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ERCCT Online Paper Series:

**Embodying Global Citizenship:
Constructing Identity through Salsa Practice in Taiwan**
(Chang I-Wen)

November 2013

EOPS No. 0020

–Young Scholar Workshop 2013 selected collections –

European Research Center on Contemporary Taiwan

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**Embodying Global Citizenship:
Constructing Identity through Salsa Practice in Taiwan**

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Abstract

In the last five years, salsa has become a growing practice among young professionals in Taiwan. However, what does it mean for Taiwanese to salsa? By investigating Taiwanese salsa practitioners in salsa studios, salsa clubs, and salsa performance, I argue that Taiwanese salsa practitioners embody exoticism and eroticism as a survival strategy to work within and against the norms which mandate a highly sedate and regulated use of the body. By interviewing salsa instructor Larry Shao—the director of the *Taipei Love Salsa* dance company—a fine artist who did several contemporary works engaging salsa, including a video art project in 2010 Taipei Biennial in Taipei Fine Arts Museum, and a solo art exhibition entitled “Esto Es Salsa” in 2012, and another Taiwanese salsa instructor James Wang, who spent seven months traveling and dancing in Korea, India, Finland, England, Spain, France, Egypt, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Japan, Hong Kong, and the USA, I argue that salsa provides these Taiwanese practitioners with an opportunity to redefine a concept of self as cosmopolitan and highly mobile but problematically tied to the dream of liberation through social ascendancy.

Although highly focused in scope, there are five areas where I believe my work to be academically relevant: 1) to bring salsa to dance studies; 2) to examine salsa in terms of dance rather than music; 3) to look at salsa dance as a critical interstice in the practice of Taiwanese everydayness; 4) to theorize how salsa engages with identity formation; 5) to theorize the relevance of Taiwanese salsa in a global context.

Dance Studies and Salsa

Dance—as a corporeal discourse—is a unique form of culture and knowledge production that both embodies and produces cultural meanings (Novack, 1990). Scholars have established dance as a site of everyday political meaning making that works against a reified notion of abstract political reality bound to governmental power. Recently, Dance Studies has addressed the ways in which corporeal movement engages with issues of national, colonial, and post-colonial identities (O’Shea: 2007, Savigliano: 1995, Lin: 2010, Chen: 2009, among others), a vein that I too hope to expand upon. Undergirding my grasp of the Dance Studies framework is the assertion that dance is “a cultural practice that embodies a broader scope of purpose and influence” (Wong, 2002: 70). Thus as embodied corporeality, dance situates bodies as relational, and moving within networks of power (Savigliano, 1995), which can reveal social values embodied in everyday practice. Dance Studies provides resources for reading salsa as interpolated in the critical practices of race, gender, class, postcolonialism, and nationalism studies.

In this paper, I look at how Taiwanese dancers negotiate their personal and national identity through the practice of salsa. I focus on how Dance Studies furthers our understanding of social, cultural, and political agenda. To understand how salsa is different from any other kind of corporeal practice, I begin with a brief history of salsa in order to show the already complicated history and colonial legacy embodied in this dance form before broaching the larger question of the significance of this form in ever-expanding cosmopolitan notions of culture. This understanding provides us a background for why it is significant to discuss the salsa practice in Taiwan.

The name "Salsa" is the Spanish word for sauce, connoting (in American Spanish) a spicy flavor. It also suggests a "mixture" of ingredients. Salsa originates from the Cuban folk music dance *Son*, which arose in the eastern part of Cuba, merging Spanish guitar and lyrical traditions with African percussion and rhythms. During the Spanish colonization of Cuba (1511-1898), a great number of Europeans mostly from Spain settled there. Those European-derived elements of the dance, such as the upright bodily stance that maintains a straight back and the practice of dancing with partners of the opposite sex as can be found in contemporary salsa.

Today, salsa is a transnational and transcultural dance form that has traveled from the Americas to many other countries and taken on diverse meanings among its participants. Although tied to Cuba in its origins, salsa was actually first heard in New York around the mid-to late-1960s, and given its particular sound and identity mainly by Puerto Rican musicians. Thus, salsa is a malleable dance form onto which everyone who practices it can add their own ‘spice.’ It is a dance that best illustrates the contemporary phenomenon of the mixture of culture concomitantly with the cultural problematic

of notions of “authentic” roots¹.

Unlike other popular world dance and partner dance forms, such as flamenco or tango, in which practitioners often trace back its dance roots to Seville (Spain) or Argentina, salsa enjoys a contested origin and global circulation among various locations with salsa congress/festivals held around the world. In international congresses², salsa is promoted as a universal language by the organizers. Dancers claim that salsa can unite the world. According to this articulation, salsa’s popularity constitutes a pan-global village-ness in salsa congresses around the world. The practitioners of other partner dance forms, such as flamenco or tango, may pursue the life style of a specific region of origin, and those dance forms become national symbols of their country of origin³, however, salsa dancing shares a different story. As a globalized dance form, salsa is promoted as a cosmopolitanism/urban dance practice reaffirming an understanding of its already “inauthentic” and “mixed” origins. This unique feature of salsa, therefore, provides an urban cosmopolitan space for Taiwanese practitioners to negotiate their identities with other salsa practitioners around the world.

However, although salsa is claimed to be universal, it requires that dancers practice within certain boundaries of form. The statement of universality is only a conditional promise that places the colonial legacy under erasure while de-emphasizing the power structure involved in the globalization process of salsa. In the following discussion, I give an overview introduction of the contemporary salsa practice to Taiwan. I look at how dancing salsa in Taiwan brings a different bodily discipline that may liberate people from regulated bodily practices and the possible problem that may occur in the process of this transnational practice.

Salsa History and the Dance Literature in Taiwan

Salsa entered Taiwan in the early 21th century, first introduced by those who had study abroad or by foreigners who lived in Taiwan, such as Cynthia and Brook Hall.⁴ Salsa events were introduced by event promoters, including Jon Raabe who worked in night clubs such as Brown Sugar in 2003.⁵ Later, the first international Taipei salsa festival was held in 2007, indicating the first moment of popular foment of salsa in Taiwan. Today the salsa population in Taipei is about 400

¹ By “authentic,” I am not assuming there is a “real” “authenticity” but I am more interested in the performing of the “authenticity.”

² Salsa congresses are events where practitioners attend shows, workshops, and competitions. They have been circulated internationally around the world.

³ In the pioneering book *Tango and its Political Economy of Passion* (1995), Marta Savigliano describes how tango circulates in the First world and in turn becomes a national symbol for Argentina.

⁴ Based on my interview with James Wang on 6/28/2012 and interview with Larry Shao on 7/1/2012, the first generation who introduced salsa to Taiwan, such as Cynthia was studying in London, Larry Shao is graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute, both of them get their salsa information from their experiences abroad.

⁵ Brown Sugar is a popular night club located in 信義區, the most commercialized area in Taipei.

people, not including those in Taichung, and other major cities.⁶ There are different salsa nightclubs that people can attend every night in Taipei. Salsa has enjoyed an ever-increasing popularity in Taiwan among young professionals, a swatch of the social strata whose participation is predicated upon available leisure time and disposable income. As a social and dance practice, how does salsa negotiate Taiwanese identity?

In current Taiwanese Dance Studies, scholars have researched how dance is being enlisted in order to rethink ideas of subjectivity, embodiment, and social identities. Scholars have discussed Taiwanese identity through the lens of anthropology, literature, fine arts, and theatrical arts (Brown:2004, Chen:2011, Chen:2009, Ching:2001, Lin:2010, Tsai:2009, Shih: 2003, among others). For example, by investigating several works from Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, dance theorist Yatin Lin argues that the company's choreography signals changes in Taiwanese identity in terms of national identification.⁷ Similarly, dance scholar Ya-ping Chen depicts unexplored contemporary dance history in Taiwan by way of disclosing the complex interplay of cultural and political practices that shape Taiwanese "subjectivity."⁸ Through these scholarly analyses of the politics of the body, scholars have shown that nation-state politics are challenged through corporeal practice. However, within Taiwanese dance studies, scholarly texts cover exclusively theatrical concert dance forms: what we might consider about dance performed for a non-participatory audience. It is important to look at the agency of the moving body within a social dance practice.

Tactical Bodies: Flirting with Salsa

I will introduce the concept of "flirtation" as a way of explaining how Taiwanese salsa practitioners stage their individual identities. Dance scholar Marta Savigliano's investigation of tango's global circulation and national signification serves as an important model for my research. Savigliano examines the history of tango in terms of its exotic/exoticized representations constructed to fit into the "colonizing gaze's" demand for "passion." Drawing on Savigliano's concept of "tango's fatal embrace" as a metaphor for the postcolonial adaptation of European/North American concepts of analysis, I assert that flirtation can serve as a metaphor of negotiating identity and the instability of cosmopolitan meaning creation for Taiwanese salsa practitioners.

Salsa has been studied through the lens of gender and sexuality.⁹ While those theories mainly

⁶ Taichung is another big salsa city in Taiwan. The Taiwan Salsa Association is founded in Taichung.

⁷ Lin contextualizes the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's work into four parts in relation to different cultural and political states in Taiwan: Chineseness in *Tale of the White Serpent* (1975), Taiwaneseeness in *Legacy* (1978), cosmopolitanism in *Rite of Spring, Taipei, 1984* (1984), and new "Eastern" aesthetics in the age of globalization.

⁸ Chen utilizes literary scholar Liao Ch'ao-yang's theory of the "empty subject" as the essential feature of Taiwanese subjectivity to describe the formation and development of Taiwanese contemporary dance.

⁹ For example, Garcia argues that there is a different hierarchy among Latina and White female salsa practitioners in the Los Angeles salsa clubs (Garcia, 2005). Sheenagh Pietrobruno argues that salsa provides a safe space for the Montreal

focus on the race and gender identities, I would like to contrast those studies with the limited literature on flirtation. The concept of flirtation has been studied in the field of communication, psychology, and marketing studies (Givens: 1978, Phillips: 1994, England: 1996). Flirtation is defined as: *a behavior that demonstrates a playful attraction to someone for a short period of casual experimentation with interest in a particular idea or activity*. Flirtation is often thought of as frivolous, rooted in sexuality, and, by definition, ephemeral, and therefore not worthy of study. It is not surprising that this term does not get serious attention in academia outside of communication studies.¹⁰ This marginalized position parallels how dance is understood in most non-dance academic research. Theorizations of flirtation mainly focus on flirtation at the courtship level, focusing on its communicative role in human behavior. These flirtation concepts are basic and literal, and fail to mobilize the element of social experimentation in contexts outside of courtship. I would like to provide a more nuanced conceptualization of flirtation.

In this paper, flirtation is employed as a metaphor for salsa in the context of its global circulation, which bears at least three implications when the two are combined: 1st) erotic imaginings; 2nd) impermanence; 3rd) future possibilities. Both Arjun Appadurai and Benedict Anderson invoke imagination as a political act. However, while Anderson focuses on the nation as an imagined community, Appadurai emphasizes imagination as social practice and looks at how these social practices produce locality. Specifically, Appadurai's emphasis on affect and imagination could be employed to analyze how everyday life is reterritorialized through social dance and how this action allows people to participate in building locality.

Flirtation employed as a critical framework of this study is theorized on five levels of relationship in salsa: 1st) person to person; 2nd) person to dance forms; 3rd) person to capitalist modernity; 4th) person to nation; 5th) person to the world. Due the unique features of salsa, it provides good sites to discuss issues of particular practice in many possible sites, however the scope of this paper is focused on issues of Taiwanese identity at both individual and national levels.

While salsa comes in many different forms in Taiwan, I will consider both the practice by elites in salsa clubs and consider the various ways salsa has come to Taiwan through two case studies of legendary salsa teacher/performers, Larry Shao and James Wang. Fleshing out and employing the above mentioned relationships, in the following discussion with salsa instructors Larry Shao and

salsa practitioners to practice the traditional gender rules which have been abandoned by the Canadian society (Pietrobruno: 2006).

¹⁰ Among other theorists who have discussed flirtation, psychotherapist and literary critic Adam Phillips tries to make flirtation a main metaphor in his studies. He suggests that flirting constitutes a productive pleasure, keeping things in play, letting us get to know others in different ways, and allowing us the fascination of what is unconvincing (Phillips, 1994). For Phillips, flirtation is a metaphor for flexibility and psychic and intellectual playfulness. He extends our understanding of flirtation through the lens of literature and contemporary and traditional psychoanalytic theory. However, his theorization of flirtation is still based on individual and personal life level, focusing exclusively on psychological analysis.

James Wang, I focus on three perspectives of identity construction for the salsa practitioners in the context of Taiwan: gender, class, and nationalism. I assert that salsa practitioners in Taiwan generate an alternative identity that is not limited to the national-state based categories.

Salsa as a Mixture of Culture without Roots

Larry Shao is both a salsa instructor and fine art artist. He learned salsa when he studied in the San Francisco Art Institute. He is also the founding member of those who hosted the First International Taipei Salsa Festival in Taiwan in 2007. Salsa music and culture have fascinated Larry Shao for years. The artist launched his career in salsa in 2008, giving weekly lessons, choreographing steps, dances, and giving frequent performances. What first began as a career later infiltrated all aspects of his life; it eventually became a source of income, a lifestyle, a cultural exchange tool, and a source of inspiration for artistic creation. Interestingly, Shao did several contemporary arts experiment in salsa, including a video art project in 2010 Taipei Biennial in Taipei Fine Arts Museum, and a solo art exhibition entitled “salsa” in ITPARK¹¹ in 2012.



¹¹ ITPARK is one of the most famous alternative spaces in Taipei. It is famous for providing more experimental art practice.

His 2012 solo exhibition “salsa” in ITPARK features six projects that use salsa as a means for social and cultural intervention. Those six projects include: *the Blurring of Salsa and Life*, eight interviews of people speaking about their relationship with salsa dancing; *Esto es Salsa* is a performance that explores food, rhythm, dance, and sex; *Salsa Lesson* examines the artist’s relationship with his subsidiary profession; *The World’s First Nachata* highlights the cultural similarities between Taiwan and the Dominican Republic through a hybrid song; *Salsa Lesson Plan* is indeed a real lesson plan that teaches history, music, physical education, and the arts through salsa choreography; *La Salsa Nunca Se Acaba* is an installation of a never-ending salsa party. Here I would like to focus on Shao’s homonymy loop Single Channel Video Installation, a live performance *Esto es Salsa* (2010), and *The World's First Nachata*, as examples to illustrate my point of how salsa enables a transnational body for Taiwanese practitioners.

In *Esto es Salsa*, Shao and his partner mix salad with various ingredients and sauces on top of a wood desk. He starts with providing a variety of vegetables and fruits in the table. He and his partner start cutting vegetable with the salsa music. After that they put the wood table on the ground and put another layer of flat wood on top of the salad. Shao and his partner dance salsa on top of this wood with the salsa music. After the dance, Shao puts all these just-made salad in to a bowl, and invite all the audience to taste the salad he just “danced.” The spicy salsa also tastes hot, and thus indicates the “passionate” quality of the salsa dance form.



In Shao’s piece *Esto es Salsa*, through the play of making salsa sauce by salsa dancing, he invites the audience to listen, watch, smell, and taste “salsa”. Shao tells us a story of salsa as a dance form that is like a salsa sauce, combining many different ingredients. He demonstrates the history of salsa as rootless, mixture, and indicates the quality of salsa as passionate and spicy. Through this performance, he invites the audience to play with the concept of salsa, and to enjoy an unfamiliar exotic and erotic dance that links to food and music. In this sense, salsa enables a sense of *being* without roots, and of allowing alienation from the continuity of tradition in Taiwan. While Taiwanese urban professionals embrace salsa, because it is foreign, this embracing of the foreign culture,

especially a rootless one, is central to salsa's popularity in Taiwan because it allows the practitioners to participate in a global salsa village. This "rootless" quality allows a certain celebration of participating in a global salsa trend as a new fashion possibly risking a loss of the politically salient signifiers associated with its origins.

According to Shao's artist statement, he wants to emphasize the blurring of boundaries among salsa dance, food, and everyday life. His intention is more about his position as both an artist and a salsa teacher. He is more interested in switching between his different occupations. For Shao, salsa is more about life whereas being an artist is more about being regulated under certain kind of expectation. As an artist, Shao is aware of the politics at play in the art industry. He sees the possibility of salsa dancing as a resistance, or a window for him to escape the norm and regulation. Salsa is an antidote for him against the stress he has from this work. In this perspective, his salsa art work does bring a relaxed and careless attitude toward the embracing of a blurred rootlessness, mixing, and yet retaining a passion for foreign culture. This performance is an explicit illustration of how salsa as a dance form comes into being. Therefore it enables the audience to think about the mixture and culturally inauthenticness that is inherent in the concept of salsa itself. While some who claim proprietary cultural right over salsa might find this instantiation threatening, the evidence of salsa's actual practice in the context of Taiwan tells us otherwise. It shows how the artist practices this foreign dance form as a way to liberate himself without having to pay tribute to a fetishized notion of "origins," which, in the case of Taiwan, is precisely the site of a problematic notion of identity.

With the entertaining and relaxing attitude shown in this piece, *Esto es Salsa* is a good example to show salsa's lack of origin. However, this lacking element of salsa's history in *Esto es Salsa* is possibly accounted for in the lecture Shao gives to accompany the live performance in this exhibition. He talks about the history of salsa and how salsa migrates around the world, as well as the difference among various prevailing salsa styles. In dance and Latin American area studies, many salsa histories are grounded in nation-state forms instead of more localized practices, and conflicting narratives of cultural history and heritage serve to reify the nation-state as the producer of meaning (Aparicio: 1998, Boggs: 1992, Rondón: 2008, Waxer: 2002). Through such debates over origins and belongings, salsa reflects discourses of nationalism and post-colonialism in the Americas. These scholarly debates address problems of ownership, racial 'authenticity,' and national identity in salsa.

However, in Shao's talk and his performance, although stylistic taxonomies are provided, the discourses of nationalism and post-colonialism embodied in salsa are omitted. When I asked Shao about the colonial legacy as an inextricable characteristic of salsa literature and history, he answered: "*I don't think it is necessary to think about that, salsa is about life, to relax, to enjoy the present moment, to know our body more, and to get along well with ourselves. I think that is the more*

important part of dancing salsa.”

In Shao’s interpretation, there is no need to question the popularity of salsa as a cultural commodity. For him, salsa is a concept: a mixture of fusion, a contemporary creation. Shao mentioned in the interview that “*salsa is a way of life, and the origin of who has the ownership over this dance does not really matter for the practitioners.*”¹² Shao’s indifference toward salsa’s roots and celebration of popularity in dancing salsa is a way of proposing liberation as a means without ends. By doing so, he adopts the form and superficial aspects of salsa and transforms this dance according to his own interpretation, while at the same time taking advantages of salsa’s world popularity.

While salsa circulates internationally; drawing upon different national sources, and is re-imagined in various sites, how does salsa allow Taiwanese practitioners to carve out a space for themselves within a globalized public sphere? And does the stripping of salsa’s more culturally specific roots—as a free way to engage the body in liberation from oppressive political or financial circumstances—engender or dissuade such an engagement and popularity in Taiwan?

Another video work by Shao may bring more answers to these questions. The *Blurring of Salsa and Life* is a video installation documenting eight interviews of people speaking about their relationship with salsa dancing. One of the interviewee tells us of how she can “feel” the personality of the opposite sex by dancing with them. Another interviewee whose job is as an engineer, claims that he is selected as a worker for a big enterprise because he mentions that he can salsa in the CV, thus indicating that he sees salsa as indicative of abilities and skills that make him more socially mobile. Through those interviews, Shao focuses on what salsa can offer for the practitioners. It is not just about dancing, but always involved in the construction of individual identity and liberation from the pressure of everyday life.

Another piece from Shao, *The World’s First Nachata* articulates a new music genre created by

¹² Interestingly, this attitude is also revealed in another interview I had with a Cuban local salsa dance company artistic director. In May 2013, I interviewed Juan Gomez Barranco, the artist director and manager of the “Proyecto Rueda de Casino.” This salsa dance company was founded during 1993 in Havana, Cuba. It is a Havana-based salsa dance company that performs every week in the salsa clubs and the hotels in Havana. In the Cuban context, for many years, it regarded salsa as another instance of US imperialism taking advantage of musical sources for purely commercial purposes. However, this attitude changed in the last decade, with some Cuban musicians themselves judging the popularity of salsa as a positive development because it popularized Cuban music as well. Based on my interview, during 1980s, the Cuban musician and dancer switch their attitude of salsa from negative to a positive due to the fact that salsa is globally popularized and attract foreigners to come to Cuba. Cuban salsa artist Juan Gomez Barranco claims that “*Salsa is world popularized, and the different styles in salsa in turn promote a greater salsa community. It is good to have people around the world to embrace salsa, and how the term salsa was invented (from the US) is no longer important.*” To the Cuban salsa artist director, whether the term salsa is created in the New York is no longer his main focus, what matters the most is the popularity of salsa and how it connects to the Cuban culture. In this sense salsa can be said to be elevated to a national cultural commodity domestically through an ‘othered’ definition from without.

Shao, the ‘Nachata,’ to illustrate the globalized nature of Latin dance forms localized in the context of Taiwan. Shao mentioned that when he came back to Taiwan, he was so surprised to realize that the Dominican dance music—bachata, normally performed and danced along with salsa music in the Latin dance clubs— was very popular in Taiwan. From a lower-class background, bachata is an erotic and “sticky” dance form. Bachata emphasizes the total trust of the dance partner while being close and intimate with each other. The belly is often at the center of the initiating of movement, where the partners will support each other from this point. The closeness of the two partners results in a more sensual, erotic, and sexual quality. The music of bachata is slower than salsa thus provides a more relaxing and methodically sensual feeling. It is because this dance form is hyper erotic even in the Western society, that Shao is so surprised that bachata dance would gain such popularity and acceptance in Taiwan. In this way we can see that Shao’s own conception of Taiwanese social norms as conservative indicates his own cultural determinism.

The World's First Nachata, according to Shao’s artistic statement, is his attempt at explaining why bachata gained such popularity in a comparatively conservative society like Taiwan. Originating in the context of working class dancehalls, bachata was seldom played on radio and almost never mentioned on TV in the Dominican Republic. Effectively barred from high society venues, bachata lovers moved to bars and brothels in the poorest neighborhoods. The music is often about sex, despair, and hardship of life. Shao points out that “*Nakashi, a kind of traditional Taiwanese music, the word is taken from ‘Nakashi’ which means ‘flow’ in Japanese....nakashi came from Beitou, a northern outpost of Taipei set up as a leisure era for Japanese colonial forces in the pre-WWII era that continued its function as an area for prostitution after WWII for US military, Japanese tourists, and Taiwanese.*” Shao emphasizes the similarities with the sad and bitter lyrical content in bachata and nakashi. He therefore decided to make a Taiwanese bachata, where he picked a bachata song, adjusted the musical instruments to Taiwanese traditional ones, write lyrics in Taiwanese, finally having Nakshi musician plays and record it.

While Shao may declare a celebration of the similarities of bachata and nakashi, the idea of building similarities among two music forms based on a fetishized concept of “authenticity” coming from poverty while dismissing the context of the artist’s own social position is problematic. Shao’s intention to find similarities among those two dance forms indicates the desire for him to find reference of a Taiwanese local practice with a foreign cultural dance practice. The crucial questions would be: first, why is it important for these practitioners in Taiwan to find a cultural reference through a foreign culture practice? Second, is it true that due to the musical/lyrical/and lower class background similarity that bachata gained such popularity in Taiwan?

The World's First Nachata is an example of celebrating Otherness without questioning its roots in Taiwan. Scholars have looked at how the meaning of the moving body in dance and the migration

of dance forms, traditions, and styles as cultural practices are shaped by specific located and interconnected histories and caught up in global cultural flows (Nash: 2000, Malbon:1999, Savigliano: 1995, Cresswell:2006). In the case of *The World's First Nachata*, Shao does not care about the origins, roots, or attempt to contextualize the two forms. On the contrary, he sees the similarity of practitioners' class, melody, and rhythm of the two music forms and decides to mix it together. This strategy is like "collage,"¹³ particularly how it exists in the post-modern era, where the originality of the pieces put in dialogue through the method is no longer the central issue. The searching of "authenticity" is gone in this practice. From a contemporary art training background, Shao strategically uses the "collage" as a metaphor to indicate that in the globalized world, there is nothing authentic any more. He could be suggesting that the idea of authenticity is problematic. Embracing globalized popular culture and finding similarities between "me" and the "other" indicates the degree of cosmopolitanism that the new generation of dancers in Taiwan may use to position themselves in the world. They are embracing the mixture of culture as a way to celebrate their escaping from the dominant metanarrative or grand narrative in cultural authenticity or national identity.

Shao claims that there are similarities in nakashi and bachata, yet if nakashi is already similar to bachata, how come people do not just simply dance nakashi rather than spend time in studios learning the bachata technique and pay for the entry fee for the salsa clubs? To be clear, one has to understand that the salsa practitioners in Taiwan have a higher socioeconomic class than the class Shao mentioned in the nakashi background. Class plays an important role in the Taiwanese salsa scene due to the comparatively higher costs of learning salsa and attending salsa clubs, and the fact that the majority of salsa club goers in Taiwan tend to be young working urban individuals without children, a spectrum of society that tends to have relatively more leisure time and money. Salsa requires skill and practice in order to flow with a partner. Therefore, the salsa club remains a territory of the elite beyond the reach of many Taipei working class people. This is very different from the working class of the bachata and nakashi context. Then, what makes bachata popular in Taiwan?

Flirting with a Foreign Dance Form and an Other Body

Through a dance phenomenological/kinetic perspective, I argue that salsa/bachata provides Taiwanese salsa practitioners with a way to imagine a foreign dance form—a cosmopolitan trend—and a way to become passionate that distances themselves from the disciplined body grounded in a notion of authenticity that is severed from the political implications of its poverty-stricken roots. I draw on my theory of flirting as a metaphor to discuss what salsa offers to the practitioners. Flirting enables an excess of engagement for the salsa dancer to enter into the

¹³ "Collage" is a technique of art production, primarily used in the visual arts, where the artwork is made from an assemblage of different forms, thus creating a new whole. This method indicates the carelessness of how different forms functioned in the first place, but with more concern about the rootless and breaking of the boundary.

cosmopolitan world and at the same time embody a foreign dance form. Flirting with western world refers to the ability to switch between different bodily disciplines. By practicing salsa, these Taiwanese salsa practitioners experience the values of liberalism albeit uncritically.

How does a globalized dance form engaged with the local bodily politics? Dance scholar Halifu Osumare argues that in the case of Japan, global urban hip-hop culture becomes a world-wide language for youth resistance. In his study, dancers use the hip-hop genre to defy gender restrictions for women (Osumare 2008) and work against oppressive heteronormativity. In other words, they flirt with these dance forms to get a negotiable position against the traditionally disciplined body. Flirting with dance forms enables the person to put on, in Osumare's terms "a mask," but once they take the mask off, they go back to the normal life again. For the Taiwanese salsa practitioners, flirting enables them to embody a Latino "passion" that is a way to push back against a body that is disciplined by Confucian tradition.¹⁴ I will talk about the notion of "passion" in the Latino dance form, and discuss how it liberates the disciplined body in the case of Taiwan.

In discussing transnational Latin dance forms, dance scholar Savigliano defines "exoticism" as a representation that is constructed to fit into the colonizer's demand for "passion," whereas another dance scholar McMains argues that Eastern European immigrants enact their 'whiteness' by performing latin-ness. The term latin-ness in the western culture, especially in American context, refers to a 'primitiveness' that tied to poverty, day-laboring, flirting with 'slumming.' In the context of Taiwan, however, due to a lack of Latin immigrant and spatial immediacy to everyday latin-ness, people experience latin-ness only through mass-media that is dominated by a western gaze on Otherness. In this sense, I focus on how salsa is exoticized by the West and how this Westernized salsa is carried on to other non-Western locations (similar to Savigliano's discussion of tango in Japan). McMains argues that the cultural products (dance and music) of minority ethnic groups are borrowed and redefined by "brownface" practices for the benefits of the First world practitioners. (McMains, 2006: 133). In her analysis, she describes how Latinos are being viewed as primitive, wild, sexual, and as "Latin Others". However, in the case of Taiwan, salsa is not just indicating "Latin Others," but also a symbol of "Western Others." The above mentioned theories does not answer the questions of how salsa could be examined under not just "Latin Others" but also "Western Others." Salsa, once globalized, stands in, through its foreignness, for whiteness or 'Westernness.' Globalized salsa is characterized by multiple layers of exoticism and self-representation especially in the case of Taiwan. There is a level on which Taiwanese salsa dancers are performing 'Westernness' and "Latino passion" by claiming the right to exoticize a foreign other is really what they see as the restrictive traditional within themselves.

Salsa in the context of Taiwan and with regards to its complicated roots, is already

¹⁴ I realize that the 'Latin' body is also disciplined.

internationally popularized through a somewhat “Westernized flavor.” In this sense, it can also be understood as engaging the dominant form of cultural capitalism in an age of expanding cosmopolitan global urban-ness in East Asia. As I mentioned earlier, the first generation of salsa practitioners in Taiwan were those who studied abroad or had access to living abroad. Some of them learned salsa from the mass media operated mostly by the US. This indicates the transnational form of salsa is not only dislocated from a North America-specific notion of latin-ness, but exists as an already Westernized practice in East Asia.

James Wang, another dance instructor from Taiwan, describes that during his time serving in the Taiwanese army, he watched the movie *Shall We Dance* (2004) and *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004). The scenes of passionate dancing attracted his attention and in 2006, Wang attended a meeting in the Rotary International,¹⁵ where one of the members told him about his learning experience in salsa:

“I am able to hold hands with girls!”

It was the beginning of Wang’s salsa journey. He looks embarrassed and admits to me, “*Yes, it was not an attraction that came from high taste or out of erudite reasoning.*” But, once he began, Wang enjoyed the feeling of dancing salsa. He said “*I find a way to express myself, to listen to the music, and feel challenged and am able to express my body and feeling, which is hard for me to do so before.*” Wang emphasizes how salsa’s style is different from ballroom dance, which focuses more on the regulated and competitive body. He states that salsa provides a way of soft, smooth, and more of a “S” shape of the body. This body, based on Wang’s description, is free, passionate, expressive, and enables a “flow”¹⁶. He emphasizes: “*It is in the salsa dance floor, it is in this place that turns me into another person.*”

Here we can see the confluence of a notion of passion enabled through a move toward primitiveness against a more regimented body politics as well as acknowledgement of those features of salsa that would be categorized as part of a discourse of latin-as-passionate in the West yet lacking a direct link to those features as ‘latin’ per se. This lack of cultural specificity is engendered not only by the particular type of ‘othering’ of latin-ness that occurs in East Asia (Taiwan), but also a perspective that is facilitated by the cosmopolitan setting of dance spaces in Taiwan.

The lavish furnishing of the dance floor itself is a microcosmic dream world of urban life, and it

¹⁵ Rotary International (also known as Rotary Club) is an international service organization whose stated purpose is to bring together business and professional leaders to network. In Taiwan, only those who are above middle class would be part of it.

¹⁶ For more information about the “flow” in dancing, please see my article “Leader-Follower—Throwing Out Gender Rules in Taiwanese Salsa Today.”

serves the people who can afford to it by allowing disengagement from their lived urban environment into a safe place of pseudo-reality. 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. By making a space to negotiate social body politics¹⁷ in the salsa 'salon,' the social expression of bodies originally part of salsa on the streets is depoliticized in an inverse action of class-defined political realms.

In order to understand how salsa provides a different body experience for the Taiwanese practitioners, it is important for us to understand how traditional culture of Chinese Confucian conservatism disciplines the Taiwanese body in highly restrictive ways. One relevant example of this is the old Chinese saying that states “you 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. 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. Even though right now the society is more open and westernized, those traditions still provide notions of bodily conduct in contemporary Taiwan.

Therefore, in terms of gender dynamics in Taiwan, salsa mobilizes the practitioner's body and enables them to have a free access to meet the opposite sex. Wang is not alone in articulating this statement, and in fact the ambiguous position of the Asian male body in the West is also negotiated through salsa. Larry Shao, who studied in the US, explains that as an Asian man in the US context, he found it hard for him to behave as a “man”. Salsa gives Shao a referential framework through which he can express his emotion and gaining masculinity.¹⁸ He has a vivid expression of his own experience in salsa:

“When I was in the US, I found it was hard for me to define myself as a man from my culture of reference.¹⁹ I didn't know how to interact with girls. However, salsa provides me with a model for

¹⁷ In recent studies, dance is never just a reflection of social value, but a site capable of producing cultural values and concerns, including notions of gender, class, and race (Foster, 2011; Novack, 1990, and so forth). Therefore, Dance Studies brings insight to the understanding of bodily practice by focusing on the agency the moving body. Through a politics of the body, nation-state politics can be challenged.

¹⁸ This concept of gaining masculinity through the practice of salsa is different from the Western concept of masculinity. In the majority of Latino dance studies, Latin movement is considered more “primitive” and therefore more feminine. Also, there is an impression of man dancing the Latino dance as to be gay. For more reference, please see my article “Leader-Follower—Throwing Out Gender Rules in Taiwanese Salsa Today.”

¹⁹ The representation of Asian American men in the US social context has being feminized. For more reference, please see my article “Asian American Choreographies in Los Angeles Salsa Clubs,” or Eng, David L. 2001. *Racial castration:*

being like a man. I find it is rare for me to find any cultural reference of how to attract women. But in salsa, I am able to gain masculinity; I am able to “take her.” I am confident, graceful, and sexy. Salsa provides me with an alternative solution to be a man.”

As I have noted in earlier work (Chang, 2012), 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. These qualities of salsa have contributed to its fast adoption in Taiwan where it serves to emphasize mutual respect between the partners rather than showy acrobatic moves.

Thus in this context, salsa is a form of liberation for the practitioners in Taiwan, where they redefine the concept of self within a passionate and responsive body to counteract the dominance of both the traditional Chinese identification and challenge the restriction of body distance in public, while freeing themselves to negotiate gender roles in a more cosmopolitan frame. Salsa provides the individuals with a freedom to imagine a Westernized body which is sexy, liberal, and superior, and at the same time not have to acknowledge the cultural and social-political ideals associated with salsa in North America. However, this freedom of switching between different bodily expression and mentality stills belongs to those who have free time and extra money and can serve to reify a notion of class detached from the everyday realities of life in urban East Asia. Therefore, the Confucian discipline of the Taiwanese body and the economic accessibility of salsa in Taiwan are contextual elements without which it is impossible to situate its social meaning of salsa in Taiwan.

Flirting with Global Citizenship

In addition to the individual identity constructed through the practice of salsa, I argue that there is a level of national identity construction in the salsa practice specifically within the context of international salsa conventions. The tendency to ignore the origins of salsa, but pursuing a broader acceptance of its forms around the world, has another effect on the identity of Taiwanese as it enters global environments. I argue that Taiwanese salsa dancers use globalized salsa as a cosmopolitan practice to create a citizenship in the world that does not have to be grounded in nation-state identification. Salsa congresses provide Taiwanese practitioners a way to redefine a concept of self through higher social mobility against a dominant framework of Chinese identity²⁰.

managing masculinity in Asian America. Durham: Duke University Press.

²⁰ By Chinese identity, I refer more to the deeper layer of socio-cultural mindsets and rule-sets. And the salsa movement and salsa practice quite intriguingly coincides with the time of the pro-Taiwanisation cultural policies of the DPP government.

In contrast to China, an emergent super-power defined, Taiwan has long positioned itself as the site of the “authentic” Chinese political and cultural system: capitalist, democratic, and actively embracing a relationship with the rest of the world, especially the market economies of North America and Europe. Add to this the 50 year history of Japanese colonial occupation of Taiwan and forced education and cultural reeducation during that time, and we can see how even the fight for cultural (self-)determination evokes a traumatic structure for identity formation. Nonetheless, despite Taiwan’s focus outward to the world, the politically dominant nation-states have refused to officially acknowledge Taiwanese independence for fear of offending China. Salsa, by providing Taiwanese dancers with a means of exercising this global focus in a seemingly apolitical space, offers the Taiwanese an opportunity to redefine a concept of self that is different from Chinese.

Nationalism theorist Tom Nairn argues that nationalism looks to the past in order to provide sustenance for the national community for the future. It stresses tradition, continuation and maintenance of the “national memory” as a way of uniting and a source of inspiration for the future. In this sense, national identity is a dualism; it looks forward and at the same time backward. In Nairn’s sense, Taiwan falls into a double bind of sharing a common heritage with China, while establishing itself as a separate country. Taiwan shares a similar cultural identity with China but also represents itself as diametrically opposed to China politically.²¹ How can Taiwanese escape their Chinese heritage, while looking forward to a distinctly Taiwanese identity?

In response to this issue of Taiwanese identity, East Asian studies scholar Shu-mei Shih suggests that while many nations construct their identity through reference to an “authentic heritage”, Taiwan, on the contrary, because of its vexed relationship with China, avoids reference to Chinese tradition and cultivates national identity through the embrace of foreign cultural products, a process that Shih labels ‘cultural inauthenticity. (Shih 2003).’ Shih suggests that this “inauthenticity” legitimizes Taiwanese autonomy in the international community by staging Taiwan’s modernity to the Western world (Shih, 2003). Shih points out how Taiwanese artists and writers localize Western canons and theories, applying them to the case of Taiwan. By doing so, globalization shifts the focus of Taiwan away from its ethno-cultural Chinese heritage, and enables Taiwan to represent its multicultural democracy since the lift of the martial law. By adopting Western culture and embracing globalization, Taiwan circumvents Chinese nationalism, constructed through cultural authenticity, and positions its “existence” in the geo-political world.

Since the term “inauthenticity” assumes that there is achievable authenticity, thus it might be problematic. To avoid the misunderstanding, I draw from French sociologist Jean Baudrillard’s idea

²¹ I am speaking of dominant cultural identities in Taiwan. Minority identities in Taiwan and China are very different from one another.

to propose what I called “cultural simulacrum,” which emphasizes the appearance of what something claims to be rather than searching for a deep ‘authenticity’ in terms of cultural meaning. I argue that salsa’s rootless origins and its global popularity functions as a type of “cultural simulacrum” where salsa becomes something almost hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994). The concept of salsa here becomes interchangeable and also meaningless. Salsa’s “cultural simulacra” also indicates its movement in the world of globalized consumer society rather than just the nationalist framework.

While Shih’s analysis focuses exclusively on Taiwanese artists and writers, I would like to extend her argument to show how the Taiwanese people use the same strategy in social dance to negotiate their identity. By using the strategy of “cultural simulacra,” the popularity of salsa indicates one example of this celebration of the foreign in Taiwanese society precisely through performing inauthenticity in the face of insurmountable Chinese ‘authenticity’ in the global sphere. I argue that Taiwanese salsa practitioners participate in the worldwide salsa trend to establish global citizenship as part of an ongoing attempt to contest the validity of the power structure of the nation state system that both substantiates and undercuts Taiwan’s independence. Taiwanese salsa practitioners embody exoticism and eroticism as a survival strategy to work within and against the norms which mandate a highly sedate and regulated use of the body.

James Wang provides a good example of how he uses salsa as way to situate himself in the world. Wang had traveled around the world to different salsa venues, including Korea, India, Finland, England, Spain, France, Egypt, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Japan, Hong Kong, and the USA in 2009. Wang’s salsa travel experience needs to be examined in the context of the Taiwanese society after the lifting of martial law. Since the 1980s, Taiwanese society has entered a postmodern era with multiculturalism, and American corporate consumer culture has become a prevalent phenomenon in Taiwan. Taiwanese were living under martial law for a long time, during which period their awareness of international affairs was constrained. When martial law was lifted in 1987, Taiwanese people started to make “physical” connections with foreigners.²² For those generations who grew up under martial law, to go abroad is something that used to be impossible but became possible. This might be the reason why there is a need for this generation to find themselves in the process of going abroad, to see the world, and to be seen as well.

Wang claimed that “*I want to see the world through salsa dance*” in his Facebook notes and blog. Wang has later posted all his travel photos along with travel writing in his blog. He mentions that although he graduated from university as a specialist in international trade, he had never traveled to a foreign country before. This salsa trip became his first time to backpack around the world. Wang said that he wants to see how people dance salsa around the world. He imagined that people would

²² During the martial law era, only the authorized Taiwanese were able to travel abroad. Traveling abroad thus is a symbol of being privileged. Even with the lift of the martial law, traveling abroad is still a class based privilege.

add a “local flavor” to their movement that would indicate both connection to Wang’s practice and also broaden what a notion of salsa ‘vocabulary’ could be. Wang told me that he is able to salsa with people dancing different styles,²³ and this helps him to communicate with foreigners more easily.

“I was surprised to recognize that there are not many differences in dance among those locations I traveled to. I feel I understand the world better, and I am being part of the world by doing this salsa trip.” Wang describes.

Salsa pair-dancing, with its “playful”, “erotic”, and “exotic”²⁴ overtures, subtly indicates an interest in a relationship, actively providing a way for people to make temporary connections with others without commitment. Taiwanese salsa practitioners’ participate in the unofficial international arenas, such as the international salsa congress, to communicate with others using the same dance language. Taiwanese salsa practitioners, by positioning themselves as dancer from Taiwan, embody an unofficial and temporary relationship with people from other countries, and, thus, escape or resist Chinese-identification. Symbolically, salsa practice becomes a way for dancers to divorce themselves from their ‘marriage’ to China.²⁵ At the same time, Taiwanese salsa practitioners are able to gain access to the cosmopolitan salsa world and build their global citizenship for international audiences.

Through the practice of the “Other” body, these Taiwanese salsa practitioners challenge governmental definitions of social identity— the international lack of recognition of Taiwan— in the international salsa events. Then, in terms of flirting with the nation, this is how Taiwanese salsa practitioners construct an oppositional yet simulacraized ‘inauthentic’ Taiwanese national identity through salsa practice as a critical trope against the power of the nation-state form. In the last stage of flirtation, salsa becomes a symbol for practitioners to negotiate their relationships and connections to the world as I argued in this project.

Conclusion

Acceptance of identity as Taiwanese makes the island distinct from mainland China, and therefore may be seen as a step towards forming a consensus for *de jure* Taiwan independence. In Taiwanese studies literature, there are many scholarly works discussing identity issues from many perspectives. However, isn’t it the nature of state political discourse to always be articulating the

²³ There are many different salsa styles in the world. The most prevailing would be NY style, LA style, and Cuban style.

²⁴ I am aware of the problematic term “exotic” in describing salsa. Here, exotic literally means foreign. This fits with my argument about cultural inauthenticity. In addition, I want to emphasize the sexual and spectacular part of salsa in order to draw attention to the connection of this dance form with flirting.

²⁵ In Chia-Yin Chuang’s paper “Divorcing China: The Swing from the Patrilineal Genealogy of China to the Matrilineal Genealogy of Taiwan in Taiwan’s National Imagination,” Chuang explores the popular concept of the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China as a feminine-masculine dichotomy. In my corporeal studies, I look at how salsa provides a matrilineal corporeality for Taiwanese to mobilize themselves and resist the Chinese matrilineal body.

national body in order to recreate its own significance as political voice? In this sense, salsa stands as a way to deemphasize the central position of state political discourse in articulating identity.

In my studies of salsa, I look at how salsa engages with not only the national identity construction but also the personal identity construction. I focus on how the dance as one of many bodily tactics for cultivating national/personal identity via foreign products. The gender, class, race, and nationalism play important roles in understanding the practice of salsa in Taiwan. In addition, salsa provides a different bodily training system for Taiwanese. However, this liberation through salsa might be an illusion as it still requires a regulated bodily discipline.

In sum, in this project, I contribute to: first, to provide a new performance-based framework to understand identity politics of Taiwan; second, to uncover salsa practice by Taiwanese, which has not yet been adequately examined in dance scholarship; and third, to deepen an understanding of Taiwanese corporeal practices, which have been neglected in the growing scholarship on Taiwanese/Chinese cultural criticism.

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