

Royal Court Dance of Thailand

Thai dance theatre is a strict form of disciplinary performing art whose training starts from 'pleng-char-pleng-reo' (elementary dance following the pace of slow to fast tempo). Among the various dancing styles of Thai classical dance is the pattern of 'tua-phra' (male characters) which is usually performed by female dancers. The following piece, by Chommanad Kijkhun, is extracted from research that explored the components, structure and grammar of this dance form.

This research discusses some major essences of Thai classical dance. An interdisciplinary approach was employed with research methodology based on Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* theory of ancient Indian dance, and linguistics and laban movement analysis.



mue bae, the first variation



mue bae, the second variation

In Thai classical dance, bendable and flexible arms and fingers are requisite. There are sixteen directions of dancing, involving three levels of body postures: high (head level), middle (shoulder level) and low (abdomen level). For the backward posture, the position of the arms must be at the low level. Placing foot at the side-diagonal position creates a visual dimension, which helps the dancer to achieve an angular posture while kneeling down. To make the curving posture discernible and elegant, dancers rotate their lower arms into and out of the body trunk as much as possible. The muscles that are used most are side and back muscles.

In terms of structure, there are three patterns of hand posturing: '*mue-bae*', '*mue-jeed*' and '*mue-loe-kaew*'. There are eighty-eight posturing patterns and seven dancing sets. The principle of body movement concerns a reciprocal relation between body weight and limb rotation. While the posturing and the moving of arms and hands do not relate to those of head, body trunk, legs and feet, they help balance the body and implement visual aesthetics.

Concerning the grammar, the *tua phra* has forty-nine alphabets, five vowels and twenty-one tonal accents, and the construction of its vocabulary comprises of '*ta-ton*' (beginning posture), '*ta-tor*' (interval posture), '*ta-tarm*' (following posture) and '*ta-toke-tang*' (decorative posture), with the last being the beginning posture for the next vocabulary. In this logic, all dance vocabulary is like the formation of a chain.

Studying the *tua phra* (male role)

Traditionally, there are two groups in Thai classical dance. The first is performed by the common people, and the second is by the Royal Court dancers. The former features only men, and has an imprecise and heavy movement compared to the latter. Only women are allowed to perform the Royal Court dance. A woman dancer is assigned the male role, known as *tua phra*, and for training, she has to start with *pleang cha* and *pleng reo* routines which would help to familiarise the body to the Royal Court style, whose gestures have been kept alive from generation to generation.

My research on *tua phra*, the Royal Court Dance, centres on its characteristics that are based on theories from Bharot Natyasart, linguistics and Laban Notation. The objectives of the study are: to study the dance characteristics, the structure of these characteristics, and the grammar of the dance.



mue jip



mue lokaew

Characteristics of *tua phra*

The characteristics of a good *tua phra* relate to the desirable qualities of different body parts, such as a beautiful face, an oval-shaped face, a pronounced forehead, and a tall and slim body. The *tua phra* has to perform daily exercises of bending her fingers and arms backward. Three hand gestures are predominantly found in *pleang cha* and *pleang reo*.

In the first main position, *mue bae*, four fingers are placed together, extended upward and bend backward. There are two variations (page 43, left image): one with the thumb bent inward and the other is with the thumb in the same plane as the finger.

In the second position, *mue jip*, the tip of the thumb is joined to the index finger, while the other fingers extend upward and reeled backward, while the wrist is bent toward the forearm.

In the third position, *mue lo kaew*, the tip of middle finger is pressed into the joint of the middle joint of the thumb to create a circle. The other fingers are extended upward and reeled backward, while the wrist is positioned at 90 degree to the forearm in either direction, depending on the specific gesture.

In Thai classical dance, one is required to twist the forearms as far as possible, whether they are in a bent position or extended straight. The lower legs must be equally flexible. During the arm-twisting, the dancer must maintain the *jip* (second position as described above) without breaking the connection between finger and thumb. The wrist must also maintain its 90-degree angle to the forearm. The head, the chest, the stomach, arms, hands, fingers, legs and feet are in action continuously, whilst the shoulders, hips, palms and knees are used from time to time.

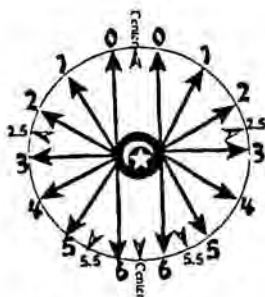


Diagram 1
*Directions of body parts
in male role dance*

From an aerial view of a dancer in standing position, the limbs point to sixteen possible horizontal directions. You can compare these directions to a clock-face although you need to add 2.5 and 5.5 and remove 4, 5 and 6 to give seven directions on either side of the clock-face (see diagram). The centre line that runs from 0 to 6 offers the other two directions, with the leg bent behind or lifted forward.

It is a rule that the dancer neither adopts a horizontal position, nor jumps, nor lifts her leg above her waist, nor extends her arm above her head. When the dancer rises to the tip of her toes, she must keep her knees bent. The leg must always remain bent when raised.

There are three main arm levels. The extended arm can be at (1) shoulder level and (2) approximately 30 degrees above shoulder level (see photos at bottom of page). The third level is with arms downwards, with hands at abdomen level.

There is only one position for the arm behind, and it is at 5.5 on our imaginary clock.

There are only two leg positions, (1) the raised and bent open leg and (2) the knee bent backward, with heel close to the hip (see top two photos)

The rhythm is in a 2/4 time, and can be compared to the continuous flow of the links in a chain. The dancer moves with lightness and, at the end of each musical phrase, should complete their gesture on the final beat. They can choose how to arrive at that position, using a fast or slow movement. The best achievement of the *tua phra* is through a strong controlled flowing movement.

Grace is attained by the following position: the legs are bent at the knees, with knees together and the leg turned out; the shoulders are held back with a straight spine and the arms twisted out at shoulder level.

To keep the body in balance during movement, the head may tilt to one side while the torso remains relaxed with the body weight locked within the pelvis. The shifting of weight is simple and slow. The path of the dance is either a straight line or curved, and the steps tend to be small. It is the upper body, the arms and hands which are the focal point of Thai dance.

Variations of the *tua phra* pose

I analyze the *tua phra* poses, with reference to the Indian dance form called *naritta* and the dramatic theory from Bharot Natyasart. Like the *naritta*, there is essentially no emotion or meaning in the *tua phra* form; there is only pure gesture.

*The raised,
bent open leg*



*The knee
bent backwards*



(Twist the forearms)



*The first and the Second The third level of arms
levels of arms*



Knee bending *twist forearm*

The combination of different gestures creates a series. There are eighty-eight poses derived from the two songs and seven sequences. They combine three hand positions, the arm positions, the three levels and the directions. For example, when the arm is in the wong bon position, with the *meu bae* hand, and the arm is bent inward to the body at the 2.5 direction, one can derive nine separate poses. If both hands and arms are symmetrical, there are forty-nine possible poses.

A table of the directions and levels of *mue bae* (first variation), *mue jip* and *mue lo kaew* that twist inward and outward. ▼

Direction	mue bae												mue jip												mue lo kaew								
	Arms twisted inwards						Arms twisted outwards						Arms twisted inwards						Arms twisted outwards						Arms twisted inwards			Arms twisted outwards					
	stretched arms			bent arms			stretched arms			bent arms			stretched arms			bent arms			stretched arms			bent arms			stretched arms			bent arms					
	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low			
0					✓	✓					✓	✓					✓																
1		✓			✓			✓			✓	✓					✓			✓			✓										
2					✓			✓				✓	✓					✓	✓					✓									
2.5		✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓					✓		✓				✓				✓						
3		✓						✓					✓					✓													✓		
5.5													✓				✓																
Cent																																	

A table of the directions and levels of *mue bae* (the first variation), *mue jip* without twisting arms, and *mue bae* (the second variation) ▼

Direction	mue bae, without twisting arm						mue jip, without twisting arm						mue bae, the second variation					
	Arms twisted inwards			Arms twisted outwards			Arms twisted inwards			Arms twisted outwards			Arms twisted inwards			Arms twisted outwards		
	stretched arms			bent arms			stretched arms			bent arms			stretched arms			bent arms		
	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low	high	mid	low
0											✓	✓						
1						✓												✓
2																		
2.5																		
3										✓								
5.5																		
Cente																✓		✓

The legs and feet of the dancer must always be turned out. When the body weight is on one foot, the other foot needs to be in a specific position. As the dancer steps forward, the weight shifts to the forward-most foot. The step is always made with the heel first, then toe, with the knee bending as the dancer moves forward. This creates the illusion of the *tua phra* gliding gracefully forward.

To execute turns, the whole body must rotate at the same time. The dancer can only move from side-to-side or forward-backward, but never diagonally, and the weight must always shift forward before the body turns. All turns are made strictly with bent knees.



Open feet, heels together, toes raised



Walking step

For the *yued yup* movement and the *hom khaw* movements, the leg has to be held in tension, and because the rhythm is a *staccato* one, the leg must pause a little before it completes its movement.

The grammar of *tua phra*

Before we apply the Laban Notation to the *pleang char* and *pleang reo* dances, we have to begin with a linguistic and movement analysis of the *tua phra* poses.

The Thai linguistic system, as we know, has twenty-one consonants, twenty-one vowels and five tones. Borrowing from the Thai sound system, I am able to derive forty-nine consonants, six vowels and twenty-one tones that can be assigned to the characteristics of the dance poses.

I define the "consonant" as the smallest possible unit to denote the combination of the hand with the arm. Combining two "consonants" together gives rise to a *mae tha*, which comprises of the *tha ton* and the *tha tam*. The "vowel" is the continuous movement that links two "consonants" together to create *tha tor*. The "vowel" movements include straightening the entire body vertically, bending, bowing, gliding and turning.

The tone is used to polish the movement and concerns the leg positions and the angle of the head. These factors are isolated from the head and arms, and are used to make the poses at all levels more elegant, balanced and smoother.

Therefore, I identify these twenty-one tones:

1. Walking Step
2. Knee bent, foot behind
3. Knee bent, ball of foot touches ground (behind)
4. Ball of foot touches ground (front)
5. Rapid running on the spot (very small movements)
6. Open step with pause
7. Open step with sweep
8. Open stamp (heel-toe)
9. Open step (heel-toe)
10. Twist sideways (heel-toe, heel-toe)
11. Open step advancing further
12. See 6 but with a tap of the ball of the foot instead of pause
13. Open feet, heels together, toes raised

14. Open foot raises with knee bent
15. Raising on toes and lowering with knees bent
16. Lowering with knees bent and raising on toes
17. Cross step, knees bend
18. Lowering shoulder, tilt head in counter direction
19. Back foot slides forward
20. Standing with one ankle touching instep, toes raised
21. Tilt head

A 'word' can be created by a combination of consonants, vowels and tones, as shown in diagram 2

To recapitulate, the *tha ton* is the consonant to be linked by a *tha tor*, a movement (the vowel) which will take us to the next *tha ton*. The final consonant that appears at the end of a musical phrase is called the *tha*

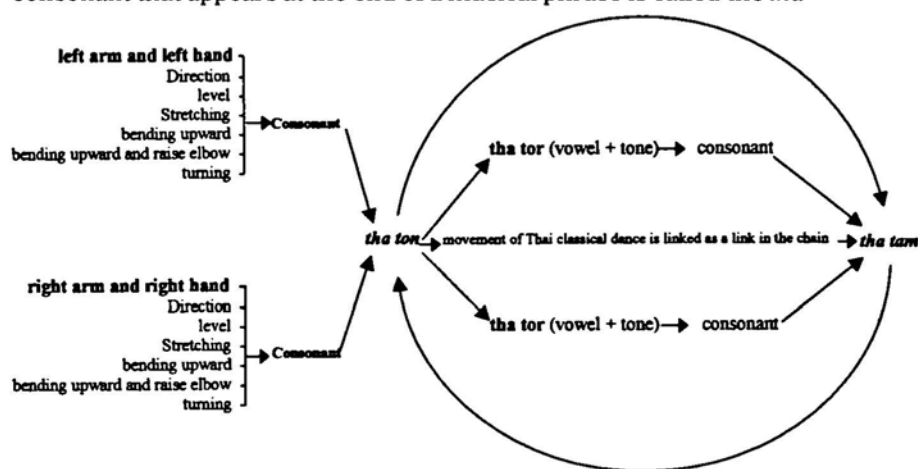


Diagram 2 Pose mixing formula

tam, and it is always the first consonant at the beginning of the new phrase - a link in the chain.

By closely observing the one-dancer *tua phra* form, we gain the means to describe a larger system. From this research, it is clear that the characteristics of the *tua phra* can be applied to all other aspects found in Royal Court Dance. Further analysis of the directions, levels, variations, poses and grammar can also be used to explore the roots of Thai dance, as well as other Asian dance forms.