

# Tradition and Modernization of Thai Music and Dance Art

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**Abstract:** Thailand, as one of the important representatives of Southeast Asian culture, has a long history of music and dance art. It integrates various cultural elements such as Thai, Chinese, and Indian, forming a unique and diverse artistic style. With the development of society and the exchange of culture, Thai music and dance constantly evolve between tradition and modernity, showing rich artistic charm. This paper aims to explore the significance of Thai music and dance in cultural inheritance, artistic innovation, and international exchange through the study of Thai music and dance.

**Keywords:** Thai music and dance; Traditional art; Modern performance; Cultural inheritance

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## 1. History and tradition of Thai music and dance

### 1.1. Origin and development of Thai music and dance

The origin and development of Thai music and dance is an important part of Thai cultural history, which reflects the changes in Thai society and the continuity of culture. The origins of Thai music and dance can be traced back to ancient court art and folk beliefs, including the worship of deities and royal celebrations<sup>[1]</sup>. These performances usually tell stories from the Thai epic poem, the Epic of Rama, and are conveyed through dance, music, and theater performances<sup>[2]</sup>. Among them, “Khon” is one of the most famous classical dances, where performers wear elaborate masks and ornate costumes and tell epic stories through dance. Over time, Thai music and dance gradually moved from the royal court to the folk, combining with local folk traditions and customs to form a more diverse performance style. Folk music and dance, such as “Likay” and “Mor Lam,” pay more attention to improvisation and interaction, reflecting the true face of Thai village life. In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, Western influences began to infiltrate Thai musical dance and dance, making it more diversified. Modern Thai music and song and dance not only retained traditional elements but also absorbed international styles and became an embodiment of the diversity of Thai culture. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and globalization to traditional art forms, Thai music and dance remain an important part of the country’s cultural identity and heritage, continuing to show its unique charm on both domestic and international stages<sup>[3]</sup>.

In the modern era, Thai music and dance continue to evolve and innovate. Popular music and modern dance are popular among the younger generation in Thailand, and these modern art forms combine traditional and modern elements to show the vitality of Thai culture. Thai pop music, such as “Luk Thung” and “Mor Lam Sing,” is also gaining international attention as a new emissary of Thai culture.

## **1.2. Performance forms and characteristics of traditional Thai music and dance**

The performance forms and characteristics of Thai traditional music and dance directly reflect the cultural diversity of the country. Thailand’s traditional music and dance are mainly divided into two categories: classical and folk. Classical dance is one of the most elaborate and ritualized forms of Thai music and dance. The most famous classical dances include “Khon” and “Lakhon,” which are often based on epic Thai stories, such as the Ramakien, telling of ancient myths and heroic deeds. In addition to “Khon” and “Lakhon,” there are other forms of classical Thai dance such as Fawn Thai. These dances are often closely related to court life and show the lifestyle and aesthetic concepts of ancient Thai aristocrats. For example, “Fawn Thai” is a dance that imitates the movements of animals in nature, and its movements are elegant and symbolic, reflecting the Thai philosophy of living in harmony with nature.

Folk dances, on the other hand, are more lively and free compared to classical dances. They are usually performed at village festivals, celebrations, or social events and reflect the true face of Thai village life. Representative forms of folk dance include “Ramwong” and “Mor Lam,” which are often accompanied by traditional instruments such as “Khaen” (a bamboo harmonica) and “Phin” (a guitar-like instrument) and are characterized by bright rhythms, infectious melodies, and more relaxed and improvised dance moves <sup>[4]</sup>. The “Ramwong” is a traditional round dance in which male and female dancers hold hands and dance in a circle with simple and repetitive steps that are easy to participate in. In addition to dancing, Thai classical music is equally elaborate and complex, and it often consists of an array of traditional instruments such as the “Ranat” (a xylophone), the “Saw Duang” (a two-stringed violin), and the “Khong Wong Yai” (a large brass gong). These instruments have a melodious tone and are capable of expressing a wealth of emotion and delicate musical layers. Accompanied by classical music, the dance becomes more vivid and moving, making the entire performance form a highly integrated artistic experience <sup>[5]</sup>. In addition, the Thai government and cultural institutions are also actively promoting the conservation and inheritance of traditional music, singing, and dancing by holding various festivals and drum competitions

Encouraging the young generation to learn and spread these traditional arts, these traditional art forms still occupy an irreplaceable position in Thai society and are regarded as precious cultural heritage.

## **2. Modern expression of Thai music and dance**

### **2.1. Innovation and development of modern music and dance**

The innovation and development of modern Thai music and dance is a remarkable manifestation of the dynamic nature of Thai culture. Based on traditional art, Thai artists continue to explore and integrate new elements, which makes Thai music and dance radiate new vitality under the background of globalization. Thai modern dance shows the trend of innovation and development. Traditional Thai dances, such as the delicate “Khon” and the expressive “Lakhon,” have found new interpretations in the creations of modern dance artists. While retaining the basic elements of traditional dance, they have introduced techniques and ideas of modern dance, such as contemporary dance, jazz dance, and street dance, among others <sup>[6]</sup>. These modern dance works tend to pay more attention to individual expression and emotional transmission, in contrast to the collective and ritualistic nature of traditional dance. Another characteristic of modern Thai dance is cross-border collaboration.

Dance artists collaborate with visual artists, musicians, and theater producers to create cross-disciplinary pieces of performing art. These works have not only been shown in theaters and festivals within Thailand but have also gained attention internationally.

## **2.2. Musical cabaret shows that blend tradition and modernity**

Contemporary Thai musical cabaret is a unique art form that incorporates modern and innovative elements while retaining the essence of traditional culture. This integration not only showcases the traditional aesthetics of Thai culture but also reflects its response and adaptation to modern society. Thailand's traditional music and dance are deeply rooted in the country's cultural heritage <sup>[7]</sup>. Classical dances such as "Khon" and "Lakhon," as well as traditional musical forms such as "Piphat" and "Mor Lam," are an important part of Thai musical culture. These art forms play a central role in religious ceremonies, royal celebrations, and folk festivals, conveying the history, mythology, and values of Thailand. In modern Thai musical cabaret performances, artists have employed a variety of ways to combine tradition with modernity. Musically, traditional instruments such as "Ranat" (a xylophone) and "Khaen" (a bamboo harmonica) are juxtaposed with modern electronic instruments and synthesizers to create novel sonic fusion <sup>[8]</sup>.

## **3. Cultural inheritance and development of Thai music and dance**

### **3.1. Cultural inheritance**

As a cultural heritage, traditional Thai music and dance carry values and lifestyles passed down from generation to generation. Classical dances such as "Khon" and "Lakhon," as well as traditional musical forms such as "Piphat," are symbols of Thai culture, and they occupy a central place in national festivals, religious ceremonies, and royal celebrations <sup>[9]</sup>. Through the passing on of these art forms, the Thai people have been able to maintain their connection with their ancestors, while also passing on respect for Thai history and culture to the younger generation. Music and dance play an irreplaceable role in shaping and maintaining Thailand's national identity and cultural pride.

In Thailand, music and dancing are not only an expression of entertainment and art but also a tool for education and socialization. By studying and performing traditional musical cabaret, the younger generation can understand and experience Thailand's history, philosophy, and social values <sup>[10]</sup>. Such cultural heritage activities help to maintain Thailand's cultural diversity while strengthening the bonds between individuals and society. In addition, music and dance also play an important role in shaping Thailand's national image and promoting domestic unity. In international exchanges, Thai music and dance are often used as cultural representatives, showing the traditional and modern face of Thailand.

### **3.2. Artistic innovation**

Thai music and dance have been constantly evolving in terms of artistic innovation and contemporary expression. While retaining the essence of traditional art, artists introduce modern musical elements and dance techniques to create new art forms. This innovation is not only reflected in the diversification of musical styles, such as combining traditional "Luk Thung" with modern pop music but also in the modern choreography of the dance, such as the integration of modern dance and hip-hop elements <sup>[11]</sup>. These contemporary forms of expression have brought Thai music and dance closer to the aesthetics and emotions of modern audiences, while also injecting new vitality into the development of Thai art.

In terms of music, traditional genres such as "Luk Thung" and "Mor Lam" have attracted a wider audience by incorporating modern elements such as pop, rock, and electronic music. This fusion not only brings new

aural experiences to Thai music but also broadens the boundaries of its artistic expression.

In the field of dance, Thai dancers and choreographers combine basic elements of traditional dance with modern dance techniques to create works that are both Thai and international in style. These works often explore themes of contemporary society, such as the impact of globalization, gender equality, and social justice, among others, making Thai dance not only a cultural showcase but also a platform for social dialogue.

The artistic innovation and contemporary expression of Thai music and dance not only show the artists' deep understanding of tradition and keen insight into modern society but also reflect the openness and inclusiveness of Thai culture. These innovative practices not only enrich Thailand's artistic landscape but also open up a new path for the future development of Thai music and dance <sup>[12]</sup>.

#### **4. International dissemination and influence of Thai music and dance**

The influence and spread of contemporary Thai music and dance on the international stage is an important part of Thailand's cultural diplomacy and international image building. Thai music and dance are not only respected at home but also in many countries around the world, becoming an important carrier of international cultural exchanges. First of all, Thailand's traditional music and dance are often exhibited in international art festivals and cultural exhibitions, which provide a platform for Thai artists to showcase the charm of traditional art. For example, the Thai classical dance "Khon" has been listed as a representative on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, which has further enhanced the international visibility of Thai culture. Secondly, Thai pop music, especially modern music that incorporates traditional elements, such as "Luk Thung" and "Mor Lam Sing," has attracted a large number of fans in Asia and even around the world <sup>[13]</sup>. These musical styles have spread rapidly through modern media of communication, such as the Internet and social media, resulting in Thai music gaining unprecedented attention internationally.

The international spread of Thai music and dance is attributed to several factors. On the one hand, the Thai government has actively promoted cultural diplomacy and introduced Thai music and dance to the world through various international cultural festivals, tourism promotion activities, and cultural exchange programs. On the other hand, with the development of globalization and digital media, the international dissemination of Thai music and dance has become easier and faster. Artists have released their works through YouTube, Spotify, and other streaming platforms, giving a global audience instant access to Thai music and dance <sup>[14]</sup>.

The influence and spread of contemporary Thai music and dance on the international stage is a testament to the vitality and innovative spirit of Thai culture. These art forms have not only enriched Thailand's cultural landscape but also provided new opportunities for Thai art to be displayed on the international stage. The spread and influence of Thai music and dance on the international stage demonstrates its global appeal as a cultural phenomenon <sup>[15]</sup>. Through the Internet, music videos, and online streaming platforms, Thai music and dance productions have been able to quickly reach global audiences. This spread has not only raised the international profile of Thai culture but also provided a wider stage for Thai artists.

The status of music and dance in Thai culture is unshakable, they are the soul of Thai culture and an important part of social life. It is not only the expression of entertainment and art but also the key to social cohesion and cultural inheritance. Under the influence of globalization, it is particularly important to preserve and develop Thai music and dance, which are symbols of Thailand's cultural diversity and historical depth. The integration and development of traditional and modern Thai music and dance enable us to better understand the rich connotation and diversified characteristics of Thai music and dance art, and realize its important significance in cultural inheritance, artistic innovation, and international exchange.

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## Disclosure statement

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