

# AN EXAMINATION OF FOLK DANCE POPULARIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWAN

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**Scenario one:** On May 26, 2013, Fu-Jen University Folk Dance Club hosted a dance party in a spacious, fancy activity center, as a final event before the team was to disband. Founded in 1972, the team once included a hearty two hundred members. In 2013, however, there were only two.

**Scenario two:** I invited my friends to attend my university folk dance team performance at the National Taiwan University Folk Dance Club. Afterwards, one of my friends wrote on her blog, 'I thought folk dance was something you see in parks. That type of thing elders or housewives do when they get together to dance for fun and to make friends. I did not know that you needed to learn so many techniques, to perform in so many different forms and steps, and even to do a split!'<sup>1</sup>

This paper traces the space of folk dance activities in recent Taiwan. In Taiwan, folk dancing is not only an art form, but it also negotiates issues in political and social spheres within Taiwanese history; emphasized in its verb form, it has been very meaningful within this society. That is, the actual doing of folk dance is considered more important than the study of the folk dance itself. Moreover, as a folk dance practitioner, I also view folk dancing as not only a recreational and social activity, but also as an embodiment of the historical record within Taiwan, and of nostalgic memories for the Taiwanese folk dancers living and dancing outside their first homeland. I begin this paper with the above short stories illustrating my experiences, not only to highlight folk dancing as part of the participants' lives, but also to bring up the issue of how folk dancing is currently misunderstood by many people in Taiwan.

Folk dance, sometimes known as world traditional dance, is a dance genre originating from the people of a nation or region. Folk dance is a broad term, for it includes Taiwanese indigenous dances, Chinese ethnic dances,

polka, mazurka, hora, and even line dances. Many reputable scholars focused their efforts on folk dance research from the 30's to the 70's, such as Taiwanese scholar Dr. Tian-Min Lee (1925-2007), and Dr. Michael Herman (1911-1996) from the United States. However, under the "western-centric/Eurocentric" hierarchy in recent Taiwan's dance field, folk dance education, either practical or theoretical, has been undervalued. Even though scholars such as Susan Leigh Foster and Joann Kealiinohomoku have claimed different meanings between folk dance, world dance, and ethnic dance, many people still see different genres of traditional dance as one form. In Taiwan, folk dancers usually have to deal with misunderstandings from their family and friends. For the purposes of this paper, I claim that folk dance is equally valuable as any other "western dance" in academic research.

Brian Keith Axel's 'Introduction: Historical Anthropology and Its Vicissitudes' provides me with the methodology to carry out investigations as both an insider and outsider to the folk dance community. Axel (2002) claims that one of the main tasks for anthropologists is 'explaining the production of a people, and the production of space and time' (p.3). Axel's insights enable me to conduct my personal experiences as a "research insider" who records my sense of the current situation in the Taiwanese folk dance community, while at the same time reinterpreting meanings as I observe the dancing from the outside instead of as a practitioner. This process of observing and documenting is a kind of 'entextualization, a process constituting new forms of textual authority' (Axel, 2002, p.14) and enables me to examine invisible knowledge within the Taiwanese folk dance community.

### **History of Folk Dance Evolution in Taiwan**

The prosperity of folk dance activity in Taiwan dates back to the 1950's and is related to political factors. Due to the hostility between the governments of the Republic of China (currently known as Taiwan, R.O.C.) and the People's Republic of China (known as China, P.R.C.), Taiwanese Martial Law was applied throughout Taiwan since 1949, thus greatly undermining the constitutional rights

of the people, such as freedom of speech and publication, as well as assembly and physical movements. Although people were prohibited to gather freely under Martial Law, the government allowed people to do international folk dance as the only permitted assemblage. One can only assume that those in power did not feel the dances held any political, social, or cultural ideologies and that unnecessary problems and provocations by political radicals could be avoided by allowing this form of dance to be practiced. Also, since international folk dance included a broad variety of steps and what was considered pleasant music, it was seen as satisfying people from different ages, dance levels, and aesthetic preferences. It was considered the most suitable and least troublesome exercise, able to reach from kindergarten children to seniors.

In 1957, American folk dance expert Rickey Holden made his first visit to Taiwan and had workshops open to the public.<sup>2</sup> He taught about thirty works of dance from Europe and America, many of which are still danced today to include the Israeli dance, Mayim.<sup>3</sup> It was the first time international folk dance was introduced directly by a foreign instructor in Taiwan. At that time, folk dancing was popular in both Physical Education classes and leisure activities. However, when Martial Law was lifted in 1987, the Taiwanese people started welcoming various, newly-introduced recreations: ballroom, jazz, and music video dances became seen as more stylish, fashionable, and “suitable” for younger generations. The government no longer supported folk dance related activities since there was no need to have this particular “official, permitted group exercise” anymore. All the facts above coincided with the recession of folk dance activities in contemporary Taiwanese society.

### **Recent History and Current Status in the Folk Dance Field**

People in the folk dance community in Taiwan often divide dance groups into two categories: student and non-student. Each of them is facing crisis in different aspects at this time period. On the one hand, the decline of folk dance in Taiwan is most obviously shown in the current low number of student-based folk dance clubs. Those of us who have been involved with folk dance activities since

our student years certainly sense this declination of folk dance popularity. In the 1980's, there were over thirty-five university folk dance clubs and groups (Chen, 2008). Many high schools had their own dance teams as well. Currently, there are less than twenty university folk dance clubs, and none at the high school level. On the other hand, composition of club members also reveals a rather pathetic future. At the age under thirty, I am now considered a young dancer in a non-student based company, as most of the members in the club are in their late 30s and 40s. This means that the future existence of these dance companies is not guaranteed; it may be possible that there is no successor operating folk dance groups and events in Taiwan within one or two decades.

Even though the number of dancers has declined, cultivation of folk dance has not stopped moving forward. Many instructors, dancers, and students have been putting forth an effort to create opportunities for folk dancing to be practiced in differing venues. For example, each university folk dance team takes turns holding parties for folk dance communities, including both students and non-students. If budgetary and human resources are somehow made available, some dance teams are able to hold performances once a year.

Non-student folk dance companies, such as Orodancer Folk Dance Group, Feng-Tsai Folk Dance, and CCU Folk Dance Promotion Association, provide spaces for amateur dancers who look for continuous dance opportunities after college graduation. Taiwan International Folkdance Association (TIFA), founded in 2004, is a national level non-profit organization. It plays the role of integrating activities hosted by different folk dance companies and teams around the country, while also sponsoring larger events and competitions. Clearly, even without governmental support, folk dancers in Taiwan have found ways to sustain the practice of folk dance within their society. However, difficulties described previously reveal the underlying problems for the future development of the entire dance community. When senior members are not able to dance anymore, can these companies survive with fewer people? Do young dancers have enough abilities to undertake leading these companies and associations? Will there be enough resources to fulfill the tasks demanded of us? In the following discussion,

I introduce one group of dancers who are exploring ways to continue prospering (verb) the folk dance community in the current climate.

The situation like *Scenario two* at the beginning of this paper was also not the first time that people expressed their astonishment and apologies to me regarding their prior impressions of folk dance. I suggest in this paper that this misinterpretation has been one of the main reasons young people are not willing to join folk dance groups and activities. They often refuse to experience for themselves what folk dancing is as soon as they hear the term “folk dance.” To convince people to participate in folk dance events becomes, therefore, a crucial move for current dancers who are passionate about keeping the community alive. As a folk dance practitioner, I have witnessed a crisis amongst folk dance teams and companies as they try to survive. At the same time, I have benefitted from prizes and fellowships offered by instructors and associations that have been trying to rehabilitate the prosperity of folk dancing. Being a dance scholar, I hope to propagate the wonderfulness of folk dancing through not only my physical participation, but also in my choreographies of writing.

In this section, I revealed the difficulties of folk dance evolution in contemporary Taiwanese society. In what follows, I will examine recent activities related to folk dance popularization. As mentioned previously, folk dance includes various kinds of world traditional dances. Therefore, groups and companies around Taiwan have dance forms that they specialize in, and these divergent forms are also one of the ways to attract new members. Methods of recruitment differ, according to areas where companies are based; however, of importance to each company is the need to introduce folk dancing to the public; all companies desire to attract people to the field. In the next section, I discuss Orodancer as a group who has created methods and exciting ways of disseminating content to future practitioners of international folk dance.

### **Orodancer: Behind the Scene of Popularization**

Established in September 28, 1990, the Orodancer Folk Dance Group (abbreviated as Orodancer) is now one of the most famous non-student folk

dance organizations in Taiwan, and it is also the only folk dance company run through membership support. That is, practitioners become members by paying seasonal membership fees that cover their share of weekly tuition of classes as well as space rental. There are also certain benefits limited to members, such as quarterly released dance magazines and cheaper registration fees to some workshops. This established membership system has helped Orodancer become a stable and well-established representative of folk dance companies in Taiwan.

Orodancer was founded by five college graduates. Their initial intention was to create a space to dance after graduation. Today, the company is one of the most famous and emblematic folk dance groups in Taiwan. The word “Oro”<sup>4</sup> originates from the kind of dance well known in the Balkan Peninsula, meaning to dance in a circle. The founders chose this name for the company in order to invoke the spirit of people dancing hand-in-hand in circles, thus revealing one of the more important features of folk dance.

The *Orodancer Periodical* is another important feature the company has initiated. Published by Orodancer for over thirteen years, it has been the only magazine featuring folk dance in Taiwan. The periodical not only introduces folk arts around the globe, but also shares information of performances and other events within and outside the Taiwanese folk dance community. It is an important source for Taiwanese folk dancers to acquire related news and knowledge. The development Orodancer has created provides an important resource for other smaller-scale folk dance companies to embody.

In particular, Orodancer has targeted student participants and non-student populations in the following manner, to pursue the process of folk dancing popularization:

### **1. Popularization targeting student participants**

According to the company’s historical archives, Orodancer started hosting activities, such as leadership training and administrative tasks, for university students in 2002. For instance, in cooperation with Taiwan International Folkdance Association (TIFA), the company has also been helping with the

University and College Folk Dance Contest for more than five years. For the purposes of this paper, I will now describe in more detail how Orodancer created and popularized the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Folk Dance Experiencing Camp in order to reach out to the youth of Taiwan.

The World Folk Dance Experiencing Camp has now been in existence for six years. The aim of this annual event is to introduce international folk dance and related elements to students, and to build connections among folk dance participants from different schools (Orodancer, 2011, p.1). Fundamental to the mission of the camp is the introduction of the cultural values of folk dance to new dancers entering the field. However, another very important aspect of the camp is providing students to make new friends while in the process of learning about and practicing the dances. In order to bring in students from all walks of life, Orodancer and other coordinating groups have insisted that the camp do not charge a fee to student participants.<sup>5</sup> Over time, the camp reached beyond university students to include participants of all ages and levels of dancers, to include dance instructors and those with no prior experience. The camp then becomes an event that not only introduces folk dance to new-comers, but also provides practical opportunities that can help train future dance instructors. For instance, people who are familiar with folk dance can observe teaching methods suitable for beginners, as well as help beginners around them as a pragmatic way of practice. This notion of “dance without age limitation” and “dance for all ages” has been and still is two of the main features in folk dancing history in Taiwan. Even though many dance artists assert that one must start learning dancing from a very young age when speaking of dance, in the instance of this folk dance camp, participants are always encouraged to bring their friends, children, and even parents to any event in the folk dance community. The goal of breaking down barriers between ages and occupations within a society is foundational to this camp.

Different from other folk dance camps in which the concentration is on learning a series of steps or techniques, the Experiencing Camp contains a section called “Cultural Seminar,” which lectures the participants about cultural

contexts of international folk dances from selected regions worldwide. While East Asian countries are on the educational repertoire, some nations in Middle Asia and Europe are often introduced as well. According to conversations between members of Orodancer and myself, contexts in the Cultural Seminar include a general study of the geography, history, and culture of the dances, and an introduction to the differing music styles of the dances in relation to the dance's form.

The Cultural Seminar at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Folk Dance Experiencing Camp in 2011 was 'Getting to know folk music through the beat' (Orodancer, 2011, p.2). Tien-Min Lee, one of the most important scholars in the folk dance field, once pointed out that dance 'is the art of time, and beats are the time element of dance' (1998). This emphasis on the connection between music and dance is especially important for beginners who often seem to only want to learn the steps without understanding the close relationship of the timing of the beats to how the steps are felt and performed. What is particularly interesting to me is how the seminar instilled in students, especially the beginners, an awareness of how differing cultures around the world work with the timing of beats differently and how this timing is connected to the cultural values, the geography, and, finally, the shape of the dance. This understanding helps the students imagine themselves dancing within new spaces and new places.

## **2. Popularization targeting non-student practitioners**

Another important task that Orodancer initiated was how to continually introduce folk dancing to the general public. To this end, in 1990, the group created the "Oro folk dance lesson" in Taipei, and was available for both group members and non-members in order to learn beginner-level international folk dances. Different from the Experience Camp described previously, these weekly lessons targeted non-student participants who were not able to join college-level folk dance clubs. Tuition for the classes depended on whether a participant had membership or not, thereby encouraging people to become members of the company and participate in the journal and other opportunities that continually



arose through the group. After four phases (one phase had about eight to twelve times of class) of the beginner-level course, intermediate-level course was initiated at the same venue but different days of the week.

Besides folk dance classes in Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan, Orodancer held national teaching programs around the country during 1991 and 1992. To be more precise, the company invited instructors and set up one-time workshops outside Taipei. The main motivation for this action was to encourage those Orodancer members outside of Taipei who also owned equal rights and benefits for attending folk dancing events. Moreover, regions outside of Taipei often lack enough access to workshops and related resources, thus it was worth holding the around-the-country program.

However, it was difficult for Orodancer to maintain this touring enterprise over the years since, as a non-profit organization, there was a very limited budget and human resources. As a result, this nation-wide teaching program was unable to be sustained for more than two years. Fortunately, folk dance companies and school teams based in the middle and southern part of Taiwan have got increased acknowledgement, and funding has been provided by TIFA for selected groups in those regions. It would be interesting as a future research project to explore if the countrywide teaching program established by Orodancer was responsible for the interest in folk dance within the southern part of Taiwan; nevertheless, folk dance organizations have been seeking equal development in different regions throughout the country, as Taiwanese folk dancers have always considered the community in Taiwan as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

As an art form, folk dance varies from place to place and from generation to generation. It is a vital art form that dynamically changes throughout time and space as its practice and performance are passed down through different generations. This essay archives specific events in current folk dance field in Taiwan, and simultaneously demonstrates the effectiveness of these events to popularize the dance form and recruit new folk dancers. Without doubt, more

effort should be made to revitalize folk dance as a recreational movement and art form.

This essay further reveals various decisions that Orodancer, together with other folk dance associations, have made to achieve the goal of attracting new participants into the folk dance community, specifically by offering different formats and learning possibilities to meet various needs of students and non-students as well as the people in different regions who have their preferred way of participating in folk dancing. Therefore, it is important to adjust event goals (in terms of attendance, recruitment, efficiency, and pedagogical aspects) and methods of organizing the various planned activities. In order to make this notion easily understood, I first analyze through the table below, the comparison of dissimilar targets in different aspects.

Table 1: Comparison between two main categories of participants

Event Participants Aspects Compared	Student	Non-student
Financial Status	Weak	Strong
Flexibility in Time	Strong	Weak
Commitment	Strong	Weak
Physical Condition	Higher potential	Depends
Technology Usage Habits	Strong	Depends

In Table One, I compare the five elements I consider key differences between student and non-student participants: financial status, time flexibility, commitment to the team, physical condition of the body, and technology usage habits. For students, registration fees and other expenses, including transportation and accommodation fees, are often the greatest concern when deciding whether to attend an event. Thus, activities providing free admission, like the Experiencing Camp, are more attractive to students. On the other hand, from my observations, people who have jobs have more time restrictions when it comes to participating in recreational activities. For example, weekly courses on

weekday evenings may not be feasible for non-students who are employed, while short-term, efficient, and elaborate programs are suitable for non-student dancers.

With regard to time distribution, students possibly have more commitment to folk dance teams they individually belong to because folk dancing plays the role of an extracurricular activity in college and university campuses. Therefore, programs designed for each team can be semester-based and coherent, while for the general public, people often expect to see outcomes of what they have learned immediately after a single event. Dance is an activity that highly relies upon human bodies, thus physical conditions of participants are crucial to contents of courses. Students are encouraged to try different, and sometimes challenging, dance genres. For those whose bodies are less physically capable, organizers must be concerned with choosing dance pieces with suitable levels of difficulty. Another interesting shift is that as more and more people realize that folk dance is for all ages, participants start to bring their children with them, and family-friendly events have become the new trend to challenge event organizers.

Determining different and appropriate ways to advertise each event is another important factor in order to make sure meaningful information is reaching the right group of people. For instance, announcements through Facebook can be very efficient among students, while emails, flyers, and even face-to-face invitations might work better for practitioners in their 40s or 50s. Technological abilities and habits may seem irrelevant, yet they are critical for event holders to ensure exposure of upcoming programs to their target audiences. Further, even though it is pleasant to hold dance activities in interior spaces with wooden floors and mirrors on the wall, organizers have noticed that when events take place in open spaces, there are chances to attract people passing by. Walk-in attendees have, therefore, been made welcome in most folk dance gatherings.

To conclude the comparison of the above categories, it is important for experienced folk dancers to consider the purpose of the activities they are sponsoring. For example, do those events offer only a one-time experience, or continuous studies? However, most importantly, instructors are now figuring out

how to attract and keep new members in the groups after their first experience. Therefore, it has become extremely important for instructors to notice how participants with dissimilar levels and experiences in dance react to the material being taught and to the methods of teaching. While some people may feel bored about repetition of already mastered instruction, others may feel frustrated because they are unable to follow the instructor. To take every single person's background into account is truly challenging.

In summary, in this paper I discuss how over time folk dancers in Taiwan, together with the folk dance community, have been ignored. However, this community is important and is constantly developing methods for continuing its vitality in the country. Folk dance and folk dancing are both important, because they carry historical memories of many Taiwanese people within the country and overseas. With this in mind, my future research is to utilize both historical archives and my personal experiences as a folk dancer to examine folk dance communities in both Taiwan and California formed by Taiwanese people, and to explore how folk dancing serves as a memorial while also creating a bridge for connecting different generations. This article is my first step on my research journey in which I begin the process of documenting past and current situation of folk dance in Taiwan. Through my proposed collection of data concerning how participants, companies, and associations have accomplished the growth in popularity of the folk dance community, the pros and cons of these strategies become clear and make it easier to establish more sufficient methods for continued growth in the future. The importance of the folk dancing resurgence has been put in motion as I begin my research journey; I am proud to be a part of this ongoing adventure.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The blog is originally written in Chinese. I rewrote and translated the sentences into English.

<sup>2</sup> In 1960, Holden visited Taiwan for the second time, focusing his teaching on couple dances.

<sup>3</sup> Mayim means 'water' in Hebrew. The dance describes happiness of Israeli people finding the origin of water.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes known as "hora," a traditional Romanian or Bulgarian circle dance.

<sup>5</sup> Due to the inflation of prices, participants paid 100 Taiwanese Dollars (less than 4 USD) per person to join the event.

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