

The Great Choreographer, Thanpuying Paew Sanithwongseni

Thanpuying Paew Sanithwongseni's works in Thai performing arts, used as teaching material in schools, have been subjects of extensive studies. Savaparr Vechsuruck researches the life of the choreographer and the choreographic principles of her work, by studying essays, articles, performance programmes, official announcements, records in the Government Gazette, reviews of performances, and interviews.

Thanpuying Paew Sanithwongseni (1903-2000), one of the most famous choreographers in Thailand, was trained in court dances during her childhood, from 1911 to 1915, in Suankularb Palace, the royal residence of H.R.H. Prince Asdang Dejavudh Krom Luang Nakhon Rajasima. She later served as performing arts expert in the Department of Fine Arts between 1948 and 1992. During these forty-four years, she choreographed a total of 164 dances, consisting of her own creations, collaboration with others and adaptations. The dances were in the form of the *Khon* masked drama, dance drama, group dances and solo dances.



*Thanpuying Paew Sanithwongseni
spent a life time in Suankularb Palace*

Born on December 25, 1903, Thanpuying Paew Sanithwongseni, né Suthiboon, spent her childhood, from the age of five to eight, with her cousins in the Grand Palace. These three years were an important period that enabled her to absorb court etiquette, manners and traditions. The lifestyle of the court was a significant foundation for her life, providing her with opportunities to see and appreciate royal performances.

Later, Thanpuying Paew went to serve in Suankularb Palace, where she was educated, and trained in dramatic literature, which she was later able to use for organising performances for the Department of Fine Arts. More importantly, she was trained in court dances by many well-known dance teachers in Suankularb Palace, as well as foreign experts. She practised traditional dances, including slow-quick-rhythmic dances, four musical composition dances and dances that are accompanied by lyrics. On many occasions, she was assigned to perform leading roles. During her four years as a student in Suankularb performing arts school, she accumulated knowledge and skills in advanced performing arts. This formed a solid basis for the development of her expertise in dance and drama.

At the age of fourteen, Thanpuying Paew was married to H.R.H. Prince Asdang Dejavadh, and she had to stop performing, except on special occasions. Being a royal consort, she was exposed to and enjoyed the luxuries of the court, its atmosphere of pomp, fashions, daily routine and the socialising with aristocrats. She was able to experience European culture which was popular among the upper-classes at that time. The exposure to European arts and culture, Western-style plays and dances, ballroom dancing and horse-riding, inspired her to introduce dramatic innovations in the development of Thai performing arts.

When H.R.H. Prince Asdang died, Thanpuying Paew requested for royal permission to revoke her position as a royal spouse. Two years later, she married Major General Mom Sanithwongseni, and accompanied him on official duties to England, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Portugal. During her ten years abroad, she held the role of wife to a diplomat as well as the mother of four children. With the privilege of being in the diplomatic circles, she took part in various social events and cultural activities in Europe, including attending plays, ballets, operas and other art forms. Her background in performing arts enabled her to appreciate the aesthetics of Western performances more than other Thai artists of her time. This exposure to Western dance forms and her expertise in Thai performing arts resulted in her becoming knowledgeable in the Western and Thai theatre, and contributed to her work as a choreographer for the Department of Fine Arts.

In 1947, Thanpuying Paew was invited by the Music and Dance Division of the Fine Arts Department to serve as an expert in performing arts. This was a time when she could use her experience in performing arts and literature to create dramatic scripts and choreographies. Her creations and adapted works for the Fine Arts Department include the 'Blessing Dances' and the seven episodes of the *Inoh* dance drama. Thanpuying Paew also adapted and simplified some of the royal compositions to make them suitable for performance – within the limit of two hours – at the National Theatre. Examples are *Sungthong* and *Ngo-pah*. She also wrote new scripts for some scenes; for example, the scene of "Phra Suthon's Visiting Nang Manorah's Chamber" in *Manorah* and the scenes of "The Maiden in the War Drum" and "Burning of the Sword" in *Kawi* (to which seventy-six new verses were added), and the scene of "Escaping the Water Demon" in *Phra Abhaimani*. Thanpuying Paew served as the sole director in charge of all performances offered by the Music and Dance Division for over four decades. Her duties involved the selection of programmes to present, and teachers to train the cast. She also had to demonstrate her newly-created dance postures to the dance teachers so that they could rehearse the dancers. Thanpuying Paew supervised the whole training process, until the final rehearsal.

During her years with the Fine Arts Department, she dedicated herself to the creation of many spectacular dances and dramas, and became renowned in the performing arts circles. For this reason, H.M., the King bestowed upon her the title of National Artist in Performing Arts (Dance) in 1985. She was the first artist to be decorated with such a title. In her final years, she kindly served as an advisor to other artists and students until she died on September 24, 2000, approaching the age of ninety-eight.

Thanpuying Paew's choreographic works total 164 in number: 138 being her own creations, 10 being the works she collaborated on with others and 16 adaptations. This research is based on her forty-four creations that can be classified into four groups, namely:

1. Dances accompanied by props;
2. Dances for festive occasions;
3. *Mitra-maitree* dances; and
4. Dances in *Khon* masked drama and in the *Lakon* dance drama

Dances accompanied by props

From the six dances of this type that were analysed, it shows that Thanpuying Paew relied much on the choreographic principles of court dances. She modified some human gestures and movements, and incorporated a dance dimension before blending them into a traditional dance style to create a spectacular effect in performance. What she introduced to this kind of dance was the dynamic and complex movement of daily activities; for instance, farming, the use of weapons and fans.

Dances for festive occasions

For eight selected dances of this category, Thanpuying Paew would start by matching the dance concept with the objective of the festive occasions, with dance styles related to the choreographic principles of court dance. In terms of the occasion for celebration, and the music, songs and costumes, other schools of choreography would not be applicable because the frame of reference was purely Thai. She was able to avoid the monotony caused by repetitive dance postures and movements. Performers would firstly present the standard posture dance but when they were to adopt the same posture to relay the same message, she would have them adjust it to vary the dance style in order to attract the attention of the audience. Thanpuying Paew's customary technique was tremendously admired by her audiences and is known as "the coquettish posture".

Mitra-maitree dances

The main objective of five dances of this kind is to combine classical Thai dance with those of the countries that have established diplomatic relations with Thailand. Thanpuying Paew created a dance style to serve the objective by dividing the structure of the dance into three parts. The first part features representatives of Thailand so the dance style is Thai. The second part presents dancers representing foreigners, and the choreographer thus utilizes distinctive dance postures of those countries in this part. The third part is a combination of the first two parts, representing the good-will between the two countries. The Thai dance was adjusted to blend in harmony with the foreign dance.

Dances in *Khon* masked drama and in the *Lakon* dance drama

The study is conducted on twenty-five dances in this category, consisting of eight solo dances and seventeen group dances. Solo dances refer to the dance of major characters in the *Khon* masked drama or in the *Lakon* dance drama in which there is a tradition that the major characters are required to flaunt their artistic ability. Thanpuying Paew's technique in choreographing solo dances was different from that in designing other dance forms. That is, she had to study and analyse the characters, their characteristics, their motives and their situations to decide the degree to which they would be permitted to express themselves on stage to make the audience understand the story. She chose the dance postures and demonstrated them for the performers to practise. During this time, she decided which dance postures could be best presented for performances. This meant that she emphasised the performer's ability as the most important principle in designing dance postures and consequently, people, in general, admired her superb ability in creating dance styles.



"*Mue chukaew posture*"

Group dances in the *Khon* masked drama or in the *Lakon* dance drama were invented during the time of Thanpuying Paew to make the performances more spectacular. This was well received by the audience. Yet, she would not make these group dances too lavish or too long because she did not want them to divert the audience's attention from the drama. The dance style was designed in such a way as to be in line with the part where the dances were inserted so that the audience experienced the smooth flow of the story. This type of dance was designed with only a few postures because most of the performers were only minor characters, for example, soldiers, ladies of the court and animals. Yet these postures were beautifully designed and Thanpuying's dance expertise could be seen in the dynamic and complex changes in the alignment of the dancers, and the unfamiliar style of grouping. Their appearance on stage would correspond with the setting, and they would not come on to the stage in lines or groups as they did in ordinary group dances.

The following are eleven dances of Thanpuying Paew's own creation:

The Blessing Dance

This dance was first performed by H.R.H. Princess Chulabhorn. Thanpuying Paew designed the dance style for a performer who was not a professional dancer, and who did not practise frequently or hold an adequate background in traditional dance. The choreographer chose dance postures that were not too difficult for the princess to rehearse, requiring her to dance to the music of the Thai orchestra. Usually, a single dance posture would be used in this part but Thanpuying Paew made it double to show the princess' special talent. The emphasis was not on the movement of the feet so as to enable the princess to concentrate on the dance postures. The choreographer stressed that for those whose background in dance is limited, their focus should be on the arm movements, not those of the feet.

The Sukhothai Dance

This dance was choreographed with the objective of reflecting the glory of the Sukhothai era through dance. Thanpuying Paew considered the 'Walking Buddha' image of the Sukhothai Period as the symbol of a prosperous and tranquil kingdom. The serene and fluid movements inspired by the image were adopted as dance postures. Lotuses and sculptures of angels were used as accompanying components to the dance, integrating the philosophic significance of symbolism in dance form.



The Walking Buddha pose is presented as dance posture

Kenlong in the garden

This solo dance shows the choreographer's ability in creating dance postures according to the principles of the court dance, with a reputation for being innovative in choreography.

The Hanow's Chuichai solo dance

This is the only *Chuichai* solo dance in *Ngo-pha*, King Chulalongkorn's royal composition. In designing the dance style for this drama, Thanpuying Paew did not want to observe the strict rules of the court's drama. Some characteristics of it were incorporated. The *Chuichai* solo dance by Hanow, the protagonist of the drama, was exquisitely designed to follow the convention of the traditional *Chuichai* dance. As Hanow is a Semang, the choreographer had to translate the personality of this young native into the dance he performs during the



Ta Pongna Or



Male semang character

happiest moment in his life when he is getting married, and is adorned in the most attractive attire. The identity of Hanow was presented through traditional dance postures; his leg and body positions were angular like those of demon and semang characters. The gestures were a combination of the demon character and the male dancer, with the demonic clash of rhythms. Hanow's movements – jumping, springing to his feet and walking – were designed to show his rough manners. The choreographer used the sound of a traditional Thai flute to communicate the performer's emotion. Hanow's snapping of his fingers, his amorous gestures and the nimble movement of his fingers, which are normally associated with the movement of female characters, were all utilized in the dance to reduce the coarseness of the character. It is evident that Thanpuying Paew was able to combine the postures of a male, female, demon and Semang character in representing a male semang who is pleased to get married.

The Sacrifice of Manorah

Thanpying Paew compared this dance with the sacrifice of Darasa, which was also a sutee (ceremony in which a widow commits suicide). At the same time, she choreographed the dance to show that the sacrifice of Manorah was deceptive. Monorah performs her final dance to escape by flight, not as a dance prior to her suicide like that of Darasa. She thus chose twelve out of the nineteen dance postures from Darasa dance, and appropriately added the gestures of birds – Monorah is a half-bird, half-human creature.



The sacrificial dance of Manorah

The dancer is made to express certain mannerisms to make the audience realize that she is deceiving the court's prophet before she finds the moment to escape.

The battle between Myarap Demon and Hanuman Monkey Warrior

In this performance, Thanpuying Paew was able to present the battle between the demons and the monkey warriors through their

belligerent manners and movements that corresponded, step by step, with the lyrics. The performers do not have to rely on hand gestures to communicate the message to the audience. This shows that Thanpuying Paew was knowledgeable in the military



Warrior in masked drama

procession of demons and monkey warriors, and she was able to design a dance style for it in the masked drama.

The Equestrian solo dance

This solo dance was quite unique during that time because most animal dances were group dances. As Thanpuying Paew was familiar with horses, enjoyed horse-riding, and had the chance to attend horse shows in Europe, she could distinguish some special characteristics in the horses' movements, and apply them to her creation of the equestrian solo dance.



Horse movement

Reviewing the Burmese troop (the troop of King Padung)

This performance had never been attempted until Thanpuying Paew studied the structure of Thai and Laotian inspection of troops and weapons dances. She applied it to her creation of a Burmese version, displaying more evidence of her ingenuity.

Lao-duangdeun Dance

This dance, bringing male and female dancers closer to each other, imitates the manners of young lovers in courtship. The dance style is in harmony with the song. This was the first time that natural manners were portrayed.



Sword dance

Thai-Chinese Relations Dance

The uniqueness of this dance is in the Chinese dance style. The gestures and manners are slightly adjusted to synchronize with Thai gestures and manners.



Thai and Chinese dance style ►

Vichani Dance

The dance is accompanied by lyrics and its distinguished characteristic is the use of fans to suggest various gestures and manners.

Contrabution to Thai Dance

Thanpuying Paew Sanithwongseni was a choreographer who designed dance styles in a systematic way. She would initially study the concept and objectives of the work she was to choreograph. Then, she would do research on the resources through paintings, sculptures, literature and the natural behaviour of humans and animals. After that, she would select manners and movements, and adapt them to dance postures, which were combined with traditional Thai choreographic principles. The refinement and individuality were specially added through her creation of "the coquettish posture," making her choreographic works unique and highly praised in dance circles and by the general public.



The use of various fan gestures

Thanpuying Paew's dedication to Thai dance was immense, and was deservedly honoured by institutions and society. Her works continue to be popular in the present, both in performance and for study, and undoubtedly benefit the development of Thai performing arts, contributing to the depth of its quality.

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