replaced with ‘citizenship and social development’ – a subject that emphasizes loyalty to authorities and to the nation. Third, the establishment of a National Security Awareness Day on 15 April teaches the public about the role of the police – or the ‘disciplined forces’, as they are called – and invites children to role-play as police by driving mini police cars and firing toy guns.
- 6 Greater Bay Area, Hong Kong SAR Government, at [www.bayarea.gov.hk/en/home/index.html](http://www.bayarea.gov.hk/en/home/index.html) (accessed 9 May 2023).
- 7 For example, on 23 August 2019, thousands gathered along the city’s harbourfront to form human chains in a sign of solidarity. Other creative acts of collective expression included flash-mob singalongs in malls; hundreds of Lennon Walls composed of colourful post-it notes expressing encouragement, hope and humour; and 10 p.m. nightly chanting from apartment windows across the city’s districts. Many of these actions were inspired by past protest movements in Chile and the former Eastern Bloc. See ‘100 Days In: Ten Creative Ways Hongkongers Sustain Their Protests Away from the Barricades’, *Hong Kong Free Press*, 16 September 2019, at <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/09/16/100-days-ten-creative-ways-hongkongers-sustain-protests-away-barricades> (accessed 2 November 2023).

- 8 *Bach Is Heart Sutra* took place on 23–4 April and 8–9 May 2021 at the Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui. The theatres were open for four months. Otherwise, they remained closed for almost three years, from early 2020 to late 2022. Previous iterations of *Bach Is Heart Sutra* were staged in 2009, 2018, 2020 and 2021, each involving a different dramaturgy and different collaborators.
- 9 Lauren Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34, 4 (2016), pp. 393–413, here p. 394.
- 10 Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2022), p. 20. I follow Berlant's definition of 'life' as 'a technical scene of animated and dynamic embodiments' and 'world' as 'the sensed, physical, and extensive context for social being and collective life that is saturated by norms of the relation among action, effect, institution, and event'. *Ibid.*, p. 123. There are inevitably internal frictions between these two modes of existence, as we aspire to be in life even as the world resists our possession.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 28.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 18 Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, 1990, Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, Hong Kong SAR Government, p. 84.
- 19 The Fraser Institute has named Hong Kong the freest market in the world since 1985, and despite the political changes and the implementation of the NSL, the city retained its spot in 2022. See the Fraser Institute, *Economic Freedom in the World* executive report, at [www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/economic-freedom-of-the-world-2022.pdf](http://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/economic-freedom-of-the-world-2022.pdf) (accessed 22 May 2023), p. 8.
- 20 'About Us', Zuni Icosahedron, at [https://zuni.org.hk/new/zuni/web/default.php?cmd=about&locale=en\\_US](https://zuni.org.hk/new/zuni/web/default.php?cmd=about&locale=en_US) (accessed 21 January 2023).
- 21 Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotronics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 50.
- 22 Mathias Woo, 'Mindfulness, Technology, Art', *Zuni Icosahedron*, at <https://zuniseason.org.hk/en/z-live/mindfulness-technology-art> (accessed 9 October 2022).
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Hui, *Art and Cosmotronics*, p. 205.
- 25 'About Us', Zuni Icosahedron, at [https://zuni.org.hk/new/zuni/web/default.php?cmd=about&locale=en\\_US](https://zuni.org.hk/new/zuni/web/default.php?cmd=about&locale=en_US) (accessed 11 October 2022).
- 26 Victor Fan, *Cinema Illuminating Reality: Media Philosophy through Buddhism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), p. 7.
- 27 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Other Shore: A New Translation of the Heart Sutra with Commentaries* (Berkeley, CA: Palm Leaves Press, 2017), p. 20.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 31 Buddhist teachers often use the analogy of waves and water to explain emptiness and the co-presence of the world of distinguishable forms (conventional reality) and the dimension of formless relationality (ultimate reality). When we see a wave (a form), it seems to have a definable shape and a beginning and an end; however, if we see with the eyes of emptiness, we see that the wave is indivisible from the water from which it emerges and into which it extinguishes.
- 32 Hanh, *The Other Shore*, p. 76.
- 33 The Buddhist concept of signlessness evokes Jacques Derrida's writings on the sign and *différance*, which assert that signs always refer to other signs, *ad infinitum*, and that there is no ultimate referent or foundation. Signs, in both Derridean and Buddhist thought, are at once emptied of a singular meaning

and connected to a whole system of signs. We might also hear in Buddhist teachings on emptiness and formlessness echoes of New Materialist theories, which see a world of entangled, lively matter, rather than of discrete subjects and objects.

- 34 Hanh, *The Other Shore*, p. 97.
- 35 The psychology of flow state, made famous by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, describes a state of deep concentration, a sense of mastery, a lack of self-consciousness, and an emotional buoyancy when performing an action.
- 36 Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 76.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 24.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 39 Recent attempts by the government to ban the protest anthem 'Glory to Hong Kong' from the Internet and to weed out 'soft resistance' suggests that it is not simply the violent aspects of the protests that pose a security threat, but any words, sentiments or actions that run counter to national loyalty.
- 40 As Berlant writes, 'Infrastructure, then, is another way of talking about mediation – but always as a material process of binding, never merely as a material technology, aesthetic genre, form, or norm that achieves something. Mediation is not a stable thing but a way of seeing the unstable relations among dynamically related things.' Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 22.
- 41 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.
- 42 Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 150.
- 43 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.
- 44 Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 75.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

JOANNA MANSBRIDGE ([jmansbridge@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:jmansbridge@cuhk.edu.hk), [joanna.mansbridge@gmail.com](mailto:joanna.mansbridge@gmail.com)) is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her publications appear in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Public Culture*, *the Theatre Journal*, *the International Journal of Performing Arts and Digital Media*, *Modern Drama*, and *Theatre Research International*. She is on the international advisory board of *Performance Matters*, and the author of Paula Vogel, the first book-length study of the playwright. The research for this article was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Reference No. CUHK 11607021).