



My East is not your East

Independent Dance Artist,
Jane Chan invites us all into a 'questioning practice' about who we are and where we speak from, that we might move beyond simply not offending to understanding, care and respect.

Hi there, Jane here. I am an independent dance artist who works at the intersection of choreography, performance, teaching, project management, mentoring and change instigation. Empathy, kindness, care and a people-centred approach are at the heart of my artistic practice. My work is auto-ethnographical and aims to question and reclaim cultural and social misrepresentation as well as acknowledge, dismantle, redistribute and reconstruct the power asymmetry within the landscape of movement and dance. I work with different artists, mediums and processes with a consistent objective to tell stories of our time.

I will start by locating myself in the context from which I express myself. I am a cis-gendered, non-disabled East Asian woman with tertiary education, who speaks Cantonese, English and Mandarin. I am using English, my second language, to speak, think and often write about matters relating to race, identity, and culture. I struggle to articulate myself in my mother tongue, Cantonese, when speaking, thinking or writing about such issues – an irony in itself – and I continue to improve on and learn from it, “a privilege and exclusion that I find myself leaning into at times as well as a survival mechanism for mobility and emancipation”. (1)

Below are a few experiences that informed my questioning practice, a practice of curiosity:

Some years ago, in a time before Black Lives Matter, Brexit and Covid-19 Pandemic, I was in my early years of freelancing as a young dance artist and working front of house at different arts institutions to make ends meet. Back then, a lot of time was spent conversing with colleagues who were artists themselves and those who were passionate about and work in the creative industry. Some became lifelong friends, some have been inspirational to be around, some could be challenging.

One day, in the foyer I was having a conversation with a colleague, who is of Japanese heritage. Another colleague, who is white, crossed the foyer to enquire, “What’s happening in the Far East?” I was first taken aback then responded: “Where in the world are you referring to?” I was then met with comments about me being ‘too blunt’ and that I spoke with ‘pronounced annoyance.’ Suddenly, I was the ‘troublemaker’ and I was not considerate of the other persons’ effort in making a conversation...

Let’s return our minds to the current context.

Against the backdrop of ‘post’ Black Lives Matter, ‘post’ pandemic, Queen Elizabeth II’s passing and the implications of the first British South Asian Prime Minister, we may wish to think we have learnt a thing

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Jane Chan, People Dancing in The Summer 2022. Photo: Rachel Cherry.



or two, progressed further. And yes, some things certainly signal this is so and have given us some confidence. An example list might be: more people sharing pronouns, flexible and hybrid working, speaking more openly about care responsibilities, more spaces and initiatives that centre people with intersectionality. All these born out of necessity as common practices proved unfit for purpose. These changes are significant and are indicators perhaps we are moving towards a more empathic and kinder society.

Yet one thing seems to consistently irk me - language.

Especially the phrase East and West.

'East and West' is a phrase that has been thrown about and used regularly by many including mainstream media and journalists; a phrase that is commonly understood to refer to East as meaning different parts of Asia and West as meaning Western Europe and North America.

Yet I find myself repeating my question: Where in the world are they referring to?"

Who decides whose 'East' or 'West'? How are we referring to vast lands and cultures to merely 'East and West'?

Because my east is not your east, and your east certainly is not mine.

The phrase makes assumptions and is ambiguous. It is relative and it depends where you are geographically in the world.

Another fact to acknowledge, is that the world is a sphere. Hong Kong's east is the South China Sea or Mexico, depending on how you wish to look at it. Japan's east is the Pacific Ocean and North America. Australia's East is the Pacific Ocean and South America, respectively. East of Finland is Russia and the list goes on. This is, of course, not a geographer's way to identify East of different countries and cities in the world, but this is not the point of this article. I wish to identify the ambiguity of the phrase 'East and West' and how problematic it can be as it continues to perpetuate the Eurocentric perspective, way of being and thinking. And it continues to uphold the status quo.



Left: Jane Chan, East Asian Community Project.
Photo: Audrey Lam.
Below left; Jane Chan. Photo: Claire Farmer

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After many different conversations over the years, many artists, cultural provocateurs and I would like to invite us to consider adopting a few questions, perhaps a questioning practice: Who is being centred? Whose perspective is being centred? What are we centring? What is the focus? What is in question? What are the current power dynamics and who is benefitting from them?

This is a questioning that I practise myself every day and every space I am in, pass through and hold as racism and injustice are being perpetuated through everyday action and language. These

actions and languages cause harm to people of the global majority and those with embodied intersectionalities.

I would really invite and welcome artists, arts and cultural practitioners to shift our perspective, thinking and being. Embrace that change is the only constant. Centre, rediscover and re-narrate our voices, ways of being and narratives in the wider arts landscape and ecology; become rooted in a thinking that we are as important and of as much value as one another. And that there can be multiple centres at any one time.

By continuing to question, to strive to have a more nuanced approach to the everyday actions, language, intersectionality and lived experiences surrounding us and, hopefully, we cause less harm to those around us and make the world a better place to be, work and live.

The change that I would like - and hope - to see, experience and be part of is rooted in togetherness, collaboration, care, empathy and kindness. I look forward to multiple centres being held, actions and languages being compassionate and everyone being not only accepted but celebrated.

References

1. Cheng, Y. (2021) ‘China-watching’ is a lucrative business. But whose language do the experts speak? By Yangyang Cheng. Available at: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/13/understand-china-speak-chinese-english-language (Accessed 21 Oct 2022).

Info

Jane performs regularly with Amina Khayyam Dance Company, lectures at London. Contemporary Dance School, sits on the South Asian Dance Advisory Panel and Artist Advisory Group for Sadler’s Wells and Akademi, respectively. She is currently on the Clore Leadership Inclusive Cultures programme 2022 and lead artist for F-ing Good Provocation (FGP). FGP is a project/practice centring and celebrating dance and movement artists of East and Southeast Asian diasporas with different intersectionalities. Jane is a mentor for independent dance professionals and for young people at Arts Emergency. She is also the founder of Passion Project, a teaching initiative which aims to share the joy and benefits of movement to people of all ages and abilities including immigrant women groups, toddlers, children with different learning needs and older adults with and without dementia in community settings.

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People Dancing members can access the FGP document as an illustrated zine from www.communitydance.org.uk.