

# *Universal Values in Asian Dance*

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*Dance is movement, a universal activity because its medium or vehicle is the human body itself. It is a personal impulse aptly defined by Homer as "the sweetest and most perfect of human enjoyments"—a living, non-verbal, non-literal rhythmic visual means of communication as old as life itself because with life came movement, the essential ingredient of dance.*

A number of reasons account for the popularity, universal appeal, and acceptance of dance as a means of dramatic expression. Regardless of form, style, or function dance is admittedly more eloquent than language or music, because a people's culture, nature, and aspirations come to life in dance, whether performed by trained specialists or participatory.

In Asia, which has a most profound dance history, partly recorded through more than two millenniums, dance functions beyond technical

skill—it includes values, judgement, and perspective as it educates the sensibilities of performers and spectators alike.

Thus, the function of dance in the Asian context runs the gamut related to local cycles and cultural habits. There are dances performed primarily for art's sake or to create beauty; dances for recreation, entertainment, or story-telling; dances for healing or to teach order and coordination, problem-solving, and rudiments of skill or community

discipline that justify the unwritten rule of conformity to accepted concepts of behaviour.

Asia's greatest dance traditions have been a constant mode of sharing beauty and spiritual upliftment; in times of social or political upheaval dance has even served as a unifying force. But more significantly, the classical dance traditions, which require formal training, special technique, and virtuosity, are living monuments. They show how much the Asian people value the sacrifices

of forebears to uphold national ideals.

For many societies in the Asian region, traditional dance, together with its modern derivatives, is as much an enduring symbol of continuity as of unity: it arouses patriotism as it nurtures a national memory or consciousness. This specific role of dance is peculiar to the dance-centred cultures of the so-called "theatre states", a term used by one scholar to refer to traditional nations of Southeast Asia where the performance of rituals of legitimacy imply a connection between statecraft and stagecraft; the rituals express physical, mental, and spiritual values of the participants.

Today, the abundance, consistency, and maturity of Asian choreographic traditions have spawned, notably in the West, fresh inspiration among dance anthropologists, researchers, documentalists, choreographers, dancers, conservationists, and others involved in different aspects of dance creation. The interplay of dance elements from diverse cultural sources is unprecedented, thanks to the efforts of Western dance initiators since the 19th century. Their artistic foresight and courage to borrow from the dances of Asia—not only postures and gestures, but also staging techniques conventions of makeup and costuming, and themes—continue to add luster and substance to contemporary dance theatre.

To name a few: Loie-Fuller's manipulation of yards of silk fabric fastened to hand-held sticks or wands must have been borrowed from the Chinese dancer's technique;

thus the fantastic shapes she created with the billowing fabric became a sensation at the Folies Bergere in 1892. Modern dancer Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) used fluid and expressive arm movements reflective of her exposure to Asian dance; likewise Mikhail Fokine in "The Swan", a brief role he choreographed for Ann Pavlova, which was possibly an offshoot of having seen Siamese court dancers in St. Petersburg in 1900. Ruth St. Denis (co-founder, Denishawn School 1914–31) blended Oriental sensuality and spirituality in her creations. She paid tribute to her Indian sources when she wrote later that "the deepest lack of Western cultures is any true workable system for teaching a process of integration between soul and body." Martha Graham (1894–1991) adapted Asian dance postures and gestures to enrich her movement vocabulary; at the same time she "borrowed the flexible staging of Asian drama forms like Noh, Kabuki, and Chinese opera where a few steps can indicate a journey, a few moments the passage of years."

The Asian tradition which evolved strong choreography based on the martial arts of the region inspired the inclusion of martial arts in the training programme for stage actors and dancers in America and elsewhere in Europe. Likewise inspired is the adaptation of a theatrical convention that creates the illusion of infinite distance and timelessness: "Motion in stillness, stillness in motion"—an outstanding quality from Asian theatre and dance where the perfect pose and time, more than space, are given primary emphasis. This quality is best

exemplified by *mie* a device used in Kabuki whereby a performer momentarily freezes in a sculpture-like pose to express overwhelming emotion.

But perhaps the most important Asian legacy to world dance history is respect for tradition. In the Asian milieu classical dance forms endure because of the tenacity of a critical mass of devoted and well-trained dancers and musicians, complemented by an equally supportive and enthusiastic core of patrons and spectators who understand and value tradition. Through their collective effort, coupled with numerous interdisciplinary ways and means for research and documentation—including publications, broadcast television and visual records such as video, film, computer graphics, and other electronic imaging techniques for archival storage, plus choreology or movement notation—Asian dance will remain an important point of reference for future achievements in the field of dance. Traditional dance in Asia will also be a binding force as our fast-changing world enters the 21st century through the portals of culture.

Fellow Asians, peers, and colleagues in dance: As an offering on the 10th Anniversary of the Asian Dance Association, I choreographed a dance in the pangalay style, a traditional dance form of the Sulu Archipelago Southern Philippines. Pangalay-style postures and gestures bear closest affinity to the Balinese and Siamese (Thai) modes of dancing. The fan used as a prop of the masked dancer is actually a gift from Madame Oh Hwa-Jin, Chairperson of the Asian

Dance Association. She gave me this fan when I came to Seoul to participate in the International Dance Festival held to commemorate the 1988 Olympic Games. This delicate fan symbolizes our friendship and commitment to the propagation of dance as a means of communication to promote harmony and peace.

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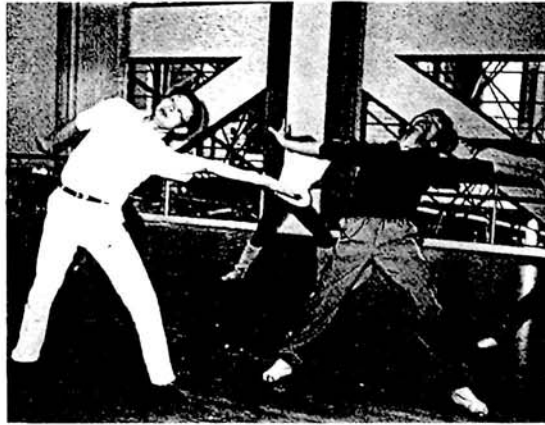
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*Traditional Chinese sword dance demonstrated  
by Madam Lee Shu Fen*



*Dancers from Brunei Darussalam conducting a dance workshop at the 3rd ASEAN Theatre Festival held in Bangkok, 1993*



*Dance class at the Hong Kong Academy of  
Performing Arts*

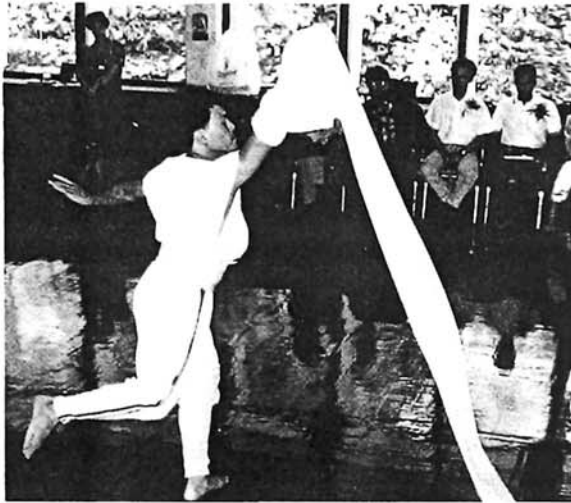


*Classical Javanese dancers presenting new choreography in Solo Academy of Dance, 1989*



*Innovative new choreography created by  
Malaysian choreographer Chong Yoon Keong;  
"Leisure"*





*Malaysian leading choreographer Chong Yoon Keong performs his own choreography "Egret Awaken from his Dream"*