The transformation of Thai jongkraben: A guideline of fabric draping techniques

การแปรรูปโจงกระเบนไทยเชิงประยุกต์: แนวทางสู่เทคนิคการนุ่งห่มผ้า

Mayrissara Chantararat (เมย์ริสสรา จันทรรัตน์)*

Abstract

This paper is part of a study of fabric draping technique as found in different cultures with main focus on the Thai jongkraben. Draping is a technique that humans have always associated with dressing up themselves. From Greek chiton to Indian sari and more, most draping styles would wrap a few pieces of cloth around a person's body with not much complications. But, around the world, no other draping technique can be as astounding as that of jongkraben, which requires different steps of tying and rolling of fabric that would result in a pair of voluminous pants. It only takes a single piece of fabric, plus a knowledge of how to wear it. And this has been passed down from generations of Thais until now that the knowledge is limited within circles of trditional Thai arts performers and a selected few. Its popularity has diminished in the sea of easy-to-wear western clothes. In hopes of preserving the Thai local wisdom and the aesthetic features of jongkraben, an original set of contemporary fashion has been created, as well as different techniques on how such creations could be further applied in other aspects of designs. Together with the research on the history and techniques used in various country, this paper can serve as one guideline of fabric draping technique. The new fashion collection devises the techniques as found in jongkraben, plus several others as utilised in draped costumes around the world.

Keywords: *jongkraben, draping, aesthetic features, contemporary fashion*

* Student of the Doctor of Philosophy Program in Design Arts (International Program), Graduate School of Silpakorn University นักศึกษาหลักสูตรปรัชญาดุษฎีบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาศิลปะการออกแบบ (หลักสูตรนานาชาติ) มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร
Advisors (ที่ปรึกษา): Assoc. Prof. Sone Simatrang รศ. สน สีมาตรัง
Asst. Prof. Dr. Veerawat Sirivesmas ผศ.ดร. วีรวัฒน์ สิริเวสมาศ

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

Introduction

Draping, since ancient times, has been about using a single piece of fabric to cover up a person's body for both warmth and decency, with limited sewing or none at all. It is a work of efficiency that took local wisdom to conjure while technology and machinery weren't able to keep up. In primitive era, it started with pieces of animal skin, fur and loincloth. Much later, humans learnt to weave fabric and devised that into cloth and costume.

In different countries, draping technique – on different fabric type and colour – has created various individual sets of costume that's unique to each culture. In Ancient Greece, for example, there are chiton and toga. In Asia, we are familiar with Indian sari and Myanmar sarong. In Thailand, some of the most distinctive costumes that have utilised draping technique include sabai and jongkraben.

Compare to other draping technique, the work that is required in order to create the Thai jongkrabn has to be one of the most complicated methods existing to turn a single piece of fabric into a pant-like costume. Mostly, draping technique would result in a free-flowing, gown-like dresses and costumes. But jongkraben manifested itself into a puffed up pants with intricate details and several aesthetic features. It wouldn't be too far off to say that jongkraben is a work of art, and a very unique one at that.

In Thailand, jongkraben can trace its usage back in Dvaravati period (6^{th} – 13^{th} centuries) up until late Rattanakosin period. After the shift in the country's ruling system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy during King Rama VII's reign (circa 1930s), there have been attempts to orchestrate the cultural movement to lift Thailand up to international standard.

The government under Field Marshal Por Piboonsongkhram has encouraged the people to wear more contemporary clothing like pants and skirts instead of just wrapping a piece of fabric around themselves. The change in wardrobe was also done to gain acceptance from other nations, as proper wardrobe was perceived as a symbol of being civilized (Kurowat 1980). Not before long, the use of jongkraben in everyday life disappear. Jongkraben is currently used only as part of the Thai traditional costume during some formal events and special occasions, as well as some performances of Thai traditional dance. It is no longer worn by the people. The great influx of Western culture had affected the entire wardrobe, and little trace of traditional hand-drape garment was left in modern fashion.

A piece of costume can be a symbol of arts and culture of a nation. It tells a story of one's characteristics, way of life, tradition and even ideals. Jongkraben, through its complicate draping technique, possesses both historical and aesthetic values, as well as the work of local

wisdom that shouldn't be allowed to disappear. At the same time, it is quite understandable how the complicated way of wearing jongkraben could be difficult to infuse in contemporary fashion.

The purpose of this research is to study draping techniques associated with jongkraben and others. At the same time, the research aims to bring back some of the aesthetic features that can be found in jongkraben and adapt them to suit modern lifestyle while still be able to reflect the traditional wardrobe of the past.

Wearing jongkraben

Wearing jongkraben can be considered almost as an art for those who don't know how. About 3-metre-long fabric is required to create a full-size jongkraben.

The steps are as follows:

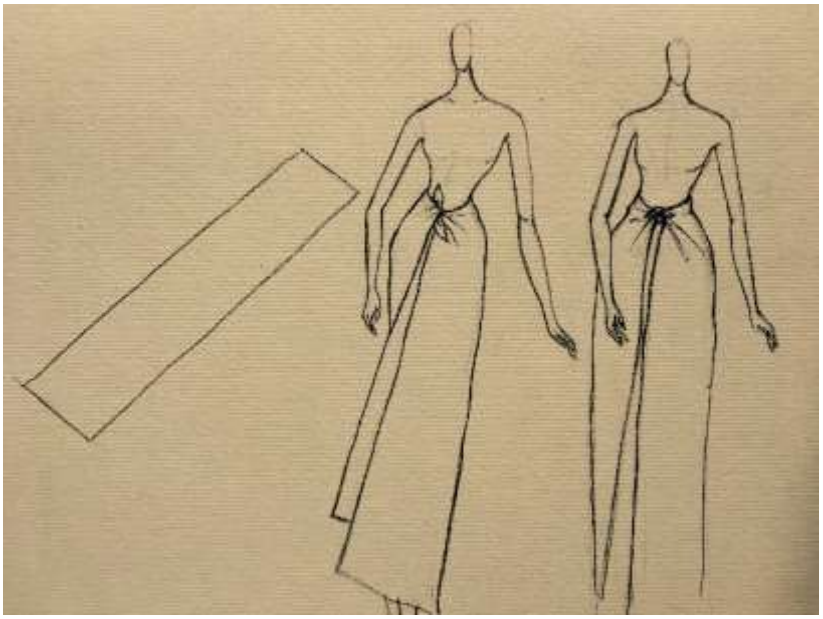


Figure 1: Tie the cloth around the waist to create a waistline (Chantararat, 2016)

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

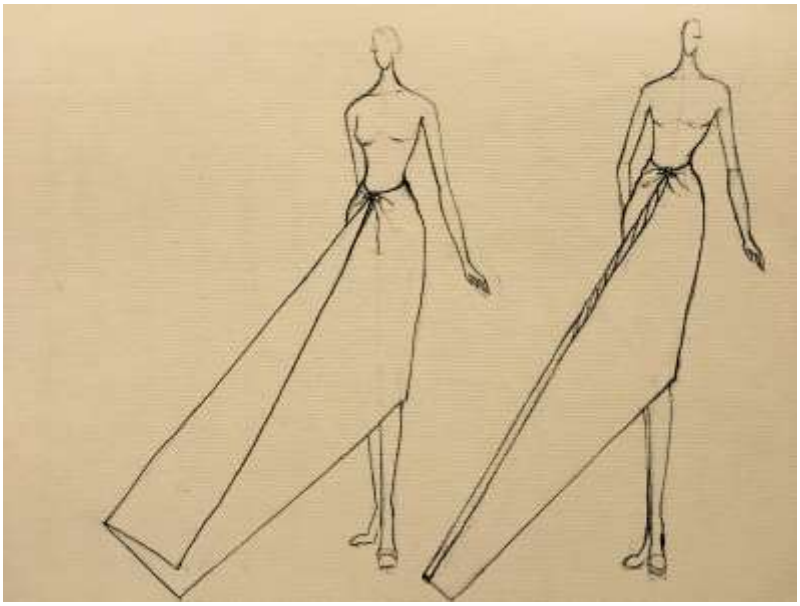


Figure 2: Fold the remaining strand in half. Roll the folded strand (Chantararat, 2016)



Figure 3: Fold the remaining strand together into layers (Chantararat, 2016)

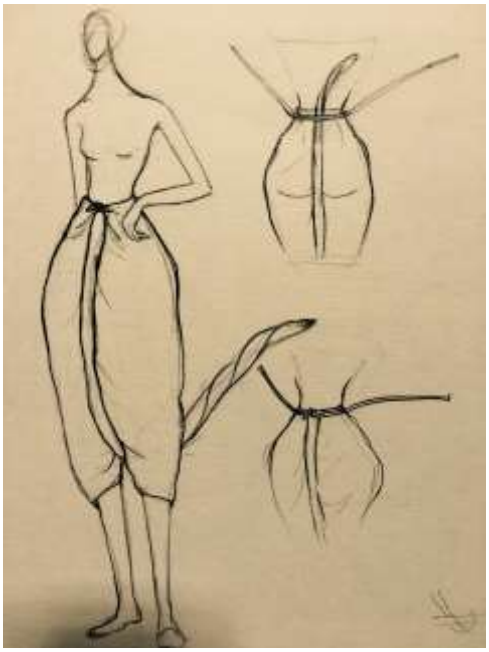


Figure 4: Put the entire strand between the legs. Tie the strand in place using a string (Chantararat, 2016)

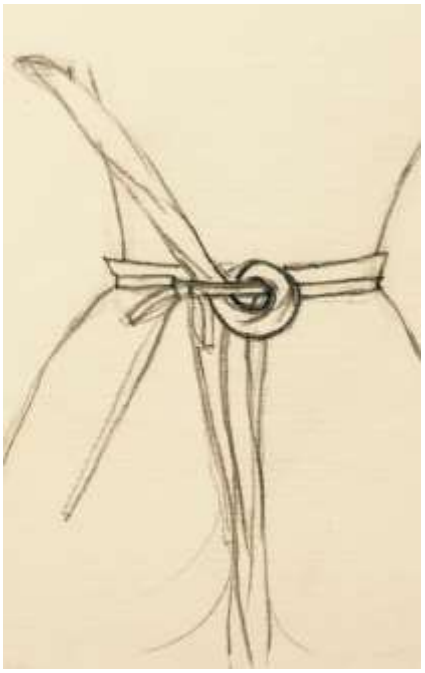


Figure 5: Insert the strand under the string. Coil it into a roll (Chantararat, 2016)

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431



Figure 6: The leftover strand is tuck under the hem (Chantararat, 2016)

Draping techniques in other countries

The fabric draping technique associated with jongkraben from Dvaravati period until Rattanakosin period has been investigated. Dvaravati was greatly influenced by Indian culture. There have been evidences of the people's costume in this period found in stone carvings depicting a male aristocrat wearing jongkraben (Ratchawet, 2000). The aristocrat was depicted as shirtless, and adorned with ornament such as earrings, bracelets and belts (see Figure 7). Female attire was similar, though there was a light fabric draped over their breasts.



Figure 7: A male costume in Dvaravati period (Department of Fine Arts, 1968)

This style from Dvaravati period has slowly evolved to Srivijaya, Lopburi, Chiengsaen, Sukhothai and Ayudhya with minor changes and additions. It wasn't until Rattanakosin period that the style has become more westernised with the incorporation of shirts and blouses. This period formed the basis of our current fashion that has been completely modernised with little to no trace of any traditionalism left.

However, to an extent, draping technique is still being used in *pha thoong* and *pha khao ma*, which dumbed down the complicacy of jongkraben to just wrapping a piece of cloth around one's waist to cover up the lower part of the body. This similar technique is still found in Myanmar sarong which, for women, gathers the cloth at the waistline and tie the attached string on the side. Men would tie the fabric together and leave a knot at the centre of their waist.

While there seems to be no difference in the technique used among different social classes, people do wear their jongkraben differently. People of higher social classes and status would choose their fabric with care, often opting for high-quality silk, which then has to be scented and ironed (Prime Minister's Office, 2005). It would be later paired with beautiful blouses and ornaments as a way of displaying one's wealth. The process has to be even more intricate for court ladies such as ladies-in-waiting all the way up to members of the royal family. Of course, the process is much simpler for commoners.

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431



Figure 8: A lady wearing jongkraben (n.d.)
(Image from www.teen.mthai.com)

In other countries, draping technique has been around since ancient time, long before Thailand or Siam even existed. For example, in Ancient Greece (circa 700-150 BC), there were uses of chiton – a rectangular piece of linen or wool that can be draped and fastened at the shoulders (See Figure 9). In India, we still see women putting on sari on a regular basis.



Figure 9: Costumes in Ancient Greece (Kurowat, 1980)

Jongkraben and contemporary fashion

It can be seen now that, while draping has been around for as long as human know how to dress themselves, none can be as complicated and intricate as that of jongkraben. A technique that is able to transform a single piece of fabric into a pants-like costume with voluminous shape – all without an aid of sewing machine – is a unique work of local wisdom. This distinctive style should be able to find its place within contemporary fashion.

Based on Jaipak Burapajatana (2016)'s research in applying traditional design of Jok woven textiles to suit contemporary usage, it is suggested that to transform the old style to appeal to modern taste, the traditional beauty and features such as patterns, colours and materials can be fused with current knowhow and technology for an ease in manufacturing and daily functions. And these designs should be able to apply into other products as well.

In another research by Nataporn Teawpanich (2013) which focuses on the designs for Lanna identity, she suggested that new designs based on traditional arts can be interpreted into three forms: denotation, connotation and symbolical.

By analysing the gathered information, and through countless experiments of trials and errors, some of the aesthetic features including voluminous silhouette and techniques like folding and tying of fabric can be preserved and incorporated into modern wardrobe. Draping technique as found in other countries have also been used.

Here are some of the new contemporary designs that are a work of the reinvention of Thai jongkraben. Different designs are attained through moving up and down the original waistline. Others have been fused with other draping techniques as found in other countries' costumes. To follow suggestions from other researchers in similar fields, the designs were

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

made, applied and interpreted in various forms with the aims of retaining the traditional form and aesthetic features of jongkraben, while also making it functioning for contemporary usage and lifestyle. Furthermore, these designs can be applied into other art forms such as woven textile, jewelry, sculpture and more.



Figure 10: A new contemporary design that incorporates techniques used to create jongkraben (Chantararat, 2016)

Conclusion

The long history of draping can be traced back to ancient time in different cultures around the world. And while some forms of it still remain as cultural and national costumes today, such as the Indian sari, others like the Thai jongkraben mostly fade into the background of contemporary fashion. The use of jongkraben in Thailand has begun to disappear under Field Marshal Por Piboonsongkhram, as it was perceived as outdated and not up to the international standard of clothing. Years after, we are starting to realise the cultural importance of such costume, and how it reflects societal ideals and values, which should be preserved for future generations of designers, students and historians to benefit from. The research on different draping style should be able to serve as a guideline that can be further into other academic and creative works.

References

Burapajatana, Jaipak. (2016). "Applying patterns from Identity of Jok woven textiles of Mae Jam to design of cultural textile products for home decoration." **Veridian E-journal.** Vol. 9, Issue 3: 1720-1738.

Chantararat, Mayrissara. (2016). Self-designs and photographs.

Department of Fine Arts. (1968). **An Illustrated Book of Costumes Based on Historical and Archaeological Evidence.** Bangkok.

Kurowat, Puangpaka. (1980). **History of Costumes.** Bangkok.

Prime Minister's Office. (2005*).* **Rajapatraphorn (Royal Costumes).** Bangkok.

Ratchawet, Ohm. (2000). **Garn Tang Gai Thai Siam (Thai – Siamese Costumes).** Bangkok Cartoonist. Bangkok.

Teawpanich, Nataporn. (2013). "Environmental Graphic Design for Lanna Idenity." **Veridian E-journal.** Vol. 6, Issue 5: 16-36.