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The Influence of Directions and Beliefs on Fortunate Directions in The Choreographic Design of Thai Classical Dance

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Abstract

This study examines the significant impact of directional beliefs and favorable orientations on the choreography of Thai classical dance. The study looks at how positive orientations, like those shown in the Four-Directional Dance and the change from right to left, affect the planning, performance, and symbolic representation of choreography by looking at how artistic practices and cultural traditions meet. To show how cultural ideas affect the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of Thai classical dance, the study uses qualitative methods such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews with dance experts, and observational studies of ceremonial performances. The findings highlight that favorable orientations significantly influence movement choices, stage configurations, and narrative frameworks in performances. Ritual dances and religious performances, intricately designed with these ideas, convey cultural identity, spiritual importance, and artistic sophistication. Still, strictly following these traditions might make it harder to come up with new choreographies, especially in modern settings that put an emphasis on audience preferences and artistic flexibility. This study promotes a balanced approach to maintaining the relevance and vitality of Thai classical dance, integrating traditional principles with creative flexibility. Practitioners can maintain the cultural history and symbolic significance of Thai dance while accommodating the changing demands of contemporary audiences. This dual strategy preserves the art form's rich heritage while facilitating its ongoing development and global relevance in a dynamic cultural environment.

Keywords: auspicious directions, traditional Thai dance choreography, ritual choreography, cultural identity and symbolism, heritage preservation in performing arts

1. Introduction

Thailand's classical dance, a refined and intricate art form, reflects the nation's rich cultural heritage, traditions, and long-standing history. This art form encompasses diverse styles, including **Khon**, **Lakhon**, and regional folk dances. Renowned for its precise movements, symbolic gestures, and captivating beauty, Thai classical dance serves as both an artistic expression and a medium for storytelling and conveying spiritual beliefs (Krityakiarana & Jongkamonwiwat, 2016). Thai culture deeply ingrains Thai classical dance, which continues to play a significant role in rituals, ceremonies, and cultural identity (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015; Phetruchee et al., 2024).

One of the core elements of Thai culture that influences classical dance is the belief in auspicious directions. These beliefs shape rituals and actions, guiding movement choices to align with traditional and spiritual values. Kruaraya (2012) emphasize that directions such as facing east or moving from right to left symbolize prosperity, respect, and spiritual harmony. Choreography intricately weaves these beliefs, instructing dancers on movements that resonate with these cultural and spiritual principles (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015). Other cultures observe similar ideas; for instance, Indian classical dance often reflects spiritual unity and cosmic balance through carefully designed movements.

The fusion of Thai classical dance with beliefs in auspicious directions exemplifies how national traditions uniquely influence artistic practices. While this blending enriches the art form, it also presents challenges in modern contexts. Traditional beliefs may sometimes conflict with contemporary demands for creativity and artistic freedom (Krityakiarana & Jongkamonwiwat, 2022).

This study seeks to explore the cultural, aesthetic, and symbolic significance of auspicious directions in Thai classical dance choreography. It aims to preserve the cultural essence of Thai classical dance while facilitating its adaptation to modern contexts by harmonizing traditional beliefs with innovative approaches. By doing so, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural traditions and contemporary creativity can coexist, thereby advancing the fields of performing arts and cultural preservation.

1.1 Research Objective

1.1.1 Analyze how the choreographic structure of Thai traditional dance embodies the connection between auspicious beliefs and directional motions. This involves recognizing how cultural values influence the choice of movements and stage composition.

1.1.2 Analyze the impact of advantageous orientations on the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of Thai classical dance, emphasizing stage configurations, ceremonial gestures, and the whole creative expression in performances.

1.1.3 Examine methods for reconciling the preservation of traditional beliefs in auspicious directions with the advancement of innovative modern choreographic practices that ensure cultural authenticity and creative flexibility.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the influence of directional beliefs and attitudes on the choreographic design of Thai classical dance. We structured the research process around three primary methodologies to ensure comprehensive and in-depth analysis:

2.1 Examination of Documents

The research involved an extensive review of scholarly articles, research studies, and historical documents relevant to Thai classical dance, auspicious directions, and their cultural significance. Key resources included traditional dance manuals, cultural studies, and historical narratives that highlighted the symbolic importance of directional movements and their practical implementation in choreography. This foundational exploration provided a detailed understanding of how cultural beliefs shape choreographic practices.

2.2 Comprehensive Interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews with specialists in Thai classical dance, including experienced choreographers, instructors, and performers, to capture firsthand insights. These interviews explored the impact of auspicious beliefs on various aspects of choreography, such as the selection of movements, stage design, and overall performance structure. We used a semi-structured format that allowed participants to freely share their perspectives while ensuring the discussion remained focused on key research objectives. This approach facilitated the collection of nuanced viewpoints from a diverse group of experts.

2.3 Observational Study

The researcher observed live performances and rehearsals of Thai classical dance, particularly those performed in ritualistic and ceremonial contexts. This observational study examined the incorporation of auspicious, belief-informed directional movements into choreography. Detailed notes and video recordings, collected with participant consent, enabled a meticulous examination of the relationship between movement patterns, directional symbolism, and cultural expression.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the collected data identified recurring patterns and themes related to the use of auspicious orientations in Thai classical dance. This method allowed the integration of insights from documents, interviews, and observations to develop a holistic understanding of how directional beliefs influence both the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of choreography.

The study ultimately aimed to capture the cultural richness and artistic complexities of Thai classical dance, highlighting how tradition and innovation converge in its choreographic practices.

3. Results

A performance space refers to the designated area for dance or theatrical presentations, encompassing the physical stage, its dimensions, and spatial arrangements designed to accommodate performers and props. The layout prioritizes audience visibility while enabling performers to execute intricate movements with ease. In Thai classical dance, performance spaces often feature distinct characteristics such as symmetry, clear pathways, and elevated platforms. These design elements reflect the cultural emphasis on balance and harmony, which are central to Thai aesthetics (Krityakiarana & Jongkamonwiwat, 2016).

Symbolic directions play a pivotal role in shaping movement and stage utilization within Thai classical dance. Performers traditionally align their entrances, exits, and movements with auspicious beliefs, such as moving from right to left. These motions are believed to invoke positive energy and spiritual harmony, establishing a profound connection between choreography and cultural values. For instance, enhancing auspiciousness through clockwise movements contributes to the aesthetic and spiritual balance of the performance (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015).

Thai classical dance incorporates symbolic directions through performances such as the **Four-Directional Dance**, which represents the protection offered by the Four Guardians of the World (**Thao Chatulokaban**). These celestial beings are believed to safeguard humanity's joy and sorrow in the four cardinal directions:

- Thao **Dhatarattha**: Guardian of the East,
- Thao **Virulhaka**: Guardian of the South,
- Thao **Virupakkha**: Guardian of the West,
- Thao **Kubera (Thao Wessuwan)**: Guardian of the North.

The **Four-Directional Dance** performed during **Phleng Na Phat Sadhukarn** exemplifies this belief. According to Professor Dr. Chomnan Kitkhan (2012), this dance incorporates distinct movements, including bowing in four directions, “Lor Keaw Hands,” and seated gestures throughout the performance. These elements align with ritualistic practices observed in royal ceremonies, such as the restoration of royal chariots and thrones during the Royal Cremation Ceremony of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej at the National Museum of Bangkok (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The restoration of royal chariots and thrones during the Royal Cremation Ceremony of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej at the National Museum of Bangkok.



Source: Phetruchee & Jirajarupat (2018)

The Fine Arts Department developed the choreography of the Kridaphinihan dance in 1943, which corresponds with the Four-Directional Salutation. Phra Chenduriyang created an orchestral arrangement for it. This dance piece originally completed a historical play titled Kiat Sakk Thai (The Prestige of Thailand). Subsequently, it evolved into an independent performance, favored for celebratory and propitious occasions (Figure 2). This also corresponds with the Four-Directional Salutation in the choreography of the Suranagong dance with a dagger, as illustrated in the dramatic play Inao during the moment where King Daha conducts a sacrificial ritual. This script constitutes a segment of the royal compositions authored by King Rama II (Figure 3).

Figure 2 The Kridaphinihan Dance Exemplifies the Four Directions.



Source: Fine Arts Department (1999)

Figure 3: Suranagong dance with a dagger Exemplifies the Four Directions.



Source: Fine Arts Department (1999)

The bowing movements in the “Rua La Dieow” segment consistently begin to the right, adhering to traditional beliefs in auspiciousness. This practice encapsulates core cultural values, including respect and positive energy, which are integral to Thai classical dance. Such movements are especially prominent during Phleng Na Phat performances. However, strict adherence to these traditional principles can limit the creative freedom of modern choreographers. Striking a balance between tradition and innovation remains a significant challenge for contemporary practitioners aiming to preserve the cultural essence of Thai

classical dance while adapting to the dynamic expectations of modern audiences (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015).

Figure 4: The "Rua La Dieow" bow starts to the right.



Source: Researcher (2024)

Thai classical dance features a meticulously designed performance space that enhances audience visibility and supports performers' movements. This space often includes symmetry, clear pathways, and elevated platforms, reflecting the Thai aesthetics of balance and harmony (Krityakiarana & Jongkamonwiwat, 2016). Symbolic directions are essential on stage because performers align their movements with beliefs that are positive, like going from right to left or using clockwise rotations to bring in positive energy and spiritual harmony (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015). The Four-Directional Dance exemplifies the protective influence of the Four Guardians of the World (Thao Chatulokaban). Its choreography includes bowing in four directions, "Lor Keaw Hands," and seated gestures, highlighting its cultural and spiritual significance in royal ceremonies (Kitkhan, 2012). Traditional practices serve to preserve cultural identity; however, their strict adherence may limit modern creativity. This poses a challenge for contemporary practitioners who must navigate the balance between tradition and innovation within changing artistic contexts (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015).

4. Discussion

The conviction in favorable directions is fundamental to Thai culture, significantly impacting both everyday life and creative manifestations, especially in Thai classical dance. These beliefs, which encapsulate symbolic beauty and spiritual importance, are essential in influencing movement trajectories, choreographic frameworks, and stage configurations. The Four-Directional Dance, representing the protection of the Four Guardians of the World, and the practice of transitioning from right to left are essential components of Thai cultural traditions. This study investigates the impact of these ideas on choreography and their role in shaping the importance and identity of Thai classical dance.

Numerous global traditions, especially in performing arts and ceremonies, possess notions concerning directional auspiciousness. People often associate directions with positive energy, respect, and holiness. In Thai, Tibetan, and Indian traditions, clockwise rotations signify the augmentation of energy and auspiciousness, enhancing both the spiritual purpose and aesthetic value of artistic expressions. In Thai classical dance, these guiding ideas are expressed through movements that signify respect, spiritual harmony, and cultural depth (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015; Salvatore et al., 2019).

Thai traditional dance distinctly integrates these propitious concepts into its elaborate movements. The Four-Directional Dance exemplifies cultural and spiritual safeguarding, featuring choreography that embodies balance, beauty, and cultural significance. The initiation of movements from right to left reflects Thai principles of respect and positivism. Other cultures, such as Chinese Feng Shui and Indian Vastu Shastra, emphasize the significance of proper placement in construction. Conversely, Thai dance exemplifies these principles through elegant and symbolic motions (Chancharund & Charassri, 2015; Phetruchee & Jirajarupat, 2018).

Contemporary obstacles have arisen for choreographers attempting to reconcile traditional ideas with the demands of modern audiences, especially in a progressively globalized context. Thai classical dance confronts the simultaneous challenge of preserving its cultural integrity while attracting overseas audiences who may lack familiarity with the art form's symbolic significance. Thai culture is deeply rooted in movements that are influenced by lucky directions, like the Four-Directional Dance. However, these aspects may need more background or explanation when shown to people from other cultures to make sure they understand what they mean.

The necessity for originality and innovation poses an additional challenge. While auspicious ideas underpin traditional choreography, contemporary choreographers may experience limitations in their artistic expression due to rigid compliance with these standards. To accommodate changing audience tastes, numerous practitioners are exploring the incorporation of multimedia elements, including lighting, soundtracks, and visual effects, to enrich the narrative dimensions of traditional dance. These advances enable choreographers to preserve the spiritual core of auspicious dances while adapting the art form to modern performance contexts.

The complicated structure of these beliefs can be seen by looking at directional and symbolic elements in the performing arts from different cultures. In Tibetan beliefs, clockwise circumambulation of sacred sites represents devotion to the Buddha. Native American civilizations, such as the Navajo, ascribe spiritual importance to the four cardinal directions, closely linking them to nature and veneration. These examples demonstrate that the connection between cultural and spiritual aspects and directional ideas is universal and beyond mere artistic representation (Shor, 1970; Tylén et al., 2016). Thai classical dance may enhance its own identity by incorporating broader viewpoints.

Furthermore, choreographers must manage the equilibrium between cultural preservation and the exigencies of the global creative economy. International festivals, cultural exchange initiatives, and digital platforms are progressively highlighting Thai classical dance. These situations necessitate practitioners to modify performances to emphasize the universality of Thai traditions while ensuring accessibility for varied audiences. The incorporation of

explanatory narratives or participatory aspects in performances helps overcome cultural divides and augment the audience's comprehension of auspicious beliefs.

The incorporation of favorable directional ideas in Thai classical dance illustrates a wider connection between culture, spirituality, and the performing arts. Looking at Thai classical dance and similar cultural traditions from around the world side by side helps us understand how to balance new ideas with preserving old ones. These ideas underscore the necessity of incorporating ancient beliefs into modern methods to maintain the relevance and identity of Thai classical dance.

The elaborate craftsmanship of Thai classical dance illustrates the deep interaction of cultural legacy, spirituality, and artistic innovation. Comparative investigations deepen our comprehension of Thai cultures and uncover universal elements that link distinct societies. Achieving equilibrium between innovation and preservation is essential as the art form progresses. We can preserve the profound individuality of Thai classical dance for future generations by maintaining this careful balance. Adopting these principles cultivates a profound respect for this dynamic art form, guaranteeing its continued significance within Thailand's cultural legacy while appealing to global audiences.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the profound influence of auspicious directional beliefs on the choreography of Thai classical dance. The findings demonstrate that directional movements, such as clockwise orientations, play a pivotal role in shaping stage composition, movement patterns, and the symbolic representation of this art form. Deeply ingrained cultural norms enrich the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of Thai classical dance performances.

The integration of auspicious directions into Thai classical dance connects the art form to significant rites and ceremonies, as exemplified by the **Four-Directional Dance** and other traditional customs. These gestures embody reverence, positive energy, and cultural identity, serving as a bridge between spirituality and artistry. However, the strict adherence to these traditional principles can create challenges in modern contexts, where creativity, flexibility, and innovation are increasingly essential to meet evolving artistic demands.

To ensure the continued vitality of Thai classical dance, it is essential to balance traditional values with contemporary artistic practices. By harmonizing these elements, Thai classical dance can preserve its cultural integrity while remaining relevant and appealing to diverse audiences. This study underscores the importance of this equilibrium, offering insights into how cultural traditions can coexist with innovation.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Thai classical dance serves as a dynamic interplay of heritage and modernity. By fostering this balance, the art form can thrive, safeguarding its rich identity and ensuring its transmission to future generations. This approach not only supports the preservation of Thai cultural heritage but also reinforces the universality and timeless relevance of the performing arts.

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