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# Modernity and the Formations of Female Bodies: Dance Hall Culture in Taiwan during the 1920s and 1930s

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*English abstract: This article examines the bodily discipline of comportment in Taiwanese society with a focus on the formations of modern female bodies during the Japanese "Dōka" (literally "assimilation") policy era (1919-1936). It investigates the cultural relevance of dance in terms of bodily discipline and the negotiation of identities in urban spaces. With archival research and the examination of the documentary Viva Tonal: The Dance Age (2003), this article looks at how the idea of modernity was brought to Taiwan during the Japanese colonization era through various bodily techniques. It argues that dance halls and social dance are locations in which the moving body in urban Taiwan negotiated and subverted specific forms of resistance and agency.*

阮是文明女  
東西南北自由志  
逍遙恰自在  
世事如何阮不知  
阮只知文明時代  
社交愛公開  
男女雙雙  
排做一排  
跳狐步舞我上蓋愛

*I am a cultured woman.  
Traveling freely to every part of the world  
I'm happy to be on my own  
I'm not interested in the international affairs  
I only know that in the age of civilization  
Social life should be liberated  
Couples together  
Cued in lines  
I fell in love with the foxtrot*

【跳舞時代 Viva Tonal】歌詞

*Lyrics of the song "The Dance Age" from the movie "Viva Tonal: The Dance Age" (2003)*

These lyrics, as written and sung in Taiwanese,<sup>1</sup> describe how a "civilized" woman can travel freely and be happy on her own. Her social life should be open and liberated. She has neither worries nor trouble, and the foxtrotting life is here for her. This music, along with footage of Taiwanese women dressed in Western style clothes of the 1930s walking in parks, rowing boats, smoking cigarettes, and dancing to music played

1 Taiwanese is a variant of Hokkien spoken by the majority of the population of Taiwan. In contrast to Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese is considered a "mother tongue" for local Taiwanese.

on phonographs, is a scene from the 2003 documentary film *Viva Tonal: The Dance Age* (跳舞時代, 2003. *Tiaowu shidai*, Taiwan).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Dance music gramophone record cover during the 1930s Taiwan. Courtesy of the collector Li Kuncheng (李坤城). Photo by the author.

*Viva Tonal: The Dance Age* traces the dissemination of popular dance music and songs from Japan to colonial Taiwan in the 1930s. It depicts a time when new acoustics and phonographic sound reproduction technology emerged from the recording industry, with a particular focus on the history of the Nippon Columbia Records Company in Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> With the introduction of the recording industry, Western-style popular music and partner dances emerged as well. Young people listened to the music and practiced dance moves following choreography charts from record sleeves. Through the reading of these documents, we can see that music and dance contained social meanings that reveal local and global cultural coding. In these early years of modernity, the dancing body also symbolized a new physical awareness alongside modern urban life.

Dance studies have recently enjoyed an increase in literature focusing on embodiment and performance space (Pearson & Shanks, 2001; Dolan, 2005; Lepecki, 2006; Jose, 2006; Hamera, 2007; Banerji, 2009; Hunter, 2015). Urban studies is also a burgeoning field for scholarship on the

2 This 16 mm, 104-minute long documentary film includes rare footage shot in the colonial period and was made by Chien Wei-ssu (簡偉斯) and Kuo Chen-ti (郭貞弟); the film won the “best documentary” award in the 2003 Golden Horse Awards. By interviewing several singers, composers, and collectors in Taiwan, this documentary offers a nuanced and sensible interpretive account of Taiwanese cultural history during the Japanese colonial era.

3 Nippon Columbia Co., Ltd. is a Japanese record label founded in 1910. It was affiliated with the Columbia Graphophone Company of the United Kingdom. It promoted several important local Taiwanese lyrics and singers in Taiwan from the late 1920s until 1945 (the end of WWII).

body, especially in the North American and European context (Bremmer & Roodenburg, 1992; Sennett, 1994; Pile, 1996; Borden, 2001; Power & Sheard, 2001; Pavlidis & Cranz, 2012; Sluis, 2016). Unlike the standard focus on the West, this article analyzes the history of the body in Taiwanese cities.



*Figure 2. The gramophone record of the original music “Viva Tonal” and other dance orchestras in the 1930s. Courtesy of the collector Li Kuncheng. Photo by the author.*

The following article situates dance halls and social dance as locations in which the moving body in urban Taiwan negotiated and subverted specific forms of resistance and agency. In order to illustrate this argument, I begin with a discussion of the historical background of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan during the 1930s. In a second step, I introduce the idea of a modern body as juxtaposed with a foot-binding body in order to demonstrate how the female body was subject to disciplinary changes. Finally, the article examines the female body in Taiwanese dance halls during the 1920s to 1930s. I look at kinesthesia—the body's awareness of motion—to investigate the importance of motion in the determination of space. Moreover, I discuss the idea of the *flâneuse* and assert that the colonizer's attempt to reinforce bodily training inadvertently provided a means of female liberation. While the examination of the dancing body in literature often illustrates how corporeal behavior aligns with socially accepted conventions or standards, I argue that social partner dances offered a playful and soft resistance to dominant, mainstream ideas of comportment and bodily etiquette in Taiwan. Partner dance offered an opportunity for practitioners to negotiate their modern Taiwanese identity during the 1930s Japanese occupation. Dance movements had a powerful and effective influence on how female citizens challenged social hierarchy and created a space for their own usage in the dance halls of urban Taiwan.

## The “Dōka” era (1920s-1930s) and the Introduction of Modernity in Taiwan

In order to understand how a new urban identity was shaped in Taiwan during the 1930s, I begin with a brief history of Taiwan before the early twentieth century. Taiwan has an extensive colonial history. It was originally populated by Austronesian people (later known as Taiwanese aboriginals), with Han Chinese immigrants settling there from the sixteenth century onwards. However, after its defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War,<sup>4</sup> Qing dynasty China declared its cession of Taiwan to Japan in 1895. As a result, Taiwan entered fifty years of Japanese rule, from 1895 to 1945.

This article focusses on the “Dōka” (同化, Tónghuà, literally “assimilation” and “Integration”) era (1919-1936) when Taiwan was viewed as an extension of Japan. During this period, the Japanese government tried to indoctrinate the Taiwanese population to “become” Japanese through acculturation and education while at the same time leaving native Taiwanese and Chinese culture in place.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, the Japanese government allowed a relatively liberal margin of control in certain areas, including some freedom to innovate culturally.<sup>6</sup> During the “Dōka” era, two main purposes were to facilitate the colonizer’s economic advantage over local labor and to construct a “civilized” modern Taiwanese body through education so that the colonized population could be as “civilized” as the population of modern Japan. The Japanese made economic use of the Taiwanese population by exploiting local labor and extracting natural resources. The government used the education system, in order to spread notions of Japanese superiority and advanced civility, as well as to foster loyalty of Japanese nationality.

The introduction of modernity in Taiwan offers a local vantage point through which to assess notions of the “modern” within a larger Asian context. The edited volume *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*

4 The First Sino-Japanese War (1 August 1894 – 17 April 1895) was a war between Qing dynasty China and Meiji Japan. The Chinese were defeated in this war and the Qing dynasty lost its port of Weihai and the island of Taiwan in February 1895.

5 It was a time of growing waves of nationalism among colonial populations in the wake of the end of the First World War. Therefore, colonial governments all over the world became slowly liberalized and made concessions to populations they colonized. Likewise, the Japanese government in Taiwan also allowed limited freedom for local Taiwanese, such as publishing more local newspapers and inaugurating the Taiwan Council movement.

6 After the First World War, the idea of self determination was spreading worldwide. In Taiwan, an elected advisory committee, which included locals, was instituted. The Japanese government also encouraged Taiwanese artists and writers to create works referring to local styles and aesthetics, such as lyrics written in Taiwanese.

addresses the problems of reexamining "modernity" in East Asia. This text recognizes the important role colonialism played in the construction of East Asian "modernity". It argues that modernity was not comprised of a pre-set, importable system. Instead, the authors show that modernity was a shifting, negotiated, and deeply ideological struggle deployed in various ways throughout East Asian society and politics during the twentieth century (Barlow, 1997). This view introduces an inherent ambivalence and tension in the notion of "modernity" in the East Asian context, which Taiwan studies scholar Fangming Chen called "colonial modernity" and "belated modernity" (Chen, 2004).

Taiwan's occupation by Japan represented a paradoxical period because the country's modernization was considered a part of colonialism (Chen, 2004). Scholars view modernity in Taiwan as a "colonial modernity," since it was Japanese institutional, educational, and physical training that introduced modernization and Westernization (Chen, 2004). This form of colonial modernity originated in Europe and subsequently spread with the imperialist expansion since the nineteenth century. However, precisely because colonial modernity in Taiwan was not a static copy of the West, but was formed through multiple influences, it was culturally ambiguous.

## The Introduction of the Modern Body

A modern body was introduced to Taiwan through a specific Japanese colonial influence. As illustrated in the previous section, the encounter with Western modernity was, for Taiwan, mediated through Japanese colonization. By modern body, I mean a new habitus that the Japanese established, in order to replace the traditional Chinese and Confucian-influenced body. Prior to the Japanese occupation, Taiwanese people often followed Chinese and Confucian bodily comportment. These Chinese and Confucian bodily disciplines included strict rules on how to behave properly, such as a regulated physical distance between men and women.<sup>7</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Confucian ideals required women to behave in a controlled and submissive way (Chang, 2012). One example for this is the old Chinese saying that "[women] must be decent when [they] stand and sit (站有站相, 坐有坐相)." In the common interpretation of this saying, "decent" is understood to mean that women must keep their legs together and their hands on their knees while

<sup>7</sup> There is an old saying by Mencius (a famous Confucian scholar): "Men and women should not touch each other when giving or receiving an item" (男女授受不親), which demands a strictly regulated body distance between men and women (Chang, 2012).

seated. When women stand, they have to stand up straight and not sway. “Slouching and fidgeting are also frowned upon. Under these regulations of the body, people shall always stand up straight and tall, and avoid rocking the lower part of their bodies while standing or sitting down” (Chang, 2012). The Japanese government intended to “de-Sinicize” the Taiwanese from such traditionally Chinese and Confucian bodily comportment.

During Japan’s occupation of Taiwan, the colonial government paid a pronounced attention to the health of the Taiwanese for the purpose of improving the national body.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Japanese colonial rule constructed a modern female body via an overall disciplining of the Taiwanese body. In 1916, forms of physical culture, such as gymnastics, were introduced into the Taiwanese education system in order to train the modern citizens’ bodies (Fan, 2001: 89). Physical culture was a system of training the body that originated during the nineteenth century in Germany, and was often promoted in accordance with nationalistic loyalties (Manning, 1993). With its emphasis on “position and posture”, this system required a huge amount of repetition, indicating that its training necessitated extreme discipline (Hsieh, 2004: 281). The ultimate goal of physical culture in Taiwan was to allow Taiwanese women to reform their bodies to run, walk, and jump. For example, gymnastics allowed women to perform jumping jacks or flips. Through these exercises, a modern Taiwanese body was constructed that was meant to replace the Chinese body. At the same time, this system also created a productive Taiwanese body that served the colonizer’s need for physical labor and factory work. This physical emancipation was thus seen as strengthening the Japanese nation by providing better human resources for economic growth and industrialization.

However, even though women’s education began in 1897 in Taiwan, it was not until the Japanese changed the Taiwanese foot binding tradition that women were able to practice more intense physical culture such as gymnastics (Chin, 2012). Foot binding was a custom from China, practiced in Taiwan, which involved tight constriction of girls’ feet to prevent further growth. Foot binding as a custom existed prior to the court of the Southern Tang dynasty (937–976). In the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), the term “three-inch lotus (三寸金蓮)” was invented to describe the beauty of a small female foot. In the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), all girls, no matter whether rich or poor, were expected to have their feet bound. The practice of foot binding was also prevalent in

<sup>8</sup> The Japanese government carefully conducted medical inspections and physical examinations for both Taiwanese locals and the Japanese who immigrated to Taiwan. In 1915, there were large-scale physical examinations throughout Taiwan (Fan, 2001).

Taiwan. In order to promote the transformation of the Taiwanese into modern civilized subjects, the Japanese government prohibited female foot binding during the early 1910s with the intention to support improved physical conditions and strengthen the spirit of women<sup>9</sup>.

The anti-foot binding movement in China during the early twentieth century provides an example of how “liberating” women actually served a nationalist purpose. In her book, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, Dorothy Ko points out that the Chinese abolitionists were mainly men, and their core argument was aimed at the perceived weakness and embarrassment of the Chinese nation “caused by such an uncivilized custom” (Ko, 2007). Ko criticizes that the anti-foot binding movement was to discriminate against women with bound feet only for the nationalist cause without caring for the pain caused by unbinding (Ko, 2007: 68). For these abolitionists, anti-foot binding was a nationalist ideology that had little to do with women’s rights.

Paradoxically, while women were trained to move more vigorously and with more frequency, physical training was introduced as a disciplinary measure to promote colonial and economic productivity. Movement without foot binding offered a way for women to experience themselves through comportment entirely different from Chinese and Confucian tradition, thus increasing female agency. In contrast to the previous Chinese foot binding aesthetic tradition, which focused on the beauty of not being able to move intensively, Taiwanese women not subjected to foot binding suddenly had more freedom and more physical flexibility than ever before. With the freedom to move un-bound, women could work in such urban professions as nurses, factory laborers, entertainers, dancers, and bus ticket inspectors (Ong, 2010). This dual impact of colonial modernity on women’s bodies shows how the same policy had a regulatory and a liberating cultural impact.

Recognizing the moving and dancing body as a site of meaning-making wherein movements are lived, agential experiences rather than abstract representations of bodies, offers a bridge to feminist scholarship. In her article “Of Liberation and Discipline: Colonial Modernity, Identity Politics, and the Dancing Female Bodies in Early Taiwanese Modern Dance,” dance scholar Chen Ya-Ping examines how early Taiwanese modern dance choreographers, in alignment with trends in early versions of modern dance across the globe, reflected the dual practices of “liberation” and “discipline.” This peculiar experience of “colonial modernity”, according to Chen, was especially complicated for female choreographers, whose works explored the awareness of “new women” who performed oriental

<sup>9</sup> The percentage of foot binding among female Taiwanese students decreased from 90% in 1905 to 28% in 1914 (Chin, 2012).



dance from a liminal cultural position. These choreographic representations of womanhood expressed liberation and a departure from traditional Taiwanese femininity (Chen, 2011).

Along similar lines, the gymnastic classes also offered Taiwanese women a new way to express themselves. Chen's text provides several personal examples (Chen, 2011): Lin, a woman who received her gymnastic education during the era of Japanese rule, recalled that "Sometimes we danced and sang during the class, and I felt very happy. It wasn't boring at all. It was not a military style gymnastic class. We danced and sang a lot. All kids like to dance and sing" (Huang, 2005:61)<sup>10</sup>. In her autobiography, Tsai Jui-yueh, a pioneering modern dancer in Taiwan, describes how "when [I] was in elementary school and high school, there were three gymnastic classes, two PE classes, and one dance class per week. On the dance class day, [I] would be very excited, hoping to attend the dance class as soon as possible" (Tsai: 1998:10).<sup>11</sup> These personal documents suggest that female practitioners gained a new embodied awareness through many of the physical activities introduced by the Japanese. While belated modernity and colonial modernity brought a new form of power hierarchy to the Taiwanese population, it is important to acknowledge that women did enjoy an increase in agency through moving their bodies "freely" and liberated from previous restrictions.

## Partner Dances and the Urban Dance Hall

While the modern body was introduced to benefit the colonizer, the increased freedom of physical movement contributed to emerging forms of partner dances that offered opportunities for resistance against mainstream social norms. In this section, I focus on how partner dances became an alternative bodily tactic for Taiwanese people to experience modernity during the 1930s. More specifically, while the Japanese colonizers reinforced a trained modern body, an unintended consequence of the modernization allowed partner dances to become a liberating force for women. Taiwanese dance halls turned into another important urban space where women navigated the ambiguity of Taiwanese modernity.

10 上課的時候有時是邊唱歌邊跳舞,我覺得那時候很快樂,不要很呆板的一直做體操,有時體操,有時跳舞唱歌,小朋友就是喜歡唱唱跳跳的。Yi-lin Huang interviews Lin Caiqin (林彩芹). This quote is translated by the author.

11 小學和中學時每週有三堂體操課,二堂上體育課,一堂上體操舞蹈。如果當日有排舞蹈課程,我一整天就很興奮,期待這堂課快點到來。This quote is translated by the author.

During the Meiji era, partner dances were viewed in Japan as a cultural symbol of Western high society. The opening of the *Rokumeikan* (鹿鳴館) dancehall in Tokyo in 1883 symbolized how Westernization was prioritized in the Meiji period. The Japanese Foreign Minister commissioned the dancehall for foreign guests and the venue became famous for hosting glamorous parties and balls. The *Rokumeikan* served luxurious banquets with menus written in French. On the dance floor, Japanese men dressed in imported London-tailored suits; Japanese ladies dressed in the most recent Parisian fashions. They danced the waltz, polka, quadrille, and mazurka to the latest European songs. European foreigners in Tokyo were hired as dancing tutors (Keene, 2005: 391-395). Only the guests of the government and Japanese who had already lived abroad were invited to attend these events, thus introducing many members of the Japanese elite to Western manners (Ishii, 1926). In this sense, partner dance practice was a political tool of Japanese modernization. The *Rokumeikan* was designed to impress Westerners through an extreme spectacularization of a Westernized social atmosphere. Japanese diplomats and foreign dignitaries alike were invited to experience high society as cultural equals, which the Japanese government hoped would “civilize” Japan in the eyes of Europe. For the Japanese, adopting Western manners would benefit Japan’s place in a symbolic hierarchy vis-à-vis other imperial powers (Hane, 1990: 116).

In early twentieth-century Taiwan, city planners from Japan built huge boulevards lined with trees. These roads were inspired by the Champs-Élysées, reflecting an ideal of Westernization and urbanization. Additionally, there were many empire-inspired urban designs constructed in Taipei, including buildings in a Victorian and Baroque-style architecture. The Japanese authorities intended for the new architecture to represent colonial power and included design elements that directed visual sight lines toward the rising sun, to promote a sense of cultural grandiosity.

Contrary to the idea that fixed architectural structures represented colonial hierarchy, I suggest that the spatial construction of meaning is always in motion. Rather than an isolated, static entity, space is a shifting plurality. From this perspective, an urban system can neither be administrated nor suppressed, and it depends inherently on the actual human act. Space is continuously constituted and created through different kinds of movements, including those of pedestrians on the streets. The discussion of the “spatial turn,” which came out of 1980s cultural studies, indicates that space is “(a) socially produced, (b) historically determined, and (c) corporeally experienced” (Kwan, 2013: 16).

In her article “The Re-Turn of the Flâneuse” about somatic memories of place, dance studies scholar Lena Hammergren proposes a feminist notion of the flâneuse – a quasi “second return of the flâneuse (Hammergren, 1996)” to rephrase cultural critic Walter Benjamin’s essay “the return of the flâneur” (Benjamin, 1999). Flâneur is a term borrowed from Benjamin that documents and objectifies the city through a male gaze; Benjamin’s flâneur is a man with the leisure and rights to walk the city streets: “In literature, the figure of the flâneur essentially accounts for the experience of men, since they had the freedom to drift alone in the cities, whereas women were confined to private spaces. Women could not leisurely inhabit the public spheres on their own, without putting their social rank and reputation at risk.... so, in assuming the (formerly non-existent) role of a flâneuse, in order to make the historiographical gesture of redistributing value-charged categories, this flâneuse will reject sight as the single magic key that will unlock society’s hidden secrets” (Hammergren, 1996).

While the flâneur relies on his sight as a mastering and objectifying gaze, Hammergren offers a feminized response: the flâneuse gathers information through moving her body; she is a subject who experiences the city through her body. Thus, the flâneuse is all about the kinesthetic experience of space.

Along similar lines, in her book *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces*, dance studies scholar SanSan Kwan argues that kinesthesia—the body’s awareness of motion— allows us to describe the experience of participating in and responding to the urban terrain’s kinaesthetic flows (Kwan, 2013). By turning her focus to the flâneuse as a feminist methodology, there is a reflexive and participatory relationship of the dancing body to contemporary Chinese urban spaces. In Kwan’s analysis, Taipei has gone through a gradual and constant re-negotiation of its identity since the 1950s. Therefore, Taipei offers an example of a city shaped by ambiguity. While Kwan studies Chinese identity in Taipei after the Second World War, my research focuses on the negotiation of the modern female identity of Taiwan prior to the Second World War.

Unlike Japan, dance halls in Taiwan were introduced by city dwellers rather than by the state. The introduction of venues for the express purpose of social dances allowed people to experience modernity through embodied practice. Dancing can be a synecdoche—the dancers can choose the various routes they want and thus create opportunities to observe the modern architecture of the city and break the stability of the urban order. French philosopher Michel de Certeau argues that the body is a site of everyday life practice. Space, for de Certeau, is a mobile

place for pedestrians to create their own trajectory through the city. In this sense, modern female bodies in dance halls can serve as a subversive “tactic” —a bottom-up action against domination (Certeau, 1984). By looking at bodily movements in relation to surrounding space, we can see how embodiment is a form of cultural information, and that movements create opportunities for new relations, rather than fortifying standard orders of dissociation and hierarchy. Beginning in 1930s Taiwan, dance halls offered alternate spatial and temporal meaning as compared to colonial urban architectures. A new urban modern identity was established.

The introduction of partner dances and the construction of dance halls in Taiwan started as early as 1927. A member of the Taiwanese elite named Lin Shu-zhi (林樹枝) who had studied in Japan,<sup>12</sup> had learned partner dances during his time abroad, and later invited his dance teacher to Taiwan. Within a few short years, and ultimately throughout the 1930s, this dance phenomenon rose to tremendous popularity. The mainstream newspaper at that time, the *Taiwan Daily News*, featured several reports on requests for the opening of more dance halls in both Taipei and Kaohsiung city on the part of Japanese settlers and local Taiwanese who had previously studied in Japan. These requests were rejected by the Japanese government due to a lack of clear legal regulations concerning dance halls in 1930.<sup>13</sup> However, in 1931, the first two dance halls in Taiwan were finally legally launched.

The openings of dance halls were turned into impressive events. Approximately 500 guests attended the opening night of the Plumage Dance Hall (羽衣會館) in November 1932, one of the first dance halls in Taiwan (Takenaka, 2009). The *Taiwan Daily News* reported about the opening of the Japanese-run Plumage Dance Hall on its cover page. In order to prepare for the Plumage Dance Hall’s opening, the owner had brought twelve dance instructors and dancers from Japan, who were treated like stars.<sup>14</sup> The craze for partner dances continued and in 1934, due to the financial benefits associated with this business, there were even criminals that fabricated and sold two thousand fake entrance tickets to the Plumage Dance Hall.<sup>15</sup> These news reports reflect the popularity of social partner dances at that time.

12 Lin Shu-zhi is from the Banqiao (板橋) Lin Family. The Banqiao Lin Family is a Taiwanese family of businesspeople, politicians, and scholars. They originated from Banqiao, Taipei during the Qing Dynasty and are still active in contemporary Taiwan.

13 Taiwan Daily News (台灣日日新報), 10/7/1930 (8); 10/04/1930 (4); 10/22/1930 (4).

14 Taiwan Daily News (台灣日日新報), 11/3/1932, cover page.

15 Taiwan Daily News (台灣日日新報), 04/08/1934 (8)

The Plumage Dance Hall and the Simultaneous Sound Club (同聲俱樂部) were among the first dance halls in Taiwan. They were also described in contemporary popular songs. The lyrics of “Taipei Bamboo Poetry” (臺北竹枝詞), written in 1932 by Li Teng-yue (李騰嶽), vividly depict the popularity of these two famous dance halls: “Today we go to the Simultaneous Sound Club, while last night we were in the Plumage Dance Hall; in the blurring lights, we dance as if we were a pair of lovebirds flying around the dance hall” (今日同聲昨羽衣，舞腰輕抱合鮮肥；迷離舞色燈光下，共效翩翩比翼飛).



Figure 3. The advertisement of the opening date and entrance fee of the Plumage Dance Hall, in the cover story of Taiwan Daily News on November, 3, 1932.

The popularity of partner dances, however, was only shared among cultural and political elites. The Simultaneous Sound Club was operated by several members of the Taiwanese elite, including doctors, businessmen, and scholars (Chen, 2011: 152). The club was expensive to attend. In addition to paying the tuition to learn proper dance steps, for example, guests had to cover entry fees to attend dance hall events, and they even needed to pay for a partner with whom they could dance.<sup>16</sup> Only guests dressed in the appropriate attire who arrived by car were allowed to attend the popular events. While these social partner dances catered exclusively to the members of the elite, the trend in new dance activity also allowed non-elite women to participate via their roles as dance event support staff. Elite women had the ability to attend school as

16 In 1932, the entry fee for the Plumage Dance Hall was 0.5 silver coins and monthly tuition for learning dance was 10 silver coins (Taiwan Daily News, November 3, 1932). For reference, the average income in 1930s Taiwan was 205 silver coins, which equals 17 silver coins per month (Yeh, 2009).

part of their formation in a modernized culture. In contrast, non-elite women, who worked as singers and dancers (the aforementioned partners for hire), were also participating in modern cultural formation, albeit in a socially subservient status.<sup>17</sup>

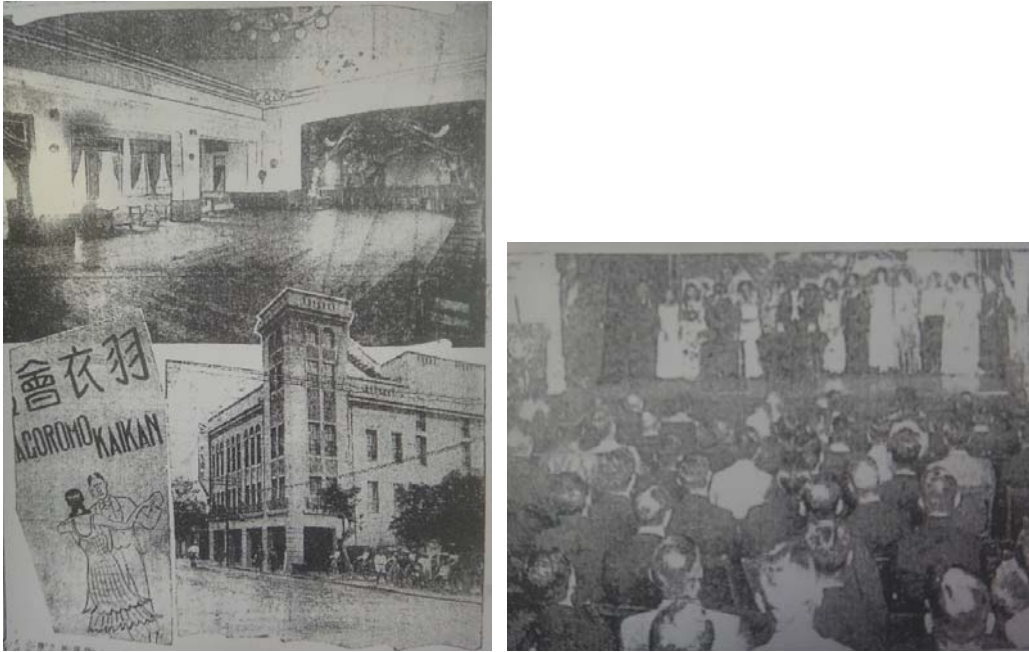


Figure 4. (Left) The advertisements of Simultaneous Sound Club in Taiwan Daily News on November, 11, 1932, and (right) Plumage Dance Hall in Taiwan Daily News on October, 18, 1932.

Female dancers had limited agency to be part of this new modern world, as described in song lyrics and poems:

毛斷台北現代女，十字路頭來相遇，  
 行路親像在跳舞！跳舞！跳舞！  
 活潑無人有，萬種流行擺會副咖啡館  
 五燈，  
 窗前女給（女服務生）在歡迎，  
 吃酒服務談愛情！愛情！愛情！

(1934, “新台北行進曲” 歌詞)

Modern Taipei girls meet at the crossroad.  
 They walk as if they are dancing, dancing,  
 and dancing.  
 They are so active, beyond anyone else.  
 These women are fashionable, they are  
 attending coffee shops.  
 They can work as independent female  
 servers. They drink while they talk.  
 They enjoy their love lives. Love, Love, and  
 Love.

(music lyrics from “New Taipei  
 March,” 1934)

17 Historians Kathy Peiss and Valerie Matsumoto have also discussed the similar situation of women in the US (Matsumoto, 2014; Peiss, 2011).



廿紀摩登女。風流燦一堂。  
 蹁躑相握手。窈窕共俛香。  
 樂奏隨人轉。聲喧引客狂。

(Chang, 〈跳舞女〉  
 1936:20)

*Charming modern women in the twentieth  
 century.  
 They are spinning and dancing in the dance hall.  
 When they take turns next to each other, there is a  
 nice aroma smell spreading around.  
 Music continues with their dance steps and the  
 sound of music makes everyone crazy.*

*(Poem from “Dancing Women”, 1936:20)*



Figure 5. (Left) Japanese dancers traveled to Taiwan to work as Plumage Dance Hall dancers. (Taiwan Daily News, November 2, 1932). (Right) The opening ceremony of Plumage Dance Hall in Taiwan Daily News on November 4, 1932.

As the lyrics from “New Taipei March” illustrate, new jobs were emerging at the time that allowed women to work independently.<sup>18</sup> Similar to what dance scholar Linda Tomko has argued in her book *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance 1890-1920* (Tomko,

18 Female coffee shop server (珈琲店女給) was a new career option for women during the 1930s in Taiwan. It was considered fashionable because coffee shops were a new modern idea in Taiwan. These coffee shops offered wine, drinks, and food, and sometimes even space for events such as exhibitions and lectures for cultural elites. Female coffee shop servers worked solely on tips. They were famous for being sociable and beautiful, and talented in arts and literature to attract guests. Even the government had enlisted them in its service (Liao, 2012).

1999), women began to appear in the public sphere as professional dancers. Dancing became connected with the liberation of the modern woman who embraced contemporary culture and the new concept of love and liberation. Dance offered a space for participants to engage with modern culture and contribute to the understanding of class mobility in colonial modernity. What emerged in this period before the Second World War was a social trend that shows how dance gradually became a liberating leisure activity of personal choice rather than part of a bodily regime dominated by government authorities. However, women were still subjected to the male gaze as described in the following poems:

座上妙齡女。輕盈體態嬌。  
挺身連足蹴。舞手並頭搖。  
衣袖隨風轉。裙裾等雪飄。

(Zhou, 〈跳舞女〉 1931: 14)

*This young dancer has a light and feminine  
body shape.  
She stands up and dances with her hand  
and head moving.  
Her sleeve is turning with the wind blowing,  
and her skirt floats like a snow falling on  
the ground.*

(Zhou, *Dancing Women*, 1931: 14)

體態任風飄。  
如癡帶撒嬌。  
蛾眉誇捷足。  
粉黛弄纖腰。  
雀躍身頻動。  
燕飛掌輒搖。  
郎君真得意。  
攜手欲魂銷。

(Wu, 〈跳舞女〉 1931: 14)

*She is as skinny as the wind could easily move her away.  
She acts like a cute spoiled child.  
Her eyebrow and makeup are beautiful.  
She has such a nice tiny waist and can move her steps so  
quickly and delicately.  
When she dances in the air, she is as light as a bird.  
Being her dance partner is such a satisfying experience.  
You can hold her hands and you are willing to die  
without hesitation because you have already enjoyed  
this pleasant movement.*

(Wu, *Dancing Women*, 1931: 14)

The detailed illustration of female bodies in these two poems written by male authors suggested that, while dance could offer liberation and modern manners for Taiwanese women, female bodies were still consumed and displayed for the male gaze. Although women had found a means of entering the public sphere, they were still objectified. In addition, dancing women were often deemed the subject of temptation and moral degradation. In 1927, for example, the *Taiwan Daily News*



(台灣日日新報) posted a critique of the new social events: “When dancing, the natural impulse occurred. These innocent girls are easily tempted. They might end up miserable as ‘a false step may cause a lifelong regret’” (跳來跳去之間。生出本能衝動。無垢少女。受人誘惑。有一失足而成千古恨之陷於悲境也).<sup>19</sup>

Two female characters from the documentary *Viva Tonal: The Dance Age* (2003), mentioned in the beginning of this article, may tell us more about the complicated concept of colonial modernity in Taiwan in that period. These two major characters are the female singer Chunchun (純純), who sings the song “The Dance Age” in *Viva Tonal*, and the female singer Aiai (愛愛), who also worked for the Nippon Columbia Records company. Their personal stories illustrate how their gender, class, and national identities negotiated colonial modernity. Their stories also indicate how modern experience in East Asia did not follow a singular narrative, but was open to various interpretations.

The singer Chunchun, the film’s protagonist, represents a woman’s struggle for modern life. She was able to perform, sing, and participate in the formation of early Taiwanese modern culture as a high earning popular singer and performer. As a modern female performer, she even ran her own business: She owned a Western-style coffee shop located near the most crowded Taipei train station. While singing songs about free love and dancing, Chunchun fell in love with a university student she met in the coffee shop she owned. This university student was from an elite family and was educated in Japan. Due to her background as an entertainer, her lover’s family didn’t accept Chunchun. This struggle between liberation brought by modernity (free choice in love) and tradition (arranged marriage between people of similar class backgrounds) highlights the fact that class mobility through capitalism had its limits (Sang, 2012: 78). Chunchun later married a Japanese businessman, perhaps hoping to advance to a different class by “becoming Japanese.” She then died at the young age of twenty-nine from tuberculosis that she had contracted from her Japanese husband.

Aiai, another female singer interviewed in the documentary *Viva Tonal: The Dance Age*, had a more positive attitude regarding her experience of colonial modernity during the Japanese colonial era. While working at the Nippon Columbia Records company, Aiai met Chiu Thiam-ōng (周添旺), a young talented Taiwanese songwriter who would later become her husband. Together, they created several famous love songs, such as “Smiling with the Spring Breeze” (滿面春風) and “Spring Dreaming on the River” (河邊春夢). The lyrics to these songs elegantly indicate how young men and women fell in love and became eager to express their

19 Taiwan Daily News (台灣日日新報), 11/28/1927 (4).

desire for each other.<sup>20</sup> In *Viva Tonal: The Dance Age*, Aiai enthusiastically expresses the happy memories of her earlier life. As the documentary unfolds, we learn that her singing career was discontinued due to the Second World War and that she was not able to successfully work in the music industry once the Chinese nationalists took over Taiwan. Aiai sang in the Taiwanese language, which was banned after the Chinese nationalist government assumed power in Taiwan after 1949. One likely interpretation is that the Second World War interrupted the success of her singing career. Perhaps for this reason, she represents a part of the Taiwanese population who speak very positively about Japanese colonization.

Cultural spaces for dancing were diminished once Japan militarized Taiwan to support the all-out war in the Pacific.<sup>21</sup> With the onset of the Sino-Japanese war (1937) and the outbreak of the Pacific War (1941), the Second World War in East Asia became more and more intense. Both Taiwanese and Japanese societies entered an era of military rule that would last from 1937 to 1945. Taiwan's era of militarization, or "Kōminka movement" (皇民化運動, *kōminka undō*, literally "imperialization") involved a more concerted transformation of the Taiwanese into Japanese through building a "Japanese spirit" (大和魂, *Yamatodamashī*). The goal was that Taiwanese who adopted a Japanese identity could serve as soldiers for Japan during the Second World War (Huang, 2005). As a result, social partner dances were banned during the 1940s, since they were considered as reducing the will of the general population to fight (Jitian, 2002: 203). According to the Japanese imperial power, partner dances were too much fun, too flirty, and too entertaining to practice during wartime. The fact that war policies affected dance practices shows that political considerations influenced everyday life, especially in the manipulation of the body.

20 For example, "That day I went hiking on the side of the river with him. He talked to me about love and youthful dreams. He said I am so beautiful. I felt very shy and I blushed. (人阮彼日恰伊雙人, 做陣去遊江伊, 有對阮講起愛情, 說出青春夢, 又攔講阮生成愛嬌, 生作真活動, 乎阮一時想著歹勢, 見笑面煞紅" lyrics from the song "Smiling with Spring Breeze (滿面春風)," translated by the author.

21 The Pacific War is also called the Asia-Pacific War. It was fought in the Pacific and East Asia from 1941 to 1945. During this war, the Allied powers (including the Republic of China) were pitted against the Empire of Japan. It was the main theater of the Second World War in East Asia.

## Conclusion: The End of the Dance Age

Modern dance halls carried dual features: liberation and ethical controversy. The practice of partner dances also held two meanings: modern (liberal) and immoral (against traditional values). While disciplining the Taiwanese body in support of efficient economics, this new corporeal rule also liberated women's ability to move their bodies. The productive, modern Taiwanese body was constructed to replace the Confucian Chinese body and to serve the colonizer's economic demands. However, it also offered limited agency for Taiwanese women in this modern era. There is an ambiguity to how colonial modernity functioned by regulating women's bodies while simultaneously liberating them. Partner dances offered a form of agency that the imperial power wanted to prevent its soldiers from experiencing.

In conclusion, the "liberation" of the female body from Confucian discipline and foot binding tradition and its expressions in dance hall agency, can also be seen as novel form of disciplinary regime intended to produce a new modern body. Although liberation from old forms and insertions into a new regime suggest greater agency, this liberation was directly tied to productivity. Therefore, the development of these modern forms of agency and body usage were liberating, while also serving to create a greater workforce productivity. While this article suggests that partner dances offered an opportunity for resistance against and(or) reinforcement of mainstream compartments and social norms, it also proposes new ways of looking at the negotiation of urban history, the body, movement, modernity, and colonialism were intertwined in East Asia throughout the early twentieth century.

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