

Localised Exoticism: Developments and Features of Belly Dance in Taiwan

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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ABSTRACT

Belly dance has become one of the most popular dances in Taiwan today, with women of various ages participating in this imported dance. With respect to this speedy expansion, the purpose of this study is to investigate current developments, and to distinguish features of Taiwanese belly dance. The method adopted is literature analysis: a large number of Internet news items were collected to capture the trend of belly dancing in Taiwan. This study concludes that belly dance in Taiwan is primarily presented as: an exercise that is beneficial for health; widely accessible and partially embedded in local life; an exercise for all age groups and genders; a blend of multiple cultural elements; outstanding dancers acclaimed as the pride of Taiwan. The representation showed that the development of belly dance was influenced by the Taiwanese social background. Within the Taiwanese cultural landscape of meanings, belly dance moves between the exotic and the local. This study argues that belly dance is better described as “localised-exoticism” in Taiwan.

KEYWORDS

belly dance, Taiwan, Orientalism, localisation, exoticism

1. Introduction

At the recently concluded Expo 2010 in Shanghai, each of the participating countries or areas chose its own representative cultural elements for display on the global stage. Live shows with singing and dancing are always appealing for the visitors to the fair and for the media, and on the special day of each pavilion, ethnic performances are usually put on stage. Middle Eastern belly dance was first introduced to most Western people at the 1893 Chicago Exposition. Although the name “belly dance” has been thoroughly criticized, it is still in use today (Tsai 2009).

In present days, belly dance is very popular in Taiwan, especially among women from young to old who take up this exotic dance. It is taught in dance studios, fitness clubs, and community universities throughout Taiwan¹. Competitions and workshops on various scales are held across the year, and the mass media provides information about belly dance quite often. There are also some publications containing instructions regarding the techniques and body-shaping benefits of the dance.

Taking into account its speedy rise and current popularity, this paper aims to describe some recent developments in Taiwanese belly dance, as well as its distinctive characteristics. My description is based on literature analysis. A large number of Internet news items were collected to capture the trend of belly

¹ Community university is a kind of local institute for adult education in Taiwan which offers a lot classes of life skill, dance and exercise, the number of community centers has increased to 85 in 2010 (National Association for the Promotion of Community Universities, NAPCU <http://www.napcu.org.tw/website/>).

dancing in Taiwan and compare it with previous research. In what follows, I will first introduce the formation and transformation of belly dance in the Middle East and the United States. Then, I will categorize current developments of the belly dance wave in Taiwan. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the distinctive orientation of Taiwanese belly dance.

2. Development of modern belly dance

As a Western name for a traditional Middle Eastern dance, belly dance is directly translated from the French term *danse du ventre* (dance of stomach). In Arabic, the dance is called *Raqs el Sharqi* and in Turkey *Oryantal Dans* (Tsai 2009). Both mean oriental dance.

Changes in belly dance in the Middle East and in the United States

Some studies have explored the origins and developments of this dance genre. In their historical research, Sach and Buonaventura have related the origin of belly dance to ancient religion and myths and to the worship of the goddess of fertility (Sachs 1937, Buonaventura 1990). For a geographical localization, this dance genre has been understood to comprise styles of bodily movements that originated in the vast extension spanning from northwest Africa and the Balkans in the West, to the eastern area of China, Central Asia, and the western portions of the Indian subcontinent in the East. In each of its areas of origin, the dance is characterized by improvised movements of the torso, hands, arms, and head. The specific portion of the body that forms the focus of the dance varies throughout the different areas, and probably varied historically as well (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003).

The movements of the traditional dances of Middle Eastern and North African women were not only used in the dance but could be found in other contexts of daily life. While carrying jars, bags and trays upon their heads, the women could walk calmly and gracefully, turning about without dropping the object. The ability to move in such a manner came from the centering that these women developed “in the lower part of the belly”, allowing for flexible and free movement of the pelvis (Al-Rawi 2003). As the movements stretched a woman’s muscles and trained her to breathe rhythmically through the stomach flutters, as well as isolate and control various muscles, the dances also held a strong connection to pregnancy and childbirth (Fisher 2003).

The different folk dances are often conflated in the United States and elsewhere under the single term “belly dance”, which has its origin at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003). Since that exhibition, belly dance has undergone a transformation that was inspired by Orientalism both in the United States and the Middle East, in which the dance developed into the modern belly dance that most people are familiar with today.

In the early 20th century, the dance served as a tourist draw to Cairo nightclubs, which led to its connection with sexual and vulgar imagery. These images were then disseminated to neighboring countries and the West as Egyptian musical movies gained popularity (Tsai 2009). In the United States, enterprising American dancers began to emulate the dance they had witnessed at the Chicago exposition, and the dance remained in the public eye via theater, films, and burlesque shows. As the numbers of immigrants increased during the 1950s, the dance changed its association with erotic *hoochie coochie* to that of ethnic entertainment of Middle Eastern immigrants in the United States. In the 1960s, belly dance was allied with the second phase of the feminist movement (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003). Many women were excited to find a permissible means to embrace and explore their femininity (Deagon 1999). During this period, belly dance allowed women to express their ideas of liberation and self-fulfillment. Moreover, the Middle Eastern nightclubs that had begun to appear in the 1950s began to attract Americans from other ethnic backgrounds (Forner 1996).

Around 1980, a strong and active community of professional and leisure time belly dancers was firmly established. Classes were offered and workshops, magazines, websites, and competitions kept dancers

informed of events, new music, and costuming techniques. In addition, the belly dance community spread overseas to places such as Japan, Australia, Norway, and Germany (Oatley 1999, Sellers-Young 1992).

Belly dance fad in Taiwan today

Belly dance did not come to Taiwan from the United States, however. In 2002, the first one to actively herald belly dance in Taiwan was Wan-Ru Lee, a Taiwanese woman who had learned it in the Middle East (Tsai 2009). In just about a decade, this exotic dance was embraced all over Taiwan². News concerning belly dance frequently appeared in the mass media. There were also many publications instructing people on how to do the belly dance or how to acquire a slender body shape through belly dancing. Few academic studies, however, have paid attention to Taiwanese belly dance. The following four studies review the development of belly dance in Taiwan.

A study on the development of belly dance was the first academic paper exploring the development of Taiwanese belly dance (Lee 2007). Lee concluded that as times change, the concern for female body liberation and self-consciousness soon made belly dance fashionable among Taiwanese women, to the extent that it even became one of the most popular dances. Lee argues that the potential market is enormous because of its combined advantages of weight loss, toning, and posture modification. Moreover, Lee argues that solo belly dance performances are considered more interesting for the spectator than other solo dance performances. Most belly dance in Taiwan, however, tends to be for leisure and recreation. Teachers often create new combinations by mixing different dance styles, such as Latin belly dance or aerobic belly dance. According to Lee, there are not many teachers and resources for people who want to learn orthodox belly dance. The author therefore suggests that aspiring dancers should go to the Middle East to pursue further skills, or to hold regularly international symposiums and conferences in Taiwan to improve their performance.

In the paper entitled *A Study on the Current State of Belly Dancing's Development in Taiwan 2007*, Chen uses methods such as literature analysis and statistical analysis to explore the development of belly dance in Taiwan in 2007 (Chen 2007). The author concludes: 1. The number of belly dance associations founded or prepared increased more than twofold in the course of 2007; 2. Over 70% of community universities offered belly dance classes in the second semester of 2007, with an average class number of 2.5%; 3. Workshops with foreign masters were held with an average of one class every 1.7 months – oriental and fusion were the most common dance styles³; 4. Open belly dance tournaments were held very often, at a rate of one tournament every 1.5 months on average. According to this data, she concludes that belly dance has become a prominent leisure exercise in Taiwan, especially among women.

Glamorous Dance in Taiwan—Two Myths of Women's Bodies was the first article to explore the belly dance trend and the women body culture in Taiwan (Chang 2009)⁴. The author, Xiau-Hung Chang⁵, claims that recently belly dance is the most popular dance in Taiwan. She illustrates this claim with some cases. For example, in the Celebration of Justice, a show in which eight female judges exposed their stomachs and performed a belly dance, which captured the attention of the media at that time. Moreover, from temple festivals to college galas, belly dance performances became a fixture in all sorts of social events. Chang also argues that few dances have found as many followers among women of different age and social classes as

² Exotic feature was usually emphasized by belly dancing promoters. For example, belly dancing classes of community university entitled 'Exotic, enthusiastic, and charming belly dance' (Songshan Community University, 2010) and 'Dance of exotic women' (Tauyuan Community University, 2010).

³ Oriental, Fusion, and ATS (American Tribal Style) are three popular belly dance styles. Oriental is the traditional form that can be mainly divided into Egyptian, Turkish, and Lebanese styles; Fusion features to melt belly dance with other dance forms, like jazz or flamenco; ATS is a new style created in the United States that put many tribal elements in dance, costume, and music.

⁴ This paper was primarily published in United Daily News and aroused much attention. Later included in *Forum in Women's and Gender Studies*, published by Women Research Center of National Taiwan University.

⁵ Xiau-Hung Chang is a Taiwanese essayist of modern literature, feminist, and professor at National Taiwan University.

belly dance has. Young girls and elderly women alike got in to it, and it was performed everywhere from fashionable clubs to community parks and nursing homes.

Its enormous popularity in Taiwan could be seen as the localisation of a global belly dancing fashion. As for the key to its appeal, the author argues that it might reside in the fact that belly dance is the best exercise for training the waist and hip, the most critical area for the modern body aesthetic. In addition, the dance originally favors well-rounded female bodies thus giving older women more opportunity to perform it in a leading role. Belly dance totally reverses the predominant aesthetic standard, the worship of the slim and young body.

In *Sexy Dancer or Productive Goddess* Tsai (2009) argues based on her own learning and teaching experience⁶ that leisure, exercise, weight loss and exoticism occasioned the main appeal of belly dance for women. Ironically, whereas it originally preferred dancers of a well-rounded body, weight loss and figure shaping have come to be marketed as the greatest benefits of belly dance. The author stresses that the Orientalism never disappeared, and that the influence of mainstream values should not be underestimated, either. She also queries who trains Taiwanese belly dancers, and what image of the “Middle Eastern” is taught in conjunction with belly dancing in Taiwan.

Though methods adopted were various, and viewpoints held were just as diverse, all of the studies mentioned above confirmed the ascent of belly dance in Taiwan. Some of the authors mentioned present developments and typical sites of performance of the dance. However, the exact association and characteristics of belly dance in the context of Taiwanese relationships between consumption and social distinction are so far undeveloped in the relevant literature. Thus, the first two purposes of the present paper are to categorize the current developments and distinguishing features of belly dance in Taiwan.

Influences of Orientalism and self-exoticism in belly dance

Recent scholarship of belly dance has complemented the historical approach with attention to a wider array of dimensions (Sachs 1937, Buonaventura 1990). In *Beyond the Glitter: Belly Dance and Neoliberal Gentrification in Istanbul*, Potuoğlu-Cook (2006) talked about belly dance and city development. Fisher and Shay (2009) discussed the gendered dimension of belly dance in their book *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities across Borders*. Keft-Kennedy (2005) explored how women attained empowerment through belly dance in *How Does She Do That? Belly Dancing and the Horror of a Flexible Women*. And in *Straddling the Sacred and Secular: Creating a Spiritual Experience through Belly Dance*, Kraus (2009) examined the relationship between belly dance and spirituality. Moreover, some scholars point to the influence of Orientalism⁷ on modern belly dance.

Fisher (2003) asserts that the misconceptions of the East that flourished among Americans has led to the false belief that belly dance is a traditional Middle Eastern dance. In reality, current belly dance was developed in America and has only recently been imported into the Middle East. Fisher argues that the similarities between traditional women’s dances in the Middle East and belly dance are minimal, but representations influenced by the misconceptions of the Oriental have affected Western perceptions of what is accepted as Middle Eastern tradition. Fisher also points out that nearly every aspect of belly dance reveals its commercialized nature. Traditional dances were a social activity and most women were free and able to participate without having to incur and investments or special preparation. Belly dancing, by contrast, is a highly theatrical style of dance with monetary value attached to every possible facet of its acquisition and performance.

⁶ Shi-Ren Tsai got her Ph.D. of cultural anthropology in EHESS, France. She learned Oriental dance from Arabian and French people while studying abroad. She is a lecturer at community universities in Taiwan.

⁷ The basic point of Edward Said’s theory in *Orientalism*(1978). Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 71) sums up its salience for this discussion: ‘Orientalism...is on the one hand, a topic of learning, discovery, practice; and on the other, it’s the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions, and requirements...However, this site is continually under threat from diachronic forms of history and narrative, signs of instability’ (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003, p. 18).

Shay and Sellers-Young (2003) provide insightful observations on Orientalism in modern belly dancing performances. They show that how the past century has witnessed the phenomenon of belly dance becoming a key symbol of the Middle East in the West. This iconic representation often causes outrage, resentment, and even protest among Arabs who resent Westerners (mis)representing them by focusing on cabaret-style belly dance, a low-class and disreputable entertainment for many in the Arab world, as a primary media image of the Middle East.

Orientalism has more recently been identified as not only a tool of Western imperialism, but also a way of defining self in relationship to the other. One aspect of this self-other dichotomy is the inspiration, sometimes communicated via artistic or expressive forms one gains from an other whom you perceive as unlike yourself. Thus, one aspect of Orientalism consists in a mechanism through which I see you as what I am not, and attempt to express myself as you to expand upon my potential experience of self. Shay and Sellers-Young (2003) have developed a related concept, **self-exoticism**⁸, to get a grasp at this phenomenon. They write

“By self-exoticism, we mean a process in which individuals native to dance’s place of origin utilize orientalist elements, often originating in Western sources, in their performance, both enunciated and embodied” (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, p. 18).

Shay and Sellers-Young also suggest that many individuals who actively engage in belly dance⁹ do believe the myth that the dance form was performed for a Mother Goddess, a popular New Age concept, because it is fun in a theatrical way, similar in style to dressing up for Halloween. Although it is significant that most of these concepts and interpretations of belly dancing originate in the West, Middle Eastern scholars, until very recently, have remained silent on the topic.

Given that the above literature is mainly from Western and Middle Eastern backgrounds, what were the key factors for contributed the rapid expansion and popularity of belly dance in Taiwan? Was it also a result of Orientalist fantasies and self-exoticism? The third purpose of the present paper is to answer this question. Though belly dance has become popular in East Asia, there are not many studies that look at belly dance from this region. This paper hopes to provide an innovative perspective from the East.

3. Data analysis

The method adopted in this study is literature analysis. The literature used consists mainly of previous Taiwanese studies and electronic papers that cited 23 Internet news articles dated from December 2007 to September 2010 and published on the website of six Taiwanese online newspapers¹⁰. The reason for including Internet news as the main material for this paper resides in the fact that belly dancing information frequently appears in this medium. In Taiwan, over 63% of the entire population uses the Internet¹¹, and “reading Internet news” is included among the most common behaviors when people surf the Internet (Lin 2007). Since Internet news has become an important channel for the communication of information, numerous Internet news articles are cited in the next section to reflect present developments of belly dance in Taiwan.

4. Developments of Taiwanese belly dance

Based on the reviewed literature, the following five points were identified as relevant for the phenomenon of Taiwanese belly dance.

⁸ Shay & Sellers-Young (2003, pp.18-20) mentioned that Said neglected this sensitive area of the orientalist discourse.

⁹ Since the 1970s, millions of women and some men in the West have been attracted to belly dancing, investing millions of dollars and enormous time acquiring the basic skill of the dance in order to perform it (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003, p. 13).

¹⁰ Including The Liberty Times, LT Sports, CNA News, Now News, Taiwan Review, and Yahoo News Taiwan.

¹¹ Taiwan Network Information Center, retrieved, August 26, 2010, from <http://statistics.twnic.net.tw/item04.htm>

Belly dance regarded as a healthy exercise especially effective for body shaping

Many organizations and belly dance lectures regard belly dance as a healthy exercise, and promotes its benefits for figure shaping, weight loss, and physical fitness. To prevent the metabolism syndrome, Taipei City Hospital offered citizens a diversity of exercise courses that also included belly dance¹². The Taiwan Dance & Sport Association¹³ is the first non-profit organization promoting belly dance in Taiwan. Its official website states that the ultimate aims are to promote techniques of leisure exercise, quality of life, and to increase the habit of regular physical exercise among the population¹⁴. At the 21st TAFISA¹⁵ World Congress held in Taiwan in 2009, a lecturer of AFAA¹⁶ performed a belly dance and instructed all participants to move together and experience this novel aerobic exercise¹⁷.

Wan-Ru Lee, belly dance lecturer and the founder of the Arabesque Troupe, especially highlights figure-shaping benefits of the dance in both her instruction book and VCD. When interviewed by a reporter she stated:

"I didn't have a waist curve when I took up other dances before, my waist curve appeared when I started learning belly dance ... Most Taiwanese are not really fat, just lack exercise. For sedentary office workers, belly dance can especially exercise waist and abdominal areas, as a substitute for exhausting whole-body exercise and shape specific body parts".

The reporter concluded in her own voice

"The greatest appeal of belly dance is the multiple benefits of reducing fat on the waist and stomach, toning the hip and waist area, creating a curve, and improving firmness of muscle"(Tsai 2009).

Belly dance lecturer Hue-Lan Lee said:

*"I was very unhappy and lost self-confidence when my weight went up to 115kg after childbirth, but I get rid of 65 kg within 5 months by diet and belly dancing. The dance emphasizes movements on waist, abdomen and hip, together with arms motion to exercise almost the whole body in a moderate way, avoiding injuries from strenuous exercise... I usually tell my students that regardless of your ability to dance, the most important aspect is to get aerobic exercise for health promotion and find your own beauty from it. The benefits of belly dance include weight loss and figure-shaping through exercise, its graceful movements have a female charm thus it has been especially embraced by women. Like active yoga, the way of respiration is focused on in belly dance as well, thus can help learners to regulate respiration"*¹⁸.

Another lecturer, Chien-Hue Kao, said, *"Belly dance is really healthy! There are few jumping movements, and thus can better avoid sports injuries. Further, muscles used for belly dance are*

¹² The Liberty Times, *People dance and workout in Taipei City Hospital*. Retrieved, August 18, 2010, from <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2010/new/may/24/today-taipei9.htm>

¹³ Founded in 2005 and changed name to The Taiwan Dance & Sport Federation, TDSF in 2007. It introduced certificate system from Turkey for training belly dance lecturer and assigned professional instructors to schools and communities promoting belly dance. It is also awards prizes for distinguished dancers, holds national and international belly dance competition. (Official website <http://www.tdsf.org.tw/>).

¹⁴ The Taiwan Dance & Sport Federation, retrieved, September 5, 2010, from <http://www.tdsf.org.tw/>

¹⁵ TAFISA (Trim and Fitness International Sport for All) is an international NGO approved by the IOC that aims to promote sport for all and physical fitness.

¹⁶ AFAA (Aerobics and Fitness Association of America).

¹⁷ LT Sports, *Belly Dance, Aerobic Boxing, Exercise Together in the 21th AFAA Congress*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from http://www.ltsports.com.tw/main/news.asp?no=70665&N_Class=1

¹⁸ The Liberty Times, *Get Rid of 65 kg by Belly Dance*. Retrieved, August 18, 2010, from <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2010/new/feb/19/today-so11-2.htm>

not often exercised in usual time, exercising them more can not only relieve lower back pain but also curve the waist”¹⁹.

Widely accessible and gradually embedded in local life

Chen’s (2007) study found associations for promoting belly dance spread in various administrative hierarchies in Taiwan. They greatly aided the dance’s prosperity; further, the number still seems to be growing.

Another prominent phenomenon was the high proportion of belly dance classes in the curricula of Community Universities. Housewives and elder women comprised the majority of students at Community University, especially in belly dance classes. The participation was so enthusiastic that in some communities they even had their own belly dance groups. From local festivals to national celebrations, performances of community groups, dancing studios, or independent belly dancers are frequent occurrences of Taiwanese daily life. Take Yunlin prefecture, for example²⁰. In 2010, some belly dancers were licensed by the Culture Affairs Bureau as street performers that were allowed to dance in 27 public places. Table 1 shows the diversity of events in Taiwan that included a belly dance performance in 2010.

Table 1. Events including belly dance performance

Name of occasion	Category of occasion	Reported date	Source of information
Tse-ra Noodle Carnival of Lujhou Township	festival of local specialty	2010/08/22	The Liberty Times
Chinese Valentine’s Day Evening Party of Hsinchu City	traditional culture	2010/08/16	The Liberty Times
Eco-friendly Carnival in Hsinchu City	environmental awareness	2010/08/10	The Liberty Times
Awards Ceremony for Father of Single-parent Families	education	2010/08/01	Yahoo News Taiwan
Fruit Festival of Jhuolan Township	festival of agriculture product	2010/07/21	Now News
Music Art Season of Lontan Township	art	2010/07/09	The Liberty Times
Traditional Arts Festival of Kaohsiung County	folk art	2010/06/12	The Liberty Times
Spring Concert of Taichung City	art	2010/05/25	CNA News
Bring Warmth to Penghu Jail	social	2010/02/09	The Liberty Times

Source: Data collected by this research (2010)

Promoted as an exercise for all age groups and genders

In Taiwan, belly dance is sometimes promoted as an ‘exercise for all.’ In addition to young women, children and older women participate in the dance. Although there are male students and teachers, female participants are still the majority. Media reports often focus on older women who gained confidence and a slim figure through belly dancing, and on the increasing number of older dancers who participate in competitions. Belly dancing is even promoted as a family activity. A large number of news articles are about domestic Taiwanese competitions. The following paragraph summarizes some of those reports.

At the 2007 TDSF Belly Dance Open Competition, organizers included for the first time the Children’s Division and the Golden Age Division (above 60 years old) in response to the increasing number of young and elderly belly dancers. There were also 18 participants in the Individuals Division and 24 teams in the Groups Division. One team named “Silence is Sweeter” was composed of deaf-mute people and

¹⁹ CNA News, *Shake belly, dancing to a healthy and happy life*. Retrieved, August 25, 2010, from <http://www.cna.com.tw/SearchNews/doDetail.aspx?id=201007100052&q=%e8%82%9a%e7%9a%ae%e8%88%9e>

²⁰ The Liberty Times, *69 buskers are selected*. Retrieved, August 26, 2010, from <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2010/new/jun/23/today-center7.htm>

golden age dancers. Moreover, participants even included a 5-year-old child and an 85-year-old grandmother²¹.

According to another newspaper article²², more than 800 Taiwanese enthusiasts were attracted to the casting competition for World Belly Dance Competition. The organizer said that selection was competitive, the number of participating teams was greater than in previous years, and that each participant had put in great effort as representatives of Taiwan. The fact that participants included mothers, grandmothers, children, and even fathers showed that belly dance could be seen as an exercise for all people.

Among the 20 Taiwanese representatives at the 2010 World Belly Dance Competition in Seoul, the oldest dancer was 63 years old while the youngest was 9 years old. One Taiwanese team consisted of three older mothers who won the Popularity Award in Mature Adults division²³.

Dance lecturer Hui-Lan Lee states:

“Women comprise the main groups of yoga and dance classes of Yonkan community center in Tainan, and it is belly dance with sexy costumes and movements that attracted the most learners. In the beginning, few people joined the class owing to overtly sexy stereotype, however, word-of-mouth advertising has attracted more people gradually and some people even have to wait for vacancies sometimes [...] Women devoted themselves to family and children thus neglecting their own needs and interests in early years, but they pursue their dreams bravely and show their confidence when their responsibility to family is not such a burden as before²⁴.”

In 2010, the Taiwanese Belly Dance Mama Competition was held on Father’s Day. The slogan read ‘Ba Ba Day, Ma Ma Show.’ In this case, the dance was promoted not only as a healthy exercise encouraging mature mothers to join in, but suitable for participation by the entire family.

Multiple cultural elements blended with belly dance

The organizer of the Creative Belly Dance Open Competition in Taichung City stated that belly dance is now not only a matter of the Middle East, but that it is becoming popular globally and gradually entering the local culture in Taiwan. Various Taiwanese themes are brought in to the competition to create new dance styles, including Taiwanese aborigine belly dance, Hakka belly dance, Karate belly dance, Tribal style belly dance, and creative rotating belly dance²⁵.

Another example comes from the fourth National Dance Exercise Performance and Awarding Ceremony, where senior dancer Mei-Hue Lai revealed to the audience a brand-new style by mixing traditional Chinese dragon and lion dance with belly dance. Other fusions included Chicago jazz belly dance, American tribal belly dance, and hip-hop belly dance²⁶.

Jie Liu, the chairman of Taiwan Creative Belly Dance Association who was interviewed at the first Cultural Industry Exposition that included participants from both Taiwan and mainland China, stated:

²¹ LT Sports, *Belly Dance Grand Meeting, December 30 in Taipei*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from http://www.ltsports.com.tw/main/news.asp?no=54874&N_Class=1

²² LT Sports, *More than 800 Taiwanese enthusiasts were attracted to the selection for World Belly Dance Competition*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from http://www.ltsports.com.tw/main/news.asp?no=70001&N_Class=1

²³ CNA News, *Taiwanese Belly Dancer Lo Chon-Yu Wins Big Prize in Seoul*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from <http://www.cna.com.tw/SearchNews/doDetail.aspx?id=201005020007&q=%e8%82%9a%e7%9a%ae%e8%88%9e>

²⁴ The Liberty Times, *Grandmoms and Moms, Belly Dancing Together*. Retrieved, August 18, 2010, from <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2010/new/feb/19/today-so11.htm>

²⁵ CNA News, *Creative Belly Dance Competition Is Coming Soon*. Retrieved, August 27, 2010, from <http://www.cna.com.tw/SearchNews/doDetail.aspx?id=201003190146&q=%e8%82%9a%e7%9a%ae%e8%88%9e>

²⁶ LT Sports, *The 4th National Dance Exercise Performance and Awarding Ceremony*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from http://www.ltsports.com.tw/main/news.asp?no=73839&N_Class=1

“The main difference between mainland China and Taiwan is that the former focuses on traditional style with more ethnic flavor while the latter develops multiple forms like leisure fitness, entertainment and performance. Branches of her belly dance studio have been set up in five Chinese cities, and the cooperative plan for training professional lectures of tribal, fusion and oriental styles will start soon”²⁷.

In the Gala Show of the 2010 World Belly Dance Competition in Seoul, the Taiwanese team performed fusion style, which blended elements of Taiwanese aboriginal dance, Hakka dance, and Taiwanese folk opera into belly dance. The president of The Taiwan Dance & Sport Federation said: “Creativity of dancers not only makes belly dance more diverse, but also gives new life to traditional Taiwanese culture”²⁸.

Outstanding dancers are acclaimed as the pride of Taiwan

Chen calculates that there were eight open belly dance competitions held in 2007, which computes to an average of one every 1.5 months (Chen 2007). To date, Taiwanese belly dancers have also participated in many international competitions, and they have won several top prizes.

Nancy Kuo’s choreography, ‘The Chinese Ghostbusters,’ which merged Chinese Taoist religious dance with belly dance moves, landed Kuo the bronze medal at the 2007 Nagwa Fouad Cup International Belly Dance Competition held in Seoul. The following year, she won the ninth Ahlan WA Sahlan Belly Dance Festival of 2008 held in Egypt, a competition that is known as the Olympics of belly dance. Her victory was a big surprise, as it constituted the first time that a dancer from East Asia had ever taken the gold medal. Taiwanese news praised ‘The pride of Taiwan!’²⁹:

“Her win was not only a personal achievement, but also showed the commitment to belly dance exhibited by performers in Taiwan as well as the growing popularity of this ancient dance among locals”³⁰.

Several Taiwanese belly dancers won prizes at the 2010 World Belly Dance Competition in Seoul³¹. The president of The Taiwan Dance & Sport Federation stated that the promotion of talented dancers has been emphasized recently in Taiwan. Dancers being recognized in international competitions in Asia, the United States and even Egypt not only aid unofficial diplomacy but also further the international recognition of Taiwan³².

In July 2010, stories of 99 Taiwanese citizens were published in the special issue ‘New Pride of Taiwan’ by a famous and influential Taiwanese magazine entitled *Global Views Monthly* (Wang 2010). The common feature of the profiles was that these Taiwanese citizens had won international honors in their respective fields. Yu-Ting Sun, who won the 2010 World Belly Dance Competition in Seoul, was selected in the category of performing arts. The magazine also explained that Taiwan had long been isolated for political reasons, and that these achievements had gained Taiwan international recognition. Beyond their personal

²⁷ CNA News, *Cultural Industry Exposition between Taiwan and Mainland China in Xiamen*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from <http://www.cna.com.tw/SearchNews/doDetail.aspx?id=201006190081&q=%e8%82%9a%e7%9a%ae%e8%88%9e>

²⁸ CNA News, *Taiwanese Belly Dancer Lo Chon-Yu Wins Big Prize in Seoul*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from <http://www.cna.com.tw/SearchNews/doDetail.aspx?id=201005020007&q=%e8%82%9a%e7%9a%ae%e8%88%9e>

²⁹ LT Sports, *The Pride of Taiwan—Nancy Kao*. Retrieved, August 26, 2010, from http://www.ltsports.com.tw/main/news.asp?no=59545&N_Class=1

³⁰ Taiwan Review, *Belly Dance in the Big City*. Retrieved, August 26, 2010, from <http://taiwanreview.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=47607&CtNode=1337&mp=1>

³¹ World Belly Dance Competition is one of the four main international belly dance competitions.

³² CNA News, *Taiwanese Belly Dancer Lo Chon-Yu Wins Big Prize in Seoul*. Retrieved, August 28, 2010, from <http://www.cna.com.tw/SearchNews/doDetail.aspx?id=201005020007&q=%e8%82%9a%e7%9a%ae%e8%88%9e>

achievements, the nurturing support of their homeland had also contributed to their success. For the makers of the special issue, the 99 represented the new Taiwanese spirit.

5. How is belly dance in Taiwan different from other places?

Five points were identified in the previous section, which argues that the development of the imported dance has been influenced by Taiwanese social context, and that it was embedded in local life. Moreover, one distinguishing feature can be detected in Taiwanese belly dance. The unstable orientation between exotic and local made it better to be regarded as a localised exoticism, which is different from the Orientalist motif of belly dancing representation in Western context. The following section will elaborate on the notion of belly dance as **localised exoticism** in Taiwan.

A dance that vacillates between the exotic and the local

There are many examples where folk dances serve to anchor ethnic identity and ease nostalgia in diasporic contexts (Kwok 1979, Foley 2001, Eshel 2003, Usner 2001). For example, among immigrant communities in the United States festive celebrations of culture include dancing, music, and food. These celebrations are important for Middle Eastern immigrants to remain in touch with friends and make new contacts with those of similar ethnic heritage (Rasmussen 1992).

However, in the case of Taiwan, it was a Taiwanese who imported belly dance from the Middle East. In fact, there are not many immigrants from Arabia and the Middle East in Taiwan. Apart from foreign masters who visit Taiwan for short-term workshops, no Middle Eastern teacher has taught belly dance in Taiwan for a sustained amount of time. Most Taiwanese learn the dance from Taiwanese instructors, and the lack of native teachers possibly contributes to the success of 'fusion' or 'hybrid' belly dancing style. As Lee observes, classes of fusion styles and belly dance for fitness promotion are much more popular than the traditional and culture focused Oriental style (Lee 2007). As mentioned in the preceding section, some domestic competitions and associations encouraged the creativity to invent styles of belly dance with strong local and Taiwanese cultural influences.

However, in contrast to this, the imported dance was frequently promoted for its folkloric and exotic contents by dance studio websites, TV shows, electronic advertisements, fliers, and publications. Nevertheless, since the belly dance taught in Taiwan is more or less hybrid, and sometimes even has a strong Taiwanese flavor, why do people flock to the dance classes? If exoticism is the key to luring participants, then what kind of exoticism is being pursued by the Taiwanese belly dancing industry?

Based on her teaching experience, Tsai indicates that most learners are not very interested in the Middle Eastern culture or in the background of the dance (Tsai 2009). On the contrary, the main appeal for them lies in its quality as a leisure time activity, the fitness and weight loss aspects, and the exotic touch. Similar to Tsai's perspective, data collected has shown that although they express their susceptibility to an abstract exoticism, many learners do not really care where the dance comes from or whether they are learning an orthodox form of the dance. What they pursue, in reality, is a general sensation of the exotic, rather than authentic contents from exotic cultural contexts.

Apart from the promotion and pursuit of exoticism in the case of Taiwanese belly dance, belly dance appeared on multiple local activities and attracted participants from various areas, ages and genders, who then mingled with multiple cultural elements. Though potentially it could become a new focus of Taiwanese identity, we could see a localizing tendency at the same time. One thing that requires clarification was the unstable orientation of Taiwanese belly dance, which was not corresponding to Said's self-other concept, nor was it the same as Shay & Sellers-Young's self-exoticism. Taiwanese belly dance is not merely exotic, not merely local, and not merely hybrid. However, it is sometimes exotic, sometimes local, and sometimes both exotic and local at the same time. As a review of the literature and news articles reveals, exotic and local – two seemingly contradictory concepts – can be adopted interchangeably and co-exist. They are flexibly

appropriated in various occasions, be it in dance competitions, in dancing studios, in the mass media, or in the explanations given by individual dancers. To describe this dialectic and fluid relation, I propose to speak of “localised exoticism” in Taiwanese society³³. This localised exoticism is the result of multiple routes of appropriation and consists of the exotic fantasy of local people, the blending of local cultural elements and the practical embedment in local life.

6. Conclusion

To elaborate on the extraordinary development of Taiwanese belly dance, this article proposes five categories that elucidate the way in which the dance is accepted by the local population. Belly dance is regarded as an exercise that is beneficial for health and especially good for acquiring a well-shaped body; it is widely accessible and has been gradually embedded in local life; it is promoted as an exercise for all age groups and genders; it is blended with multiple cultural elements; and it made the news when outstanding dancers were acclaimed as the pride of Taiwan. These categories show that the local development of the imported dance is influenced by Taiwanese social backgrounds and embedded in local life. Further, to express the unstable location between exotic and local, this article proposes that belly dance responds to what I call the localised exoticism that is pervasive in Taiwan. This is not only a case study of the global belly dancing trend, but also reflects the diverse and dynamic culture flow of the modern world.

Therefore, considering the success of belly dance as a popular new trend in Taiwan that has aroused widespread interest, we must ask if belly dance will be connected with excessive marketing strategies and commercial activities, possibly occasioning a negative image for the dance. Further study employing different methods and theories is required. It is also essential to keep track of further developments of belly dance and to explore its relationship with the Taiwanese social background.

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³³ The term “localised exoticism” was created by author, referring to both the exoticism that created by local people's exotic imagination and the work they try to make the dance with localism.

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