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Hong Kong/ Hong Kong economy

## Covid-19 pushes Hong Kong arts groups to embrace technology, with help from HK\$20 million fund

Sixty-eight projects get funding for 'art tech' experiments, with events lined up from later this month  
 Pandemic shut down arts events, but also spurred practitioners to get creative by using tech



**Denise Tsang and Kathleen Magramo**

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Dance Virtual@ Tai Po, a performance combining Indian and Western dance, is expected to debut later this month. Photo: Handout

The show will go on at last for Benis Cheng's dance project, after two years of delays caused first by the [social unrest of 2019](#) and then the [Covid-19 pandemic](#).

Dance Virtual@ Tai Po, a performance combining Indian and Western dance, is expected to debut later this month. It will not be the on-location show she planned originally, but a digital production.

"It's heartwarming that we can still create something positive when it seemed like the whole world stopped, especially in the arts industry," said Cheng, a former banker who, in 2015, co-founded BEYOND Bollywood, a cultural exchange platform focused on dance.

Her group received HK\$300,000 last September from the Arts Development Council for its first digital performance. The statutory body which promotes art and culture selected 68 projects to share about HK\$20 million (US\$2.6 million) in funding and test "art tech", bringing together the arts and technology.

Dance workshops give Hongkongers chance to enjoy body movement



Cheng's production, a fusion of Indian and Western dance styles, features 10 professional dancers based in Hong Kong, including Indian and Nepali performers. But half the funding went towards partnering film companies, web developers and virtual reality production firms.

"The most difficult part was filming, because we scheduled our on-site dance recordings at historic landmarks in Tai Po just as the fourth wave of coronavirus infections emerged," she said, referring to the surge of Covid-19 cases last November.

Everything was eventually completed, and the four group performances will showcase the landmarks of the town in the New Territories.

Winsome Chow Wai-sum, chief executive of the council, told the *Post* that the pandemic helped speed up the use of technology in the arts, something it had wanted to promote earlier.

"When the pandemic hit, the industry came to a standstill," she said.

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Head of arts hub insists embattled museum never planned to show controversial photo

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Its Arts Go Digital funding initiative is aimed at encouraging arts groups to experiment with art tech, which has taken off in Britain, New York, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan in recent years.

Blending the arts with technology was also a policy floated by Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor in her policy address last October.

Chow said there were 256 applications for Arts Go Digital funding and the 68 selected projects received between HK\$300,000 and HK\$500,000 each. Funding for the programme came from the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

Chow hoped the wide range of projects would appeal to the young and old as well as others forced to spend more time at home because of the pandemic.

The projects and shows will be launched over the next two months. "If the response is good, we will roll out more of these funding programmes," Chow said.



Stage director Stephen Tang. Photo: Handout



Prominent stage director Stephen Tang Shu-wing obtained HK\$500,000 for an experimental play that will open in June. *The Fourth Night* will use immersive role-playing game elements similar to those in the groundbreaking Netflix interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*.

The play is about a 28-year-old woman who gets infected with Covid-19 in Hong Kong at the height of the pandemic last July.

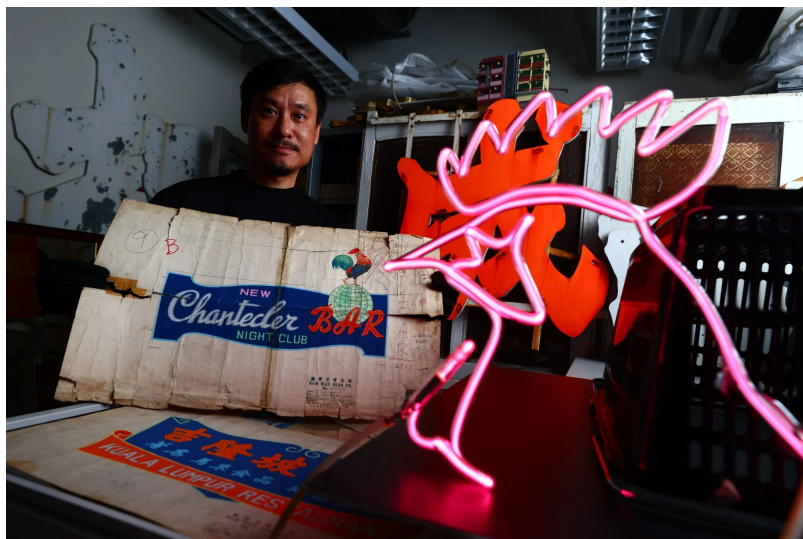


'The Fourth Night' will be an experimental production. Photo: Handout

The twist is that viewers can choose different outcomes by deciding scenarios for the woman as she battles the disease while forced to self-isolate at home because the hospitals are packed.

Tang admitted that using technology for a play was “an adventure we would never have thought of” if not for the pandemic. “Covid-19 really forced everybody to think of alternative ways of creation ... Arts and technology have gone hand in hand in the pandemic,” he added.

He noted that online performances have transformed beyond live webcasts, with directors adding elements of cinematography and digital audience participation to keep viewers engaged.



Brian Kwok, an assistant professor from PolyU. Photo: SCMP

Brian Kwok Sze-hang, assistant professor of the School of Design at Polytechnic University, intends to make good use of the HK\$300,000 he received for a digital archive of the city's neon-lit streetscape.

He wants to create a digital log of about 800 neon signs donated by local craftsmen, including some dating as far back as the 1950s.

It will document the typography and design of the signs and the types of businesses that used them, as the medium has been losing out to newer forms of advertising.

The digital archiving process is labour-intensive, requiring manpower to clean the signs, record data and bio information about the craftsmen as well as programming to enable easy searching for the works.

“Neon signs have been vanishing quickly in Hong Kong, changing the streetscape. Many see it as part of a disappearing visual culture or history,” Kwok said.