
SUMMARY

DANCING INVISIBLE

CLOUD GATE DANCE THEATRE OF TAIWAN 1973–2019

The appearance of modern dance in Taiwan is connected with the Japanese occupation of the island in the first half of the 20th century (1895–1945). At that time, Taiwan was colonized not only in the political and economic sense but in the cultural sense as well. Modernized curricula of schools augmented arithmetic, nature sciences and literature with music, singing, sports and Western-style rhythmic gymnastics, which provided a solid foundation for the future development of modern dance in Taiwan.

In the 1930 and 1940s, the first Taiwanese young women coming from the upper social classes began to seek a further dance education in Japan. After returning to the island, some of them established private dance schools, primarily teaching classic ballet, traditional Asian dances and sometimes modern dance. Most of them studied with Ishii Baku (1886–1962), the Japanese dancer and choreographer, who was a leading dance teacher in Japan at the beginning of the 20th century at the dance and physical education school in Tokyo, where he taught not only ballet and eurythmic but also creative dance. Ishii Baku greatly admired Isadora Duncan (1877–1927), the master of so-called free dance, and he was a disciple of Émil Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950), a Swiss composer and professor of harmony at Geneva Conservatory, who developed eurythmics, which coordinated body movements with rhythm. During his stay in Europe in the 1920s, Ishii Baku also had an opportunity to see the dances of Mary Wigman (1886–1973), a German dancer and choreographer, who was a pioneer of modern expressionist dance.

In the 1950s, the Taiwanese dance stage was dominated by the so-called national dance (*minzu wudao*), promoted by the government. *Minzu wudao* included Chinese classical dances, folk dances of the Han majority in China (such as lion or dragon dances), dances of ethnic minorities in China and Taiwan, and military dances. These national forms of dances, which emphasized traditional motifs and values, became the object of central propaganda disseminated by a special political/cultural committee and popularized through regular competitions and shows. They were treated as a healthy form of entertainment strengthening the body, spirit and morals of the nation, and an effective tool for integrating society after a military fashion.

In the 1950s and 1960s, dance began to enter the walls of academies, finding its place in the educational curricula of universities. The lecturers on the courses, masked by the name of “rhythm” or simply called “dance”, were masters educated in Japan and immigrants from mainland China. The first dance faculties were opened in the mid-1960s in Taipei,

at the University of Chinese Culture (Zhongguo Wenhua Daxue) and they proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s, especially at the artistic universities. With the passage of time, small, private dance studios like those opened by early promoters of modern dance, classical ballet and traditional dance in the 1950s or 1960s, Ts'ai Juei-Yueh (1921–2005) and Liu Feng-Hsueh (b. 1925), became less popular. In the mid-1980s, under the resolution of the Taiwanese Ministry of Culture, some primary and secondary schools were singled out throughout the country for teaching children in modern dance, ballet, traditional dance and improvisation.

Throughout the first stage of development, Taiwanese modern dance was influenced by European expressionist dance, because Japanese teachers of Taiwanese dancers who studied in Japan were themselves disciples of European teachers. The situation changed significantly in the 1960s and 1970s, as Taiwanese cultural institutions and dancers established and maintained contacts with renowned American dance groups throughout that period. In 1962–1963 the island was visited by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and José Limón Dance Company, but their outstanding performances did not attract much publicity on Taiwan, as local audiences were not prepared yet to accept a new form of dance art. Few years later (1967) two young American Chinese, Al Chung-Liang Huang (b. 1937) and Wong Yen-Lu, came to Taiwan to conduct workshops for young Taiwanese dancers hungry for new dance techniques. They introduced them to Doris Humphrey's and Martha Graham's dance theories and techniques and confirmed that it was possible to blend the elements of Chinese opera, martial arts, local dance traditions and Western modern dance. It was in tune with propositions of Ts'ai Juei-Yueh and Liu Feng-Hsueh, who much earlier had merged traditional Chinese dance, folk dance and Western modern dance. Frequent visits by American modern dance companies to Taiwan and more frequent visits by young Taiwanese dancers to the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who went there to acquire professional education, created reliable foundations for the further development of modern dance in Taiwan. Lin Huaimin (b. 1947), the most famous Taiwanese choreographer of our times and creator of the renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (Yunmen Wuji, 1973), was one of those modern dance addicts.

Lin's path towards the art of dance was a meandering one. He did not begin his artistic career as a dancer, but as a talented writer. Lin completed an undergraduate degree at the Faculty of Journalism at Zhengzhi University in Taipei. In 1969 he obtained a scholarship and went to the United States to study creative writing. He had been interested in dance since childhood but his experience in dancing was rather meagre at that time. During his literary studies in America, he began to attend a regular dance course and even tried his hand at choreography. After graduation, Lin moved to New York and enrolled in the Martha Graham School of Dance and participated in summer courses. Graham, at that time already an iconic figure of modern dance, entered the history of dance as the creator of a technique requiring virtuoso talents and much effort, which became an alternative to classical ballet. After Lin had returned to Taiwan in 1972 and decided to create his own dance theatre a year later, Graham's technique became fundamental to his dancers' education program, although their daily training also consisted of Western classical ballet and movement techniques of Peking opera, visits to museums and concerts, lectures on Chinese culture and literature, and open-air training.

Yunmen, a word used in the name of Lin Huaimin's dance theatre, referred to an ancient ritual, the Cloud Gate dance, which was probably a totem dance of the tribe of Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, the legendary ruler of ancient China, and a symbolic figure for the whole Chinese civilization, who was considered to be its founder. Lin intentionally referred to the mythical origins of Chinese culture. His ambitious plan aimed at creating

a modern dance company which would present choreographies composed by the Chinese, danced by the Chinese and intended for Chinese audiences. Frustrated by the reorientation of American policy towards Taiwan in the early 1970s, the sudden change of Taiwan's international status and the loss of the island's representation in the United Nations, Lin proposed a new, Taiwanese version of Chinese nationalism in the form of a regenerated Chinese dance tradition. That regeneration meant taking the best elements of the East and West. The final result was the rejuvenation of dance language and the creation of a new idea of body and dance movement.

"Sinicization of contemporary dance" – a phrase recalled by Chao Yu-Ling - characterized the first stage of Cloud Gate's development and was typical of the 1970s and 1980s. *The Tale of the White Serpent* (*Baishhe zhuan*, 1975) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng*, 1983), created in that style, became the classics in Cloud Gate's repertoire. The inspiration came respectively from Chinese folk literature and a well-known Qing dynasty (1644–1911) novel written by Cao Xueqin. In the early stage of his choreographic career, Lin very often searched for interesting plots in Chinese music drama, local tales, prose and poetic works or ancient customs or myths. He used to say that Chinese were very meaning-oriented and liked to know what was happening on stage. Moreover, he had the soul of a writer for whom choreographing was akin to narrating different stories. Tales and stories taken from classical drama and prose became a pretext to create an original dance form merging Graham's technique with Peking opera's stylized and symbolic movement, studied by Lin under the guidance of Yu Ta-Kang, the Taiwanese historian of Chinese theatre, who understood both the necessity of modernizing classical theatre and the "Sinicization" of modern dance in Taiwan. Lin incorporated many conventions and specific body language of traditional music drama into his innovative choreographies, simplified the stage setting and let his versatile dancers be the center of the dramatic action, just as in Peking opera. *Nine Songs* (*Jiuge*, 1993), created one decade later, in the era of great political, economic, social changes, were inspired by a set of poems from the famous, ancient anthology, entitled *Songs of Chu* (*Chuci*), traditionally associated with the pre-Han poet, Qu Yuan, and shamanistic and exorcist cultures of South-Eastern China. It became a special form of Lin's dialogue with modernity and an example of a highly hybrid and eclectic episodic dance in which we can trace not only Peking opera movements and Graham's technique but also Javanese court dance steps, Japanese *butō* strange movements and even some traces of "contact improvisation", which was influenced by the "pushing hands" (*tuishou*) method known from Chinese gymnastics. The dance became an example of Lin's post-modern play with different cultural traditions and art conventions, enriched with his very private comments on Chinese and Taiwanese history, political manipulation and violence, but also on spirited femininity, which was prioritized by him in this choreography. Lightness and heaviness went hand in hand (or rather foot in foot) in that dance, disclosing the unbearable lightness or heaviness of the dramatically changing contemporary world.

The ever more complicated international situation and Taiwan's unclear political status in the 1970s enlivened the long-lasting debate on Taiwan national characteristics and the cultural / national identity of contemporary Taiwanese people, which is connected with the Nativist Cultural Movement. Although Lin Huaimin did not identify himself with the nativist movement, some of his most important choreographies, like *Legacy* (*Xinchuan*, 1978), *My Nostalgia, My Songs* (*Wode xiangchou, wo de ge*, 1986), *Portrait of the Families* (*Jiazu hechang*, 1997), *Rice* (*Daomi*, 2013) and *Formosa* (*Guanyu daoyu*, 2017), portrayed the continuously changing faces of his Taiwanese patriotism and different reflections on the phenomenon of being a Taiwanese citizen, and especially an artist. *Legacy*, one of the most famous performances in Cloud Gate's repertoire and actually its cornerstone, told in a highly symbolic

and expressive way the story of Chinese migration to Taiwan, which had begun centuries before. While working on that dance, Lin Huaimin imitated American dance practitioners and organized open-air training sessions for his dancers. In the politically hardest times, *Legacy* not only helped to create the founding myth of Taiwan but also expressed the importance of family and national traditions. Lin provoked Taiwanese society to rediscover its roots and, as a result, to strengthen its sense of unity. He did so with the use of quite sophisticated tools. First of all, he imbued his choreography with a somewhat ceremonial, ritual character. Besides this, he asked Chen Da, a folk singer from southern Taiwan, to sing a ballad about ancestors who had crossed the dark waters in search of a better life and dignity a few centuries before, thus giving his work a more epic character. As usual, he combined Peking opera movement conventions, stylized Chinese folk dances and modern dance techniques, which he used to reflect on the mystery of death, the wonder of birth and re-birth, and the sense of freedom, joy and happiness. *Legacy's* first night was held on the day when the United States announced the breaking of diplomatic relations with Taiwan (December 16th 1978). Placed in this unexpected context, Lin's dance became a strong manifestation of the patriotic and even nationalistic emotions of people who were betrayed by their ally. *My Nostalgia, My Songs*, in contrast to *Legacy*, did not try to present any pathetic "tale of the tribe". It contained far more private reflections on Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s, seen through the prism of individual experiences. Lin decided to record small fragments of life which had passed a long time ago. Songs from the past times, everyday gestures, out of fashion clothes and a hint of nostalgia helped him to paint a simple but touching vision of bygone Taiwan and its people. The opportunity to see the choreographies of Pina Bausch composed for her Tanztheater Wuppertal in the mid-1980s inspired Lin's idea of dance movement, especially his method of presenting male-female relationships on stage, marked with coldness, rejection and total lack of ties. In *Portrait of the Families*, Lin Huaimin again settled accounts with the bitter history of Taiwan in the 20th century: the Japanese occupation, wartime and White Terror. The turbulent history of the island was recounted with the use of photo-projections, recitations of very personal stories by Taiwanese citizens and the body language of Cloud Gate's dancers. Those different, parallel narratives let the choreographer to build an episodic but quite coherent image of modern Taiwan and its people, forced to be constantly confronted with terror, brutality and loss. In 2013, Lin proposed a totally different vision of Taiwan, which was rather idyllic and pastoral. *Rice (Daomi)* was inspired by the serene landscape of Chishang in south-eastern Taiwan, famous for its beautiful rice fields. Once more he went there with Cloud Gate dancers to conduct outdoor training session and work in the fields. The outcome of their cooperation enchanted the audience with its visual and aural beauty. The cycles of nature and human life - from birth, through growth, until death and decay - were presented with the help of video-projections documenting the metamorphosis of rice, from the spring sprouts to the burning of the fields in late autumn. The images created by the choreographer and videographers were sometimes quiet and idyllic, sometimes filled with passion and fire, but always elegant and precise. In contrast to *Rice, Formosa* proposed a much darker picture of the Beautiful Island, where concepts and images of destruction, anger and conflict prevailed. That darkness and uncertainty reflected some disquieting aspects of the contemporary world, its tensions and sudden eruptions, but also Lin's deeper, philosophical reflections on Taiwan's reality and our times.

It would be false to claim that Lin Huaimin navigated only between Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese patriotism. That avid reader and some-time writer slowly realized that dance is not about narrating stories but building a unique language of body signs. In the 1990s, he became intensively interested in the Chinese breathing and movement

techniques of *qigong*, meditation, martial arts and especially *taji*. The interest was greatly inspired by the Eastern body aesthetic (*dongfang shentiguan*), which fueled the general discussion on Asian corporality and the further search by many avant-garde performers in the 1990s. At that time, Lin began to include meditation practice and *taiji* in the training sessions of Cloud Gate dancers and in the curriculum at the Faculty of Dance at the National Taipei University of Arts (Guoli Taipei Yishu Daxue). The new style of dancing, based on meditative techniques and slow-motion exercises enriched with classical ballet and modern dance techniques, was presented in *Songs of Wanderers* (*Liulangzhe zhi ge*) in 1994. Three tons of rice spread on the stage floor from above and meditative movements of dancers helped Lin to create an enigmatic, mesmerizing performance full of ritual atmosphere, resonating with beautiful Georgian folk songs. Lin was on a highway leading to his own, unique choreographic style.

Further inspiration came from Buddhism and traditional Chinese calligraphy. Before composing *Songs of the Wanderers*, Lin went to India to visit two sacred places, Varanasi (Benares) and Bodhgaya. According to tradition, Buddha was enlightened there under a Bodhi tree after forty-nine days of meditation. In Bodhgaya Lin experienced unique peace, which can be traced in *Songs of the Wanderers*. Buddhist concepts reemerged a few years later in his *Moon Water* (*Shuiyue*, 1998) which is considered to be an important step on the way towards the change of his aesthetic paradigm. The title is a reference to the Buddhist doctrine of the illusionary character of the world: the reflection of flowers in the mirror, just as a reflection of the moon in the water are an illusion. The choreography of this dance used the principle of incessant oscillation between the material nature of the body and non-material energy present in that dancing. This was based on the contrast of heaviness and lightness, slowness and speed, fullness and emptiness. The organic dynamics of movement in *Moon Water* was the effect of the *tajidaoyin* training which Cloud Gate dancers undertook in 1996-1997. The essence of that typically Taiwanese form of training, which was based on the Daoist philosophy of body and different kinds of *taiji*, was the spiral character of movement and the unbroken flow of inner energy. During the performance, the audience could experience the omnipresence of wavy lines and the pulsation of energy both in nature (water) and in dancer's body.

Moon Water introduced a dancing technique which was developed by Lin Huaimin in the next decade in his *Cursive* trilogy: *Cursive* (*Xingcao*, 2001), *Cursive II* (*Xingcao II*, 2003) and *Wild Cursive* (*Kuangcao*, 2005). This time the choreographer focused on movement itself. The performers' bodies were writing a non-narrative, sophisticated text in the stage space. Its strength and deep meaning paradoxically came from both the improvisatory character of movement and the precision of every step, gesture of hands and body pose. It was similar to martial arts and to the art of calligraphy. The idea of dancing calligraphy had been conceived by Lin many years earlier, but it took him decades before he put his idea into practice. The creation of the cycle of three *Cursives* was preceded by intensive preparations. One of the first stages consisted in co-operation with a martial arts master. The next stage involved inviting a master of calligraphy. They helped Cloud Gate dancers to explore the relations between writing calligraphy, martial arts, breathing techniques and methods of controlling energy (*qi*). After establishing a theoretical and aesthetic foundation for the dancers, Lin began the practical stage of training, which included improvised etudes. The result was a sublime elegance, also typical of the art of calligraphy. This stemmed not only from a special dancing technique, but also from minimizing the means of expression used in the performance and perfect harmony of the beauty of performers' bodies, simple costumes, ascetic decorations, skillful lighting management and abstract music, perfectly matching the character of the dance. The essence of the choreographic series was contrast:

visual, aural and kinetic. The slowness of motion in some episodes was replaced with violence and movement acceleration in other ones. The stylistic variability of *Cursive* dances reflected the variability of the grass / cursive style of Chinese calligraphy. The abstract, experimental music accompanying the performances complemented the choreography, which sought to emphasize the abstract form of the grass script. It supported the dancers in exposing the minute nuances of mood: tension, terror, lightness, frivolity. It also helped to emphasize the transformations of dynamics and statics: the soft power of the curved, spiral lines stroked with ceremonial concentration with sharp, swift strokes like sword slashes, intentionally unfinished and suspended in the air. The culmination of the long process of composing calligraphic dances was *Water Stains on the Wall* (*Wulou hen*, 2010), inspired by the famous conversation between two masters of calligraphy in the Tang dynasty (618-907), the experienced Yan Zhenqing and young Huai Su, devoted to the most perfect form of calligraphy imitating Nature. "Stains of water on the wall" became a metaphor of the very creative process, which is also a long process of absorbing, sedimentation and, finally, appearing on the surface. Composing his dance, which was performed by Cloud Gate artists with the use of the most perfect dancing technique and filled with a spiritual, oneiric aura, Lin proved that his art had reached the ideal: Nature and Art became one entity.