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

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3fq686nf>

**Author**

Chang, I-Wen

**Publication Date**

2012-04-01

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# LEADER- FOLLOWER

## THROWING OUT GENDER RULES IN TAIWANESE SALSA TODAY

### 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, partners 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 women, such as being able to interpret changes in pressure, position, and weight that signal a change in the movement and the direction of the dance. In this way, dance is like a conversation; like any conversation, roles and power are negotiated and not necessarily given, giving agency to both men and women.

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 emphasize 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, salsa's 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 Los Angeles 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 or 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

1. Click here to view the “Taiwanese salsa scene” video.

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 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. 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” (站有站相，坐有坐相). “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 always stand up straight and tall, and avoid rocking the lower part

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Taiwanese salsa scene



# BECAUSE OF 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.

of their bodies 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 concept has been extended to any general public contact. Those traditions still operate in contemporary Taiwan.

Thus, for Taiwanese practitioners salsa is a form of escapism through which 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> Because of 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 fe-

2. Click here to view the “Taiwanese male-male dancing couple” video

male 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 public” while at the same time showing their dance techniques. They are so “brave” to dance together in public; people look at them and admire them. The existence of these male-male dance couples at the exclusion of same-sex female dance 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 tends to be young middle-class professionals with leisure time and extra money. Salsa requires skill and

Taiwanese male-male dancing couple



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 serves only the people who can afford 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 that 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 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 restored. Through salsa, gender norms redefine a concept of self within a passionate and responsive body to counteract the dominance of Chinese identification. Taiwanese people participate in this international salsa trend to construct their national identity and establish global citizenship. In the future I will further analyze how class, nationality, and gender operate in complex ways in Taiwan.

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**I-Wen Change is a doctoral student in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA. She presented a version of this essay at the Thinking Gender 2012 plenary session, which was titled “Thinking Gender in Space, Place, and Dance.”**

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