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Modes, Politics, and Goals of Tai-chi in Dance Performance and Education in Taiwan¹

While our understanding of ‘dance’ is derived from many places, times, and contexts, the form as a performance art within our area of studies is a fairly marginal activity. Internationally touring dance corporations that perform dance are not ‘bands of wandering sages’, nor ‘enlightened artists².’ Most choreographers will quickly explain the tight and sometimes threatening relationship between the production of modern dance, its audience base, and funding. Funding aside, however, the essence of true art is to ‘exist without the audience in mind³,’ and the prolific and deeply moving spectrum of dance performance in Taiwan warrants no argument for a hegemonic cultural aesthetic. That is to say that in order to be a successful dancer or choreographer in Taiwan, you do not necessarily have to choreograph a relationship between traditionally ‘Asian’ symbols of culture, religion, or movement and modern dance—at least while on the island. My research in Taiwan led me to witness choreographers working in contexts free from cultural reference, inspired by global tides in cultural modernity, and with impeccably trained dancers with whom to collaborate with. However, the question I posed to many choreographers, dancers, and dance historians on the island is one that challenged this notion. As a result of the presence of internationally successful Taiwanese dance

¹ This paper would not be possible without the guidance of Lin Ya-ting, professors and students at TNUA, and the support of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre in granting me an interview with their founder and artistic director.

² Some scholarship on Cloud Gate talks about Lin’s wandering band of sages and mystics and how Lin Hwai-min is a combination of Lao-tzu and Isadora Duncan. See Houseal, Joseph. *Fifteen Million Moments of Fame*. Lin Hwai-Min International Dance Conference Proceedings, 2005.

³ Benjamin, Walter “The Task of the Translator”. *Illuminations*. Random House.

companies who employ culturally symbols of Asian heritage within their work, funding networks within the government of Taiwan and cultural affairs offices, and demands from Western arts presenters and audiences, I researched if there is a cultural pressure on the non-established modern dance choreographer to include symbols of Asian cultural heritage within their work? After a presentation of a contextualizing history of Cloud Gate to better inform our project, I will then present excerpts from interviews and descriptions of dance I observed while conducting the research project.

To align culturally loaded vocabulary such as spirituality, enlightened movement, cultural traditions, or national kinesthesia within the context of the artistic work of an island whose national identity, artistic production, and global political standing are constantly in flux is a problematic yet sometimes necessary way of discussing the goals, inspirations, and desires behind the thriving dance scene of post-colonial Taiwan. To fully understand the many contexts of the traditional psychophysical practice of Tai-ji within Taiwan, and the often more important contexts in which dance does not utilize Tai-ji in performance, the researcher must analyze practices of both dance education and performance in Taiwan. With the goal of presenting the multi-layered motivations behind a dedication to the movement practices of Tai-ji within the teaching and performance of dance at the Taiwan National University of the Arts (TNUA) and by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (CGDT), I will turn to interviews conducted on and off the campus of the dance academy, lectures attended while at the Hong Kong Dance and Education festival, interviews with members of Cloud Gate as well as choreographer Lin Hwai-min, and my experiences watching recitals and performances at TNUA and at the Hong Kong Academy of the Performing Arts.

To some eyes or ears within the realm of Asia knowledge or modern dance, the image or story of a dancer performing the role of a Buddhist monk on the stage of UC Berkeley or the Brooklyn Academy of Music who stood meditating on stage while thousands of grains of rice fell from the sky would conjure up discussions of Cloud Gate Dance Theater's performance *Songs of the Wanderers*. Often described through quotations from choreographer Lin Hwai-min as inspired by Hesse's *Siddhartha* or the more general reference to Zen, the piece in grand production includes several tons of rice on stage, an epically choreographed dance of farming, rituals with fire, travels, and throughout the entire piece one persistent meditating monk in the downstage right corner. Although choreographer Lin Hwai-min detests references to any of his work as existing under a specific labels such as spiritual, or in other examples nationalistic, the piece has avidly been depicted by reviews and publications as a captivating dance that performs the quest for enlightenment. Perhaps if that initial discussion about an infamous monk in a dance piece continued it might move beyond its immediate association with *Songs of the Wanderers* to mention of another notorious performance piece that toured widely in the states, *Moon Water*. Both pieces depict a kinesthetic and aesthetic quality that both researchers and critics have come to describe as distinctly 'Asian.'

Conversely to the ears of almost every Taiwanese person I ever asked, the words Cloud Gate Dance Theater and more specifically the name Lin Hwai-min instantly inspired a quick and often proud response about the success and power of the nationally and internationally celebrated dance company and choreographer. The difference between these two recollections, one bringing to discussion a specific work of modern dance often connected to Asian aesthetics, and the other the proud response recalling a

nationally encompassing conception of the company's long and public presence within Taiwan, are telling of both the saturation of Cloud Gate Dance theater within Taiwanese culture, as well as the singular knowledge through which the work of Cloud Gate is normatively understood in the west. *Moonwater* and *Songs of the Wanderers* made a name for Cloud Gate in dance circles in the West, but the company has a long and diverse history of work that skillfully attacks and choreographs the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, the migration of Chinese to Taiwan, motifs from Chinese literature such as *Nine Songs* (1993) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1983), as well as numerous dance pieces inspired by narratives from Chinese opera.

There is no equivalent within U.S. culture to the celebrated position Cloud Gate holds within Taiwan's political, cultural, and global identity. Writing on the connection between Taiwan's political ambitions and its investment in the work of Lin Hwai-min, I feel it is useful to site the words of dance historian Lin Yatin at length:

Taipei has also been rebuilding the metropolitan, transforming it into the center of the modernized Chinese world with culture as one of its major assets. This task has been taken up by the charismatic Harvard-educated Taipei mayor Ma Ying-juo, and his former high-profile minister of culture-the well-known writer and critic Long Ying-tai. Lin Hwai-min, a close friend of Long Ying-tai due to his early years as a well-known writer himself, and as a former cultural advisor to Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian, is fully aware of the role and responsibility of Taipei in the global cultural industry. But perhaps more pertinent for Lin's role as director of the expanding Cloud Gate cultural enterprise-with two fully active dance companies, a dance school franchise, and a whole administrative and technical team to maintain-Lin as been invested in creating a new movement vocabulary that could represent a state of the art of dance company based in the contemporary urban center of Taipei. After years of searching, Lin seems to have found his answer in Chinese martial arts such as *taichi daoyin*^{4,5}.

⁴ *Taichi Daoyin* was developed by Master Hsiung Wei of Taiwan based on the philosophy of Taoism and primary principles of three different schools of *taichi ch'uan*.

⁵ Yatin, Lin, *Corporealizing Taiwan's History: Cloud Gate's 'Portrait of the Families (1997) and Beyond*. Lin Hwai-Min International Dance Conference Proceedings, 2005.

How did a metropolis striving to transform itself into the center of the modernized Chinese world come to value the potential of a modern dance company so highly? One point in this genealogy is the historic relationship between the nationalist regime's ambition to claim power over China and the government's support of the Taiwan National Opera. Guy's in depth analysis presents strong funding relationships between Taiwan's military and the National Opera and argues that in the seventies and eighties the Taiwanese government, through the support and export of a National Chinese Opera to international cities, sought to standardize Taiwanese culture as a more true representation of Chinese culture within international circles. The result was substantial funding to the National Opera, a support of all 'Chinese' art ultimately silencing many cultural organizations supporting aboriginal work, and a deep cultural emphasis on the possibilities of Chinese opera as a successful and celebrated art form. Guy states:

In their struggle with the iconoclast Beijing government for international recognition, the Nationalists portrayed themselves as the guardians of traditional Chinese culture, which in turn, bolstered their claims to legitimate rule of all of China. Peking Opera, maintained in its traditional form, was ideal for promoting the nationalist regime's image as the principal preserver of traditional Chinese culture.⁶

I feel this connection is essential to an analysis of the growth of Cloud Gate, especially during the eighties when much of the work was fusion with normative modern dance⁷ and Chinese opera. Intrinsic to our understanding of the role of traditionally Asian movement forms to Cloud Gate and TNUA, Chinese Opera, in its historic political role and its more modern reincarnation, is integral to Lin Hwai-min's work as well as politically supported

⁶ Guy, Nancy. 509.

⁷ For this paper modern dance will refer to Graham technique. Lin Hwai-min studied at the Graham school in New York and much scholarship talks about the initial project of Cloud Gate to fuse Chinese opera with Graham.

performance art from Taiwan's past. Regard the similar yet contextually different sentiment taken from an interview I conducted with dance researcher Chen Ya-ping on the relationship between funding and the arts during the nineties:

The money for dance from the government, in the nineties at least, I will not say this about right now, did go to dance companies which displayed an Asian aesthetic. They wanted internationally exportable dance, and, at least in the nineties, the internationally exportable dance was all 'Asian' in representation.⁸

Could a comparison be drawn between funding motivations in the seventies towards Nationalist Opera and funding in the nineties towards dance displaying cultural symbols of distinctly Asian tradition? This paper if anything displays that the grounds where public policy, power, and funding meet to decide the nature of performance art is an essential axis in the understanding of a culture's power structures and political goals.

Another key aspect of the political nature of Cloud Gate's strong and successful presence in Taiwan is the fashion in which Cloud Gate first came to fruition in the late 70's. Conceptions of Cloud Gate within Taiwan are intrinsically linked to the context, culture, and history from which the dance company emerged in 1979. In his initial stages of choreography Lin Hwai-min was not depicting Siddhartha's journey to enlightenment as seen in *Song of the Wanderers*, but the migration of his ancestors to Taiwan. An understanding of the dominance of 'Asian' motifs as witnessed in the nineties that this paper focuses on demands a discussion of the diversity of Cloud Gate's work through a limited historical lens.

This paper lacks the space to offer a synopsis of the relationship between the R.O.C., the P.R.C., and the U.S. with any useful depth. However, the decision by the United States in 1978 to re-establish formal relations with the PRC and hence abandon its

⁸ Personal Interview, June 22, 2006.

embassy in Taipei immediately sparked a heated response in Taipei, an excerpt from Time magazine captures the sentiments in Taiwan following the decision:

An angry mob threw eggs and rocks at the U.S. embassy on Taipei's Chung Hsiao West Road. Some 2,000 tried to storm an American compound and were driven back by Marines with tear gas. Near by, students daubed slogans on white sheets taped to the walls. One message: "We protest American recognition of the Communist bandits. We will oppose Communism to the death."⁹

On December, 16, 1978, the same day the U.S. announced its decision to cut ties with Taiwan, Lin Hwai-min premiered potentially his most famous work in all of his repertoire, *Legacy*. *Legacy* is Cloud Gate's most prolifically performed piece. In brilliantly dramatic performances dance depicts the struggles Chinese migrants crossing the strait between Taiwan and China faced some three hundred years ago. Premiered during the hysteria resulting from the U.S.'s decision to acknowledge the P.R.C. in diplomatic relations, *Legacy* developed into an aesthetic representation and symbolic representation of the turbulent times. Chen Ya-ping presents Lin's thoughts on the goals of the piece and the sentiments within Taiwan during December, 1978:

It was this mood of desperation and uncertainty about the future of Taiwan in face of the increasingly hostile global environment which led Lin to choreograph *Legacy*: "I was eager to bring out the work, hoping that Cloud Gate dances, the audience, and the whole society could gain strength [from it] and could be reassured of our own power through the footsteps of our ancestors," said Lin not long after the premier of the dance drama.¹⁰

Legacy launched Cloud Gate into the public eye and served as a definite foundation for the growth of the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. Roughly four years later Lin Hwai-min founded the department of dance at The Taiwan National University of the Arts. The connections between TNUA's dance department and Cloud Gate are limitless: the current

⁹ Time Magazine, December 25th, 1978.

¹⁰ Ya-ping, Chen. *'Legacy' and the Nativist Cultural Movement in 1970's Taiwan*. Lin Hwai-Min International Dance Conference Proceedings, 2005.

dean of TNUA is a founding member of Cloud Gate, nearly all of Cloud Gate's current dancers attended the school, and Lin Hwai-min is still a very influential voice in decisions regarding curriculum and teaching methodologies. To explain my stated question of whether or not there has been a pressure on choreographers to present work that displays cultural symbols of Asianness, it is essential that we discuss Taiwan's most prestigious dance program, the dance department of the Taiwan National University of the Arts.

TNUA

There is a striking difference between the performances I observed at TNUA in the form of end of the year graduate school recitals and the curriculum's required curriculum of Chinese Opera, Tai-ji, Ballet, Modern, and Martial Arts. When I would talk to students about their interest in Tai-ji, most all of them hated it as a movement and nearly all couldn't wait to explore their own expressions through the more open movement of modern dance. Even though much of the courses focus on tai-ji, ballet, and Chinese opera, the performances and recitals within the grounds of the university are open ended.

A chance to interview the dean of TNUA's dance department illuminated many of the philosophies behind the movement practices taught at the school. The overwhelming message from educators was that TNUA strives through cultural lectures and classes in meditation to create dancers who 'feel,' choreographers who will create interesting work, and dancers whose technique is exemplary on an international standard. When I asked if tai-ji was more used as a movement technique or a meditation on qi to help train the dancers mind, the unanimous response was always, "both."

Here is one normative explanation of the role of *taichi daoyin* in dance education: that the skills acquired from prolonged training in *taichi daoyin* benefit the possibilities for a dancer to find work. Cloud Gate requires training in *taichi daoyin* for no less than five years before dancers may perform with the company. What does the prolonged study of *taichi daoyin* achieve for the dancer? Intensive and prolonged study of *taichi daoyin* offers the dancer's body first and most tangibly a supreme control over the movement of the torso and arms. The dean of TNUA discussed how she is so proud when she brings her dancers to international dance festivals and the audience looks at the dancers amazed at their movement qualities, which, to most western audiences, come across as unfathomable, especially to a student of rigid ballet. The emphasis of *taichi daoyin* lies in acquiring a supreme flexibility in joints uncommonly used by other dancers, such as rotations in the torso, knees, and shoulders, all of which have no comparison in modern dance in the West. This is but one example of how dance educators describe the benefits of *taichi daoyin* to a quality education in dance movement.

The second aspect of *taichi daoyin* is teaching students at TNUA the philosophy and subsequent movement practice of qi. The question that kept arising for me while listening to all of this praise of the powers of qi to the modern dancer was how does Lin Hwai-min *choreograph* the flow of qi? Lin does not practice tai-ji, does not teach tai-ji, yet requires it of his dancers for what I argue to be primarily a benefit to the movement capabilities of his company and choreography. He utilizes the physical benefits of *taichi daoyin* on a dancers body to ultimately create work defined by the new possibilities of dancers who have studied *taichi daoyin*.

A third aspect of teaching *taichi daoyin* is the attainment of what much scholarship has referred to as a Taiwanese and more often Asian kinesthetic. Under Lin Ya-tin's breakdown of the three stages of Lin's work which is cited below, the ultimate factor which helped create that Asian dance form and so successfully dominated all of Cloud Gate's work in the 1990's was the training of Tai-ji and martial arts, and the possibilities it presented for Lin as a choreographer. Some have described watching Cloud Gate during the nineties as watching an enlightened band of martial artist or Shaolin gongfu masters. Given three motivations from educators and choreographers to include the practices of tai-ji and meditation within a dance curriculum, one must wonder how the students relate to such traditional pedagogy.

I feel there is a sharp difference between work observed in the university and in the outside realm of publicly presentable art in Taipei. Within the university, avant-garde work to minimalist composers exploring the history of feminism and concubines and other work throwing all signals of Taiwanese culture out the window is applauded and discussed amongst audiences of about 20 faculty, students, and the lone researcher. While attending one of these four performances conducted over the course of one week, I saw one piece set to the music of Philip Glass that attacked the history of foot-binding. Four women dressed in red rain-coats and matching skirts sat facing the audience, giggling awkwardly as another female dancer would attempt to squeeze the feet and then raise the skirts of the seated women. However, all the work I saw which became well enough supported to be presented outside the university did have clear links to Taiwanese traditional culture. One work I observed of the Wind Dance Theatre presented at the Taipei Red Theater and choreographed by a former member of Cloud Gate was set up in

scenes that worked in parallel structure to a ritual sequence of traditional Taoism. Similarly, the opening at the Taiwan Museum of Modern Art was celebrated by the slow performance of a very traditional and marginal sect of Chinese theatre. The quest of much of my research was to determine if the hugely successful presence of Cloud Gate and other factors created a climate in which it was hard for modern dancers to break out of the pressure to create work that contained performed signals of Asian culture. Many people I talked to be it dancers, choreographers within the University, or successful dance historians confirmed this sentiment.

Normative Explanations of the ‘Asianness’ of the Nineties

In an interview with the researcher and professor Chen Ya-ping, she alludes to Lin’s newest most abstract dance and then describes the East West dichotomy in relation to Cloud Gates work as follows:

White 3 is a truly modern dance. If Lin Hwai- min had come out with this dance 20 years ago the audience wouldn’t have accepted it. He is a very smart man. The first ten years of his work he was educating Taiwanese people about modern dance, the second ten years Lin was educating the Western audiences about Asian dance. Maybe the next phase will be totally modern with Lin allowed to just choreograph. The relationship between the East and West dance scenes is really apparent over the history of Cloud Gate. Lin’s work with *Songs of the Wanderers*, *Bamboo Dreams*, these works impressed the West through their ‘Asian-ness.’ Now that Lin has gotten the attention of the Western audience, through crafting that Asian look, he can make his own dance.¹¹

Even though when I asked Lin Hwai-min about his opinion on this perspective he responded in harsh disdain at the question, I am compelled by Lin Yatin’s notion of Cloud Gate educating Western audiences about Taiwanese dance through his ‘Asianness’ stage of the nineties. Taking the argument a bit farther, I do feel that the great success of this educational process, through the medium of performing work based on cultural

¹¹ Personal Interview, June 27, 2006.

references to Buddhism, Tai-ji, and enlightenment to Western audience, created an artistic environment within in Taiwan which privileged work similar to Cloud Gate's in aesthetic representations. In an article Lin Ya-tin offers another explanation for the role of Tai-ji and Asian aesthetics in Cloud Gate's work more representative of Taiwan's unique history:

Due to this complicated history of colonization, the people currently living in Taiwan have incorporated a hybrid cultural identity, with different factors such as ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and so forth contributing to the broad category of "Taiwanese." Such an open and sometimes conflicting ongoing process of cultural identification has come to value flexibility as not only a pragmatic way of negotiation, the government also employs 'flexible diplomacy.'¹²

In this article Lin uses this conception of 'flexible diplomacy' to refer to Lin Hwai-min's choreographic styles. In the decisions he makes, where he turns for themes and movement styles, under this reading does further the telling metaphor of 'diplomacy' within international dance.

On July 8th, one hour before a massively attended outdoor performance in a large sports stadium right outside of Taipei, I sat down with Lin Hwai-min to present many of the questions which inform the paper written thus far. Lin Hwai-min is a successful man and highly pursued by all angles of the press for interviews on a constant level. The context of my interview should be stated for I feel it informs the data actually discussed during the interview. A week after my arrival in Taiwan I e-mailed the executive director of CGDT Wen Wen Yeh describing my goals during my time in Taiwan. Wen Wen responded quickly and severely asking me to clarify in more detail my interest in Cloud Gate, what I thought was so 'spiritual' about the work, and why I was interested in Lin's

¹² Yatin, Lin, *Corporealizing Taiwan's History: Cloud Gate's 'Portrait of the Families (1997) and Beyond*. Lin Hwai-Min International Dance Conference Proceedings, 2005.

point of view on whether or not there is a modern orientalism in the West hungry for modern dance which displayed characteristics of ancient Asian symbols. I replied with a lengthy e-mail describing some of my experience with modern dance and I was granted one half hour to discuss my questions with Lin in which “I had better be prepared.”

Sweating, smoking, dressed in all black, Lin Hwai-min is a fiercely intense man capable of terrifying than delighting anybody lucky enough to meet him. He is notorious for flamboyantly harsh interviews where the interviewer is often lucky enough to stay in the room. Lin knew my questions in advance knew my goals and purposes in Taipei, yet chose to very rarely directly answer my questions. What Lin did intentionally offer me in our time together was a metaphor, which he described as a metaphor after the story. He states:

This is very important. There is one clock in Beijing. That means that people in Urumqi have to wake up when it is still dark out. In China in the 1930's and 40's, people traveled around and collected all the folk dances. They were brought back to Beijing, coded, finalized, made beautiful, and created in the 1950's into what we now understand to be Folk dance. Do you understand what I am saying? That was a metaphor.¹³

I went to Taiwan researching the relationship between Asian physical traditions and modern dance. What I now present informed by interviewing choreographer Lin Hwai min is that akin to the politically tainted genealogy of folk dance in China-where the most pure signals of tradition are ultimately modern constructs laden with political motivations-so exists the ‘traditional’ movement practice of *tai chi* in modern day performance art in Taiwan.

Tai-chi daoyin is no more traditional than it is current. Created in the past thirty years by a master who is still alive, when critics in the West present Cloud Gate as

¹³ Personal Interview, July 8, 2006.

displaying classical Asian traditions of movement, what they are actually seeing is as current and in many ways innovative as a new trend of movement practice of modern dance emerging from New York. Cloud Gate, however, very publicly and professionally presents itself through its website and press releases as a modern dance company that fuses tradition in the modern day. In effect the stylization of Tai-ji and its subsequent performance by Asia's most prestigious modern dance company on stages around the world has brought the practice of Tai-ji into a new realm, modern dance. One teacher of Tai-ji I interviewed was adamant that the Tai-ji one sees in Cloud Gate's performances is definitely not 'true Tai-ji'¹⁴. There is no pure untouched Asian tradition to the extent of normative publications¹⁵. What I was searching for in my interview quickly disintegrated in front of my eyes as I realized the 'meditation' and Tai-chi Lin presents in his work are no more pure representations of a historic Asia than Chinese folk dance is a representation of folk cultures of China.

¹⁴ Personal Interview, July 16, 2006.

¹⁵ Modern dance web-pages, dance reviews, and Cloud Gate publicity.

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