

Drawn to the Art of Dance in Japan, a Thai Woman Becomes a Master of Classical Japanese Dance



The exterior of the National Theatre of Japan (Chiyoda City, Tokyo)

Photo: barman / PIXTA

Born in the Kingdom of Thailand, Okada Yuphin came to Japan in 1993 after her marriage. She began practicing classical Japanese dance in earnest in 2009, and after ten years of training, she became a *natori* — a master of classical Japanese dance — in 2019. She continues to practice under the name Hanayagi Itotomuyuu.

Koike Ginga

Before coming to Japan, Okada Yuphin worked as a hospital clerk. After marrying a Japanese man she met in Thailand, she came to Japan in 1993 at the age of 25 and began living in Tokyo.

“When I first arrived in Japan, I could barely understand Japanese, and I struggled a lot. But it is normal not to understand at first. I learned little by little, at work and in my daily life.”

In such a situation, Yuphin encountered the Bon Odori dance¹ held every summer in her neighborhood. She was fascinated by the joy of dancing with the local people, who gathered together and learned the *furitsuke*² on the spot.

“I really enjoyed participating in Bon Odori with the work colleagues

and friends I made in Japan. Even though I did not know the *furitsuke*, I imitated the way others danced and before I knew it, I had learned the steps and movements.”

After discovering the joy of dance in Japan, Yuphin began learning *Shin Buyo* (lit. “new style of dancing”)³ and made rapid progress. She was able to memorize the steps and movements quickly. Her teacher at the time recognized her dancing talent and artistic sense and recommended that she study classical Japanese dance in a more serious and structured manner. In 2009, she was introduced to Hanayagi Tamaito, a master of the Hanayagi School,⁴ and she continues to study with her master today.

“I felt really uneasy when I was introduced to the Hanayagi School, which is a traditional school of clas-

sical Japanese dance,” Yuphin says. “I still didn’t understand Japanese well, and I was worried about whether someone like me would be able to perform classical Japanese dance. But when I started attending the new class, I found the *sensei* (“master”) and more experienced students to be



Photo taken at the performance of *Uchiwa Uri* (“Fan Seller”) staged in March 2023 at the National Theatre of Japan

Photo: Hanayagi Tamaito



Hanayagi Itotomuyuu Okada Yuphin Photo: Hanayagi Tamaito



Okada Yuphin Photo: Okada Yuphin

warm-hearted and nice. This made me feel at ease, and I was able to continue studying.”

The most difficult part was the exam to be qualified as a *natori*,⁵ a challenge she took on in 2019. Until then, her *sensei*, Hanayagi Tamaito, had suggested several times that Yuphin should take the exam, but she lacked confidence and kept declining. However, a senior student who was a good friend of hers urged her to take on the challenge, and Yuphin decided to give it a try. Once decided, she began a rigorous training program.

“I was working, and in addition

to my regular training, I had to practice for the *natori* exam. Even though I was praised for my dancing skills, perhaps surprisingly good for a non-Japanese, I knew that once I became a *natori*, I would be expected to dance well as a matter of course. The audience looks at you more strictly, and most importantly, your own attitude changes a lot.”

Yuphin says she was so nervous on the day of the exam that she lost her footing. Still, she managed to pass with flying colors on the first try and was given the name Hanayagi Itotomuyuu.

“A person who has always supported me came up with the name ‘Itotomuyuu.’ It is a combination of the character ‘*ito*,’ which is one of the characters in my master’s name, the phrase ‘*tomu*’ (meaning ‘giving many dreams’), which expresses my desire to inspire many dreams, and the character ‘*yuu*’ (lit. ‘graceful, gentle’), which represents the first sound of my given name, Yuphin.”

This year marks Yuphin’s 15th year of practicing classical Japanese dance. “I would like to teach Japanese dance to children in Thailand one day,” she says of her future goals.

1. In Japan, there is a summer custom, called Bon, of visiting the graves of one’s ancestors and making offerings, usually in mid-August. The term “Bon Odori” refers to the dance performed during the Bon period as a ritual to honor the ancestors or as a community event.

2. Choreography, the movements performed to music or song in a dance.

3. A general term for Japanese dance styles that differ from traditional classical Japanese dance forms and aim to create new forms with Western influences.

4. A school of classical Japanese dance founded in the mid-19th century by Hanayagi Jusuke.

5. A type of qualification in which a person is recognized by a school as having a certain level of skill after an examination. A *natori* is entitled to use his or her official stage name. (In the case of the Hanayagi school, the person’s name is added after “Hanayagi”).