Performance Traditions

Tian Feng assembled this group of Yi dancers from the Yunnan Ethnic Culture Preservation Institute (1993–2000) to revive local performance traditions. The group reunited in 2004 for this performance in Anning, a village outside Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. Photo by Lei-Lan Wang.

The Lisu people from Northern Thailand celebrate the New Year with music and dance. They believe that music pleases the spirits and that dance chases away bad spirits before the New Year. Photo by Panita Sarawasee, Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.

The Khmer communities in Cambodia and elsewhere, including this group from Vietnam, perform robam masked dances—folk versions of dance dramas from the royal court in Phnom Penh. Many of the stories, such as the Ramayana, originated in India but have been adapted to include local tales. Photo by Lam Phuong.

There are surprising connections between the myriad performance traditions along the Mekong. For example, there are close ties between the arts of the court and the village, and between those of rural and urban areas. The Cambodian classical dance previously performed in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and now in tourist hotels shares many of its movements, styles, and stories with the robam masked dance of Khmer villagers in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.

Despite international boundaries, many ethnic communities remain connected through their performance traditions. The dances of the Lisu community of Yunnan and of Lisu immigrant communities in Northern Thailand are similar. The hat boi opera of Vietnam finds ancestry in the opera traditions of China. The migration of each tradition, however, results in new influences, new inspirations, and new audiences. Cambodian and Lao dance troupes flourish in communities across the United States; their dances take on new meanings in new contexts.

Numerous outside influences also affect performance traditions. National interests transform some of these traditions. In China, government support brought many village dancers to the city, and placed them on national and even international stages. Government influence and the pervasive presence of new media have sometimes challenged the integrity of local performances, which must remain meaningful to the community. Don ca tai tu singing still speaks to Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, and no Lao event in Laos or France is complete without a lam salavan dance.