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A Close Analysis of the Characteristics of Lin Hwai-Min's Dance Works

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ABSTRACT

Lin Hwai-min, one of the most prestigious East Asian choreographers in the world, established the first contemporary dance company in Taiwan, the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, which created a unique impression of Asian modern dance. Since his earliest dance works, unique balance is struck between literature and dance texts, mainland China and Taiwan, the East and the West, dance and humanities. This thesis begins from the perspectives of literary, eastern symbols, body language and music. It analyzes the artistic characteristics of Lin Hwai-min's dance works, aiming to reveal the essence of choreographs.

Keywords: Lin Hwai-min, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, Choreography.

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1. Introduction

On February 20th, 2013, Lin Hwai-min, a Taiwanese choreographer, was awarded the 2013 Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement by the American Dance Festival, one of the most authoritative institutions for contemporary dance in the world. The award celebrates choreographers who significantly contribute to contemporary dance, with previous recipients including Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Trisha Brown, Pina Bausch, and William Forsythe. In awarding Mr. Lin, the American Dance Festival said, "Mr. Lin's fearless zeal for the art form has established him as one of the most dynamic and innovative choreographers today." (The welcome letter for Lin Hwai-min for 2013 Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award, 2013)

"Lin Hwai-min was the first Scripps recipient of this award who worked outside of the United States and Europe." (AsianInNy, February 21, 2013) Compared to other prominent worldwide contemporary choreographers, what makes Mr. Lin's pieces unique?

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In 1947, Lin Hwai-min was born to a well-educated family in central Taiwan. Surprisingly, he wasn't a professional dancer and didn't start his dance training at a young age. Since he was young, Lin loved literature. Before he began to study dance, he was a novelist, and by the age of 23, his two short stories, *Transformation of the Rainbow* (1968) and *Cicada* (1969) were already best-sellers in Taiwan. In 1970, he won a scholarship to study international writing at the University of Iowa in the United States. Meanwhile, he chose dance as his academic minor, began learning choreography, and later on performed with the Dance Ensemble at the University of Iowa.

The young Lin Hwai-min's journey to the United States opened his door to the dance world. In order to further his dance studies, Lin moved to New York and studied modern dance at the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance and Merce Cunningham Dance Studio. The new dance training experiences from both of these schools, dances he had not seen before, inspired him to fulfill his dream to create a modern dance company upon his return to Taiwan in 1973, when he became the founder, resident choreographer, and artistic director of the first modern dance company in Taiwan, the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre.

Twenty years later, Lin's talent as a choreographer with distinguished innovations and unique ideas of dance won him the appreciation of audiences worldwide. For example, in 1995, a dance reviewer for the *New York Times*, after watching Lin's *Nine Songs*, acknowledged "That blending of history and of the cultures of the East and West has been the life work of Lin Hwai-min." (Jennifer Dunning, 1995) Lin's dance works combines his roots in traditional Chinese culture as the background, with the aesthetics of western contemporary dance embodied in the movement language he learned from modern dance in the United States. Lin's movement language is strongly influenced by Martha Graham's dance technique, in which the dynamics in people's movements come from breathing. Thus, Lin's approach is that breathing and movements cannot be separated even for a moment.

Lin's dance works are also influenced by his early love of literature; the inspiration of most of his dance works are derived from literary masterpieces or historical legends, for example, *The Tale of the White Serpent*, based on a famous myth in ancient China. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Nine Songs* also drew their material from classical Chinese literature. The creative influences on Lin's later works gradually changed from literature into that of the local reality of Taiwan, as evident in the plot in *Legacy* and *My Nostalgia, My Songs*. The archetype of the story of *Legacy* was taken from the historical migration of Han Chinese from mainland China to Taiwan during the Qing dynasty, and how they settled in and found their new home on the island of Taiwan. *My Nostalgia, My Songs* was based on the realistic social conditions in Taiwan during the 1980s, when people felt depressed about both their material and spiritual lives.

As Lin wrote in his book, "In the strategy and content of dance expression, every day's life in the thousands of years of Chinese culture is the inexhaustible source of dance creation. (Translated by author)" (Lin Hwai-min, 2002, P.75) Lin also finds inspiration from his own life. He once said that every day, even when he was asleep, he could feel the tides of the Tamkang River that flowed nearby his home in Taipei. The feeling of a gentle breeze, the slow passing of time, and other such natural feelings subtly influenced the choreography of Lin, who admitted that dance is my life. It is Lin's love and passion for life from which the strong power and profound meaning in his dance choreography stems, that in turn captures his audience into deeper trains of thought, such as invoking the complexity of human nature, the circle of life, and the spirited struggle of a nation.

In several of his pieces, Lin boldly and creatively uses countless Chinese symbols on the stage. For example, by symbolizing dancers' body as brushes, he utilizes "calligraphy" as the core point of his creation in *Cursive*, *Cursive II*, and *Wild Cursive* to express the spirit of fluency and strength in Chinese characters. Lin once poured three tons of paddy rice in *Songs of the Wanderers* from the ceiling onto the stage from the beginning to the end of the performance to represent a never-ceasing life. In *Water Moon*, he also conceived a relationship between "nothingness" and "essence" in movements derived from a key concept of Tai Chi, and unexpectedly used a large mirror to create an illusion of the moon reflected in water.

Both Mr. Lin and I have intercultural backgrounds. In my dance career, I draw inspirations from Lin's works and look up to Lin as a model choreographer. Watching two live performances by Lin's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, once at the National Grand Theater in Beijing in 2014 and again at the Bam Theatre

in New York in 2015, has refreshed my admiration of Lin Hwai-min, and aroused my curiosity about his creative process. In this thesis, I will explain my discovery and understanding of the characteristics I found in Lin Hwai-min's dance works.

2. Literature as the main line

“Literature and dance, both important forms of culture representation, are nevertheless two very different kinds of arts forms. A literacy text establishes a verbal, permanent language, while a dance relies upon non-verbal, ephemeral body language taking place in both time and space.” (Yin-Yin Huang, 2002, P.98) Literature is the parent of several art forms, as emotional expressions can derive from the plots of stories, and in this way, proves quintessential to dance.

2.1 Nine songs

Many of Lin's dance works are inspired by his Chinese cultural heritage, and this is most likely attributed to Lin's background as a writer. One of Lin's most representative dance works, *Nine Songs*, illustrates this theory as an example. *Nine Songs* is a work of myth and legend based on a kind of sacrificial poetry written by Yuan Chu in China between 480 and 222 BCE, and that is considered representative of southern Chinese literature. Fascinated by ancient Chinese dance rituals and desiring to recreate an ancient myth as a theatrical dance piece on a contemporary stage and perspective, Chu's writings form the basis of inspiration in Lin's *Nine Songs* (Yin-Yin Huang, 2002, P.108).

According to the program of *Nine Songs*, the performance is divided into eight scenes:

Scene 1: Greeting Gods

Scene 2: Monarch of the East

Scene 3: Gods of Fate

Scene 4: Princess of the Hsiang River

Scene 5: Monarch in the Clouds

Scene 6: Ghost in the Mountain

Scene 7: Ode to the Fallen

Scene 8: Honoring the Dead

(Translated by author)

Powers of nature are featured in *Monarch of the East*, in which the characters yearn for the sun (or “the god of sun” in modern Chinese), and in *Monarch in the Clouds* they worship the clouds in the sky to bring rain.

The more humanly, or corporeal feelings are featured in three other scenes: In *Princess of the Hsiang River*, the love between man and woman is praised and pursued; *Ghost in the Mountain* portrays feelings of isolation and depression as a result of living in seclusion; and in *Gods of Fate*, the fear and sorrow of death and fearing the unknowns of how and when their lives will end, such as from war or slaughter.

The final two scenes share themes related to the afterlife: *Ode to the Fallen* follows a belief of floating ghosts in the sky who are in search of the direction to return home, while *Honoring the Dead* tells of summoning all souls to end the grand sacrifice.

Several scenes of *Nine Songs* thus portray myths or legends that originated from a religion or set of beliefs that early Chinese civilization had devoutly sought to explain the mysteries of life, a seemingly constant theme in both eastern and western civilizations.

But as evident, dance is an art form that is more about expressing feelings rather than narratives. Lin is thus not only a good choreographer but also skilled at rewriting the story's structure in a way that transfers the story from a novel, a form of literature, to a script of dance, a form of art.

2.2 The Tale of the White Serpent

In *The Tale of the White Serpent*, Lin dilutes the narrative instead of engraving character's personalities, and reveals the relationship between characters and their psychological conflict. The story features three main characters: Xu Xian, Bai Niang and Xiao Qing. Xu Xian is a young boy who owned a snake as his pet until his parents command him to give it up. Many years later, during a heavy storm, the snake transforms into a beautiful girl named Bai Niang with her maid, Xiao Qing. Xu Xian meets Bai Niang and they fall in love with each other. However, a local monk named Fa-Hai believes that Bai Niang is an

evil spirit, and separates Bai Niang from Xu Xian by locking Bai Niang inside the Lei Feng tower for 20 years. In the end, Bai Niang gains freedom. She gives up her magical powers and remains in human form to prove that her love for Xu Xian is real. (Wiki. *The Tale of the White Serpent*)

In this dance work, Lin simplifies the relationship of the characters into two camps: good and evil, the three main character roles versus the monk Fa Hai, respectively. A triangular relationship is made between Bai Niang's suffering, Xiao Qing's jealousy, Xu Xian's weakness, and the cycles of inner struggles within their minds. Through use of the stage, Lin makes the story clear as it resonates with his portrayal of the emotional changes in these characters' relationships.

2.3 The Dream of the Red Chamber

The Dream of the Red Chamber tells about the rise and fall of a noble family in the Qing dynasty of China, an extremely complicated story in which the plot spans over a century and a multitude of characters. In this work, Lin scripts his own interpretation of the literary masterpiece. Lin reconstructs and integrates the structure of the dance into five parts including spring, summer, autumn, winter, and the end. According to Lin, he channels and extracts the best part of the story and then expresses it in an abstract way while largely ignoring the plot context.

In this way, Lin borrows concepts from the novel to put into his dance. For example, one character in the novel is a monk who wears a red cassock and appears at the start and end of the piece; in the novel, this character acts like a bystander and is mentioned by the author many times. Lin uses this same character in order to give his audience the impression that he is the storyteller.

Some portions in Lin's *The Dream of the Red Chamber* are like puzzles taken from the original work that let people feel unpredictable but thoughtful. For example, there are twelve named beauties in the original story, but Lin purposely does not explicitly name the twelve characters; instead, he only uses twelve anonymous dancers, with each wearing a long cloak of one of twelve different colors and bright patterns, in effect initially masking the identity of the twelve characters. However, Lin builds a space in which the audience can imagine freely through different patterns of dance, and the dancer's clothes and colors, to self-identify which dancer aligns with each of the twelve characters.

By using literature as a carrier, then reconstructing and integrating plots and relationships between characters of these stories on the stage, Lin's dances are given deeper meaning and become more acceptable by audiences. Lin's logical thinking and unique skill in integrating literature with dance has created a new pattern in choreography that is very successful, unique, and unmatched.

3. Eastern symbolism

3.1 Traditional opera

Lin's work makes use of many traditional Chinese symbols. One of many used in his work is a symbol from Beijing opera that is a typical form of Chinese traditional theater (Wiki. *Beijing opera*). In Beijing opera, the faces of the performing actors on stage are painted in different colors and patterns that correspond to exaggerated facial expressions. Similarly, in *The Tale of the White Serpent*, Lin designed theatrical facial expressions for his dancers to depict their different characteristics. For example, the anxious and nervous Xu Xian constantly glances right and left, while the sharp eyes and ferocious expressions of Xiao Qing betrays her jealousy of the love between Xu Xian and Bai Niang.

Lin borrowed elements from Beijing opera also for directions and movement. The opera step, a basic movement in Beijing opera, is used frequently by actors who need to move from one place to another when performing on stage. It requires dancers to use the soles of their feet as rollers compacted to the ground while the entire remainder of their body above the knees remains unchanged. When Xu Xian first appears on stage, he uses opera step while the music is set to the sound of drums in Beijing opera. When he walks to the middle of the stage, he also covers his face with his sleeve, a life-related movement used especially by bashful women and very common in Beijing opera, implying to the audience his bashfulness and weakness. Several other technical movements used in this piece, such as tossing the hair and the somersault turn, also come from Beijing opera.

The use of props in *The Tale of the White Serpent* gives the impression of minimalism. Xu Xian's umbrella, Bai Niang's fan, and Fa Hai's golden wand and red cassock represent a symbol of authority and a moral barrier. The mat, descending from the ceiling, separates the space into indoor and outdoor, and

acts as the barrier between the three main characters: Xu Xian and Bai Niang enjoy their sweet love behind the mat; while in front of the mat, Xiao Qing struggles with jealousy. In the end of the piece, the mat forms a triangle that represents Lei Feng tower, in which Bai Niang is imprisoned.

The Tale of the White Serpent can be defined as a dance work or a drama. Several similarities to traditional Beijing opera are in this work, not only in the facial expressions, movements, and the use of props, but also in the way of overall expression. Just as in Beijing opera, the main characters in *The Tale of the White Serpent*, with their vivid customs and styles, perform a complete story that concludes in the decency and villainy of every dancer, not only in a dance state, but also in a performance state.

In another piece called *Legacy*, several elements and symbols are used to give the audience a visible picture of a people in a specific time, and a vivid sense of their local culture. For example, the music is full of percussive sounds from drums and vocal accompaniments using the Minnan dialect (a southern Min dialect, spoken in southern provinces of China, including Taiwan), and all dancers resemble fishermen, wearing blue-cloth headscarves, rough clothes, and trousers while baring their wide and stout feet.

3.2 Calligraphy

Calligraphy is another important element in Lin's work, although it is a written art presented on paper, while dance is a dynamic visual art performed on the stage. When a calligrapher writes, the momentum in his or her writing is the same as a dancer's movements. This may be why after studying several calligraphy works of famous calligraphers in ancient China, Lin was inspired to create elegant dances that embody this other art form.

In a segment in *Cursive*, light illuminates a white block on the ground of the stage while the surrounding area remains dark. A female dancer wearing all black, the color of ink, and two long black sleeves, about three meters long apiece, dances in this white block area. As she throws and tosses her sleeves, the traces of the sleeves in the air resembles the moving brush used in calligraphy.

When talking about the creation of *Cursive*, it becomes apparent that Lin has dwelled on the question of how to combine calligraphy and dance for nearly 20 years. He would go to the National Palace Museum to carefully observe and study calligraphy for hours. Lin tries to feel the inner power of the works of calligraphy, and then imagines how to use a dancer's body in place of brushes to create the same feeling of beauty (Interview video of Lin Hwai-min).

Lin's three works related to calligraphy pursue the liberation of the dancer's body. They are also examples that combine the spirit of traditional Chinese culture with modern western dance.

3.3 Bamboo

In ancient China, the shape of bamboo is said to resemble noble characteristics that people should pursue. In *Bamboo Dream*, the stage scenery is a dense bamboo forest that represents integrity, honesty, and tenacity. The first part of this piece invokes simplicity and purity, as all the dancers' costumes are made entirely of white gauze that only partially covers their limbs, while they move and walk at a slow pace through a thin mist floating on the stage. The general sense of peacefulness from this scene represents the epitome of bamboo. In this piece, Lin also depicts a sense of the life cycle by expressing the growth process of bamboo in four different seasons, and enables his audience to experience the rite of life.

3.4 Buddhism

Lin also incorporates Buddhist culture into his work, *Songs of the Wanderers*. Here Lin portrays dancers dressed in rags, as monks in pursuit of the spiritual world, pilgrims who pause after each step to kowtow their entire journey from their home in the Himalayas to Lhasa or other sacred places, doing so as the only way to obtain the right to celestial burial. *Songs of the Wanderers* is Lin's expression of the journey of holy pilgrimage that evokes not only travels and memories in Buddhist places such as India and Tibet, but also a process of spiritual practice in Buddhism by which followers can be absolved of suffering and gain eternal life.

4. Body language

In most of his works, Lin Hwai-min uses movement language from modern dance and occasionally mixes it with Chinese Tai Chi.

In *Go Wandering with Yun Men*, Lin wrote about a typical exercise in Tai Chi, of “Lowing the center of gravity and releasing the pelvis, your upper body gains an unprecedented freedom (Translated by author).” (Lin Hwai-min, 2010, P.14) As in *Water Moon*, the sense of freedom that Lin emphasizes helps to relax his audience.

With relaxed movements, Lin also purposely uses ambiguity in his theme movement and expression, as unfamiliarity tends to resonate easier with an audience: “Thus the audience's attention is more likely to be attracted to the stage and the whole theater becomes very quiet. (Translated by author)” (Lin Hwai-min, 2010, P44)

Lin contrasts relationships between opposites, such as nothingness and essence; for example, using a duet versus a group of dancers performing simultaneously. While a male and female duet dance in the middle of the stage, other dancers form a circle around the pair. Dancers on the outer circle perform slow movements compared to the main duet doing rhythmic movements in the center. In this way, the slower sense of the outer circle group's dance highlights and clarifies the dance of the duet at the center, in the same way as seeing a clear, clean image of the moon reflecting on the surface of a glittering lake. Using different movement textures, the audience can then understand the inner circle duet's movements represent the essence, while the outer circle dancers' movements represent nothingness.

In Lin's choreography, many movements are inspired by Martha Graham's dance technique through the use in breathing that leads to contraction and relaxation of the dancer's body. An example of this is in *The Tale of the White Serpent*, when Xiao Qing distorts her body, twisting her waist intensively, the pattern of her movements resembling the floor work in Martha's combinations. Another example is in the first scene of *Nine Songs*, when a woman in red appears and shakes her body wildly with intensive movements, cycling her upper body through quick, alternating patterns of contractions and release.

5. Silence in music

Most of Lin's works feature quiet dance. To a large extent, Lin's opinion of music resembles to that of the experimental music of one of his collaborators, John Cage, a 20th-century American avant-garde composer.

On August 29, 1952, at a contemporary piano music recital in Woodstock, New York came the premiere of the newly-produced piece titled 4'33" composed by John Cage. 4'33" made John Cage notorious, as it challenged the doctrines of traditional music. David Tudor, performing in the premiere, walked to the center of the stage, sat on the piano bench, and shrugged his shoulders to release his muscles, giving the audience anticipation of the beginning of the performance. Instead, he opened the lid of the piano, placed the music score on the music rack, put on his glasses, re-closed the lid, took out a timer, and pressed it. He stared at the timer for a while, put it on the piano, and then re-opened the lid, holding the timer again. These simple movements repeated several times, arousing more anticipation among the audience in when the pianist would begin. During this piece, people became awkward in the silence, accompanied by the sound of raindrops, babies' cries, and talking from the impatient audience. After a few minutes, Tudor opened the lid, took off his glasses, closed the score, and then bowed to the audience.

Although the silent piece 4'33" brought John Cage into a controversial spot, it made the public know that music can not only be a classic piano piece or orchestra music; it can also be the sound of wind, rain drops, or babies' crying. This is also Lin's understanding of music.

Thus, in Lin's choreography, music is not only produced by musical instruments. Any sound in life can be music. While there is no specific definition of music, it comes from the consciousness of the human brain – an audience listens to sounds consciously; only when the audience perceives whatever sound they listen to can be thought of as music, can it then be called music. When an audience is in a silent environment, even their breath can be thought of as music. In this way, silence is not a concept of hearing; it needs an audience to realize that silence itself is also a kind of music. As a Chinese idiom “无中生有” translates, “create something from nothing.” This is why just about anything, from the southern

folk songs of Georgia, *Suites for Solo Cello* by Bach, to voices of nature, or even silence itself, can all be the music of Lin's choreography.

6. Conclusion

At the International May Theatre and Music Festival in Wiesbaden, the audience evaluated Lin's *Wild Cursive* as "Steady, still, violent, all the changes are happening in a moment, we have never seen such a physical technique like this. The body, spirit, space and rhythm, all present on the stage in such a harmonious way. (Translated by author)" (Lin Hwai-min, 2010, P.40)

Lin's Cloud Gate Dance Theater opens a window that lets the world see the unique body language from China. Lin Hwai-min uses literature to convey his artistic thoughts. Though he inherited the traditional culture, he does not rely on it. He wisely combines his pioneering thoughts of music with dance. He draws ideas from modern western dance, but at the same time, he does not imitate the western style. In this way, due to his background in literature, cultural roots, and aesthetics in combination with the Chinese and Western cultures, Lin has created unique works in his own distinct style.

A good choreographer does not produce tangible things in life, such as meals, electronic devices, or other such things, but precipitates life and creates another world outside of our everyday lives. Lin taught us a way to appreciate dance as a way to appreciate life itself. He provides joy and comfort while inspiring and motivating people to achieve the desires in their hearts through the abstract ways of dance. For artists like Lin Hwai-min, true creation lies in putting unique ideas into a universal context for all. This is the greatest significance of choreography.

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