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Community Art Movement In the Contemporary Thailand

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1. Background—Thai Performing Arts in the contemporary context

Globalization has rapidly modernized Thai society. On the other hand, the government of Thailand is heavily nationalistic thus promoting, preserving, and reviving the traditional culture of the country. This is evident throughout Thailand. With such social dynamics at play, what is its influence on the art's landscape? In order to investigate this further, I decided to focus on the contemporary performing arts movement in Thailand, particularly dance and theatre works. I have conducted my intensive research on the current situation of performing arts in contemporary Thailand for one year since August 2007 to June 2009.

Through my investigation, I found that Thai tradition and culture play a significant role in the field of the contemporary performing arts. Most contemporary performers and creators root their practice in the traditional cultural context and work within this context to develop the tradition multi-dimensionally. ‘Contemporary performance’ is a relatively new genre, which emerged in Thailand over the last decade. In the narrow sense, it is understood within the context of the avant-garde. In the broader sense, it represents performances that have emerged and exist within present/contemporary society. The value of tradition and culture is reassessed by its contemporary performers and creators in various forms: tradition revival, reinterpretation of classic performances, new creations with Thai traditional/ cultural elements, new findings on local wisdom, emergence of community arts movements, and so on. As a result performers and creators ensure the survival and relevance of the arts in the context of globalization.

In this paper I will focus on ‘community art in Thailand’ as a new form of contemporary performing arts. Through the practice of community art, we can see how the practitioners of contemporary performing arts can survive in globalized society and how contemporary performers can collaborate with the ordinary people. Before discussion on community art, we need

2. Concept of ‘Contemporary’ Performance in Thailand

In Thailand in general, people are not familiar with the concept of contemporary nor contemporary performance. Therefore there are few people who are aware of contemporary production in Thailand. Similar to the contemporary dance in the other Asian countries, contemporary performing arts in Thailand are mostly based on Thai traditional performance. According to the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture¹,

The word “contemporary” means being in the same period of time. Being contemporary 10 years ago, however, was pretty much different from today. “Contemporary” contains its own dynamism similar to the word “culture” whose root is defined as developing force. Thus culture has to be continually developed at all time. In fact, the meanings of these words can change depending on one's interpretation and perception. [<http://www.ocac.go.th/>]

Through the description by the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, we can see how Thai people—or Thai government at least—interpret the concept of contemporary arts. Their interpretation sounds similar to ‘contemporary’ performance in a broader sense which I described before—it represents performances that have emerged and exist within present/contemporary society. If so, any kinds of performing arts existing within present/ contemporary society could become ‘contemporary performance’. Thus recently it has become more important for the creators and

¹ The Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC), under the Ministry of Culture, was formed in 2001, and was tasked with supporting and promoting contemporary art and culture.

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performers to be conscious of their practices and concepts. Who are the practitioners of contemporary performing arts in Thailand?

3. Practitioners

Through my observation, there are four types of practitioners in contemporary performing arts field in Thailand:

1. Instructors and students in school
2. Individual Artists and dance/ theatre companies
3. NGO activists working for community
4. Artists from overseas

3-1. Dance Education in Thai National Curriculum

In the Thai national curriculum, traditional performing arts is recognized as an important area of art studies. Thai tradition and culture, especially Thai music and dance, exist in the general school curriculum more so than western styles of performing arts. Both in public school and in private school, Thai students can study Thai traditional performing arts from kindergarten up to the university level. As a center institute for training performing arts, The College of Dramatic Arts, *Withayalai Natsin*², has a great influence curricula at other schools throughout the country. Many Thai professional dancers, musicians and teachers in this field are graduates from this college. Thus not only teaching method but also performance itself at the college has been spread throughout the country. Possibly the practices here at the college become the basic body of new creation as contemporary work in a sense.

In terms of new productions as contemporary performance work, it is hard to find it at the college because in Thai education system usually students can start new creation and leaning ‘contemporary’ performance only in university level³. Recently a lot of universities, including in Chulalongkorn University, have the course to teach the students the way of new creation or otherwise the bodily movement technique which they can possibly use in the contemporary work.

3-2. Network among Thai local Artists and companies

Outside the formal education system, on the stage, new contemporary works are also developing and emerging, produced by individual artists and groups. The style of their performance are rich in variety: spoken-drama, multimedia, experimental performance, experimental Thai folk theatre, solo performance, comedy, youth theatre, shadow puppetry, puppetry, contemporary dance, contemporary Thai music and dance, pantomime, physical theatre, Butoh, Thai traditional performance, improvisation, satire, drama for kids and cross-cultural exchanges.

Some companies have their own base for activities like theatre, black box and studio, but others don’t have any fixed spaces for their own activities. In such a situation, festivals were organized as a space for the artistic creation, getting new audiences and a strong networking among performers. One famous network among Thai local artists is called ‘Bangkok Theatre Network’ which constitutes of 10 local theatre groups active in Thailand. The network organized ‘Bangkok Theatre Festival⁴’ as the annual event, which was started in 2002.

² The College of Dramatic Arts has 12 campuses scattered throughout the country. The college functions as the national conservatoire and it is where both dramatic art and music are taught. In Bangkok the school was established in 1934. It was named ‘The National Dance and Music School’ which is the oldest national school for performing arts in Asia. In 1932 Thailand became a constitutional monarchy. This affected many dancers and musicians who previously belonged to the royal dance-drama troupe. They were dismissed and instead employed as teachers in this first national school of music and dance. The founder was Major-General Luang Vichitvatakarn, first Director-General of the Fine Arts Department (1934-1942). Since then this school has been run by the Fine Arts Department, which was under the Ministry of Education and now under the Ministry of Culture. Later in 1972 the school offered college level courses, henceforth becoming ‘The College of Dramatic Arts’. Also in the 70’s, the college established other 11 campuses throughout the country.

³ At present the college of Dramatic Arts offers courses at two different levels: the beginner course which is equivalent to lower secondary school level and the intermediate course equivalent to higher secondary level.

⁴ This festival was started from the grass roots and was organized by a small group of theatre people in Bangkok. They gathered frequently and often discussed problems they were facing. One such problem dealt with the number of

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3-3. NGO and Community Art

Among those independent theatre companies, some of them are involved in the community art activity. In Thailand, ‘community arts’ is a very new trend. When referring to ‘community arts’, it is the art activity which non-governmental theatre companies support and work in collaboration with community members. Therefore the practitioners working for community art are recognized as NGO activists. For the purpose of educating people (mainly youth) through any kinds of theatre media, reactivating the life in the community through reassessment of the local wisdom and so forth, the way of their implications vary. Among those companies, Makhampom foundation could be the most active Thai theatre company in this field.

3-4. Foreigners’ Impact on Thai Performing Arts

Visitors or long-term residential artists from overseas live in Thailand (mostly in Bangkok). These foreigners can also have a great influence on Thai performing arts. As a short-term visitor, they are invited to join the international festivals or otherwise to showcase their own productions. There are three types of people among the longer-term residents: the artist resident at the theatre companies, instructors in independent theatre company or university and the artistic director of their own theatre companies—ex. Butoh-Coop in Thailand (the director is an American), Bangkok City Ballet (the director is a Japanese).

4. Community Art by Makhampom

Makhampom Foundation

Makhampom formed as a theatre group in 1981 and is now a non-profit foundation (2004) using theatre as a tool for communities to address social and cultural issues. They use a knowledge-based, participatory approach in working with communities and in training non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations. In short Makhampom’s programs can be categorized into four parts: performance, the education theatre program, the community theatre program, and the international program. The programs consists of over 60 staff and volunteers. Makhampom is based in the Bangkok and Chiang Mai province.

In 2007 ‘the Makhampom Living Theatre’ opened on the stage at the edge of Chiang Dao town, Chiang Mai province⁵. At this place, programs are provided mostly for the local community and two hill-tribe communities while also working with schools to develop a creative learning program curriculum. It is the centre for international study tour programs as well.

4-1. Contemporary *Likay* Performance

As with performance group, MKP started ‘people theatre’. They always have interest in social issues and make people educated through performance. Actually they are trying to create a various style of performing arts and several years ago they started performing *Likay* (since 1997) and then become famous to *Likay* performance.

Likay is one of the Thai traditional dance-drama. It is said that in the late of 19th century *Likay*

theatergoers. They observed that the number of people who attended the theater was far less than those who attended movies or watched television, thus they recognized the need to build a strong theater network in order to effectively introduce the theater as an alternative form of entertainment. As a result, they decided to organize such a network themselves by establishing the festival. However, in order to make this happen, they needed support from local community members living in the Banglampoo area, which eventually became the festival site. The Banglampoo area was once the artist district in Bangkok. The wealth of its arts’ tradition is evident through the beauty of Banglampoo’s old architecture, temples, palaces, noble’s houses, theatres, and schools, which remain there to this day. The festival’s purpose is to promote theatre art to Thai and international audiences, to strengthen networking among independent theatre groups in Thailand and to encourage dynamic arts activities in the Banglampoo community.

⁵ Chiang Dao is a small town 75km north of Chiang Mai, home to many hill-tribe groups and farming communities. The Makhampom Living Theatre was built in the middle of rice-fields and consists of housing for the staff, theatre, guesthouse, kitchen, and the grounds (organic rice-fields, vegetable gardens, children’s playground and sculpture garden).

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came from Thai Muslim who live in the southern part of Thailand. Likay is famous to the gorgeous costumes and beautiful singing (the script and song text also include satire) and they become popular among the ordinary people because they like to put sexual topic into the drama.

The quality of MKP's Likay is highly regarded. Some of performers in MKP group did an intensive research on Likay groups and they performed on the same stage whose master they learned with. Using Likay form, they address social and cultural issues happened in contemporary Thailand. Their version of Likay is different from the other troupes because of this approach. They are going on a tour very often and thus they become famous both domestically and internationally.

4-2. Education Theatre Program

Education Theatre Program and Community Theatre Program are overlapped in many points. It is because MKP focuses on collaboration with youth group rather than adult. As one of education theatre program, recently MKP has been involved in making school curriculum. They are trying to find the way to introduce a creative leaning into the general school education. In order to make a new model of school education using theatre media, MKP living theatre (in Chiang Mai) have many kinds of activities for school children, ex. 'Book-bike' and 'Children's day'

Book Bike, a mobile library project

MKP living theatre locates in Chiang Dao province. This area has both plain land and mountain. Financially this area is not so rich and thus the school kids are usually short of books. Sometimes there is library in school. But it is just the doorplate of library and in fact there is empty. So MKP decided to do this project to take many books to schools in this area. This program is not only taking books to school kids but also giving a chance to see some performance or play game with MKP staffs.

Children's Day

It is the monthly event in MKP living theatre. MKP invite school kids from many schools in Chiang Dao to their place. And they show some performances and play several games with the kids. What is interesting in this event is all the kids can play with together whether they are lowland Thai or hill-tribes.

4-3. Community Theatre Project

MKP has contributed to solute the community problem through theatre works for many years. In terms of community project, it is the same as education project. I mean they work all over the country. In Chiang Dao to strength local networking, they try to make the local people be more conscious of their own communities. One of the MKP staffs told me that recently the local human network became weaker than before and then they need rethink of their own local wisdom and they should know how valuable the local wisdom is. MKP help local people to build youth theatre group. These youth theatres firstly do research on their local wisdom and then they create something to tell the other community members what they found in the community. In the whole process, not only the youth group but also the other members of community can be proud of their communities again.

Constantly Working with Communities: problems in each community and conflict among them

In Chiang Dao, MKP is mainly working together with three communities to aim community cultural development. Two of them are hill-tribe groups: Pateung Ngam village which is one of the Karen hill-tribe villages and Pan Daeng village which is Da-ra-ang hill-tribe village. The last is one village in lowland where MKP Living theatre belongs. Chiang Dao is really problematic district in a sense. Between lowland and mountain where mostly hill-tribes live has a border. This is very symbolic icon. MKP group is working with three villages constantly through encouraging each youth theatre group and they contribute to community cultural development. The children's day as I told before in education program, is one of the projects, which combine with two sides of people whether they still have social issues among them.

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4-4. International program

MKP has a lot of international programs in Chiang Dao. They are working with international schools in Thailand. Mostly they offer the cultural study tour to foreigners. Besides they recruit foreigners from overseas to join many types of study tour program, which consists of three steps: facilitator training program, community interaction, and inter-cultural performance program. The latter type of international program is well-organized and mingled with the other three programs which I described⁶.

Makhampom's Study Tours are designed for students and practitioners with an interest in theater and community development. They provide a hands-on introduction to Makhampom's approach within the community context of northern Thailand. The tour provides a comprehensive study in Makhampom's process of theatre for community cultural development through the mix of workshop processes, discussion, performance making, research, participant observation, and cultural immersion within the context of the Chiang Dao community.

Case study: International Study Tour 2008 (June to July)

Participants:

- A. Participants from overseas: 13 Australian university students whose major study is theatre
- B. MKP Volunteers: Thais university students whose major is not theatre. They join this program as a part of their internship program.
- C. MKP regular staff members
- D. Local people in hill-tribe communities

What was interesting about this program was that participants interacted with the local people in a process of theatre devising. The participants were expected to meet the local people and stay close to them in order to learn more about their lives and the issues they face. Productions would vary depending on the study tour group and its participants. However, participants do not just copy local performances, rather they work to interpret the local lifestyle and created new movements out of the local villagers' daily, existing movements. They also work to incorporate into their production issues villagers face, such as challenges with tourism. While doing this, they rediscovered their own culture and incorporated the Australian aboriginal story into their production. It had a good effect on this production titled 'Village Dreaming', serving as a bridge between two worlds—tourist participants and the local villagers. Through this interaction, participants create an art production and perform it in the village so as to give back to the villagers. The tour participants are involved in a sort of community arts. This is the unique way of Makhampom's. Makhampom staff members always provided opportunities for participants to debrief after each and every new experience. These opportunities were essential to the development of new performance as they allowed participants to process their experiences thoroughly and from there conceptualize a new cultural mixture. At the same time, through this program Makhampom connected local villagers to people outside their community and through performance offered locals the opportunity to rediscover and access their local wisdom to overcome challenges faced in daily village life. Makhampom is not just a blending of eastern and western culture. Rather, it is a venue providing opportunity for sincere, thoughtful inter-cultural exchange and understanding.

5. As the newest form of contemporary performing arts

The Makhampom Living Theatre has already made significant contributions to the Chiang Dao society through such community arts activities. They promote a sustaining vision of community

⁶ When I took part in this program in 2008, it seemed to me that MKP put everything into the international study tour program. During facilitator training program, they put workshops of Likay and puppetry which is another performance genre of MKP. Then during the days, the participants from overseas were involved in education theatre program, ex, book-bike and children's day. Also in the process of community interaction, and inter-cultural performance program, all of participants can be implicated in the community life. At the same time the community people also had a chance to encounter the new world.

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arts and incorporate youth. Young people develop stronger networks within the community as they search through performance a way to describe their own community’s local wisdom. In this way, Makhampom supports local community members to research on their own culture, history and local wisdom. After such research, Makhampom leads the community in reassessing their own culture by themselves and does this through performance media.

The international tour participants work closely with the community members in developing such a performance. By way of Makhampom, both overseas visitors and local community members can engage in the dynamic process of experimental performance creation. This can be considered as one of the newest forms of contemporary performing arts in Thailand.