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## **Beyond Size and Scale: Reflections on *Small* Performing Arts Organizations**

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### **Abstract**

In every city, there are bound to be performing arts organizations (PAOs) that are considered large/big. These organizations are more well-known and are likely to possess the resources to advertise their activities in public spaces, such as train stations and shopping malls. On the other hand, smaller PAOs are less visible to both locals and visitors. This paper adds to the lack of literature on the perceptions of small PAOs in East and Southeast Asia and specifically seeks to reflect and analyze on the determinants of 'small' PAOs in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan other than the usual consideration of size and scale. The research employed two qualitative methods. Desk research was carried out on reports and website materials produced by various stakeholders, and semi-structured interviews and dialogues were conducted with 25 performing arts practitioners. I deduced that 'smallness' of PAOs could also be perceived and determined by existing funding policies, as well as the practitioners' attitudes and personal beliefs. Thereafter, I delve further into the discussions on alternative sources of income for small PAOs, the notions of social enterprises and collectives in the performing arts context, as well as the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on small PAOs.

**Keywords:** *Performing arts management, small organizations, arts funding, COVID-19 pandemic*

### **1. Introduction**

My interest in small performing arts organizations (PAOs) is influenced by my own professional experience in establishing and running a theater company in Singapore for almost a decade in the early 2000s. My company was a small-scale non-profit experimental theater company and the works produced were mostly presented in small venues of less than 200 seats, usually over a short period of three to five days. The number of regular staff in my company never once exceeded four. Most of the staff members had to multitask. I was both the artistic director as well as the general manager of the company.

In every city, there are bound to be PAOs that are considered large or big. These organizations are more well-known and are likely to possess the resources to advertise their activities in public spaces, such as train stations and shopping malls. On the other hand, smaller

PAOs are less visible to visitors and even to the locals. While size and operating budget of an organization is often the key gauge of the organization's scale, the perception of 'big' vs. 'small' organizations varies in different contexts. Current literatures on the perceptions of small PAOs are limited and Americentric and discussions on East and Southeast Asian contexts are nonexistent.

Hence, this paper analyzes and reflects on the perceptions and determinants of 'small' PAOs in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan other than the usual consideration of size and scale. These three locales were chosen based on the following reasons. First, they are highly developed economies with clear developmental policies and structures in place for the development of the performing arts. Next, most PAOs in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan are non-profit in nature and therefore, cross country/region comparisons are plausible. Last but not least, there are a number of long-standing arts and cultural management academic programs in the higher education sector of these places. This suggests a longer history of discourse around management and organizational development of arts organizations.

## **2. Research Methodology**

This research employed two qualitative methods, which were carried out concurrently. Desk research was carried out on reports and website materials produced by various stakeholders including PAOs, artists, administrators, advocacy organizations, policymakers, news media, and academic institutions. Semi-structured interviews and dialogues were conducted with 25 performing arts practitioners, who are artists and administrators in the three chosen locales, between September 2017 and June 2021. Of the 25 practitioners, 21 of them were attached to PAOs, while the remaining 4 were freelancers and/or independent artists/producers. Having dialogues with practitioners have been proven to be fruitful in the exchange of ideas and knowledge, which lead to a more in-depth understanding of the issues and problems at hand (MacInnis & Portelli, 2002).

## **3. Size and Scale of Small Performing Arts Organizations**

As an adjective, *small* is often defined in relation to what is considered *big* (Wierzbicka, 1996). However, organizations are not just big or small. Many countries/regions adopt the collective term--'small and medium-sized enterprises' (SMEs)--for companies that are not large/big. Yet, each country/region defines SMEs differently. For instance, SMEs in Singapore are enterprises with no more than 200 staff members and an annual turnover of below S\$100 million (US\$74.3 million) (Tan, 2022), whereas in Hong Kong, SMEs are determined solely by the size of the establishment, i.e., up to 100 staff members for companies in the manufacturing sector, and 50 staff members for the other sectors (Ouyang, 2020). In Taiwan, the Ministry of Economic Affairs defines SMEs as enterprises with an annual revenue of NT\$100 million (US\$3.6 million) or less, or with fewer than 200 regular employees for most sectors except for the construction, mining, and manufacturing sectors. In addition, the

Ministry defines enterprises with less than five employees as small-scale (Ministry of Economic Affairs R.O.C., 2020).

The concept of ‘medium-sized’ complicates the already unstable dichotomy between big and small. In the case of SMEs in Singapore and Hong Kong, there is no clear demarcation on when a small organization becomes ‘medium’. Moreover, when describing organizations, the term ‘medium’ is almost never used without reference to ‘size’, i.e., ‘medium-sized organizations’, whereas ‘small organizations’ and ‘large/big organizations’ are rather commonly used terms. This suggests that size, perhaps, may not be the only determinant of ‘big’ and ‘small’ organizations.

The size of PAOs is often determined in relation to their operational and management decisions. The defined boundaries of SMEs in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan may not be the best gauge of their respective PAOs’ sizes. For instance, with the current definition of SMEs in Singapore, none of the PAOs qualifies as large organizations. I argue that the total number of regular employees should not be a main determinant when assessing the size of a PAO. Generally, PAOs hire three groups of professionals, namely artists, technical specialists, and arts administrators. Moreover, the number of regular employees varies with different types of organizations. A full-fledged orchestra usually engages a larger pool of full-time musicians, whereas a theater company may prefer to work with freelance directors and actors.

PAOs tend to hire administrators before artists and technical specialists. This is, by no means, an indication that arts administrators are more important than the others. Administrators are often tasked to prepare funding proposals and implement marketing plans for the organization. Once the funding is successful, the PAO embarks on a longer-term process toward achieving its key performance indicators (KPIs) mandated by the funding bodies. This process of securing audience numbers and regular reporting for the purpose of accountability lies in the hands of administrators. Even before the completion of a project/season, administrators have to start preparing for the next funding cycle. This perpetual cycle of funding and accountability creates the urgency to hire administrators before others. Perhaps, the number of regular arts administrators and the way they are organized within the PAO may serve as a better reference in determining the organization’s size of the organization.

Larger PAOs have more administrative staff members, demarcated by clearer roles and functions fitted into departments. These PAOs usually adopt the mechanistic organizational structures, with more established (rigid) rules and regulations, standard operating procedures, as well as communication channels (Byrnes, 2014). Small PAOs, on the other hand, tend to have fewer administrators who are working organically. They are likely to take on multiple collaborative roles, instead of being boxed up in specific functions. It is common for small PAOs to only hire one or two arts administrators, who are then tasked to take care of all aspects of management, including events administration, funding applications, marketing and communications, financial management, and artists management. In some cases, artists in small PAOs have no choice but to double up as administrators.

Small PAOs are more prone to risks and surprises, such as unexpected staff resignations, lower than expected funding, or cash flow issues, as compared to large organizations. These unexpected situations could have adverse effects on the organization's abilities to meet target deliverables/KPIs. The defunct three-tier funding project by the Ministry of Culture in Taiwan had required grantees to fulfill a specific number of shows within the funding cycle in order to be considered positively for future cycles. Interviewees have pointed out the focus on quantity shifts the attention away from artistic quality and development. In the case of Singapore, PAOs which fail to meet the targets may even lose the opportunity to be considered for upgrade to a major company.

#### **4. Beyond Size and Scale: Other Determinants of 'Small' Performing Arts Organizations**

##### **4.1 'Small' based on funding policies**

This section proposes that PAOs could be categorized as 'small' based on existing funding policies in their respective countries/regions. In Hong Kong, the same nine PAOs, otherwise known as the Big Nine, have been allocated direct governmental subvention since 2008 under the Major Performing Arts Groups (MPAGs) scheme. For the financial year of 2021/22, the nine companies received a combined funding of HK\$403.7 million (US\$51.8 million). The MPAGs scheme identifies these nine PAOs as 'major' or 'big' and all other arts organizations excluded from this scheme could parenthetically be deemed as small and medium in size.

The Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) is a statutory board established by the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) to manage the development of the arts in Hong Kong. HKADC serves the function of grant allocation, policy and planning, advocacy, promotion and development, as well as program planning of a wide range of artforms. The hundreds of PAOs excluded from the MPAGs scheme depend on HKADC for some form of project grants, as well as 1-year, 3-year, or 5-year grants. For these arts groups, longer-term funding corresponds to enhanced stability in their operations. It is worth noting that the entire operating budget of HKADC is only less than half of what the MPAGs received, suggesting that support from the council is limited.

The 5-year grant is a recent scheme introduced in 2019 specifically for selected eminent arts organizations, with a grant of \$2.2 million (US\$282,000) for the first year, and thereafter decreasing 2% per year for the remaining four years. This grant scheme was aimed at encouraging 5-year grantees to enhance their competitiveness and independence through seeking alternative sources of funding. There is no clear indication that the scheme would continue after 2024, nor were there discussions that the organizations under this scheme would thereafter be upgraded to the MPAGs scheme. The grant amount of \$2.2 million for the eminent PAOs is still a far cry from the annual subvention disbursed to the MPAGs, with the lowest amount at close to HK\$14 million and the highest up to HK\$100 million.

Similar to the MPAGs scheme in Hong Kong, several major PAOs in Taiwan are revered as flagship companies under the Taiwan Brand Project. Awardees receive a combined annual funding of NT\$100 million (US\$3.3 million) alongside other non-financial brand building initiatives by the Ministry of Culture. Apart from the Taiwan Brand Project, the Ministry also managed a three-tier funding project with aims to offer some form of financial stability for PAOs. Organizations are funded annually according to their awarded tier. The first tier represents an incubation stage, supporting organizations which are still in the phase of preparedness and forming. Tier two organizations are in a development stage, indicating advancement and growth. Tier three organizations are in the excellence phase, with good track records of sound administrative and artistic delivery.

Since 2019, the three-tier funding project has been replaced by the Taiwan Top project, managed by the National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF) with the support of the Ministry. Under this scheme, selected PAOs are entitled to either 1-year, 2-year, or 3-year grants. The Taiwan Top project seeks to gear funded organizations toward sustainable development, while continuing to produce high quality performance works. 1-year grant awardees could apply for additional project funding, while the 2- and 3-year grants are lump sum funding covering both cost of operations and artistic productions.

While some PAOs may consider themselves mid-sized, it is challenging to determine the concept of ‘medium’ in the context of funding. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan have established flagship status for a selected few large/big PAOs with more substantial funding, thus rendering the remaining PAOs as small. Yet, the sense of smallness differs between PAOs. PAOs that receive project-based or shorter-term year grants may consider longer-term year grantees as larger/bigger. This further reiterates the notion that ‘small’ is always defined in relation to what is considered ‘large/big’ (and vice versa).

The funding policies for PAOs in Singapore offer new perspectives to the discourse of big vs. small. As of 2021, the small city-state has 48 arts organizations funded under National Arts Council’s (NAC) Major Company Scheme, of which 41 organizations curate performing arts-related activities. This number is a stark contrast compared to the MPAGs scheme in Hong Kong and the Taiwan Brand Project, where only a few privileged organizations were selected. Organizations funded under the Major Company Scheme are allocated 3-year funding covering up to 50% of expenses for organizations focusing on artmaking, 60% for community bridging arts organizations, and 70% for organizations that advocate and develop the arts sector.

Unlike the flagship schemes in Hong Kong and Taiwan, NAC presents a pathway for all PAOs to move toward becoming a major company. Emerging PAOs could first apply for the Seed Grant, which covers a maximum of 70% of the organizations’ expenditure (capped at S\$150,000 or US\$111,600 per annum) for up to three years. The three-year duration serves as a trial period for the organization to be evaluated on its visions, commitments and drive before NAC decides if the PAO could be elevated to the status of ‘major company’. In 2021, NAC placed the Seed Grant under review and PAOs no longer need to go through this probation period in order to apply for the Major Company Scheme.

Funding policies in all three locations studied have gone through some form of major review/revamp. The MGAGs scheme in Hong Kong was only introduced in 2007. The funding policies for major companies in Singapore also evolved from a privileged circle for a few to include a larger pool of PAOs. The introduction of new funding schemes is sometimes influenced by existing initiatives of the PAOs themselves. For instance, Act 3 International, or Act 3 (prior to 1994), had produced drama education programs in Singapore even before the formal establishment of NAC. To a certain extent, the company's efforts in art education influenced the inception of NAC's Arts Education Program (AEP) in 1993, which supports schools in their art education plans. Political situations could also trigger funding policy changes. In Taiwan, for instance, some practitioners are concerned that good policies might be short-lived due to possible political changes at both local and federal levels every few years. It is surmised to say that the notion of 'small' PAOs evolves when there are shifts in funding policies.

#### 4.2 'Small' as an attitude

In this section, I argue that 'small' is sometimes an outcome of the practitioners' attitudes and personal beliefs. From a management perspective, there is no doubt that organizations seek to grow and develop. Nevertheless, some PAOs have no intentions of ever growing in size and scale. Several small PAOs expressed disapproval to the bureaucracies brought about by government funding and they relate larger PAOs to increased accountability to stakeholders, who may not have anything to do with the arts. A couple of practitioners have revealed to me that the sole purpose for registering their PAOs as non-profit organizations was to gain access to government funding and subsidized rental rates of performing arts venues.

Many small PAOs present cutting-edge avant-garde works. Some of these works respond to socio-political issues that are considered non-mainstream, such as issues faced by LGBTQIA+ and other subordinated/marginalized communities. I spoke to a founder of a Taipei-based PAO, which considers themselves advocates of feminist issues. To them, every theater work they put up represents a message/voice the artists believe, which the public ought to be aware of. In these works, there is a strong emphasis on intimacy with audience. Furthermore, larger PAOs are more likely to face artistic interference from myriad stakeholders. Thus, remaining small is crucial to ensuring intimacy and preserving artistic freedoms.

'Small' could sometimes be deemed as lower in importance, especially when referring to an issue or challenge (for example: *Don't worry, it's a small problem!*). Small organizations may be viewed as less important than the larger ones in terms of contributions and repute. The term 'small' in 'start small' and 'think small' alludes to ambitions. For this reason, Small PAOs could also fall into the trap of small-mindedness. Many of these PAOs do not have clear strategic plans with defined goals, objectives, and action plans. Time and resources are needed to ensure that strategic plans are carefully crafted with the purpose of fulfilling the organization's longer-term mission, vision, and values.

Some practitioners have responded that they do not have the luxury of time as they often move from projects to projects due to limited funding. Small PAOs may not see the need to form a board, and even when they do, the board is usually a convenient composition comprising the peers of the founder and/or key appointment holders. Strategic planning, compliance, and/or fundraising are usually not the key focus of small PAOs' boards. From my observations, however, small PAOs that developed strategic plans with the support of an effective board are more likely to move up the grants ladder within a shorter time span.

For an organization, starting/thinking small does not mean a lack of will to succeed, but rather, it suggests a planned, step-by-step approach towards achieving its goals. On an even more empowering note, the phrase 'good things come in small packages' implies that organizations do not need to be large/big to be considered good. Indeed, small organizations are known to contribute to the local economy (Brown, 2018), generate meaningful employment, and provide opportunities to develop one's capabilities in different aspects of the field (Bideaua, 2021).

## **5. Discussions**

### **5.1 Alternative sources of income**

One of the main takeaways of this research is in how small PAOs embodied their 'smallness' in relation to funding. The divide is especially obvious between PAOs in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Hong Kong, practitioners from small PAOs are more likely to victimize themselves when expressing their views on funding. They tend to expect funding from the government and lament on their lack of funding and/or the overfunding of other organizations. In contrast, PAOs in Taiwan seem to agree that government funding, if any, serves to support their cause only partially. Some practitioners in Taiwan are even willing to have their funding reduced if the government could invest more in audience education as well as making the arts accessible to the general public.

The bulk of governmental funding tends to go to large PAOs, and in the case of Hong Kong, government subvention could cover up to 80% of the annual expenditure of a Big Nine group. Small PAOs face challenges in raising funds to cover their expenses. They are less likely to depend on ticket income due to small-scale/shorter-run performances/activities. This also means that small PAOs are less attractive to corporate sponsors who are mostly looking at reach. In 2016, I convened a conference to discuss the funding disparity between major and small/medium PAOs in Hong Kong. One of the conclusions from the conference was for smaller arts organizations to rethink their strategies to be less dependent on governmental funding.

One way in which small PAOs have generated additional income was through customizing performances for corporate functions. Interviewees have expressed hesitations for commercial activities as they perceived such productions as going against their artistic integrity. PAOs that had ventured into commercial offerings moved out of this space quickly once they

secured other forms of stable income. Yet a PAO in Taiwan has been successful in retaining their artistic vision into their performances for corporate events. Due to their unique offerings and high-quality performances, the PAO has garnered many invitations and commissions by corporations and governmental agencies.

Seeking corporate sponsorships is always an uphill task for all PAOs, let alone small organizations. Nevertheless, there are success stories of small PAOs securing corporate sponsorships as well as non-arts funding through cause-related projects. These projects often seek to alleviate societal issues or involve active participation of underserved communities using arts as a platform/agent of change. For instance, a music group in Singapore I visited has received funding from a non-arts' governmental agency for a racial integration music project.

Many small PAOs in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan have expanded into the field of arts education, such as performance showcases and training workshops, conducted in schools and/or their own premises. Schools often put aside a budget for arts education programs and would often invite arts organizations and artists to develop these activities. Apart from generating additional revenue for PAOs, arts education programs could contribute to visibility and reputation of the organizations through exposing them and the artists to young audiences, who may become regular audiences in the future. Yet, arts education is not a new concept. NAC's AEP was introduced almost 30 years ago in 1993. Compared to the 1990s and 2000s, the arts education space today has become more competitive and PAOs are expected to be creative in their offerings. Instead of selling pre-designed programs, PAOs are customizing programs according to the demands of schools.

## **5.2 Other types of small performing arts organizations**

Up to this point, I have been reflecting on small non-profit PAOs, which are in the majority in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. In this section, two other types of PAOs, namely social enterprises and collectives, are introduced.

There is a growing trend of PAOs registering as social enterprises, especially in Singapore. A social enterprise offers solutions to societal problems, and pushes for change (Bornstein & Davis, 2010). Such an enterprise differs from traditional corporations that focuses on the bottom-line, i.e., maximizing profits (Roug, 2018). Nevertheless, social entrepreneurs need to have good business acumen so that the changes they effect could be sustainable in the long run (Munoz, 2010). Yet, to tackle a social mission is not just limited to social enterprises. Many big corporations have embedded social causes into their operations beyond just philanthropy, but also actively instituting changes and reshaping ecologies through their product offerings. Non-profit organizations these days are also becoming more entrepreneurial (Lane, 2015). When government funding is limited, non-profit organizations need to seek creative ways to survive.

The idea of being part of a formally registered organization offers practitioners a stable place to foster the sense of belonging, like that of a family nucleus. Nevertheless, collectives are gaining prominence, especially amongst freelancers and independent artists/producers. An



art collective is a group of practitioners working together on a project towards a common goal (Clyde, 2016). A noteworthy similarity between a small PAO and a collective is the trend of multitasking. Similar to practitioners working in small PAOs, the members of an art collective have to carry out artistic, administrative, and technical work with limited manpower and financial resources. Moreover, arts collectives also seek for different sources of income in order to sustain and fund their activities (Brown, 2015). There is a major difference between PAOs and collectives though. Members in a collective share ideas, costs, and resources of the project, whereas small PAOs could be more hierarchical with one key decision maker. At times, collectives may include members from different geographical locations, which open opportunities for a project to premiere in different countries/regions and receive support from multiple funding sources.

### **5.3 Being ‘small’ in the face of COVID-19**

My initial intention was to complete this research within two years. As a matter of fact, the first draft of this paper was completed in April 2020, just weeks after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus as a global pandemic. Then, I felt that the paper would be incomplete if there are no reflections on the issues faced by small PAOs during the pandemic. This research was therefore extended for another 14 months and triggered two new research projects on the performing arts during the pandemic.

Without a doubt, the performing arts, as an art form that emphasizes on live experience and presence, faced existential challenges during the pandemic. The closure of performing arts venues led to waves of cancellations and postponements of performances. The entire performing arts industry was badly hit but the impact was felt more by small PAOs and independent artists/producers. Some practitioners were forced out of jobs and had to switch careers. Stepping away, however, is not a sign of giving up, but a privilege accorded to small PAOs. Practitioners could take the time to reflect on their practice and eventually return with more cutting-edge creative projects. Large PAOs, on the other hand, are expected to strictly adhere to the key deliverables and even in the face of the pandemic, they continue to churn out one project after another.

Many small PAOs and independent artists have also continued to create and launch new works on online platforms with minimal investments and training in technologies. Some of these works broke geographical boundaries and included performers from different countries/regions. Collectively, these new works pave the way toward the era of performing arts and digitization. From my conversations with practitioners, I noticed distinct differences in the perceptions toward the use of digital platforms. Majority of the practitioners from big and small organizations in Hong Kong tend to consider digitization as a stopgap measure during the pandemic. Rightly so, the performing arts is meant to be experienced live by audiences sharing the same space with performers and the experience can never be replaced by online platforms mediated by screens.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of ‘smallness’, PAOs should not undermine the potential of the cyberspace in enabling experimentations and new creative practices. Singapore’s NAC rolled out the ‘Digitalisation Presentation Grant for the Arts’ (DPG) shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19. The scheme supported artists and arts organizations to present their work in digital form or via digital format during the COVID-19 pandemic. In less than six months, the scheme supported over 500 projects and created 7000 work opportunities. DPG has since been incorporated into the NAC’s regular funding scheme, which is a clear indication that arts and digitalization is now part of mainstream creative practice in Singapore.

## 6. Conclusion

Through this multi-year research, I deduced that, apart from the organizations’ size and scale, ‘smallness’ of PAOs could be perceived and determined by existing funding policies, as well as the practitioners’ attitudes and personal beliefs. Small PAOs exude qualities of creativity, entrepreneurship, multitasking, and resilience, often under precarious conditions. A single small PAO may be deemed as insignificant in its contribution to the performing arts ecology, but collectively, they make up the strong backbone of a country/region’s cultural and creative industries and at the same time, contribute to artistic diversity and practitioners’ resilience. In conclusion, I hope this paper contributes to the lack of inter-Asia discourse on small arts organizations and inspire more arts management scholars and students to focus on the values of smaller PAOs.

## 7. The Author

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