

The Status of Traditional Thai Dance, Preservation and Innovation

by SURAPONE Virulrak

Dance is one of the major forms of Thai cultural expression. Situated in the middle of Southeast Asia, Thailand has been deeply influenced by different cultures which resulted in a variety of dance forms. Generally speaking, there are four main forms of dance each of which prevails in each region of the country namely central, northern, northeastern, and southern. Among these dance forms, those of the central region was developed by the royal court to the highest standards of refinement and sophistication. Dance and dance music of each region developed within its socio-cultural context for centuries with very few interchanges among them. Thus regional styles differ from each other and reflect very strong regional identity. However, dance of the central region, where the seat of social and political power is located, tends to influence other dance forms.

Many dance scholars believed that Thai dance was strongly influenced by the Indian dance particularly the dance of the **Natayashastra** deriving from the **Veda**. This hypothesis may be true in the case of the southern dances where **mudra** or hand gesture, **karna** or posture, and **angahara** or sequence of postures are obviously seen. About fifteen postures can be identified with the dance postures described in the **Natayashastra**. However the style of movement and the interpretation are certainly different from Indian dances.

Central court dance which developed after the Southern dance form today, deviated further away from Indian dance. While the Indian hand gestures are highly symbolic, the hand gestures of Thai court dance are mimetic, a refinement of the naturally non-verbal communication of the hands. It is important to note here that the court dance has its long history of development. But what is performed today is

the revival of dances developed during the reign of King Rama II in the early 1800's.

Northern dance today is the legacy of the northern court during the reign of King Rama V in the late 1900's, although some folk dances may be dated back many years earlier. While northern dance is recognized as dance derived from the court, northeastern dance is purely folk developed by the villagers themselves.

Thai dances today regardless of form have many functions. Dance as an offering to Hindu gods, animistic gods, or Buddha images, and to powerful spirits believed to occupy certain places. Dance performances are held in many shrines and temples in the big cities. Dance as a means to draw supernatural powers, to cast away illness, etc. is still performed in remote areas. Dance is an important part in Thai sports. Boxers and sword fighters must dance before fighting to pay homage to their gurus and to daunt their opponents. Dance is an integral part of most of traditional drama which is performed daily or nightly wherever there is a feast or a fair. Dance is an important means for national cultural identity and can serve international political ends. Dance has even become more significant since it is an indispensable part of tourism promotion.

The extensive uses of dance in Thailand leads to their preservation, promotion and propagation. The importance of dance is further enhanced by way of dance education in schools and colleges. Dance is taught from elementary to high schools as an elective subject. Dance colleges in Bangkok under the administration of the Department of Fine Arts has expanded to six provinces producing many Bachelor Degree holders in dance a year. There are at least thirty-six teachers' colleges all over the country offering Diploma and Bachelor Degree in dance and drama. Moreover, many universities now offer courses on Thai dance as an academic discipline apart from actual performance as an art.

Thai Dance has developed many technical terms among them are: **ram**, **ten**, **fon**, **soeng**, **sat**, and **rabam**. **Ram** is the generic term for all kind of dances, but its specific meaning refers to the use of hands and arms. **Ten** refers to the

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All the photographs used in this article are taken by Prof. Dr. Surapone Virulrak, the author.

movement of legs and feet. When **ten** and **ram** are combined into **tenram**, then, it means ballroom dances. **Fon** is somewhat similar to **ram** but less vibrant. Northern and some northeastern dances are called **fon**. **Soeng** is a specific term for northeastern dance form. **Sat**, refers to certain kinds or styles of southern dance. And **rabam** simply means group dance.

Each dance form may be differentiated from each other by the way two major parts of the body are moved: **wong** and **liam**. **Wong** literally means circle, but it refers to the positions and movements of arms and hands, and range of opening. **Liam** literally means angular, it is a term used to refer to the positions and movements of legs and feet. Central Thai Dance may well be characterized by what may be termed as eight-shape **wong** made up of hand movements following the horizontal line such as: medium opening of **wong** and **liam**, and medium thrust forward of chest and backward of the bottom part of the body. Southern dance style is similar to that of the central style but hands and feet have wider openings and more thrust forward and backward. While northern dance concentrates mostly on the wide opening **wong** (arms and hands) and less on the **liam** (feet). Chest and the bottom part of the body is kept inward close to the body axis. Northeastern dance is similar to that of the north except that the **wong** i.e. the arm movements lean more on the verticals.

Although these 3 regional dance types are different in their treatment of **wong** and **liam**, they share one common characteristic, that is that the dancer keeps a statuesque like posture while flexing his or her knees on the regular beat.

To be more specific, let us focus on the central Thai court dance. This dance form can be divided into **ram lakon** or dance for a play and **ten khon** or dance for a mask play. **Ram lakon** has more three dimensional movements and postures whereas **ten khon** has more two dimensional movements since it was derived from the dance for shadow play where flat puppet figures are made to dance along the screen.

Dance form can also be categorized in four groups



Dance to supplicate the Hindu gods. An example of Central Thai dance performed before a Hindu shrine.

according to the four types of characters in the play namely demon, male, female, and monkey. The differences of these character types lie in the width, height and range of **wong** and **liam** and the degree of finesse of movements.

As mentioned earlier that central court dance makes full use of hand gestures to illustrate the chanting of texts and song lyrics. These hand gestures may be divided into four major categories of emotions expressed. First is to express emotions such as love or sorrow. Second is to portray nature such as sunshine or rainfall. Third is to convey action such as to go or to see. And fourth is to express more abstract ideas such as grandeur, beauty, or tranquility.

Probably because court dance is meant to elucidate the dance text, or lyrical music, court dance relies heavily on the extensive use of hand gestures. It is notable that in court dance, the choreography for solo dance is greatly developed. Some solo dances of this kind take up to twenty-five minutes long such as various **chui chai** dances. Court dance pieces accompanied by instrumental music are few and not so interesting. Pertaining to group dances, all dancers always perform the same gestures and postures. The concentration on hand gestures and the slowness of movements inhibits designing attractive and diverse floor plans. Group composition at the end of each movement is rare. Moreover, the design is very symmetrical which probably reflects the value that the court places on dignity. By and large the



Dance from the Northern Thailand.

choreography of solo court dances is applied to group dances, increasing the number of dancers is meant to create the effect of grandeur.

Southern dances are similar to the central court dances and follow most of the same practices. But north and northeastern dances are different. Since these dances are always performed as part of a pageant proceeding along a path or street rather than on stage as is common for the central and the southern dances, the dance seem highly repetitive with very few changes of gestures in comparison to the other two dance forms.

Three decades ago, each of these regional dance forms were performed almost exclusively within the region. Court dance which was taught and performed only at court and noble houses during the monarchy are now patronized by the government and performed outside the court setting. In addition other dance forms besides court dances are incorporated into the overall school curriculum. Regional dance colleges are allowed to focus their training on their own regional forms whereas the Bangkok dance colleges are more concerned with court dance. These dance colleges tend to produce dance teachers rather than dance designers or choreographers as seen from their curriculum and practicum.

Because of the refinement and sophistication of court dance, it takes approximately twelve years to train dancers. Each and all of the elements of the dance are strictly observed to the minutest detail. This conservative aspect of court dance does not allow much room for dance innovations. However, new dance pieces have been created during these past three decades by some senior gurus or under their supervision. The system which allows only the most senior gurus to have the right to choreograph within the court tradition makes the court dance style grow very slowly.

Recently, due to tourism promotion, younger gurus are encouraged to invent new dance pieces. Adaptations of old dance pieces or invention of dances are also being carried out under the auspices of the ASEAN Committee of Culture

and Information (COCI). National, regional or provincial tourism promotion, and international cultural exchange programmes are strong inducements in changing traditional or inventing new dances.

There are advantages to these new developments. The beneficial part is that dance today figures more actively in society. But the negative part, according to some scholars and conservatives, is that traditions are being corrupted because the new dances are improperly created. The choreographers lack thorough understanding of the aesthetics of traditional dances. Consequently, the new dances do not portray the true sense or the real meaning of the dances and of the culture which nurtured them for many generations.

Besides the deterioration of dance traditions caused by faulty and hurried inventions for tourism and cultural exchanges, the approach and teaching methods cause their decline, this is particularly true of the north and the northeastern dances. This happens because dance teachers who have strong background in court dance are the ones teaching in this region. As a result, northern and northeastern dances are gradually influenced by the court elements which would eventually lead to their disappearance. It is very hard today to witness dances in the north and the northeast which do not show central Thai court influences. Television also plays an important role in bringing central dance style to the regional dancers who probably absorb some of the refinements characteristic of central court dance.

There are also some court dance teachers who, during the past three decades, observed other dance forms in order to preserve them. However, according to this group of court dance teachers, the regional and non-court dances are not standardized, not refined, and are not tied together well enough to be performed on stage. Thus, they have to be modified and adapted for the stage. They are proud of their efforts to preserve and promote other types of dance forms which otherwise would probably die away. The non-court dances should be called the National Theatre version of Thai regional dances since they are mostly adaptations made by



Dance from the Southern Thailand.



Dance from the Northeast Thailand.