

# **UCLA**

## **Thinking Gender Papers**

### **Title**

Leader-Follower: Throwing Out Gender Rules in Taiwanese Salsa Today

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00t3v7r8>

### **Author**

Chang, I-Wen

### **Publication Date**

2012-04-18

### **Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

I-Wen Chang

## **Leader-Follower: Throwing out Gender rules in Taiwanese Salsa Today**

### **Abstract**

Salsa is a transnational and transcultural dance form that has traveled from the Americas to many other countries where it has taken on diverse meanings among its participants. In the past five years, it has become a craze among young professionals in Taiwan. In this paper, I argue that the notion of "flow" in salsa practice, the Confucian discipline of the female body, and the economic accessibility of salsa in Taiwan are contextual elements without which it is impossible to situate its social meaning. In the Taiwanese salsa scene, not only do female salsa practitioners gain agency and assert their power to challenge traditional values, but male salsa practitioners also find a space to perform femininity and to enjoy their embodiment of the female role.

There are two imperatives for this study: 1) to subvert the dominant notion in academia about the immobile gender rules at play in salsa; 2) to illustrate the diversity of salsa practices around the world using Taiwan as a case study where it has not yet been discussed in the growing scholarship on Asian performance.

### **Key Words**

Salsa dance, Taiwanese identity, Choreographies of Gender, Leader-Follower Rules, Social Dance, Dance Flow, Same-sex Dancing Couple.

### **Agency and Flow in Pair-Dancing**

In the traditional conceptions of gender role assignments for pair-dancing, the woman is typically conceptualized as a passive follower. However, if we examine the flow between the two dancers more closely, we can see that the interaction is far more complex. In partner dancing, each partner cannot be understood as separate parts but must be analyzed as a single whole and experiential body. The whole lived body is an intentional body, which is lived through and in relation to possibilities in the world. In order for the dance to go smoothly and successfully, there has to be clear *bilateral* communication between the man and the woman, such as being able to interpret changes in pressure, position, and weight that would signal a change in the movement and the direction of the dance. In this way, dance is like a conversation, and like any conversation, roles and power are negotiated and not necessarily given. Thus giving both men and women agency.

To further understand my argument concerning flow, I would like to make the analogy that flow is like the energy that each person possesses similar to chi or life-force in martial arts. More concretely in pair-dance, it is the exchange of energy that occurs during the dance which can manifest in subtle body language, change in contact, and sensitivity to one's partner. Experienced dancers are able to sense the energy of their partners and adjust their response accordingly. This ensures a smooth interaction between the two, making sensitivity to this energy vital in dance.

Salsa, in particular, has a movement flow that favors equality between partners. Unlike waltz or tango, which highly emphasizes gender etiquette with closed positions, salsa partners use open positions in which partners are connected primarily at the hands. Therefore, compared with other

forms of pair-dancing, salsa has fewer pre-established moves between partners, which allows for more improvisation and dynamic interactions. In addition, its movements are explicitly sensual and erotic as both men and women move their hips and sway their upper bodies in a soft and subtle way. The movement quality in salsa is not necessarily formally locked in a gendered binary but is flexible allowing for more equality.

These qualities of salsa have contributed to its fast adoption in Taiwan where it has been adapted to emphasize mutual respect between the partners and enjoyment rather than showy acrobatic moves. This is very different from what I see in the LA salsa style, which is a male-directed form and has developed into a much more staged performance full of flashy and showy "tricks", in Taiwan it is considered proper etiquette for male dancers to be sensitive to their partner's skill level and not execute technically difficult and forceful movements such as lifts or dips excessively. In fact, that kind of spectacle is rarely seen at all. Since there is less pressure to perform flashy movements, women are able to more actively participate in the flow process.<sup>1</sup> For example, female dancers are able to communicate their willingness to do certain movements such as the number of turns, their willingness to do solo dance via the points of contact (usually pressure on the palms). More importantly, the male dancers are receptive to this, and the expectation is to comply with female dancer's intentions. In this way, there is a balanced flow, especially in cases where there is close physical contact. In the Taiwanese salsa scene, it is generally expected there will be mutual agreement on the flow, and if the male dancer detects the female dancer's wishes to go in a certain

---

<sup>1</sup> Please see the "Taiwanese salsa scene" video

direction, generally the male dancer will yield in order to preserve the harmony of the flow.

### **Cultural Background in Taiwan**

Salsa's ability to create a safe space for women to be free of traditional cultural norms in Taiwan is another reason for its popularity and acceptance among Taiwanese women. In order to understand this phenomenon better, it is important for us to understand how traditional culture in Taiwan disciplines the Taiwanese body. Taiwan has a history of multiple colonizations, here I focus mostly on the major long tradition of Chinese and Confucian conservatism. That the female body is very restricted in Taiwanese society and a woman's body position in public is highly regulated. One relevant example of this is the old Chinese saying that states "[women] must be decent when you stand and sit." (坐立有節). "Decent" in this context means that women must keep their legs together and their hands on their knees when they sit. 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 body while standing or sitting down. The movement of salsa directly contradicts these norms. Furthermore, 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. This has been extended to any general public contact. Those traditions still operate in contemporary Taiwan.

Thus, salsa is a form of escapism for Taiwanese practitioners, where they redefine the concept

of self within a passionate and responsive body to counteract the dominance of the traditional Chinese identification and challenge the restriction of body distance in public. In addition, salsa, with its subtle and sometimes not so subtle mimicking of courtship and sexual interest, provides a way for dancers in Taiwan to make connections. This flirtation with the opposite sex is not a privilege only for men but for women as well.

In Taiwan, there are also same-sex male salsa couples.<sup>2</sup> Due to the sexualized nature of salsa and its inclusion of masculine and feminine expression, the salsa dance scene allows Taiwanese men to explore their feminine dance quality safely in a public space without fear of being labeled homosexual. From this, we can see that the traditional roles of male leader and female follower are not strictly adhered to and that gender roles are blurred. These male dancers can easily switch the leader-follower roles without difficulty and display different leader-follower roles freely in public without fear. In fact, it is not unusual for other people to form a crowd around them to watch and encourage them with clapping.

However, rarely are women seen dancing with women. Same-sex dance couples are a privilege almost exclusively for male dancers, and allow them to transgress the heterosexual normativity. They exercise their power and are able to inhabit the femininity in the practice of salsa. They are gambling their masculinity by “being feminine in the public” while at the same time showing their dance techniques. They are so “brave” to dance together in the public and people look at them and admire them. The existence of these male-male dance couples at the exclusion of same-sex female dance

---

<sup>2</sup> See the “Taiwanese male-male dancing couple” video

couples actually reinforces the patriarchy by claiming gender latitude as a form of male power in male-dominated public space.

### **Class in Taiwanese Salsa Scene**

Class also plays an important role in the Taiwanese salsa scene. Due to the comparatively higher costs of learning salsa and attending salsa clubs, the majority of salsa club goers in Taiwan tend to be young middle-class professionals with leisure time and extra money. Salsa requires skill and practice in order to flow with a partner. Therefore, the salsa dance club remains a territory of the elite beyond the reach of Taipei working class people.

The lavish furnishing of the dance floor itself is a microcosmic dream world of urban modernity and it serves only the people who can afford to it. These entertainment spaces are not just a place of dance but also function as salons where young professionals can gather together to present and share information on a wide range of social, intellectual and political issues. The 'salon' of the salsa class makes exclusive a politicized space of bodies. By making a space to negotiate social body politics in the salsa 'salon,' the everyday expression of bodies on the streets is depoliticized in an inverse action of class-defined political realms.

### **Conclusion**

The global trend in salsa reveals different choreographies embodied in the different social codes which are deployed in salsa practice in various national contexts. In Taiwan, the way these practitioners imagine their gender roles is deeply related to the class position they occupy, and that

very fact already gives them relative freedom to challenge the traditional hierarchy through and in various spaces. A full grasp of the meaning of salsa practice in Taiwan thus requires understanding how it performs as part of a particular class-structure and also how traditional gender norms are both challenged and re-stored. Through salsa they redefine a concept of self within a passionate and responsive body to counteract the dominance of Chinese identification. They participate in this international salsa trend to construct their national identity and establish global citizenship. In the future I will further criticize about how class, nationality, and gender are operating in complex ways in Taiwan.







## **Bibliography**

- hmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Burt, Ramsay. 1995. *The male dancer: bodies, spectacle, sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Desmond, Jane C. 2001. *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Foster, Susan. 1998. "Choreographies of Gender." *Signs* 24(1): 1-33.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indian University Press.
- Novack, Cynthia. 1990. *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- O'Shea, Janet. 2007. *At home in the world: bharata natyam on the global stage*. Middletown, Conn:

Wesleyan University Press.

Pietrobruno, Sheenagh. 2006. *Salsa and its Transnational Moves*. Oxford: Lexington Books.

Savigliano, Marta. 1995. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Young, Iris Marion. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.