

The Journey of Finding Paths in Javanese Court Dance by Sensory and Somatic Experiences of Taiwanese

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ABSTRACT

Is it possible to discover the spirit of another culture just by feeling without knowing? What happened when Taiwanese met the Javanese court dances with body and senses only? Can we compare *Srimpi* (one of the court dance forms of Java) and *Tai Chi Chuan* of China? How to learn and feel the dance culture? In the Javanese court dance workshop, my classmates and I were in our own “webs of senses” instead of “webs of meanings” to embody a little bit of Javanese court in Taiwan. To listen to gamelan music, to touch the *sampur* (a long strip of cloth used while dancing) and floor, to shape the body in the frame, to feel other dancers’ movements; all that confused us and made us get lost in the contexts of Java for a long time. Finding paths to learn the dances is a personal journey for one’s own and via which one may understand more about different cultures and more about oneself as well. I will share the experiences of some learners, including myself, to discuss the meanings of what we suffered and what we rebuilt.

Keywords: Javanese court dance; embodiment; new culture learning

ABSTRAK

Perjalanan Menemukan Tuntunan dalam Menarikan Tarian Keraton Jawa melalui Pengalaman Sensori dan Somatik Orang Taiwan. Mungkinkah menemukan semangat budaya lain hanya dengan merasakan tanpa mengetahui? Apa yang terjadi ketika orang Taiwan bertemu dengan tarian keraton Jawa hanya dengan tubuh dan indera mereka? Bisakah kita membandingkan *Srimpi* (salah satu tarian keraton Jawa) dengan *Tai Chi Chuan* dari Cina? Bagaimana cara mempelajari dan merasakan budaya dari sebuah tarian? Dalam lokakarya tari keraton Jawa, saya dan teman-teman sekelas berada dalam “perangkap indera” kami sendiri, bukannya “perangkap makna” untuk mewujudkan sedikit keraton Jawa di Taiwan. Mendengarkan musik gamelan, menyentuh sampur dan lantai, membentuk tubuh agar sesuai bingkai, merasakan gerakan penari lain; semua membingungkan kami dan membuat kami tersesat dalam konteks Jawa untuk waktu yang lama. Menemukan tuntunan untuk mempelajari tarian adalah perjalanan yang bersifat pribadi, dan melalui perjalanan tersebut seseorang dapat memahami lebih banyak tentang budaya yang berbeda maupun tentang diri sendiri. Saya akan membagikan pengalaman beberapa pelajar Taiwan, termasuk saya sendiri, untuk menjelaskan kesulitan yang telah kami lalui dan apa yang berhasil kami bangun kembali.

Kata kunci: tarian keraton Jawa; penubuhan; pembelajaran budaya baru

Introduction

In November of 2018, I participated in a workshop of Javanese court dance hosted by Wan-Chao Chang in Taipei. It was the first time I met the elegant course instructor, Melati, and the first time I saw the court dance of Jogjakarta (or Yogyakarta). Melati is the instructor of the Javanese court dance workshop. She graduated from Indonesia Institute of the Art, Yogyakarta (Institute Seni Indonesia) and got a master's degree from Sanata Dharma University Jogja. As a court dancer in Pakualaman in Jogja since 22 years old, she continued to make research on culture and philosophy of dance. Melati is now a candidate for a PHD in TNUA (Taipei National University of the Arts) in Taiwan. The courses are *Sari Kusuma* first and *Srimpi Pandhelori* after. *Sari Kusuma* and *Srimpi Pandhelori* are names of court dances in Jogja style. Before this, I had learned dances for more than twenty years from over twenty areas, such as villages in East or Central Europe, West or Central Asia, China or India...etc. Those dances are for celebrations, entertainment, ceremonies or labor...etc. I tried to match my body with the traditional music of the locals and then to enjoy the rhythm of my body while dancing in their ways. Different music from different areas drove my feeling in various ways by movements in various styles. However, experience from the workshop in 2018 was frightening but amazing. It let me taste not only the rhythm of the body, but also the rhythm of culture. All the processes aroused me to think about the embodiment of a new culture in totally different ways.

In the Class

"I will go nowhere if I cannot let all my previous experiences go". After struggling and getting lost for more than half a year in Javanese court dance class, I shared that with my classmates.

In the beginning of the study, although Melati asked us just to follow and to feel only, I still tried to analyze every movement I saw: the two-dimensional frame of the body, the flowing of limbs, the counts of the movements, the path of head and chin. And then I tried to learn those physical techniques part

by part...It was no use! I could not complete any action even though I tried to follow the teacher. I totally failed! "What's the problem?" I asked. "What does it mean just following and feeling?" I fell into chaos in the following classes and had no time to coordinate with my mind and body. To follow without conscious thought is what I could do at that moment, so I did. After six months, I could not do the movements myself but I could imitate and follow the teacher and be able to feel a slight flowing inside my body. Step by step, it seems that my body has been gradually controlled. However, when the music played, I began to realize that my movements must combine with the gamelan music. Well, I started a journey in another labyrinth.

I must find my way in the labyrinth of music. To recognize the structures of the gamelan music? To start with metal percussion instrument *gong* as the first count? Or to find *keprak* (a wooden instrument) as hints? I knew all of the above but it was all useless, I still got lost. Again, I decided to stop thinking, just follow the gamelan over and over. Sometimes I could hear the *gong* or *keprak*, sometimes I couldn't. I knew that the routes were getting clearer for me although it seemed endless and I had to go forward just by listening and moving.

I found myself mapping my body in the frames of the dance without a mirror: I had to imagine and make sure (by the teacher or the other classmates) the position of legs, the distance between arms and torso, the angle of elbows and shoulders, the shape of fingers and toes and the expression of head and face. To assemble all together for a whole in compliance. After mapping in space, I mapped my body in time: to step on the exact note of *keprak*, to move based on melody or feeling as well, to coordinate the speed with the tension of the music. There was no absolute path in the gamelan music, repairing and beautifying the movements are endless works. Mapping without thinking or judging, but with body and feel. Otherwise, too much thinking can cause interference! All I did was trying to put my body in the right place in time and in space. It happened in each class that after 2 hours practicing, I finally could feel the stretch of my spine, the change of weight between

legs, the touching between fingers and *sampur*, toes and floor, the energy within my body and between dancers. The most important of all was that I wasn't worry about what "I cannot do", and just concentrated on what "I can do". Then, I could let my body and mind become one in such a peaceful state during those following and imitating processes. I wasn't the only one, all other students in the class felt in the state of peace. What a magic! We experienced moving with body and senses only, to imitate the teacher or to follow someone whom could be seen, one after another (in *Srimpi Pandhelori*, four dancers keep changing direction and formation, so we could not see Melati or anyone else when we turned). At that moment, I must feel others' moves, from which, I imitated or followed, or adjusted the distance between us. During the discussion at the end of each class, we found that we all felt the balanced relationship and homogeneous atmosphere among us after some time of being lost and merging with the others.

Restriction? Liberation? or Liberation after Restriction?

Most of Taiwanese in the workshop faced those chaos and defeats like me, but each one has her own feeling and thinking. After about one year's learning, I interviewed some of my classmates in the class including Ally Chang, Newfish Kao and Emma Chou. Maybe they were not familiar with Java and neither did they know any history about the court's culture, but their bodies experienced deeply and to catch sight of the culture in some ways.

Ally Chang, my partner in *Srimpi Pandhelori*, shared her feeling of being restricted in her fighting journey of court dance:

How to count gamelan music? I felt that I was trapped in the labyrinth. There must be some principles to help us to find the way!? It's impossible to get the techniques just by practicing again and again! Who created those methods of inheritance? Who dominates the power? Why did I feel that I am controlled by someone hidden behind? Hierarchy of authority is unequal

between me and the designer of this system! (Interviewed on January 27, 2021).

I felt the same as Ally that it seems there is a real master arranging everything in that labyrinth, including time and space, rules and styles, individual and group! In addition to the difficulties of the dance movement, many rules must be obeyed. We had to do *sembahan* (actions to pay respect) to the holy creator (or the king) of unknown before dancing, and smiling is not allowed while dancing. Besides, *jarik* (cloth around the lower body while dancing) must be worn in certain way and the *parang* pattern (a sacred pattern belonging to the royal before) on *jarik* must show in the right direction. Most of all, I had no other choice but to follow my teacher because I did not know what to do. There is no court in Taiwan so it is difficult for Taiwanese to imagine the hierarchy in court culture can be appreciated as aesthetics. In my opinion, by those hierarchy of authority in the form of arts, people may be ordered and be refined. However, unlike Ally, I enjoy the movements being strictly regulated because it is challenging but so beautiful.

Another classmate Newfish Kao, who had studied *Bharatanatyam*, one kind of classical dances of India for four years, felt totally different during the process.

I just want to dance barefoot! I don't want to be tied up! It's much simpler without shoes, isn't it? There is no straight guideline in *Srimpi* for me. I feel free when I move. The movements of fingers and head are quite personal. I can use my own speed to move and connect with you all at the same time. Moreover, I love gamelan music. After hearing one song more than one hundred times, I felt that I am alone with such a melody even in the class occasionally! (Interviewed on February 8, 2021).

Newfish was not worry about failure or losing control; on the contrary, she transformed such a state of uncertain to freedom. Her ambition was to enjoy the movements with music; she tried to liberate herself instead of being restricted. The boundaries of such dance on the other hand makes her to imagine the design of the composition:

When we dance *Srimpi* together, everyone is in her small world with her own curves and dynamics. It seems that we are the same but we are not! I stay in my own free land and follow the group synchronously. (Interviewed on February 8, 2021).

I am curious about the “free land” of Newfish, it seems that she immersed in such an uncertain but free soundscape. I agree with Newfish’s observations about the synchronization among us. Sometimes I did not know how to move and no one could be followed because I could not see anyone at the moment. The only way was to feel the neighbors nearby and just coordinate with her -up or down, near or away- with thermal energy between us. To evaluate the space with others let all of us tightly integrated in gamelan. like the micro world of each synthesized a macro world as a whole.

The most special case is Emma Chou, the only one in the class who had never danced before. She talked less but practiced more than others and never mentioned about her suffering (just the same like mine) in the workshop. She listened to gamelan all the time and draw figures of the movements one by one on paper. After three months of learning, she told me her miracles:

I was always in a hurry before, my tasks had to be completed on time, even more, ahead of time. I had no patience to wait and I could not bear with making mistakes! However, during the workshop of Javanese court dance, I had no control; I tried to find a way but there was none! What should I do? I’ll go crazy if I insist on remembering the movements! Well... at last, I decided to just follow, and gave up on remembering anything in the class and never checked my image in the mirror. Gradually, I could find the positions of my head, my hands and my legs...no matter if the postures were right or not. I listened to gamelan all the time and practiced almost every day although I couldn’t remember how to dance even now.

I don’t know why, but I find myself becoming someone different. Life is also busy but I could slow down now and endure a big delay. Sometimes I feel calm even if the

condition is a mess. I can tolerate accident instead of pursuing perfection. Now when I am in chaos, I listen to gamelan or I dance if possible. At that moments, I can imagine myself moving in the gamelan, which really makes me feel at peace. (Interviewed on October 12, 2020).

Learning court dances will change one’s tempo of life? Can court dancers be trained to become patient and peaceful not only in the *pendapa* (traditional building of Java) but in their daily life? I respect the hard work and the deep awareness of Emma, and I hope to find the connections between this journey and my own life, also can be aware of my steps much more sensitively not only in dance but in my normal life.

Most students in the class felt the frame- frame of body, frame of format, frame of movement, frame of formation, frame of space and frame of relationship- in the Javanese court dance. Is the frame a cage or a target that will lock or train us? Is gamelan a music for life or a labyrinth created to declaring power purposely? What are our options? To match the frame, neglect the frame, or transform the frame? Through sensory and physical practices, we may feel some spirit of court in java and become aware of ourselves more. What are the origins and meanings of aesthetics? It seems that beauty can be formed from the ability of self-awareness and self-control of an individual, or from the sensitivities to get along with others, and all that beautifying of humans can be achieved in forms of art. Restriction or liberation? Maybe It depends on one’s own interpretations, but both are elements in the aesthetics of the court in my view.

Srimpi versus Tai Chi Chuan

After *Sari Kusuma*, we spent a long time to learn *Srimpi Pandhelori* of Jogja. *Srimpi*, as Benedict explained in his paper:

Srimpi is commonly known as a symbol of the balance of the universe. The Javanese believe that this dance is an expression of the balance between good and evil, dark and light, or earth and sky. This explains why the four dancers wear the same costume

while engaging in a symbolic conflict in which no one wins, because all have equal power and strength (Suharto, 1992:27).

Benedict's dissertation reminds me about the duality of *Tai Chi* in China. From my observation, the concept of *Tai Chi* is very similar to this. *Tai Chi* is one kind of Chinese philosophy and *Tai Chi Chuan* are body techniques based on which. *Tai Chi's* theory is based on *Taoist* and *Confucian* philosophy fused *yin* and *yang* into a single ultimate. It represents the counterbalance between *yin* and *yang* which symbolizes female and male, night and day, evil and noble...etc. How to balance the power in nature or in society? And moreover, within oneself? Both Javanese court dance and *Tai Chi* try to find the answer from the duality in nature by physical training.

Principles of body techniques for both are similar. First, to make the center of gravity as low as possible; and then to put weight on only one foot are basic trainings for stability. Sometimes, when transfer of weight could last for a long time because of the slow movement, one has to keep one's body stable with a single foot in proper speed with highly control. At that moment, one can aware the changing of one's own body much more clearly. Second, to extend the spine and to erect the frame of the torso are emphasized in both. Comparatively speaking, frame with two-dimension in court dance and three-dimension in *Tai Chi Chuan*. Third, within such a highly controlled frame, one also has to relax the muscle to allow energy flow and followed by the relaxed mind. The methods and the goal of both are the same: to control one's soma and senses at first and from that, to control one's mind, to elevate one's spirit, to enter a state of empty, to get rid of self-awareness and at last, to become a better person (Hughes-Freeland, 2008:44-52; Tsai, 2011)! The only way to achieve the goal is to keep practicing with one's own body, as one practices the techniques, he/she is shaping his/her appearance, and shaping his/her mind at the same moment.

Wan-Chao Chang, the organizer and the leader of the Javanese court dance workshop I joined in 2018, has experiences of *Tai Chi Chuan* and perceives herself in details. She reminded me to concentrate on breathing, to inhale and

to exhale with body movements. It was really helpful, especially after I remember most of the steps. Awareness of breathing helps me to relax my shoulders more and allows me *mandhak* (squat) much deeper. It seems that conscious breathing will channel the energy inside my body.

Court dances of Java and *Tai Chi Chuan* of China have their own traditions and present in different ways, but the concepts of both are the same: training the body for a long time is needed and it aims to control one's behavior and mind. Even more, the qualities of movements are similar: balance, control, relax with energy. At last the aesthetic of flowing and the peace of feelings are given.

The Reconstruction of "Webs of Senses"

After the struggles of physical and mental conflict, after my nightmare of troublesome gamelan rhythm, and after facing "I can't," gradually, my movements could link the music and my mind. I found myself little by little feeling the spirit of *Joged Mataram* proposed by Prince Suryobrongto: "Total concentration...permits a channeling of this energy in a proper direction... believing in oneself without becoming proud or arrogant...do not be weak ... nor be afraid" (Suharto, 1992:44). It really happened to me from *wiraga* to *wirama* defined by Suryainingrat step by step, and maybe one day in the future, *wirasa* will come. The definition of dance by Suryainingrat has been formulated into three basic principles which are: 1. *wiraga*: whole body movements; 2. *wirama*: accompaniment of dance by the sound of gamelan music, choreographed to match with the rhythm of gamelan music; and 3. *wirasa*: the harmony of facial expression or symbol and the meaning of the dance (Suharto, 1992)

Joged Mataram (The Dance of Mataram) is a theory of performance, which was written down by Gusti Suryobrongto and published in the 1970's. It is a philosophy that identifies four requirements to perfect the art of dancing. Since then it has become the key text for explaining Jogjakarta court dance (Hughes-Freeland, 2008:43). The spirits of *Joged Mataram* happened to my classmates as well. From body to mind, they found themselves

to move with gamelan music and experienced total concentration, insistence (even with doubt), energetic flow inside and outside, and most of all, they found themselves to feel oneself and others.

Marcel Mauss said that the effective and traditional body techniques is influenced by society, biology and psychology as well (Mauss, 1973:75.87). So when we learn a new technique from different traditions, how should we redefine the effectivity between stop and move as well as quick or slow? What is the aim of training? How do we approach it? With body or cognition goes first?

As Clifford Geertz's claim that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it... to be an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973:5) where there are webs of symbols from our culture that help us find the meanings. In another view of point, instead of meanings, culture would be "webs of senses" (Yu, 2016:27-28) being spun by humans, to feel and to interpret via human's body or sense. Everyone has his/her own way to weave the webs of senses via his/her environment, culture and society. For example, Taiwanese are used to imitate teachers from mirrors, to establish standard form by visual perception in dancing class. Besides, we are also used to learn how to move the body separately and analyze the rhythm by count. Then we assemble all elements efficiently to achieve completion. However, the cognitive method is abandoned suddenly and our webs of sense are broken when we encounter Javanese court dance. The cultural shock occurred in the classroom thousands of miles away from Java, and Taiwanese faced "new webs of senses." We can experience the *kejawen*, culture of Mataram's court from the 17th century, by listening, touching and mapping the body slowly even though most of us knew nothing about *kejawen* of Mataram during that period. Meanwhile, our feelings reflect something about the culture of java and the culture of Taiwan as well. It is really a magic that we use our original "webs of sense" to experience the context of java and to struggle with the new culture. Afterwards, each of us rebuilt one's own "webs of sense", for learning and for interpretation. Based on the experiences shared above, It seems possible

to learn a new culture by body and sense without a knowing mind at first, later on to know by doing and to look by feeling.

Conclusion

Learning special body techniques like dancing may open another window to see the world of others. As Geertz's thick description of the culture, one may experience the culture deeply in the process of "know how". For me, the question is "why did we always get lost in the dance?". Those torments on the way of "know how" let me see the frame, the spirit, the hierarchy and the aesthetics in such ritual dances. To "know how" aroused me to "know what". After studying more about the culture of court in java, I figured out the answers: Just like *Tai Chi Chuan* which is not only a Chinese *kung fu*, Javanese court dance is not a dance only. In my opinion, learning "how to dance" is a journey designed to push one to discover oneself inward and outward with patience and time. After finding paths in it, one may become brave, humble, responsible and considerate. After this encounter with Javanese court dances, I moved and was moved.

On the other hand, to rethink how to face a new culture is needed. Stop thinking is really helpful at some moments. Once in a while, we can close our cognition and open our senses in the very beginning, so a new "web of senses" may be built, and that may help us to understand more about others and ourselves as well. As I mentioned earlier: "I will go no further if I cannot let previous experiences go".

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