

Thai Traditional Choreography: Differences between the Male Character of Khon and Lakhon Dance

The khon and Lakhon dances of Thailand have forms that now contain a mixture of both in performances. Supachai Chansuwan studied the distinctions between the two, specifically in their respective techniques in the dance of the male character.

Conventionally, Thai dramatic performances that contain plots were divided clearly into two genres: Khon and Lakhon. In the past hundred years, however, there have been developments in the Khon performance. One change has been the blending of Lakhon techniques with that of Khon. This new harmonized art is called “Khon Rong Nai”. In the process of this hybridization, however, the influence of the Lakhon dancing has resulted in a loss of some features of Khon identity.



a male Khon character

It was in the reign of King Rama V of the Ratanakosin period that Khon and Lakhon dance techniques were harmoniously blended and developed continuously. The dance methods of Khon, which seek to represent human characteristics, were adapted with Lakhon dance aesthetics. In this process, Khon, which was meant to represent divinity, kingship and warrior qualities, transformed into a more gentle and graceful form. Although such an artistic development enhances Khon, it also marks the partial loss of Khon’s original identity.

In a chronicle from 300 years ago, La Lubere, the French Ambassador to the Court of King Narai the Great of Ayudhya, recorded that Khon was a frightening masked performance. The actors wore a lot of ornaments and carried weapons for the combat. On the other hand, Lakhon performers were dressed simply like ordinary people. Their performance also had plot, and it was accompanied by songs. Seen through the French Ambassador’s eyes, the difference between these two arts has existed clearly since ancient time.

Outstanding Distinctions in Khon and Lakhon

A Khon performance enacts only the Ramakien epic, and was sponsored, in the past, by the king for the purpose of displaying his supernatural power, as a divine being reincarnated into the human world. On the other hand, the Lakhon troupe is free to perform the Ramakien and other dramatic pieces such as "Inao", "Sang Thong" or "Maneephichai". Although Lakhon, like Khon, is free to perform the Ramakien, it faced certain limitations in court presentations. For example, in the court, all players must be female, and the music must be gentle and melodious.

Originally, only the royal pages were trained to perform in the court Khon. They were trained to use weapons in the combat, and had to take part in royal performances in ceremonies such as "Mong-Krum", "Kula-Tee-Mai", "Rabeng", and also in general performances such as "Nang-Yai" and "Krabai-Krabong". It is believed that the stylistic dance movements of these martial performances have influenced the patterns and movements of Khon. Consequently, Khon performers danced firmly and smartly, befitting the characteristics of a man. This was different from court Lakhon performed by female artists only. The female who acted a man's role would not be as strong a figure as a male actor, while the female Lakhon, performed especially for the king, must emphasize gentleness, sweetness and politeness.



Female Lakhon

The plot progressions in Ramakien concern battles among divine beings, demons and monkeys. King Rama is believed to inherit the powers of a kind god, and he observes the Ten Items of Royal Righteousness or Dharma. He is a valiant warrior, an exemplary son, a good husband and a good father. These characteristics denote a personality, worthy of faith and respect, and he is looked upon as a

sacred being. Thus, the Khon artist who acts the role of Rama dances as if he is truly a divine being sent by Heaven to dance. In the Lakhon, however, as there are many types of leading actors, and the performance is not a part of a ritual or a function as honoured in Khon, the dance movements aim more at being beautiful than sacred.



Male Khon

The Transformation of Khon from Past to Present

To note the transformation of Khon, it is necessary to explain the teaching and training methods of the teachers of the male Khon characters. In the past 200 years, teachers of the male Khon characters were all male: Kes Phraram lived in the reign of King Rama I of Ratanakosin; after him were Khum Phraram, Pien Phraram and Chiew Phraram; and at present, there is the well-known Akom Phraram. The passing down of dance signature is surely the legacy of a teacher expert.



Khon blended with Lakhon; a favourite performance at present

At the Fine Arts Department during the past 50 years, women have been given the chance to perform in Khon through acting female characters. Female teachers of the royalty, or those who used to perform in the court Lakhon, were invited to provide training for the male Khon characters. In this way, the male Khon characters inevitably absorbed the dance techniques of Lakhon. Khon was infused with Lakhon characteristics, such as the sweet singing style and facial make-up. While the narration, the singing and the Naa-Paat (introductory songs) of Khon are still preserved along with the Lakhon singing, the Lakhon influence is greater. At present, it is very rare to see genuine Khon untouched by the Lakhon. Pure Khon can be seen only when it is staged to serve the preservation purpose.

Concerned over the insidious transformation process, I am thus interested in studying the authentic dance patterns of male Khon characters. I have consulted the older Khon teachers who appear to be uninterested in addressing the issue of the authenticity and the transformation. Sadly, it indicates that knowledge of the pure Khon will probably vanish.

The Body in the Male Khon Character Dance

In my research on the dance of male Khon characters, I have examined and analyzed documents, texts, paintings, and photographs from the past. I have also interviewed dance teachers of male Khon character. My findings on the stylistic distinctiveness of Khon are below:

The Head

The dance patterns of the Thai dramatic art emphasizes tilting the head to the left and to the right all the time, but for the male Khon

character, the head is not much tilted nor is it moved with obvious intention. It is automatically tilted because of the direction of the face. The motion is very slow and still, and the head does not roll back and forth because King Rama must maintain the calm, steady and peaceful personality.

The Face

Originally, the male Khon character wore a mask, for example, the demon or the monkey mask. However, when the face of the male Khon character is unraveled, since merging with the Lakhon, he has keep an expression-less face, similar to that of a puppet. He neither smiles nor becomes sulky. He simply communicated feelings to the audience by acting out the stylistic gestures without showing emotions through facial expression.

The Neck

The neck must not be turned violently. It is moved slowly to synchronize with the singing and music because the neck helps to determine the stillness of the upper part of the face and the head, a pose that commands faith and respect.

The Shoulders

The use of shoulders show a clear division between Khon and Lakhon dance styles. The male Khon character does not sway nor move them strongly. The shoulders must gently move in the direction of the face. It is most important to set the shoulders up to look smart at all time, never hunching or limping.

The Arms

It is important that the male Khon character must set his arms to show the patterns of the Thai dramatic arts, consisting of positioning the arms to form the upper curve, the “*buabaa*” curve, the stretch of the arms, and the bending of the elbows. The distance of the curves determines clearly and completely the perfect gestures.

The Hands

The hands are the heart of all dance movements because the spectators look at the dancer’s hands before looking at other body parts. They

notice how the fingers curve and how the wrists bend. In fact, in every hand gesture, the dancer must bend his wrists at all time – backward or upward.

The Trunk or Torso

When dancing, the character does not turn his trunk one way or the other, unlike the Lakhon male character. He walks straight, keeping the body erect so that he always appears dignified. He should not press down the side intentionally because such a gesture is not a manly characteristic.

The Waist

The dancer neither turns his waist nor tilts himself much. He does not press the waist intentionally unless it is moved naturally in the direction of the shoulders or the head. By pushing the waist to keep the back straight, he looks dignified. By controlling the waist, the dancer also controls his hips.



The use of the body to express dance gestures of the male Khon character

The Legs

The use of the legs has the biggest impact on “appearing male”. Separating the knees at all time, the bending in and lifting of legs should constitute a right angle. The dancer would resemble a female character if he keeps his knees close to each other. It is likely that some dance steps in which the foot is raised backward are influenced by Lakhon because in photographic records, the male Khon character in the reign of King Rama VI did not raise his feet backward.

The Feet

The use of the feet in Khon, such as tripping, stamping and scrubbing, bears little difference to that of the male Lakhon character, who does not make much use of his feet because he will appear fidgety or impolite; not the characteristic of a powerful divine being who always looks reserved to acquire faith and respect.

On the whole, all dance movements must signify the actions of a man who is “handsome”, and not “beautiful” like a woman. The Lakhon is able to select female heroines who can dance like genuine male characters, but the female body is not as strong as that of a man.

Thus, performing the Khon is an art form especially for men, and the male Khon performers must not dance in a feminine manner.

The Khon and Lakhon Performance

There are many differences between the Khon and the Lakhon performances:

1. The Khon characters dance by listening to and acting in accordance with the narration. Later, verse singing similar to the singing of the court Lakhon were added. The narration consists of a prepared script and also an impromptu rendition based on the improvisational wit of the narrator. The latter may be about the current topics related to politics, social conditions and daily life. Not surprisingly, such a style renders colour to the stage, and is very popular with audiences. Subsequently, Khon characters are allowed to present dance gestures a little more slowly than the narration as they have to listen to the impromptu narration. On the other hand, the scripts explained the plot by using verse. It is a custom to narrate one verse that is followed by music, and a chorus exclamation of "Pheu" signifying the end of a verse part. Such an exclamation underlines that Khon is originally a male performance because female characters will certainly not exclaim with a strong voice in the presence of a king.
2. The traditional musical band called "Pee-Paat-Mai-Kang" (a hard end-knobbed beaters ensemble) is used to play to accompany the Khon performance. It has a loud resonance appropriate for male dance. But the "Pee-Paat-Mai-Naum"(a soft end-knobbed beaters ensemble) is used in the court Lakhon as it gives out a gentle sound appropriate for the female character to perform in the presence of a king. Thus, Khon dance movements are conventionally stronger and more powerful than those of Lakhon.
3. In a Khon combat, there are several steps of "Khuen Loi Soong" (High Mounting). Such an action consists of a series of movements: the male Khon character or the monkey steps on the knee of a demon so as to push himself high up. The "Khuen Loi" (Mounting) is classified as Khuen Loi 1 (Mounting 1), Khuen Loi 2 (Mounting 2), Khuen Loi 3 (Mounting 3), Khuen Loi Soong 1 (High Mounting 1) and Khuen Loi Soong 3 (High Mounting 3). There is no "Khuen Loi" action in the Lakhon because the female characters are not permitted to step up higher than the level of the king. However, the Lakhon has been



"Khuen Loi 3" of the male Khon characters in a battle

influenced by the Khon, and, outside the Royal Court, there are now movements of "Khuen Loi 1".

4. "Ram-Chai-Naa-Nang" is a Khon feature that imitates the execution of "Nang-Yai" (leather puppetry popular in the south of Thailand). They are related art features as both of them are used in Ramakian. There must be narrators. Sometimes, Khon is performed in front of a screen; for instance, the execution of "Nang-Yai". The dancers' movements which appear on the screen seem to have two dimensions similar to Nang-Yai movements. There were no such dance movements in the old days. This practice also shows that the artists executing the "Nang" and the Khon artists are all male. Sometimes they are the same person.



Khon artist executes the Nang-Yai (leather puppetry).

5. The Khon hero, Rama, does not play the role of courting a heroine because Rama is a reincarnated god and a noble king endowed with polite and gentle manners and a personality that evokes faith and respect. Rama is different from the heroes of other stories, who are ordinary human beings. Heroes such as Inao and Pra-Law like to flirt and to play the lover's role freely as his emotions dictate.

The above differences indicate that Khon in the old days observed its own methods and procedures. After Khon was harmoniously blended with the Lakhon, it became more graceful and more attractive. The Khon identity handed down for generations should, however, be preserved.

Identity of the Male Khon Characters

Apart from the differences between Khon and Lakhon performances in general, we can also discern the specific differences in the dance movements in the figure of Rama:

1. Ram Therng refers to the walking manner of Khon Rama, who sets his chest straightforward without shrugging his shoulders, or turning the trunk aside, or swaying the face alternately as the Lakhon male character does. At present, the Ram Therng pattern has almost

disappeared, and it is totally superceded by the Lakhon walking pattern.

2. Ram Thee-Phra-Thee-Phra-Ya is the dance designed for male characters. The terms "Phra" and "Phra-Ya" indicate men's high ranks. The word "Thee" has a deeper meaning than the word "posture". Kan-Tang-Thaa, the act of dancing a Thai dramatic pattern, consists of unchangeable patterns such as "Thaa Mayures" (the peacock dances) and "Thaa-Hong-Bin" (the swan flies). Every artist is able to "Tang-Thaa" in the same way, but not all of them can present subtle movements of "Thee", that is, the stylistic movements from one gesture to another. The performer must decide how to move his "Thee" so as to appear dignified and to deserve faith and respect. Therefore, in performing the "Ram-Thee-Phra-Thee-Phra-Ya", the character must dance to suit the personality of a noble king, not that of an ordinary person. He must not move his face or body gently because that is not a man's natural manner.

3. Ram Phoom means the dance which is particularly elegant. The dancer's manners are steady, polite and never fidgety. Therefore, Khon Rama may have to ignore some details of the "Mae Tha" (principal postures) in many dance patterns. In such practice, he does not violate the rules of the Thai dramatic arts. Let us consider the Naa-Phaat-Krau-Nok tune (a tune for inspecting the troops). In this pattern, after Khon Rama finishes the gesture of Pha-La-Pieng-Lai (dancing a hillock posture), he begins a new posture called "Napha-Phorn" (a posture meaning the sky). At this point, Khon Rama may raise his arms high up immediately. He need not start with turning down the "Cheep" (the thumb touching the forefinger) hands as prescribed by the "Mae Thaa" dance patterns. Ram Phoom shows that Khon Rama's dancing style is not fidgety, but rather serene and grand.

4. Ram Len-Tapone (dancing with a musical instrument called Tapone) refers to the dance movements at the end of one narration part, but such movements are not related to the narration context, being only aesthetic gestures and postures. In general, after the end of the first narration, the artist dances the Tha-Sod-Soi gesture (stringing a garland); after the end of the second narration, he performs the Thaa-Pha-La (a hillock gesture); after the end of the third narration, he dances Thaa-Cheep-Yao (the thumb touches the forefinger and the arm is stretched out); the fourth narration is followed by the

Thaa-Sod-Soong dance (the same as Thaa-Napha-Phorn). Khon Rama's dance style must be gentler than those of a demon or a monkey because by nature, a male human being is definitely more polite than a Khon demon or a Khon monkey.

5. Ram Thao-Chak/Yiab-Chak. In the past, before inspecting the troops, Khon Rama appeared from an entrance and stood at the door frame of the stage. He then stretched out his left arm until it touched the stage door frame. These movements are called Thao-Chak. When he reappeared, he raised his left foot to step on the stage door – this is called Yiab-Chak. At present, these movements are changed: Khon Rama stretches his arm to touch the umbrella handle, and steps on the knee of the umbrella holder instead. It seems that two traditional dance patterns have vanished. One possible reason is that when the Khon is performed outdoor, there is no door to step on. Apparently, the movement has been changed to facilitate the dancing process, and it has become a tradition ever since. It is a pity that these valuable dance patterns have been lost.

6. Ram Noong-Phaa Before a male character and a demon in the Khon performance engage in a battle scene, each party embellishes himself and fixes his costume tightly and properly with his hands in the same manner as “Noong-Chong-Kra-Ben” (gripping the tail of the cloth at the back, winding it around the hips and tucking it at the back). Later, this posture is adopted by the local “Likay” (a dramatic art



Khon “Thaa-Yiab-Chak” is changed to be Khon “Thaa-Yiab-Khao”

dance/theatre form popularised in the south of Thailand). Therefore, Khon immediately eliminated this posture from its Ram-Noong-Phaa patterns so as to avoid dancing like the "Likay". Regretfully, this evidence which demonstrates how the people in the past were dressed is likewise lost.

7. Ram Cherd-Ching-Sorn-Pra-Chan is the dance in which Rama fights with Tosakanth. The dance of the two parties is the same; their gestures and postures are simultaneous. This dance ends when both Rama and Tosakanth shoot arrows at each other. However, at present, the Ram Cherd-Ching-Sorn-Thanong, in which Khon Rama hits his arrow at Tosakanth and beheads the latter, currently replaces the Ram Cherd-Ching-Sorn-Pra-Chan which is no longer performed, and artists are unable to dance this choreography.

Findings

The dance patterns of the male Khon character are different from those of the Lakhon male character because the role of Khon Rama is based on the fact that he is a sacred god. The Khon Rama character is trained by male masters (both the male Khon and Lakhon characters, who are royal court performers, belong to the same group). Therefore, the stylistic dance movements bear male characteristics. They are also the characteristics of gods, kings, and noblemen with moral principles and brave conduct. In Lakhon, the hero is an ordinary human being; he experiences love, greed, anger and infatuation and he has the freedom to devise his own dance movements.

It is known that the Ramakien is also performed in Lakhon, but in the royal court, most of the performances are presented by female dancers. This practice poses several limitations. Firstly, the female performers are unable to dance like men for the female body lacks strength. Secondly, the women's sweet melodious singing is not as suitable to the dance patterns as a firm male narrator's voice. Thirdly, the female dancer cannot engage in the battle scenes; they cannot be lifted (Khuen Loi) because they will not look dignified.

Some dance postures of the male Khon character have vanished. They are Ram-Thau-Chak/Yiab-Chak, Ram-Noong-Paa, and Ram-Cherd-Ching-Sorn-Pha-Chan. The writer has recorded them as evidence for preserving the original knowledge.



Ram Cherd-Ching-Sorn-Pra-Chan

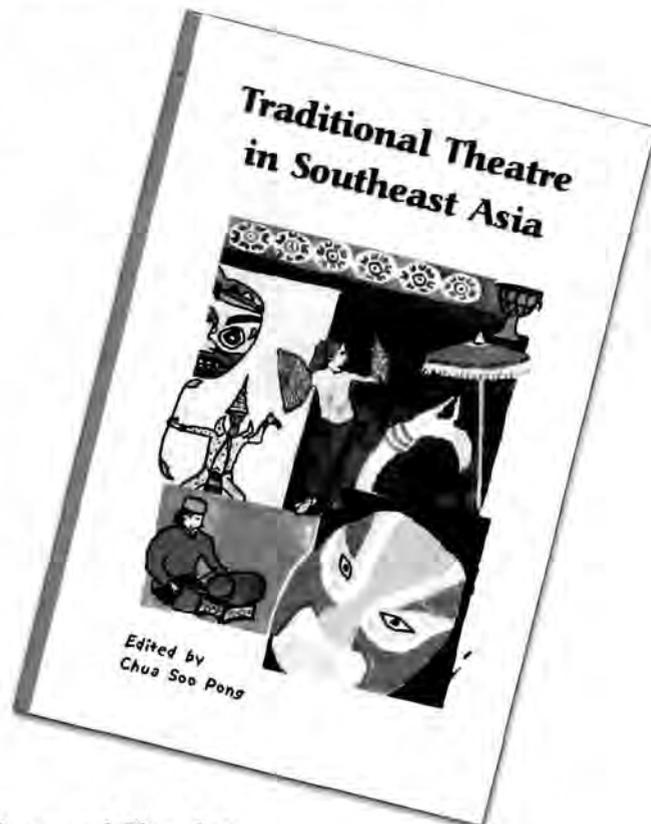
It is hoped that this article on the differences between the dances of the male character of the Khon and the Lakhon will contribute toward the study by new artists for acquiring authentic Thai dance movements.

Khon is a distinctive dance form, and should be preserved for its purity and uniqueness, against hybridization with other dance forms.

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