

Chapter 5

Elderly Empowerment: Promoting Social Wellbeing and Health through Thai Dance

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Dance and Health

Dance is an art and science that offers various capacities. From ancient times to the present, people have experienced and enjoyed dance in various ways and for various reasons. Generally, people recognized dance as an art form, but dancing can also be a social activity, an intangible cultural heritage, or a therapeutic exercise for mental and physical wellbeing. According to the American Dance Therapy Association (2021), dance emerged as a form of psychotherapy in the 1940s. Today, Dance Therapy or Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is widely recognized as the psychotherapeutic use of dance and movement to support intellectual, emotional, and motor functions of the body.

In 2009, research published by the Journal of Aging and Physical Activity proved that dance is an effective activity for elderly health improvement compared with other exercise modes (Justin Keogh et al). Phoebe and Kathryn (2015) also found that regardless of style, dance can significantly improve physical health among the elderly, particularly muscular strength and endurance, balance, and other aspects of functional fitness. Meanwhile, Peter Lovatt, head of the Dance Psychology lab at the University of Hertfordshire, also stated that there is a substantial body of research evidence to suggest that dancing is beneficial to mental health. With dance as a form of therapy, patients with depression or Parkinson's disease conditions have been improved (Cashin-Garbutt 2017). As concluded by Darin Shaw and Karl Benzo (2019), in recent years, due to the well-known benefits of DMT, it has become a

popular therapeutic approach that is widely practiced by dance therapists around the world. From a therapeutic perspective, dance is recognized as more than an art or a social activity. It has been strategically used as a form of therapy by the medical community today.

Thai Dance for Mental and Physical Health

In Thailand, over the last decade, the increasing popularity of DMT has resulted in a phenomenon of the utilization of Thai dance for various health improvement programs. Consequently, much research and practice have been carried out to examine the application of Thai dance as a form of mental and physical therapy, particularly for the aged population. For instance, in 2012, a research article *A Thai Dance Exercise Regimen for People with Parkinson's Disease* published by Dr. Surasa Khongprasert and her team of researchers from the Faculty of Sports Science and Faculty of Medicine at Chulalongkorn University has proven that Thai dance can lead to improvements in motor functions and quality of life of seniors with Parkinson's disease. In 2013, another research study entitled *Physical Performance in recently aged adults after 6 Weeks Traditional Thai Dance: A Randomized Controlled Trial* led by medical scientists from Khon Kaen University also confirmed that Thai dance as a form of exercise can improve the physical performance of aged female adults (Janyacharoen et al).

In 2019, researchers from the occupational therapy unit in Chiang Mai University studied the effects of Thai dance on depression symptoms and found that Thai dance intervention with the treatment for patients suffering from depression was able to increase their positive thinking toward life (Chansuk et al 2019). In 2020, another research named *Thai Dance Exercises Benefited Functional Mobility and Rall Rates among Community-dwelling Older Individuals* revealed that Thai dance can work as an alternative exercise program to promote independence and safety among the elderly (Kaewjoho et al 2019). By and large, substantial medical research evidence shows that engaging in Thai dance rehabilitation is beneficial for elderly health.

According to Professor Emeritus Surapone Virulrak, apart from the perspective of the medical sciences, it is also essential to examine Thai dance as an effective therapy for the elderly from a cultural psychology viewpoint. As he explained, an effective therapeutic exercise for the elderly needed to be accommodated to their lifestyles and cultural context. Therefore, when exploring the utilization of Thai dance as a form of therapy, tradition and cultural values are spiritual elements that cannot

be overlooked. Throughout the history of Thailand, dance has been an essential component in Thai religious traditions, particularly for dances that served religious ceremonial or ritualistic purposes. From the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767) to the present, music and dance have been strategically employed as an instrument to sustain the state's political and cultural development interest. Thus, Thai dances are an important intangible cultural resource that has been utilized to promote national integration, strengthen cultural identity, and foster community development.

Furthermore, since the early-20th century, traditional music, songs, and dances have also been significantly incorporated into cultural and educational policy to establish a “Thai-ness” identity. Given that, Thai traditional music and dance have become indispensable elements that are deeply implanted in Thai people's cultural DNA. Thai dance has, therefore, become an art form that most Thai people are familiar with and an intangible cultural heritage with which Thai people associate their cultural identity. Due to all these factors, when Thai dance is employed as a therapeutic activity to tackle elderly health matters, it can be comfortably accepted by the patient and the family. In brief, Thai dance is widely recognized by Thai people as an art form with high spiritual and cultural values. Subsequently, its adaptation to therapeutic usage is considered a relevant alteration that is able to be celebrated by the local context.

Aging Population in Thailand

According to Srichuae (2016), the rapid aging phenomenon is one of the greatest challenges faced by Thailand. Meanwhile, the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) also announced that the population of Bangkok is aging faster than of other provinces in Thailand. In 2008 the aging population in Bangkok was only 10% but by 2020 the aged population will reach 21%.

Wichit Chaitrong (2017) also said that since 2005, the population of citizens aged 60 or older has steadily increased. In 2017, the aged population rose to 11.23 million (17.13%) of the total population. With such speed of growth, the aged population will rise to 13.1 million (20%) of the total population in 2021. Thailand will then become a full-fledged aging society. This data presents a great challenge for families, communities, and the country, as elderly people require more care and support for their welfare and daily lives. In brief, the growing “silver tsunami” has emerged as one of the major challenges faced by Bangkok, and in Thailand as a whole.

The Culture, Sport and Tourism Department (CSTD)

The Culture, Sport and Tourism Department (CSTD) is one of the 65 departments established under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) to oversee the living quality and development in Bangkok. The department is committed to providing spaces and services for sports and cultural activities that will empower the mental and physical wellbeing of local communities (CSTD 2020). CSTD is also a strategic unit to facilitate traditional cultural value dissemination to Thai people from different age groups and engaged in arts and cultural projects that foster the capital city tourism development.

Apart from the above-mentioned missions, CSTD is also an agent responsible for implementing BMA's strategies toward current challenges faced by the capital city such as explosive growth of urbanization, environmental pollution, aging population, etc. At present, under the vision of "Building Better Quality of Life", there are 38 youth centers, 37 libraries, 10 sports centers, 7 bookmobile libraries, 2 children's discovery museums, and 1 art and culture center operated by CSTD to realize the department's mission. Among these entities, the 38 youth centers are the major agencies distributed around different districts of Bangkok to cater to the needs of youth and local community development. Meanwhile, based on the types of neighborhoods and communities, each center will develop its own "uniqueness" to accommodate the communities' interests. Therefore, different centers' programs and activities were distinctively designed by the responsible administrative team to respond to the communities that it served.

Suan-Oy Community Center for all Age Groups



Figure 1. A Thai Dance class at Suan-Oy Community Center

Located in the Dusit district, Suan-Oy Community Center for all Age Groups (also known by the locals as Suan-Oy Community Center) is one of the 38 youth centers established by CSTD to promote mental and physical healthcare for communities residing around Bangkok's central area. Open 7 days a week, nearly 365 days of service in a year, the center has been an important venue for local communities' sports and recreation activities over the last three decades. Historically, the location of the center used to be a sugarcane plantation from which it was given the name "Suan-Oy" literally meaning sugarcane plantation in Thai. Currently, the center is led by Sriwan Semmanee (Head of Center) with a team of eight members. With the mission to serve the local community from diverse age groups, the center has designed a series of artistic and cultural activities to meet the needs of different audiences. Concisely, these activities were structured under three clusters, (1) sports and recreation, (2) life-long learning, and (3) arts and culture.

For sports and recreation activities, facilities available are a multi-functional space for both indoor and outdoor sports usage and a gym studio. Programs wise, for the elderly, there are classes on yoga, aerobics, water aerobics, weight training, Tai Chi, etc. Under the life-long learning cluster, English and Chinese classes are being offered to all age groups along with some vocational short courses for adolescents. Meanwhile, activities programmed under arts and cultural clusters are without a doubt the most celebrated by the elderly group. According to Rachan Dowthong (instructor of Thai dances), from singing lessons, musical instrument workshops, dance classes to traditional handicraft working groups all programs are highly participated by the elderly members. Strategically, each program was designed into a series of classes and led by its respective instructors over a period. For instance, in Thai dance classes, a dance piece will be practiced and performed by members over a period of two months and other dance forms will then be introduced.

Thai Dances Classes - An Arts-based Elderly Empowerment Program

As mentioned above, over the past decades, Thai Dance has been employed to treat diverse aging conditions ranging from muscle strengthening to balance improvement. In addition to physical health, research has also found that Thai dance is able to improve aged group mental wellbeing. Therefore, Thai dance as a form of entertaining and therapeutic activity has been widely employed by community centers across the nation in their elderly wellbeing program.

For community centers managed by CSTD, dances have always been a key component of the recreation activities. According to Sriwan Semmanee, currently, various dance classes are being offered by Suan-Oy Community Center, and Thai dance is a very popular class among the elderly. Classes on Thai dance are scheduled every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon. Each class lasts between 45 and 60 minutes. Rachan Dowthong also said that, unlike typical dance classes, Thai dance classes are being designed as a series of cultural activities that include basic dance theory, gesture, and movement manipulation, as well as performance preparation that involves make-up, dressing, and props design.



Figure 2. Mr. Rachan Dowthong explaining the gesture and movement to the elderly at Suan-Oy Community Center

Therefore, the elderly group celebrated the Thai dance classes due to their overall experience and the program's comprehensiveness. In addition, he also emphasized that the dance piece selection process is a "significant" factor to ensure the success of the class. As opposed to a top-down approach, he discusses with the elderly what dance forms they want to explore before embarking on his lesson's design. This step is a crucial stage for the whole class's planning because once students' ideas and suggestions are embraced, they will feel appreciated and consequently it will result in high motivation and active participation.

Meanwhile, to understand and explain how Thai dance works as an instrument for the elderly's social wellbeing and physical health improvement, a focus group was conducted to investigate participants' attitudes and experiences of Thai dance classes. In total, nine research subjects were selected based on voluntary participation. A series of open-ended questions related to Thai dance classes' design and management were designed for the elderly to answer and reflect on their experiences. The researchers drew the conclusion based on what participants said during the focus group discussions.

Through the focus group's findings, the researchers found that the majority of the elderly who participated in Thai dance classes speak highly about their experience. According to Madam Daeng (70-year-old), she has been participating in Thai dance classes over the past 3 years. Every week, she attends all lessons and hardly she will be absent if there are no unexpected circumstances. She found Thai dance class to be an interesting activity that made her feel active and happy. Moreover, an opportunity to showcase performances to the public during festivals or events organized by the center motivated her and her friends to be actively involved in classes and the center. Another member, Madam Sawang (61-year-old) also mentioned that she enjoys Thai dance classes due to the attentiveness of the instructors and lesson comprehensiveness. To her, the tempo and movement of Thai dance are great exercises and social activities. She enjoyed such a dance form and was glad to learn more about the cultural heritage of the nation. Meanwhile, Madam Napahporn and Madam Panchareen who are in their late 60s also found Thai dance forms to have a very distinctive charm. As said by Madam Napahporn, "Thai dance is an activity that triggers my good memories of the past. I am grateful to have the chance to enjoy the art form again at this time of my life."

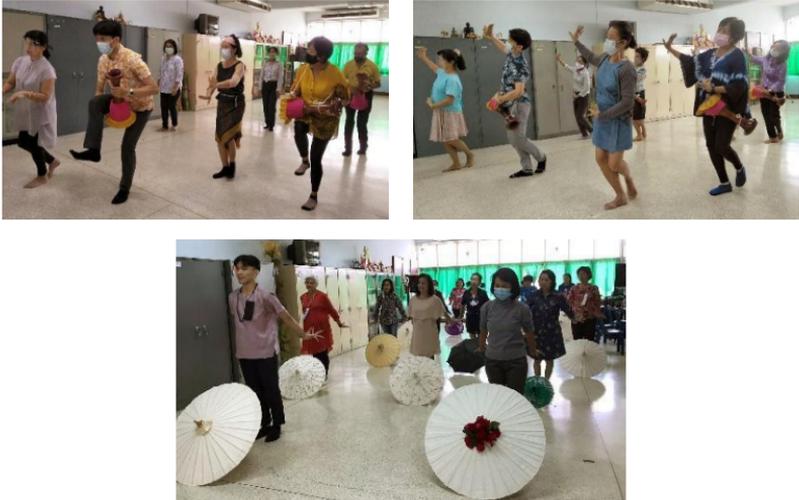


Figure 3. Thai dance's weekly practices at Suan-Oy Community Center

Interestingly, through the focus group discussion, the researchers found that most of the members who participated in Thai dance activities at Suan-Oy Community Center do not reside near the Dusit district. Six out of nine participants live further than 10 kilometers away from the center, another three members travel from other districts. According to Madam Daeng, there is another community center near her residence, but she prefers to come to Suan-Oy Community Center. She reiterated, "Since I am familiar with staff and friends here, I chose to come here. Furthermore, I really enjoyed Mr. Rachan Dowthong's teaching approach, so I don't mind spending a longer time to come over." Madam Panchareen, who must travel longer than an hour to join the Thai dance classes, also mentioned that she found friends and instructors who are good-natured. Therefore, she preferred Suan-Oy Community Center to the one close to the district where she is residing.

According to Rachan Dowthong, strong social bonding between participants and the instructor needs time to develop. In his mid-20s, Rachan Dowthong found that the elderly see him as their grandson more than an instructor. He earned their trust and love due to the amount of time that he spent with them. Apart from Thai dances classes, he also joined the elderly in their folk songs and traditional handcraft

classes. Therefore, he is well-celebrated. Another reason that made him a respected instructor is his knowledge and skills. Professionally trained in Thai classical dances, Rachan Dowthong is a graduate of Bunditpattanasilpa Institute, Thailand's leading fine and dramatic arts college. With his background and experience in Thai traditional dances, he is a very resourceful teacher who is able to design dance pieces that fit the interests of participants. For example, instead of using traditional music for dance pieces he choreographed, he replaced the relatively slow classical music with a more dynamic folk song that stimulates more vibrant energy. So far, his creative approach has received positive feedback from participants and is highly recognized by the center management team.

In 2017, the World Health Organization reported that more than 15% of seniors over the age of 60 suffer from a mental disorder. A typical mental disorder among seniors is depression, affecting 7% of the older population. Lamentably, symptoms of depression are frequently unnoticeable by the family and the older people themselves, subsequently, it goes untreated and affects their entire health. Therefore, promoting a healthy lifestyle such as betterment of living conditions and social support from family, friends or support groups is very important for the elderly (WHO 2017).

From the focus group discussion, five out of seven seniors stated that joining the classes at the center has become an important matter in their life. As said by Madam Panchareen, "after my retirement, I feel so lonely to stay at home by myself. Although I live with my children, I am always home alone during the weekdays. So, taking dance classes and other activities made me happy and it is something that I look forward to." Madam Daeng also said that "I am concerned with getting an aging-associated disease, especially Alzheimer's. So, I joined Thai dance classes to make sure I am mentally and physically healthy." Others also mentioned that due to retirement and lack of routine activities, the feeling of disconnection with the surrounding world is terrifying them. Therefore, they embraced the social activities that enabled them to reconnect with society. Given that, Thai dance classes have become one of their favorite activities.

Rachan Dowthong observed that the elderly are especially vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation. For this reason, a community center with a friendly environment and interesting programs is an important entity to cater to the needs of the aged group. To him, the Thai dance classes are psychotherapy as well as a social activity for the elderly to embrace a positive outlook of life. He also mentioned that the elderly who participate in his class are mostly physically fit and able to care for themselves



Figure 4. The rehearsal before a stage performance at Suan-Oy Community Center

well. Many of them become a member of the community because they are feeling down when staying home alone. For that reason, he always does his best to make sure the whole experience of the class is amusing.

Factors that Contribute to the Success of Thai Dance Class

The Thai dance classes offered by Suan-Oy Community Center are without a doubt an interesting arts-based elderly empowerment program which is worth being recognized and promoted. Briefly, factors that contribute to the program's success can be described as follows.

(1) Thai dance - a suitable choice in consonance with the elderly's interest

According to Prof. Surapone Virulrak, sports, in general, are result-oriented activities that require high concentration and are physically demanding. Consequently, certain types of sport might not be so accessible for some elderly. Dance, on the contrary, is an accessible and fun activity. Thai dance, however, as a social activity and therapeutic exercise is both a suitable sport and cultural activity for the Thai

elderly. Prof. Virulrak expressed that, “the elderly must first recognize Thai dance as a suitable choice to answer their needs before they embrace it. Ideally, any forms of arts-based therapeutic exercise for the elderly should be an accessible light activity with interesting cultural elements.” In brief, Thai dance is an age-friendly sport that contains all elements the elderly are looking for. Therefore, it is well-received by the elderly at Suan-Oy Community Center.

(2) An attentive instructor and interesting program

Based on participants’ feedback, the researchers learned that their high motivation and active participation are built on the respect and trust they have in their instructor, Rachan Dowthong. As mentioned above, his background, knowledge, preparation, as well as delivery methods, were able to attract and maintain participants’ interests. Meanwhile, his non-teacher-centered teaching approach and competency in balancing students’ learning interests also contributed to the class success. As said by him, “It takes time for establishing a strong bonding. Hence, I spent the time learning about each participant’s interests and inspiration. Apart from that, I must be patient and sensitive when working with the elderly. It is important for me to always remind myself that a good class is to ensure all participants are receiving equal attention and affection.”

In addition to his thoughtful teaching approach, the handicraft workshop that involved prop-making sessions for stage performance played a part in the success of the Thai traditional dance classes. For instance, workshops such as stage decoration, performance ornaments design, and makeup techniques are well integrated into the traditional dance program to enrich the overall experience of participants. As said by Madam Daeng, “we enjoy the moments of prop-making and dressing up for rehearsal. It is very motivating and fun.” In brief, the Thai dance classes were programmed as a journey for the seniors to have various kinds of amusing cultural activities in a different stage of their involvement. Therefore, it is well received.

(3) An opportunity to perform in diverse events

To encourage participants’ motivation and involvement, a series of cultural activities that involved dance groups’ exchange between community centers has also been strategically implemented. Mostly, these exchange activities are designed as part of the center’s seasonal events celebration. According to Rachan Dowthong, at these events, participants will showcase their performances to audiences from other districts and

exchange their experiences with different dance groups. It is a happy moment that the elderly look forward to. Meanwhile, during these events, the family and friends of the elderly are also be invited to participate as audiences or volunteers, for this reason, the Thai dance program is always one of the most popular activities at Suan-Oy Community Center. As said by Madam Sawang, “we appreciated the opportunity to perform in events organized by the center and enjoyed the experience throughout the whole process.” Madam Panchareen also said that, from time to time, apart from events organized by CSTD, they also have been invited to perform for events organized by other governmental and private organizations as well as participated in folk and traditional dance competitions.

Summary

Driven by the scholarly interest in active aging and empowering the elderly through the arts-based community development project in Thailand, the researchers in this study surveyed the use of Thai dance as a creative intervention for elderly empowerment. Qualitative research was conducted with key informants from the Suan-Oy Community Center, the elderly from its Thai dance class, and leading scholars in the field of Thai dance and cultural management in Thailand. The study concludes that the overall success of Thai dance as an arts-based empowerment instrument can be credited to three main factors: (1) Thai dance is a suitable art form and social activity that fit with the elderly’s interest and lifestyle; (2) the instructor’s attentiveness and interesting program motivate elderly participation; (3) dance classes provide a platform for the elderly to engage and exhibit their accomplishments is a significant step to encourage their continuous supports and sustain the program’s success.

Most importantly, results from this research provide an insight in understanding Thai dance as an empowerment activity for this group of elderly that promotes both positive social wellbeing, and physical and mental health improvement. Overall, as participants described, they celebrated the Thai dance classes offered by Suan-Oy Community Center, and found that Thai dances work as an interesting program to promote wellness in terms of positive mental and physical well-being. This result suggested a positive view that recognizes Thai dance as a significant instrument to foster elderly well-being.

Meanwhile, as this research only involved elderly women from Suan-Oy Community Center, future researchers may want to study the effects of Thai dance on social

welling and health improvement to both genders and engage more stakeholders from different community centers in Bangkok.

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