

## **Corporeality of Ballet as an Alien Dance Form in the Context of I-San Social Culture: Cultural Identity, Cultural Transmission and the Otherness of Bodily Experiences through the Concept of West Meets East**

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**Key words:** Corporeality of ballet, cultural identity, cultural transmission, West meets East, Thailand

**Abstract:** This qualitative research aims to analytical study the cultural identity through the position of ballet in the context of Northeastern region (known as I-San region) of Thailand to investigate the cultural transmission of ballet (West) that has covered its meaning to the Thai-body (East) giving a new meaning to the Thai bodily culture and to analyze the conditions of peculiarity of bodily experiences, through the concept of West meets east in the context of ballet pedagogy. The study was conducted at the Department of Performing Arts, Maharakham University, Thailand. The relevant research data were methodologically analyzed after they were significantly collected. The research is presented by the descriptive analysis. The results indicate that the form of ballet is considered as Western entertaining dance form which does not belong to the Thai tradition. The stereotype and status quo of ballet in the Northeastern Thailand has gradually been a part of the society even though it is an alien dance form that has been introduced to the context of the Northeastern Thailand. It is because ballet has been persuasively served the Northeastern society such as providing cultural entertainment to people and its community and involving cultural events and education. The ballet pedagogy at the Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Maharakham University, Thailand has been subtly manipulated to suit the background of students whose experiences were considered as non-ballet experiences and being dominant with traditional dance in Thailand due to their ability of ballet perception and praxis in ballet are narrowly limited and unfamiliarity before they were enrolling to become students at the Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Maharakham University and the corporeality of ballet

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Page No.: 2287-2293

Volume: 15, Issue 10, 2020

ISSN: 1816-949x

Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences

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suggests that the body of I-San dancers who are currently studying in majoring ballet are considered as the body of I-San culture and its origin derives from the East culture but encoding with the meaning of ballet as Western

culture. Therefore, bodily experiences in the body of I-San dancers have been transforming its meaning from the East into Western culture but remained a sense of original cultural body known as East I-San.

## INTRODUCTION

Thailand or the Kingdom of Thailand was originally known as Siam and has long been history. Thailand is situated among those Asian countries and it consists of 5 regions, Northern, Northeastern, Southern, Central and Western regions, respectively. As a nation state with 77 provinces throughout Thailand, each region in Thailand has its own uniqueness and cultural diversity which can be seen through their cultural activities such as food, tradition, costume, dances, performances, rituals, beliefs and religions (Fig. 1).

In fact, focusing on cultural aspects, the Northeastern region of Thailand is recognized as I-San region (Pak Ta Wan Og Chiang Nua or Pak I-San in Thai Language). This region is contented with the dimension of multicultural identity particularly dance that describes itself and serves the community through cultural activities. Regarding to dance in Thailand, dances have been involved with cultural activities and traditions in the community where Thai people have lived for generation to generations. Dance is a part of Thai culture, it reflects the Thai way of life and cultural identity. The Office of the National Culture Commission, Department of Cultural Promotion states: “The Thai government began to view culture as a key dimension in the process of nation building” (Department of Cultural Promotion 2010 cited in Phanlukthao<sup>[1]</sup>).

In addition, dance is not only fulfilling people and its society through cultural activities but also education. The dance education in Thailand in the past 30 years has not been seemingly accepted due to its status quo. Dance in a point of view of Thai people was that only concentrate on practical session rather than academic session like others disciplinary which have both academic and practical operation. According to the policy of Thai government, dance education was established its curriculum and open to enroll students for the first time in 1936 under the umbrella of the Department of Arts called “the College of Dramatic Arts” which were located in the 4 regions of Thailand. Dance education, since, then was in a system of Thai education and gradually been more accepted by the Thai people and its society. Regarding the study of ballet in Thailand, Surapone Virulrak gives a historical suggestion on the ballet study in Thailand:



Fig. 1: Thailand's provinces [https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/thailand\\_map.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/thailand_map.htm)

The College of Dramatic Arts was originally known as School of Dance and Music, Division of Art Science, Department of Arts in 1934. In 1935, the school later was changed its name to School of Arts, Division of Dance and Music, Department of Arts. After that, the school had moved to Division of School of Arts in 1938 and changed its name again to Music Arts School in 1944. The school had an interruption on teaching and learning due to the world war 2. In 1947, the school began to have its teaching and learning again under the new name of school entitled School of Dance. In 1966, the Western dance program was introduced to the schoole emphasizing on teaching classical ballet<sup>[2]</sup>.

According to Virulrak, ballet was introduced to the Thai culture by the policy of the Thai Government. The Government had paid attention to equalize the opportunity on the education of Thai people not just the disciplines like engineering, nursing, medical science and so on but

also dance as part of national construction. In addition, it is obvious that many form of Western dance have been introduced to Thai culture during this period. They are ballet, Jazz, Modern and Contemporary dance. As a huge combination and arrival of Western dance in Thai culture, it is manifested that the policy of education particularly on dance education was made possible to manage teaching and learning ballet in Thailand as a teaching of ballet in Thailand started under the Department of Arts in line with the standard of the international dance education. The commitment of ballet teaching at the College of Dramatic Arts has been inspiring, shaping and influencing the future of dance in Thailand. Ballet education known as majoring ballet or Western dance major is not only seen at the College of Dramatic Arts but also the universities which are under the care of the Thai government. Currently, there are 3 universities in Thailand offer an undergraduate degree courses in ballet or Western dance providing an opportunity for Thai students to gain a degree and prepare for a career in dance which are Chulalongkorn University (located in Bangkok), Srinakharinwirot University (located in Bangkok) and Mahasarakham University (located in Mahasarakham). Among those universities have been designed ballet curriculum to locate ballet within a concept of dance as non-Thai dance.

It is true that ballet is considered as a new form of dance that has been introduced to Thailand >70 years but it is still remains a sense of Western dance in Thai culture. Western culture still seems to be modernistic Thai people particularly for I-San people. To emphasize the status of Ballet in the society, Au has started clearly that:

“Dancing in general was considered a mean of socializing the individual and drawing him into harmony with the group and formed an important part of education of a gentleman. Most court ballet ended with a ‘grand ballet’, celebrating the return of concord or harmony within the context of ballet; this was followed by a ball in which everyone joined, symbolically drawing both spectators and performers into accord with the ideas expressed by the performance<sup>[3]”</sup>.

Moreover, Au has also mentioned that, in Europe, dance is part of human activity in self-expression through performance.

In regards with the form of Western culture in Thai culture, the arrival of the form of Western culture can be evident from the trace of Western fast food, cloths, movies, languages, tastes and dances. This research is contributing to offer a wide range of discussion on sense of belonging and not belonging in terms of cultural identity as part of the production of space. To emphasize on culture, identity and space, Lefebvre asserted that:

“Social space is a (social) product. This proposition might appear to border on the tautologous and hence on the obvious. There is good reason, however, to examine it carefully, to consider its implications and consequences before accepting it. Many people will find it hard to endorse the notion that space has taken on within the present mode of production within society as it actually is a sort of reality of its own a reality clearly distinct from, yet, much like, those assumed in the same global process by commodities, money and capital. Many people, finding this claim paradoxical will want proof. The more so in view of the further claim that the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control and hence, of domination, of power; yet that as such it escapes in part from those who would make use of it<sup>[4]”</sup>.

Mentioned by Lefebvre, cultural resources and identity through the production of space have reflected on the influences of the social context. Consequently, this research argues that even though the form of Western culture as cultural resources and identity seems to be dominant on Thai culture, Thai culture has been adapting and negotiating itself to the new context. However, it is leading to the reality and generally agreed that, ballet has been serving Thai society as well as I-San society through various ways such as cultural activities, rituals, government policy and education. Despite the arguments presented in this research have demonstrated the trace of cultural negotiation through the learning and teaching ballet at Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Mahasarakham University, it is also revealing the condition of cultural negotiation and corporeality of ballet through non-Western cultural tradition.

Therefore, the above background has been critical and argumentative on the study of dance that does not belong to its origin. The research question of this study was to identify how the body of the dancers whose cultural origin does not belong to the form of Western culture and they are embodied and shaped by unfamiliarity culture through the lens and understanding of dancers. In short, this research study will bridge the gap of understanding between the form of Western and Eastern culture through the study the concept of West meets East.

**Research objectives:** To analytical study the cultural identity through the position of ballet in the context of Northeastern region (known as I-San region) of Thailand.

To investigate the cultural transmission of ballet that has been transmitted its meaning to the Thai-body resulting new meaning in another bodily culture.

To analyze and understand the condition of otherness of bodily experiences through the concept of West meets

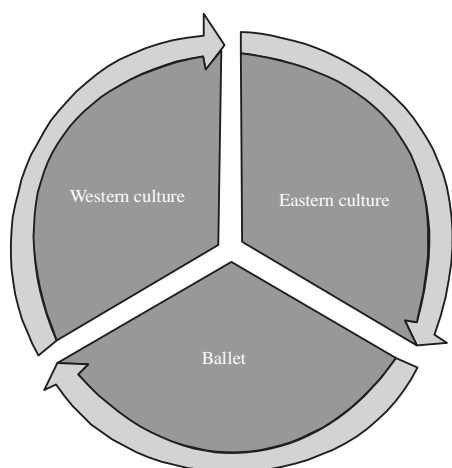


Fig. 2: Theoretical framework<sup>[1]</sup>

East in the context of ballet pedagogy at the Department of Performing Arts, Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

**Research framework:** Figure 2 demonstrates the theoretical framework which researcher has been using as a research guidance.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Researcher employs the empirical and observation methodology as well as presenting research through qualitative description. Also, this research study was conducted to collect data from the documents and related research as well as interviews with key informants which includes well-informed person. The study can be divided into 3 categories as follows:

**Documentary studies:** For library research, books and journal concerning Thai and I-San dance history, Thai and I-San values and beliefs will be researched and studied as well as books and theses about dance, drama and society more widely.

**Field work studies:** For the field studies and observation of live practices and performances concerning work throughout I-San region were researched. The focus was on recent developments and criticism, particularly the data from the case study at the Department of Performing Arts, Mahasarakham University.

Interviews of key informants and relevant sources of data information through observation and empirical methodology.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research outcome can be divided into 3 categories as follow:

**Corporeality of ballet as an Alien dance form in the context of I-San social culture:** To culturally consider the process of embodiment which this research calls corporeality of ballet, the form of ballet is considered as Western entertaining dance form which does not belong to the Thai cultural context. The stereotype and status quo of ballet in the Northeastern Thailand (I-San region) has gradually been a part of the society even though it is an Alien dance form that has been introduced to the context of the Northeastern Thailand. It is because ballet has been persuasively serving the Northeastern society like providing cultural entertainment to people and its community through cultural events and education. Moreover, beyond the expectation of I-San people, it is significantly agreed that ballet is considered as an Alien dance form which Thai people and its society are not familiar with over the last 70 years. People in I-San region and their society have most of them experienced the form of traditional I-San dance rather than the form of international dances like ballet. Furthermore, in 1977 ballet was first introduced to the I-San region through a ballet workshop at Khonkaen University for students interested in this kind of dance.

Commencing its program for Bachelor of Fine and Applied Arts, Mahasarakham University in 1999, ballet became part of I-San society which is divided from the ballet teaching at the secondary school at Kaennakhon Wittayalai School in Khonkaen province where students were having an opportunity to experience ballet as an Alien dance form.

Ajjamaporn Chaiwisut pointed out on the ballet session at Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Mahasarakham University that “the suit of practical session seems to the students as embarrassment due to ballet practical suit is fit with the body as I-San people do not show up their own body to public openly”. According to Chaiwisut, it seems that the unfamiliarity of Western dance practice is against the tradition of I-San culture in terms of dance practice. According to Fig. 3, it is manifested that dancers are covered their bodies by their traditional I-San fabric. Apart from this, to compare with a sense of beauty in Western culture, the sculpture of David is the most perfection of sculpture in the world because of its perfection of proportion and beauty. This research suggests that ballet was originated from the Italian court where the renaissance influences were dominant throughout the European region.

Therefore, the beauty of sculpture of David is possibly the idea of the beauty through the lens of Thai people when they have cultural considering seen dance practitioners were put on the ballet suit during their practical session. The perfection of the proportion of the body in the Western appreciation seems to be normal in the view of Western people. However, the bodily practice in I-San culture is something far from the way of art





Fig. 3: The I-San dance. Dancers in this picture are students majoring ballet before they enrolled to become students at Mahasakham University. Dancers had previous background and experienced on I-San dance<sup>[1]</sup>



Fig. 4: Sculpture of David<sup>[1]</sup>

appreciation in the Western context. David to compare with the form of cultural entertainment in I-San region is something far from reach.

According to Fig. 4, it can be seen that the beauty of ballet is still remained the origin of ballet. The I-San dancer was wearing the leotard and tight according to the tradition of ballet but covering her body with traditional I-San cloths. It is because dancer does not want to reveal her body without even though she has worn a ballet suit so she decided to put the traditional I-San fabric to cover her own body and it is well demonstrated the negotiation between the Western and Eastern culture through the form of dance costume. This is evident that the negotiation between the form of Western culture and Eastern culture have been adapted between each other (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: The image of body of I-San dancer was covered with the traditional I-San fabric<sup>[1]</sup>

**The ballet pedagogy at the Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Mahasarakham University, Thailand:** It was found that the ballet pedagogy at the Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Mahasarakham University, Thailand has been subtly manipulated to suit the background of students whose experiences were considered as non-ballet experiences and being dominant with traditional dance in Thailand due to their ability of ballet perception and praxis in ballet are narrowly limited and unfamiliarity before they were enrolling to become students at the Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Mahasarakham University (Fig. 6).

Therefore, the process of embodiment in the learning and teaching at Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts is designed to suit the variety background of dancers before they became to enroll as students at MSU.

In addition, the previous experiences of dancers as students at FA MSU were included with Thai classical dance, I-San dance and the form of dance that support the sport activity which this research called “cheer leading dance” which contained the trace of Jazz dance and ballet. It should be acknowledging that most students before they enrolled to become students at MSU had varies experiences of dance background (Fig. 7).

**The corporeality of ballet in I-San region:** The result of research suggests that the body of I-San dancers who are currently studying in majoring ballet are considered as the



Fig. 6: The image of body of I-San dancer whose bodies come from differences background of dance forms<sup>[1]</sup>



Fig. 7: The body of I-San dancer whose bodies come from differences background of dance forms. This image demonstrates the practical session of dancers as ballet students<sup>[1]</sup>

body of I-San culture and its origin derives from the East culture but encoding with the meaning of ballet as Western culture.

The bodily experiences in the body of I-San dancers have been transforming its meaning from the East into Western culture but remained a sense of original cultural body known as Eastern I-San (Fig. 8).

Namely, the body of dancers are comparing to the empty cup. If we pour coffee in the cup, then it is a cup of coffee. When we pour a tea in the cup, it is also a cup of tea. This comparison can be used in the bodily context of dance in this study. The I-San body of dancers have previously different background, when it has been encoding with the meaning and the form of ballet led by practical session where dancers are keeping repeatedly on their ballet session, the body will response with the form of ballet (Fig. 9). At this stage, dancers are gradually adapting their own body through practical session to approach the meaning of form of ballet for its expression:

The way the body is presented in dance varies widely in different culture around the world. The dancer's body in performance is differs from the body in everyday life



Fig. 8: The image of body of I-San dancer whose bodies come from differences background of dance forms<sup>[1]</sup>



Fig. 9: The image of body of I-San dancer whose bodies come from differences background of dance forms<sup>[1]</sup>

because of the intention of its display. How the body is 'organized' to dance including stance, gaze, breath, energy, weight, distribution and movement<sup>[5,1]</sup>. Regarding to Hahn, corporeality of dance can be adjustable in relation to the intention of its display. Nonetheless, dancers are encoding with the meaning of Western culture form but they can adapt and negotiate the two form persuasively working together as West meets East. Here, the suggestion of Jackson and Scott seems to be related to what Hahn asserted. Jackson and Scott explained:

"Here the body is not so much a part of the reflexive project of the self as an object of that project, something to be worked upon. This conceptualization of embodiment perpetuates mind-body dualism in which the mind, or reflexive self, seeks to "construct" and control the body<sup>[6]</sup>.



Fig. 10: The image of body of I-San dancer whose bodies come from differences background of dance forms (Phanlukthao, 2013)

The statement of Jackson and Scott tells us to understand the body is shaped by social processes that influenced people who live in the society as embodied sociology (Fig. 10).

### CONCLUSION

This research article is a qualitative research and has 3 research objectives which are to analytical study the cultural identity through the position of ballet in the context of Northeastern region (known as I-San region) of Thailand to investigative study the cultural transmission of ballet that has been transmitted its meaning to the Thai-body resulting new meaning in another bodily culture and to diagnose and seek to understand the

condition of otherness of bodily experiences analyzing through the concept of West meets East in the context of ballet pedagogy at the Department of Performing Arts, Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research project was financially supported by Mahasarakham University (Fast Track 2019) and I would like to express my gratitude to Division of Research Facilitation and Dissemination, Mahasarakham University who have supported me through a scholarship to work on this research. Without their supervision, my research would not have been possible.

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