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Secretary
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tel./fax: (+48) 22 635 99 37
www.askon.waw.pl
askon@askon.waw.pl

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IZABELLA ŁABĘDZKA

“Taiwanese Trilogy” of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan: in Search of Taiwanese Identity¹

Abstract

This article is devoted to Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (Yunmen Wuji), modern dance and its search for Taiwanese identity in a globalized, cosmopolitan society at the end of the 20th century. The author analyses three choreographic works by Lin Huaimin, the founder of Yunmen Wuji: „Legacy” („Xinchuan, 1978), „My Nostalgia, My Songs” („Wo de xiangchou, wo de ge”, 1986) and „Portraits of the Families” („Jiazou hechang”, 1997). The analysis focuses not only on the formal aspects of the dances but on their role in shaping the cultural and socio-political identity of the Taiwanese in the seventies, eighties and nineties as well.

Dance dramas inspired by Taiwanese history and the experiences of the people of Taiwan include, among others, three leading performances from various periods of Cloud Gate activity and choreographic work by Lin Huaimin²: *Legacy* (*Xinchuan*, 1978), *My Nostalgia, My Songs* (*Wo de xiangchou, wo de ge*, 1986) and *Portrait of the Families* (*Jiazou hechang*, 1997). All of them are the result of a reflection on the phenomenon and uniqueness of being Taiwanese. In the form of dance, they pose the question of what it means to be Taiwanese and thus join the long-lasting debate on the special and national Taiwanese characteristics, which were formed as early as in the 1920s and 1930s and continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s and eventually reopening in the second half of the 1970s and in 1990s. This debate is a part of the Nativist Cultural Movement and one of the most important social phenomenon in Taiwanese history of the 20th and 21st century with respect to forming the cultural identity of contemporary Taiwanese people. This debate has cooled down a number of times, only to explode with renewed fervent, and it seems that it will galvanize intellectual circles of the island in the future as well. It will be accompanied by a debate on democratic processes and the formation of a modern, multicultural and open society which along with the progressing globalisation, universalisation of values and uniformisation of life models and styles, will keep posing questions on the individual features of local culture, in a voice which at times sounds louder and at times is more hushed. The question about the significance of being Taiwanese

¹ This article is derived from research conducted as part of a three-year (2009–2012) research project (No. N N105 022 636) funded by Polish Ministry of Science and Academic Education.

² Contemporary Taiwanese dancer and choreographer; founder of the famous Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (Yunmen Wuji, 1973) and its artistic director.

will recur as an attempt to defend oneself against tendencies which enforce uniformity and spiritual sterility and to seek things special and unique; however, it may never give rise to such dramatic vehemence which accompanied the staging of *Legacy*.

Legacy

Legacy was created in 1978.³ Cloud Gate Dance Theatre had been established six years earlier. In the meantime Lin Huaimin had already created several important dances, but it is *Legacy* which should be treated as a corner stone of Cloud Gate. More than thirty years later the dance is still in Cloud Gate's repertoire. It is not only a documentation of the early years of Lin's choreographic activities, a reflection of a very special moment in modern Taiwanese history or a unique dance work born out of humiliation, anger and contrariness, but a starting-point for all scholars conducting research on contemporary Taiwanese dance theatre as well. It seems almost impossible to overestimate the role of this special dance which played such an important role in shaping the cultural and socio-political identity of the Taiwanese at the end of the 20th century. Taiwanese dance critics draw our attention to national sentiments aroused by the dance. SanSan Kwan writes:

Certainly, the epic story of tribulation, struggle, determination and final triumph is a sure mark of nationalistically-driven narrative. The choreography, which has remained essentially the same throughout the politically expedient shifts in *Legacy's* interpretations, argues best for *Legacy's* power. The Graham-like contractions and pleadings, the yearning, outstretched poses, and the desperate, flailing jumps of the earlier sections represent a heroic struggle against all the odds of privation. The rhythmic chanting and stamping, the arm-in-arm linking of dancers, and the simple, repetitive, chore-like movements of the middle section build an image of collectivity and cooperation, of shared labours, shared hopes, and shared history. Finally, the triumphant leaps and grinning faces, the splashes of red, and the valiant poses conclude the dance with an evocation of collective pride and elation.⁴

Legacy is a skilfully told, eight-episode story of southern Chinese peasants evicted from their homes by hunger, diseases, natural calamities, poverty and an exploitation of those who travelled to a rocky island, covered by a sub-tropical forest, beautiful but deceptive. These peasants were people of the earth who emigrated to get better life for themselves and their children and traveled to their new promised land through stormy waves, praying to Goddess Mazu, the patron of fishermen and sea voyagers. It was an ideal story for a great saga which would move Taiwanese hearts for many years to come, irrespective of their background and origin. Chen Ya-ping rightly mentioned that: "For many years, dance drama was endowed by its creator and audiences alike with a socio-political

³ My analysis of this dance is based on a DVD recording of *Legacy/Xinchuan*, Jingo Records 2003, première: December 16, 1978, Jiayi Tiyuguan, choreography: Lin Huaimin, music: Nanguan music, Chen Da's singing, voices of Cloud Gate's dancers, music arrangement: Li Tai-hsiang, Chen Yang, costumes: Lin Huaimin, Lü Fangzhi, lighting: Lin Kehua, props: Xi Song.

⁴ SanSan Kwan, "Vibrating with Taipei: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre and National Kinesthesia", in: *Lin Huaimin. Wudao Guojia Xueshu Yantaohui lunwenji/Lin Hwai-min. International Dance Conference Proceedings. 2005.8.2-3*, Taipei, 2005, p. 109.

significance that went far beyond the scope of ordinary dance pieces”.⁵ The Taiwanese researcher explained in her work the reasons for which *Legacy* occupied a special place in Taiwanese hearts, as an artistic and cultural phenomenon. The political moment during which the dance drama was staged was also of significance; in the year of its first performance, the United States announced a break of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The first night of this dance drama which was the apotheosis of strength, courage, a sense of solidarity and a spirit of mutual support in critical conditions was, therefore, of special significance. Defying all and any, particularly the most powerful global decision-makers, the perfectly arranged dance drama with particularly difficult choreographic sequences which required amazing technique and physical fitness, was a precise, sophisticated and painfully artistic slap in the face of the giant – the United States and all those who humiliated the tiny island, stripping it slowly but surely of all the rights for representing the Chinese state on the international arena and ceding them all on the growing continental power of Communist China. It was neither the first and nor the last example of a nation/community sold by the powerful and the great in order to achieve more or less short-sighted political and economic goals. Chen Ya-ping recalled the words of Lin Huaimin from the times when he was visiting the United States in 1977/1978. He said that there were three times in his life, when he thought about Taiwan with a desperate mood. “The first time was the Tiao-yü-t’ ai Diaoyutai Incident, which was possibly what gave rise to the founding of Cloud Gate... The second time was in New York [in 1978]. The newspapers kept talking about the rapprochement between the U.S. and Beijing, which made me desperate”.⁶ Lin Huaimin’s third moment of desperation came in 1989 after the bloody massacre of June 4th at Tian’anmen Square in Beijing.

However, *Legacy* was not born out of desperation and a tailspin, but out of the spirit of wilfulness and conviction that only the weak can break down in trying times. One can and should treat history as a lesson. The exiles from the continent who left it more than three hundred years ago taught such a lesson to future generations. They did not yield to the hardships of the sea voyage and tedious, heavy work in the new land. Their heritage which was passed down to their children and grandchildren was the conviction that people have as much freedom as they are able to gain by hard work. The dance drama became a moving tale of toil, hardiness, and resistance through all and under any circumstances, even the most adverse. The dance drama portrays those of huge ambition and stubbornness, defying all and everyone. But it was also a tale of love, death, despair the dramatic fear of passing away and the miracle of birth, of toil and sweat, of joy and play and joy of feasting together. Although the Guomindang critics used to value *Legacy* as an example of “healthy realism”, the choreographer reached for means of expression beyond simple realism. Although the gestures and movement of dancers included plenty of imitating elements, Lin Huaimin referred also to non-common movement techniques, to the aesthetics of folk ceremonial dance, to gesture techniques derived from the Beijing opera, to folk music forms, not to mention classical ballet and modern dance. He also used symbolic gestures and stage props. Nevertheless, decorations and stage props were sparse, as Lin Huaimin always

⁵ Chen Ya-ping, “*Legacy* and the Nativist Cultural Movement in 1970s Taiwan,” in: *Lin Huaimin. Wudao Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui lunwenji*, p. 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

avoided literal meanings and preferred to rely on the imagination of the audience and old Chinese principle which said that the less you showed, the more was there to see.

The choreographer and group prepared themselves to perform the dance drama with focus and gravity. The performance of *Legacy* followed a training of Cloud Gate dancers which Lin Huaimin arranged on the banks of the Xindian River in Taipei. He did this on the southern, rocky edge of the island, during stormy weather. In this way they were able to recreate, even if only to a small extent, the way of their forefathers. It allowed them to get ready for their new dancing parts, physically and mentally as well. Lin led a variety of exercises in the course of a few autumn Sunday afternoons, on the rocky side of the Xindian.⁷ One of them was a relaxation exercise, consisting of skilfully loosening the body and positioning it on a riverside boulder in order to distance oneself from the hustle and bustle of the city, become one with the natural, hard bed of stones and fall asleep. The stones turned into a safe bed and shelter.

Another exercise consisted of getting up from the stones. Lin Huaimin intended it to reflect the first, fundamental gesture of the forefathers, who rose from the stony coast and went forward. The exercise made dancers experience the resistance of rough, hard substance and feel the pain when their fragile human bodies are hurt by the stones. The key element of the exercise was the interaction of the performers with irregularly shaped, resistant surfaces: the reaction of the body to the varying size and shape of the stones and to dangerous cracks in the rocks. In the process, the dancers acquired awareness of the weight of the matter/earth. Its resistance forced them to make greater efforts and release energy to face the resistance, leaning how to master their own power.

Other exercises, performed with a partner, included lifting stones, carrying them and throwing them over into water. They taught the dancers about weight, balance and energy, developing a special type of dance dynamics, expression and exaggerated swing in motion.

All these exercises, along with some other ones, were accompanied by vocal training. Carrying and dropping the basalt rocks, the dancers encouraged themselves with rhythmic shouts. They would also sit in a circle on the stones, and murmur in unison, holding hands. Their individual voices would grow into a powerful choir. There was something ceremonial, even religious in this strange wordless chant, noted Liu Cangzhi.⁸

The riverside training sessions included a story telling episode. One day, the participants were asked to tell life stories of their families, which proved quite interesting and variable. According to Lin Huaimin, every dancer should answer the following questions: Who was my mother? Who was my father? What did our forefathers give to us? What will we give to the next generation? Certainly, these were basic questions asked by every person searching for identity, not only in the national and racial sense, but also cultural sense. Such questions were posed with growing frequency at the time of the staging of *Legacy*. However, no uniform answers were given then to the questions of identity; they differed depending on the respondent's background and the depth and length of his/her Taiwanese roots: for some, they dated back thousands of years, for others – two or three hundred years, for others still – three or four recent decades.

⁷ The description of exercises presented herein was based on the report by Liu Cangzhi, "Hebian de Yunmen" (Cloud Gate on the river banks), in: Yao Yiwei et al., *Yunmen wuhua* (Cloud Gate. Talks on Dance), p. 169–187.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

The outdoor training sessions were conceived for a variety of complex reasons, some of which had been mentioned by Chen Ya-ping in her work:

Obviously, the attempt to re-establish relations with the land as well as the down-to-earth approach to the task of constructing body images and a movement vocabulary in the training sessions had very much to do with the beliefs and influence of the nativist movement. At the same time, traces of the certain important concerns in American post-modern dance were also discernible in the outdoor exercises that led to the choreography of *Legacy*, albeit with very different results and for very different purposes. As early as the second half of the 1950s, Anna Halprin began conducting improvisational workshops in outdoor environments in Northern California in search of a freer and more natural or authentic expression of the body. Her open attitude toward dance as well as her analytic investigation of the body in movement were carried over by her students, including Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, to the East Coast and had considerable influence on the post-modern dance movement of the 1960s. During those experimental years, from the late 1950s to the 1970s, outdoor excursions and happenings were conducted by dancers and other artists to explore the possibilities of the human body in various natural environments or physical conditions.⁹

In fact, Anna Halprin was one of the pioneers of dance training sessions which became a standard of post-modern dance. She preferred a more organic, biological approach to the body and dance, based on the strive for the harmony of body and mind. She relied on improvisation and natural movement impulse. She readily left dance rooms, going out with her performances to city streets, sea beaches and forests: “Halprin deliberately avoided modern dance techniques in the classroom so that her students could not borrow movements nor pick up stylistic habits that were not their own; instead they acquired strength and mobility in tumbling lessons and by learning to move confidently along trails in the woods and across such obstacle courses as floors littered with automobile tires”.¹⁰ Her followers also readily used non-theatrical locations, in city spaces and outside. They also consciously blurred the boundary between professionalism and amateur dancing, techniques and the lack of them, between learnt style and commonplace gesture which sometimes surprised and baffled their audience. If anything can be dance, are there any things which are not dance then? This purposeful blurring of boundaries was often involved in the search for new means of movement expression; however it was employed equally often due to the lack of virtuoso dance techniques for dancers who started late their professional education.

Chen Ya-ping respectfully remarked that the outdoor dancing sessions which Lin Huaimin himself had emphasised as important in their inspiration provided by his friend and artist Xi Song (Hsi Sung)¹¹ and were more important than the influence of American style

⁹ Chen Ya-ping, *Dance History and Cultural Politics. A Study of Contemporary Dance in Taiwan, 1930s–1997*, New York University 2003, unpublished PhD dissertation, p. 125.

¹⁰ Nancy Reynolds, Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points. Dance in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 397.

¹¹ For more information on Xi Song’s role see Liu Cangzhi “Hebian de Yunmen”, in: Yao Yiwei et al., *Yunmen wuhua*, p. 177–178.

experiments of the body in natural surroundings. She said: “(...) what Lin strove so hard to attain through those outdoor exercises was to go beyond the codified body languages of both the Graham technique and [the] Peking Opera in order to return to the basics – to feel afresh in the sensation of weight and gravity, to be inspired by such simple physical tasks as moving a rock, and by reconnected to one’s roots – the land, its history and ancestral heritage. The body images Lin sought after were those of farmers, fishermen, and common folk who perform physical labour on Taiwan soil”.¹² On one hand, the organic approach to the body and the desire for the communion through group dance placed Lin Huaimin closer to the main concepts of American post-modern dance. On the other hand his focus was on his dance technique and his careful upkeep of the boundary between amateur and professional dance set him apart from the trends in American modern dance of that time.¹³ An important element of the outdoor training sessions of Cloud Gate dancers was their openness to new experiences and experiments with space and matter, without limiting them to repetition in various configurations of the well-known, tested and approved, traditional dance techniques. The experiment which began at that time – whether inspired by local Taiwanese or foreign, American sources – turned into a standard later, during Lin Huaimin’s search for new concepts of movement. As a result, he took an interest in Far Eastern meditation, movement and breathing techniques of *taijiquan*, *qigong* and yoga.

Legacy started with a “Prologue” – a ceremonial offering to the spirits of ancestors. The dancers paraded majestically with incense sticks in their hands towards an offering vase located in the left bottom corner of the stage, and put burning sticks into the vase. They were clothed in modern, colourful wear, as young Taiwanese people of the present age who looked like millions of young people around the world. A moment later, women removed their blouses revealing deep blue, Chinese smocks and trousers; men took off their shirts and remained with bare torsos, wearing black, loose trousers. In a blink of an eye, the dancers turned into their ancestors from hundreds of years ago, who came to the island from southern regions of the continent. However, Ch’u Ke’s report of 1978 recalled by Chen Ya-ping was slightly different: during the “Prologue”, Lin Huaimin stood in the centre of the stage holding up a torch while young people lit their offering incense sticks from that torch, and soon the stage was crowded with people entering it from various directions. Additionally, newcomers from the audience handed burning incense sticks to the choreographer. The dancers among the crowd would remove their modern clothing, revealing costumes of their ancestors.¹⁴ This rendition of the “Prologue” referred to a Chinese dance name – *Xinchuan*, which – in turn – was an abbreviation of a Chinese idiom (*xin jin huo chuan* which meant that “the wood burns out, but the flame is passed on”), and expressed the continuity of family and national traditions. One may venture to say that Lin Huaimin while creating his *Legacy* he also created the myth of the founding of Taiwan, and re-created the myth of the origins. In his dance performance he showed the beginnings of Taiwan, and in the process of recalling and creating the myth, he renewed today’s community of Taiwan, as Mircea Eliade might say. He provoked this community to re-discover its roots and re-live its beginnings. As a result, the community had a chance to

¹² Chen Ya-ping, *Dance History and Cultural Politics* ..., p. 126–127.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 127–128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

strengthen its sense of unity and power derived from regenerating energy provided by continuous recollection. Such is the process of creating a community of the living and the dead, in which nobody feels out of the way and unimportant, because everyone participates in passing the flame on. People are the wood, but this is “the thinking wood” which burns and passes on the burning heat, joy and life. *Legacy* is the apotheosis of indestructible life, its awesome simplicity and hardship, lightness and weight, frivolity and toil.

Yao Yiwei simply called *Legacy* a ritual drama (*jidianju*), at the same time reminding that the American theatre of the time also made use of rituals, the leading example being *The Living Theatre*.¹⁵ He noticed typical ritual gestures in two fragments of *Legacy* in particular, that is in the “Prologue” and “Epilogue”, especially in the scene of passing the fire and the lighting of incense sticks. According to him, it was a clear reference to an ancient cult of ancestors in China. However, the situation when viewers mingled with actors, entered the stage and participated in a ritual/theatrical action, returning to their seats afterwards, was an example of a modern ritual community – a practice well known by American practical avant-garde of the 20th century. Yao Yiwei considered *Legacy* also an example of a group/collective dance (*qunwu/jitiwu*). According to him, this collective character also included a ritual element.¹⁶ However, the dance had many more other ritual, mythological and religious elements, among others the symbolism of fire, offerings of incense sticks and obviously the collective dance, but also the universal mother figure which was impersonated not only by the Chinese Goddess Mazu but also by a figure of a mother with child, easily associated with the Holy Mother even by non-Christian viewers. However, it was the choreography, which contributed the most to the creation of the unique, ritual atmosphere of the dance: the collective arrangement, the clear domination of group dances over solo ones, repetitions of the sequences, regular rhythm, intended austerity and crudeness of the movement which did not by any means exclude virtuoso technique of the dance, as well as varying musical arrangement, correlated with the character of the dance.

The “Prologue” started with traditional Chinese music but when the dancers removed their modern wear and disclosed their traditional clothing hidden underneath, the music changed to a wordless chant sung by a choir. The slow chant and movement of dancers emphasized the extraordinary moment of the metamorphosis of contemporary people into their ancestors. The next part, “Call of the New Land” (“Tangshan”) differed dramatically with respect to sound background sound. There was no music, only rhythmic drum beat which sounded at the moment of the sequence. The dancers punctuated the rhythm of the dance with loud, unison shouts. Their dramatic dance which purposefully stressed the physical effort was performed in almost absolute silence, which highlighted even more the dramatic choreography.

Dancers stood in the centre of the stage in a circle of bluish light, and suddenly they fell on the floor, rolling from side to side with effort. They stood up, held their hands and fell to the floor again. Shouting rhythmically, they tried to get up and they fell again. These up-and-down movement sequences were repeated many times. Faces of dancers expressed

¹⁵ One of the most influential experimental theatre groups of the 1960s, created in New York in 1951 by Julian Beck (1925–1985) and Judith Malina (1926–).

¹⁶ Yao Yiwei, “*Shipping Xinchuan*” (On *Xinchuan*) in: Yao Yiwei et al., *Yunmen wuhua*, p. 157–159.

great effort. Finally, a woman would emerge from the crowd. She held a red bundle in her hand, as if she was hugging a child. At that moment, tugging began. The dancers stood in a row as if they were tugging something with great effort. The woman with the bundle appeared again. The remaining dancers held one another's arms, tensing their muscles. The woman extended her hand once, and then twice, as if she wanted to grasp something which was out of her reach. The remaining dancers, exhausted, fell on the floor. The woman trodded carefully, as if she wanted to feel the touch of earth under her feet. A group of dancers raised their torsos but they fell down again. Everybody crowded in a circle. The women broke from it, followed by two men crawling on the floor. They caught the woman by her arms and lifted her high in the air, as if she was crucified in the air and fell to the floor. When she rose again, still holding her red bundle, she went to the offering bowl with burning incense sticks, commemorating people who passed away. Some men grabbed her again and lifted her up. She stood unmoving, with her hand raised up, as if she were a monument in space; gradually, was surrounded by two separate circles – one of men and the other of women. The woman fell down and got up. When dancers who accompanied her also fell down, she rose and crossed the centre of the scene, stomping with her feet as if angry or helpless. The crowd got up and followed her; she pointed up with her raised finger and headed towards the offering vase with incense sticks. Perhaps she was pointing to the other side, to the hope of another life which would be better? The dancing style emphasised common actions, which was additionally underlined by the rhythm, measured beats and repetitive movement sequences. The protagonist in this part was undoubtedly the figure of the mother with child, which can be considered to be an archetype of a childbearing mother and a mother of the community.

A moment later Chen Da, a folk singer from southern Taiwan, began to sing a fragment of a ballad about ancestors who crossed the great water many ages ago. The old man's rasping voice separated dance scenes, leaving time for reflection and helping to concentrate. The monotonous ballad emphasised the emotional qualities of the performance, intended by the choreographer to be epic in character. It also encouraged the audience to identify themselves with the characters and events, wake up their emotions and heighten their empathy. Lin Huaimin's choreographic strategies fostered the realisation that dancers were spectators, but at the same time they were also the ancestors from many centuries ago.

Another episode featured "Crossing the Black Water" ("Duhai"). To the tune of peaceful music, a man with naked torso went out, dragging a piece of white cloth which represented a sail. This simple prop was skilfully used to create an impression of a violent storm. The cloth was hiding a crowd of men and women. One of the women beckoned to someone or something. Perhaps she was calling the wind? The crowd fell on their knees and started to bow. The sail became full and the crowd raised their hands. The cloth, covering them, started to move, as if by waves. Then it lifted, showing a neatly arranged group of dancers. However, soon the crowd fell into disorder and people began to put their hands together in the gesture of prayer. Somebody shouted. The dancers fell down on the cloth, as if they drowned among the waves. They squatted in a circle, made the prayer gesture and got covered by the cloth again. They seemed to push something. One person climbed up on their backs, but it fell down. Then the sequence repeated itself. The dancers were shouting. The dance was performed to the quick, violent beat of the drums, but at the end of this sequence a quiet flute melody sounded. A woman with

hands clasped in the prayer gesture made it to the shore on her knees, crossing the wavy cloth. All the dancers reached the vase with burning incense sticks and fell to their knees in the gesture of gratitude. Chen Ya-ping pointed out not only to the skilful use of the cloth, but also to the role of accompanying drums which created a unique sound aura in this part of the performance:

Throughout this stormy scene, the thundering strikes of the drum play and the extremely important role of creating theatrical effects and fomenting the audience’s emotional as well as kinaesthetic empathy with an ensemble of dancers. More than just a musical accompaniment to the dancers’ movement, the use of drums in “Crossing the Black Water” and later in “Taming of the New Land” serves as the driving force of a high voltage communal energy that constitutes not only the backbone of Lin’s choreography in these particular episodes, but the source of *Legacy’s* extraordinary contagious power over its audiences. The pulsating drum beats which accompany the dancers’ powerful thrusts of their torsos in unison stand symbolically for the collective heartbeats that unite the pioneers in their striving towards the same goals – to preserve lives and reach the new land. As the rhythm of the drums accelerates and their force intensifies, the visceral sensation of togetherness through sharing the same heartbeats strengthens and the feeling of a shared destiny becomes undeniable.¹⁷

The Taiwanese researcher pointed also out that this common heartbeat rhythm was symbolically reflecting the blood ties joining the past and present generations in Chinese tradition. “His reference to the passing-on and sharing of the same blood line – echoing the often cited Chinese idiom «*xie mai xiang chuan*» which reinforces the concept of «natural ties», or a sense of ‘fatality’ within the «imagined community» is crucial to the formation of nationalistic sentiment”.¹⁸

“Taming the New Land” (“Tuohuang”) was a part based on the contrast of lightness and heaviness, showing the power of earthly gravity and attempts to overcome it. This was achieved by constant attempts to jerk oneself up as well as, through acrobatic somersaults, jumps and whirling motions. A man was pushing something with great effort, in the company of three women. Another woman was lifting something and pushing it away with all her might. Men were pushing things or hitting things with all their might, standing in groups of two, three or four. The dancer’s centres of gravity were lowered and they performed frog jumps, letting their arms completely free, setting them aside or lifting them up. Their faces expressed effort and determination, with thinly set lips. But this appearance of heaviness of movement, caused by yielding to gravity, was – paradoxically – the source of its amazing lightness. One would transform into the other in a nick of time. This special form of movement was achieved as a result of this unique training session performed by Lin Huaimin with his group on the banks of the Xindian. Chen Ya-ping reminded that Lin developed the concept of the training session and particular choreographic solutions after a visit to a friend living in the suburbs of Taipei. “The sight of miles of barren boulders stretching over the river banks struck Lin as an ideal place for his dancers to experience in both the body and soul of the hardships their ancestors had

¹⁷ Chen Ya-ping, “Legacy and the Nativist Cultural Movement in 1970s Taiwan...”, p. 127.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

had to overcome and the obstacles they literally had to remove in order to build up their homes and livelihood on the island three centuries before".¹⁹

The exercises included – as I have already mentioned – quiet resting on the rock, seeking direct, contemplative contact with the surroundings, crawling on the rocks on all fours in order to feel the roughness of the rocks, lifting and pushing heavy boulders, and collective physical exercises consisting of holding one another's arms and rocking relatively fast, or sitting in a circle and humming, in order to experience a community spirit not only through physical exercises but also through vocal training. All these exercises had a great impact on the way of dancing in *Legacy*. The rhythm of dances in *Legacy*, collective shouts of the dancers, repetitiveness of the movements performed in unison and regular drum beats contributed to the sense of participation in some mysterious and not fully comprehended ceremonial/tribal dance. The intentionally square, sharp movements of dancers performed along straight lines, without curves and arches were building sophisticated and dynamic choreographic sequences subject to symmetry and repetitiveness.

Women's solo dance characteristic for this part of *Legacy* referred to selected gesture and movement conventions known from classical forms of Chinese drama, with typically slowed-down motions and halts, similarly to women warrior characters in the Beijing opera. They released their energy only to hold it up, as if some external force disturbed them or slowed their movement down. They often adopted stances known in literature as unstable balance positions. According to Eugenio Barba, actors and dancers of various cultures have a special non-everyday sense of so-called unstable balance.²⁰ The actor would intentionally upset the original balance striving for permanently unstable equilibrium. In fact, the whole *Legacy* is full of unstable balance positions which include unnaturally deep bends of the body, standing on one leg while slowly sifting the other up to 180 degree angle, standing still in some unnatural position, a bit similar to *liangxiang* of the Beijing opera where the actor halted still for a second to emphasise his position. However, such stillness hid awesome potential of movement, as if an invisible hand stopped the dancers, suspending them in the air. Actually, the unstable equilibrium intensified the bodily presence of the actor on stage. The dancer stood still for a moment, but at this very moment he held absolute power over the space and imagination of the audience.

Whether the dances were solo or group, performed by men or women, one was stricken by their desire for the absolute rule over the space, and for filling this space with a body permeated with kinetic energy. A conquest of new land is always a conquest of space, in this instance including the stage space. It is always performed with the body and through the determination of the incomer or dancer. "Taming the New Land" was the most dynamic part of *Legacy*. Dancing sequences emanated with powerful energy, generated by whirling hand movements, pirouettes in the air, jumps with hands and legs set aside, back-flips and somersaults. The boundary between women's and men's dance became blurred, as both were equally dynamic.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

²⁰ See Eugenio Barba, Nicola Savarese, *Sekretna sztuka aktora. Słownik antropologii teatru* (original title: *The Secret Art of the Performer: A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*), Wrocław: Ośrodek Badań Twórczości Jerzego Grotowskiego i Poszukiwań Teatralno-Kulturowych, 2005, p. 185–186.

After this passionate, dynamic part, the tone of the performance changed again. “Joy in the Wilderness” (“Yedi de zhufu”) was stylised after Chinese folk dance with its courting and wedding-like overtones. The stage was alive with the mood of folk entertainment, delicate frivolity, lightness and smile. Delicate dances of women would be contrasted with a heavy and gross dance of men. Background music consisted of traditional Chinese music and drumming. However, the mood of the next part, “Death and Rebirth” (“Siwang yu xinsheng”) was totally different. The dancers told quite a different story: a tale of the mystery of death, a mourning for the departed ones and the miracle of birth. Dancers brought to the stage the dead body of a man, father to a child which would soon be born and laid it on the floor. A pregnant woman expressed her despair with symbolic gestures and wordless cries. A dancer with a piece of white cloth tied over him passed by the dancing circle of silent mourners, whirled in the air with his cloth and then put it in the hands of the women crying after the departed man. A shaman woman in black, who previously announced the arrival of the dead body, performed a whirling trance dance. Cries and desperate laments echoed over the stage. Female dancers performed a sequence with scarves and stopped in a silent cry of despair. Male dancers took away the body, throwing the cloth across their arms. The pregnant woman tried to stop them, holding to the edge of the cloth, but her efforts were in vain. The white cloth pulsed in the background, adding a group of dancers imitated the pain and effort of giving birth. Chen Ya-ping noticed in this sequence still another reference to the Graham strategy which consisted of introducing a choir as the double or projection of the protagonist.²¹ It was also an indirect reference to the tradition of ancient theatre with the choir acting as a story teller and commentator of events performed on stage. Suddenly, the shaman dragged a piece of red cloth from under the white one, and pulled it across the stage towards the incense burner. The miracle of the birth had occurred. The mother carried the red bundle towards the offering vase with incense sticks. The woman with the infant was another incarnation of the archetypal mother who gives birth and care. The gesture of carrying the child to the incense burner was a symbolic emphasis on the links between generations and a request for a blessing of the ancestors.

The singer introduced another part of *Legacy*, “Planting the Rice Sprouts” (“Gengzhong yu fengshou”). The mood changed again. A rhythmic song of the male and female choir introduced the atmosphere of a simple, merry dance imitating the planting and harvesting of rice. The lightness of the musical background was complemented by the lightness of the dance. Chen Ya-ping considered this sequence of choreography to be an example of Lin Huaimin’s mastery in using nativist language for conveying a nationalistic message. The choreographer referred to the tradition of national/ethnic dances (*minzu wudao*) with stylised farmers’ dances typical for this genre. According to the critic, the audience of the 1970s and 1980s knew this tradition quite well: “Through the use of music, the pacing of movement tempo, the structure of group formations, as well as a unique way of transforming the agrarian gestures into an almost gymnastic style of movements, Lin made the scene into a grand spectacle of mass dance that aimed at exciting the audience’s emotions – the feelings of sharing the same destiny and working towards the same goal – into a physical-psychological climax”.²² A re-arranged popular Taiwanese folk song acquired the aboriginal

²¹ Chen Ya-Ping, *Dance History and Cultural Politics*..., p. 151.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

sound.²³ Its changed tempo and rhythmic character emphasised the gymnastic – as Chen Ya-ping worded it – a character of the dancers' movements. In a subsequent part of that dance sequence, the increased tempo and louder choir singing turned the quiet folk song into a march: "Grouped into a large phalanx, the men and the women move in canon, unison or a combination of both, driven by the accelerating tempo of the singing the formerly toiling gestures become increasingly unified, gaining a touch of militant excitement as the hypnotic rhythm of the repetitive music and movement turns the dance into a mass spectacle, in which the individuals give themselves over to the collective existence".²⁴ During the finale the character of the dance changed again, with ritual and ceremonial characteristics prevailing over the military march.

The performance ended with a dance with red scarves and the lion dance. The dancers were dressed in modern apparel, similarly to the "Prologue". The last scene was permeated with an atmosphere of folk fair, emphasised by loud Chinese music.

The stage decorations and costumes of *Legacy* were dominated by four strongly contrasting colours: deep blue, white, black and red. Deep blue and black costumes of the dancers were similar in cut to traditional Hakka (Kejia) wear. In traditional Chinese culture, black was the colour of water and the North, characterised by a salty taste. According to Eberhard – black symbolises all things dark, deathly and honourable.²⁵ Black was associated with roughness but also with fairness. Indigo, since ancient times, was the colour of poor people. Black and deep blue were associated with poverty and simplicity, but also with determination and unyielding character. Poverty expelled Kejia from their homeland, but the strength of their character and will made them build their new life and happiness on the new, unfriendly land.

White was used in *Legacy* for the colour of the sail used by the exiles to travel by sea; whiteness was also ascribed to stormy waters which claimed human lives. The mourning cloth carried after the deceased man and desperately held by the wife was also white. The symbolism of whiteness in Chinese culture is quite complex. White can be the colour of autumn and old age, but it can also symbolise purity and innocence. It is also associated with mourning, although it is not quite justified, because – according to Eberhard – the mourning clothes were the colour of unbleached cloth (*su*) which was brownish and yellowish.²⁶

The red, contrasted with white, is the colour of blood and therefore the colour of life, summer and the South. It had the same connotations in ancient China, and for that reason people would then put cinnabar or ruddle into the tombs. Red was also the colour of richness and opulence. For this reason, one of the good luck deities was depicted wearing a red robe. Bridal gowns also were red. Also, red has the power of sending the evil away, and for this reason people painted small red dots on the foreheads of little children. During exorcist rituals, red blood, particularly drawn from the comb of a cockerel, had immense exorcising power. In *Legacy*, red was used for a number of times. In "Tangshan", a red

²³ The arrangement was made by Li Tai-hsiang, Taiwanese composer of aboriginal background.

²⁴ Chen Ya-Ping, *Dance History and Cultural Politics...*, p. 154.

²⁵ See "Black" entry in: Wolfram Eberhard, *Symbole chińskie. Słownik. Obrazkowy język Chińczyków* (original title: *Lexicon chinesischer Symbole. Die Bildsprache der Chinesen*), p. 47.

²⁶ See "White" entry in: Wolfram Eberhard, *Symbole chińskie...*, p. 26.

bundle made of the dancer’s apron symbolised a bundled infant. In “Death and Rebirth”, a bright red piece of cloth pulled from under a white screen symbolised birth and the miracle of life’s rebirth. The final scene, stylised into a folk fair, was also dominated by red colour, with red scarves moved in the air with dancers, and red body of a lion which was considered a good omen in the Chinese treasury of symbols.

Legacy was a rich and diverse performance also with respect to its music background. Narrative songs of Chen Da, a folk singer of Pindong, who was 74 years old in the late 1970s, included in the performance, proved to be an excellent idea. He sung his tale on the emigration of the forefathers of modern Taiwanese people to the accompaniment of *yueqin*.²⁷ His untrained, natural voice matched perfectly well the sophisticated dance which was stylised for folk dance and therefore simplified and based on rhythmic repetitions of sequences of movements performed by dancers. Another great concept was the voice accompaniment consisting of diverse but harmonious shouts of dancers. Such sound effects, correlated with the character of the dance, emphasized its communal, almost ritual, ceremonial character. Still another interesting solution with respect to music in *Legacy* consisted of using re-arranged folk music of local Aboriginal people. Wordless song performed by male and female voices was used to set a quick, merry rhythm for the part of the performance symbolising the ploughing of the land.

The reception of *Legacy* was quite diverse. This does not change the fact that this dance drama, in spite of the passage of time, remained one of the most important choreographic works of Lin Huaimin and stayed for good in the repertoire of the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. For many, it was a prominent work of its time. Taiwanese people consider it a cult performance – a manifestation of their identity. For continental Chinese it was, in turn, the reflection of Chinese identity, emphasising the ties of Taiwanese people with the continent and their Chinese roots. Political turmoil in the 1970s made *Legacy* a legendary work. Its first night was held on December 16, 1978, exactly on the day when the United States announced the breaking of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. By nature, it was set in the specific historic context, quite accidentally turning into a manifestation of patriotic and nationalistic emotions. For the small, lonely island located on the edge of the world, betrayed by its grand yet materialistic ally, the USA, this dance drama became a consolation and undoubtedly cheered their spirits. At the time of its performances, Lin Huaimin intentionally added fuel to the fire when giving interviews, kindling the patriotic attitudes. He tried to persuade people that there is no point in despairing, that they should take matters in their own hands and support one another, like their forefathers did, because modern Taiwanese are again aboard a boat thrown about by stormy waves.²⁸ *Legacy* helped to create the myth of Taiwan’s origins. Lin Huaimin used a variety of means for this

²⁷ *Yueqin*, called also a moon guitar is a “Chinese lute, one of a family of flat, round-bodied lutes found in Central and East Asia. It was invented, according to tradition, during the Chin dynasty (AD 265–420). It has two pairs of silk strings, tuned (in relative pitch) to c-g, which run from a fastener on the wooden belly to tuning pegs set in the sides of the pegbox. A metal plate is hung inside the body, vibrating against it when the instrument is played.” [Encyclopaedia Britannica 2002, CD edition].

²⁸ Wen Manying, “Zai feng yu ru hai zhong yan *Xinchuan*” (To play *Legacy* when wind and rain sweep across a gloomy sky), in: Yao Yiwei et al., *Yunmen wuhua*, p. 189–198.

purpose, including diverse dance styles, cultural, religious and political traditions, Graham techniques, Beijing opera conventions, folk dances and songs, national/ethnic dance (*minzu wudao*) tradition, military marching rhythms, the cult of ancestors, and nativist/nationalist strategies. With the passage of time, the youthful patriotism evaporated in the natural way, and Taiwan became one of the most powerful economies in the world, not fitting for the role of betrayed and dejected victim. Lin Huaimin, with his immense artistic achievements, re-examined *Legacy* from a cool distance. In 2006, a reviewer of *Die Zeit* Evelyn Finger quoted his opinion on his early dance drama: “Aesthetically, *Legacy* was an isolated wonder (...). Too expressive. Not introspective enough. Not free enough. «One must develop a softer power, like in martial arts,» and Lin means martial arts, not martial sports, «or like in calligraphy»”.²⁹ But this was said by Lin from a totally different perspective, after completing work on his most masterful, abstract compositions – a “*Cursive trilogy*” referring to the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy.

Today, the patriotic fervour has evaporated and the aesthetics of modern dance have changed dramatically. Modern audience feels a tad irritated by the narrative overload of *Legacy*. However, it would be difficult to deny that this choreographic work is marked with unique dynamics, technical intricacies and amazing dance passion which seems to be contagious for the audience. Thirty years ago, Taiwanese people watched that dance drama moved to tears, mostly for reasons other than artistic emotions. The audience of today follows *Legacy* thoroughly, attentively, full of admiration for the Art. The art, for which no grand or small scale politics, alliances and betrayals are of any consequence in the end, as it has just been proved.

My Nostalgia, My Songs

*My Nostalgia, My Songs (Wo de xiangchou, wo de ge, 1986)*³⁰ was completely different in character from *Legacy* created less than one decade earlier. This dance drama can be also counted into Lin Huaimin’s “Taiwanese trilogy”. However, in contrast to the previous work, this dance drama had no consistent narrative plot. Neither did it strive to re-construct any monumental and reassuring story, or to tell a pathetic «history of a tribe», narrating the fates of founding fathers of modern Taiwan. It also reflected on history, that time on the contemporary period – but on history which was quite different and was seen from a different perspective. It was not a tale dating two or three hundred years back, well known from textbooks or scientific works, but a story which was more personal and private – the history of two or three decades before the creation of the drama. Consequently, the dance aesthetics was also quite different.

Lin Huaimin recalled the Taiwan of his adolescence and youth, the Taiwan of the 1950s and 1960s. Episodes of the dance drama, connected loosely or having no connection at all, were attempts to grasp tiny fragments of the past reality of the island, seen through the prism of individual experiences. They intended to record shards of life which passed away

²⁹ Evelyn Finger, “The Most Beautiful Writing in the World”, *Die Zeit*, April 2006.

³⁰ My analysis of the dance is based on a DVD recording of *Wode xiangchou, wode ge/My Nostalgia, My Songs*, Jingo Records 2003; première: 1986, choreography: Lin Huaimin, music selected: Chang Chao-tung, stage design: Yang Jiwen (based on a woodcut print: Xi Song), costume: Lin Jingru, lighting: Lin Keh-hua.

definitively and remained only in the memory of people who used to be young then. It is a series of volatile images, haunting fragments of songs from the past times, tiny everyday gestures, clothes which went out of fashion. All these elements create an eerie aura of the world which inevitably passed away, but still exerts powerful influence on the imagination of the audience. It was a difficult task to render this aura with dance and with movements and gestures of the body, as it was so volatile and fleeting; another danger was sentimentalism and nostalgia, referred to in the title of the drama.

The impulse for *My Nostalgia, My Songs* was a photograph made by a Taiwanese photographer, showing six men on a beach in winter. Later, another artist made a wood print (*banhua*) out of it. A copy of the print was enlarged, cut into four parts and turned into a decoration for the performance. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the scene, it was strikingly common. The photographer, and later the engraver, depicted an everyday, banal scene: one of the man was squatting, another one was standing. Someone kept a baby in his arms, still another person was bent over a small monkey. The background was just the sky and the sea.

A woman in a simple white dress appeared among fragments of this decoration. The scene slowly filled with dancers: boys and girls in everyday wear used many years ago. They took their positions on the stage. It seemed that the girl in white projected them on stage with her thoughts, or perhaps they stepped down from old photographs to pay us a visit. They walked slowly, absently, insecurely, as if they observed something, as if they dropped in for a second on their way to some other place. This sequence was quite long, taking more than eight minutes. It was accompanied by popular Taiwanese music from that period.

In the second sequence, the stage space was filled with bird songs, rush of the water, sounds of waves beating against the shore. The woman in white walked around as if in sleep or in a mad trance. Although surrounded by others, she seemed absent, looking far beyond herself and her environment. Her insecure movements which slowed down, halted or became tangled down were accompanied by solo dances by other women characters who seemed to remain in a fleeting relationship with her. At the end of the sequence, the dancers were tumbling and darting around the stage as if in a nightmare, imprisoned within their bodies which seemed to be tied to the earth.

The mood of the next episode differed dramatically, as it consisted of a light, humorous and cocky dance of a few young men in black suits, white shirts and black hats, surrounding their haughty and elegant queen – a red haired beauty who reigned over her male flock with her cool, dainty and nonchalant dance movements.

Then the tone changed again. The attention of the audience was drawn to a charismatic figure of a long-haired dancer in a white shirt and black trousers. The man was trashing uneasily on the floor, as if suffering a nightmare. Movements of women dancers in colourful tops and of men who accompanied them were insecure, uneasy, crouching, anxious and violent. Taiwanese critics pointed to the influence of Pina Bausch's dance theatre aesthetics on Lin Huaimin during his work on *My Nostalgia, My Songs*. In mid-1980s Lin had an opportunity to watch performances by her Tanz Theater Wuppertal. Similarly to the German choreographer, Lin Huaimin was presenting a characteristic type of relationship between man and woman, marked with coldness, strangeness, rejection and lack of ties. Some dance scenes almost seemed to be quoted from Bausch's choreography: a convulsively bent body of a woman dancer passionately, even aggressively and greedily desired to hug a

motionless dancer, who after some attempts pushed the woman away with equally mechanical and violent movement of his hand. After a while, the dancer in the white shirt performed a moving solo dance. Albeit surrounded by others, he seemed to be desperately lonely. Dejected, lying on the floor on his side, holding a hand stiffly against his body, he crawled away from the stage, against the background created by a row of dancers.

The appearance of the woman dressed in white who held a sparkler in her hand and a boy who gave her a toy drummer which rhythmically beat his tiny drum, changed again the mood of the performance. It was a prelude to a dance procession of men and women, full of lightness, joy and charming unpretentiousness. But the cheery mood did not last long, dispersed by five woman dancers in long gaudy dresses and impersonating representatives of world's oldest profession. They lifted up edges of their dresses and bent their well trained bodies in the gesture of temptation. Their impressive bodies, toned with many years' dance training, effectively ruined the illusion of reality, creating an unexpected comic effect. The audience simply saw muscled dancers playing roles of prostitutes. The sensuality of their dance evaporated unnoticeably, leaving only the cheap dresses, vulgar movements and an eerie sense of impoverishment and sadness. A girl in a red dress lifted her hem high up, showing large, laced, red underpants. She put her skirt over her head and was unable to take it off. Her angry friend in black brutally pushed her away from the stage. A display of erotic sensuality sadly ended with being clumsily stuck in one's own dress.

The final sequence began with a train whistle. The woman in white, with her hair set loose, fell on the floor of the back part of the stage with a dramatic bend of her body and remained motionless with her eyes wide open. The dancers entered slowly, just as at the beginning. It was snowing. Shiny snowflakes slowly covered the empty stage. Everything was dramatically quiet, as always during snowfall. Was it nostalgic and sentimental? Not really. Rather unsettling, quiet and lonely. Memories of the past are memories of adolescence, when moments of childlike, empty and fleeting joy clash with adult cruelty, cynicism, brutality and coldness.

Portrait of the Families

Portrait of the Families (Jiazu hechang) was the third of the "Taiwanese trilogy" of dance dramas.³¹ It was created in 1997, nineteen years after the first night of *Legacy* and eleven years after *My Nostalgia, My songs*. It was completely different in character and dance style. *Legacy*, showing the hardships faced by founding fathers of Taiwanese community of today was the apotheosis of the spirit of community and cooperation, while *Portrait of the Families* was a settlement of accounts with the bitter history of the last century. The narrative was also different than in *Legacy*, in spite of obvious references and continuations. The performance was opened with a lion dance, performed by a dancer manipulating the lion's head with a piece of red silk attached to it. This dancing reference reminded the audience that they were in the same place on earth as in *Legacy*. However, after just a brief a moment they would realize without any doubts that the story that they

³¹ My analysis of the dance is based on a DVD recording of *Jiazu hechang/Portrait of the Families*, Jingo Records 2003, première: September 20, 1997, Taipei, Guojia Xijuyuan/National Theatre, choreography: Lin Huaimin, music: Arvo Part, traditional Taiwanese music, stage design: Ming Cho Lee, costume: Chen Wan-li, lighting: Lin Keh-hua.

were going to witness would be quite different. It would be a history built of tiny fragments, shards and broken pieces, full of cracks, breaks and empty places which make it painfully exposed. The history of human sorrow, suffering, painful sense of absence and memories of people who one day had disappeared without trace, never to be found again. The only sign which they had left on earth are the voices of their families who tell the histories of their fathers and husbands in subdued voices, without excessive emotions – in an ordinary way which is strangely moving.

Chen Ya-ping reminded them that the performance originated from a photograph exhibition staged in Jiayi by the Xingang Foundation for Culture and Education (Xingang Wenjiao Jijinhui), presenting about a hundred photographs which depicted the life of local community between the end of the 19th century and the end of 20th century.³² Old photographs, dug out from oblivion, considerably moved Lin Huaimin, as a record of the world which was no more and one of the few authentic traces of reality to which the photographed persons once had belonged. From that moment on, the choreographer began to collect old photographs and examine family stories related to persons and situations depicted on the photos. Soon the collection had almost two thousand of photographs. Two hundred of them were used in *Portrait of the Families*.

The performance was a settlement of accounts with the modern history of Taiwan, using multimedia technology. The story was told along three independent lines. One of them used black and white photographs of Taiwanese people, considerably enlarged and displayed on the back wall of the stage. They presented multi-generation families in traditional Chinese clothes worn at the end of the 19th century, young couples with children, brides, schoolchildren, children during physical exercise, people resting on the beach, military people, landscapes, birds, old city buses and many others. The photographs documented the life of Taiwanese people throughout the past century, recording tiny, seemingly meaningless moments of everyday life. They were not arranged in any particular order, but rather displayed as a randomly set mosaic of life which consisted of solemn and trivial events alike; they would easily skip our attention, if not for the decision of the photographer. The technology and chance, or at times a conscious decision saved these ephemeral fragments of other people’s lives for us to savour. This combination of chance and conscious choice presented a picture of life which was utterly common, consisting of daily rituals, either thoroughly arranged (on family, school and military photos) or completely natural and spontaneous (landscapes, birds, city landscapes). An overhead projector was displaying these photos throughout the whole performance. Some were presented for a longer time, others disappeared faster similarly to the images of the world which surrounds us outside the theatre hall. Sometimes they showed things at close-ups, sometimes offered a view from distant perspective. The close-ups of human faces seemed to be of particular interest. However, as the models were posed, their faces were usually devoid of strong emotions. Or perhaps the expressionless faces were the result of conventions typical for the period and culture, which required that one should restrain feelings in the presence of a stranger and intruder, which was the camera. In spite of that, the posed photographs were moving and very human. They recorded people who passed away, clothes, items

³² Chen Ya-ping et al., *Yunmen – Chuanqi* (Cloud Gate. A Legend.), Taipei: Jingke Gufen Youxian Gongsi, p. 125.

which are available only in museums or old curiosity shops, recalling a nostalgic memories of a world which was gone with those people. Watching the photographs, the audience adopted the role of collectors of memories, experiencing the life of other people by watching the material evidence of the world which had floated away. However, it was not possible to approach such world directly any more, and such awareness filled the observers/spectators with melancholy. It was probably intended by authors of the performance who used the simple trick of projecting photographs to make the audience aware of the inevitable passage of time, ephemeral character of all our actions and remember them painfully that our short lives will not allow us to make up for many of our mistakes, foul actions and inactions.

The second story line was punctuated with short personal life stories told by old people, middle aged women and young people in various languages: aboriginal language of Taiwan, Hakka dialect, Mandarin and Taiwanese. They shared fragments of various family tales: a story of a father who disappeared without trace and was shot, as they discovered after many years; a story about a happy return of children, for which their mother was continually offering thanks to Goddess Mazu. The stories were often tinted with sadness, quiet resignation, the sense of impotence against the abstract and merciless history/politics which, nevertheless was created by individual people. Yet such history did not care about individual people and crushed them in the name of absurd ideologies and lowly political goals. The stories implicitly referred to Japanese occupation and to the events of February 28, 1947 and to White Terror. Although these references concerned recent history of Taiwan, they had universal meaning and conveyed a deep humanistic message on the highest value of human life, saying that there were no excuses for taking it, even in the name of the most elevated political reasons.

The third line of narration was developed along dance episodes. However, the choreographic sequences did not have any extensive narrative structure by themselves – at least not in the same sense as in *Legacy*. The dancers offered artistic interpretation of simple everyday activities: face and hair washing, teeth brushing, learning how to swim, performing physical exercises. However, they were not just copying everyday behaviour. The repetitiveness, violence and mechanical character of their movement emanated with unsettling autistic aggression. The audience was unable to perceive them as authentic and natural, but rather as eerily alienated behaviour. This sense of strangeness was amplified by their similar, brownish clothes which were sometimes cut in Western style, and sometimes reminded Chinese smocks. All these people had similar, icy and expressionless faces, indifferent and focused only on the precision and automatism of their movements.

The three story lines presented by old photographs, fragmentary stories and dancing actions were not tied by any obvious chronological links, yet they were related to one another, sometimes by overlapping, and sometimes from a distance. In the end, every spectator had to make up his own, coherent story out of the multimedia mix presented to him on stage. The story was unusual and dark. Nostalgic, almost pastoral images of people who were resting and smiling were juxtaposed with aggressive actions, symbolic acts of violence and attempts to resist it, visions of destruction and conflagration and finally of death, emphasised with making a chalk outline of a body of a dancer fallen on the stage. The seemingly quiet, everyday life hid terror. That terror lurked from behind dreadful, quietly told stories about murdered people who often accidentally fell victim to cruel and thoughtless regimes, but it could be also seen on the sad faces of the photographed

crowd, in mechanically repeated, dehumanised activities, in the absurd military drills of children brushing their teeth and in many similar details.

A special place in this dreary and dismal story was reserved for a womanly figure, and not without a good reason. Lin Huaimin personified Taiwan saying that the island was a woman.³³ Let us add, an extraordinary woman. Taiwan – a weak, maltreated lady, occupied and colonised throughout centuries, wielded a great power. It persevered, in spite of everything and against everyone, it never yielded, it fought for its own, just like a mother who had to fight for her children. The figure and symbolism of a woman was already emphasised in *Legacy*. However, at that time, the woman had archetypal characteristics of a child-bearing mother who ensured the continuity of generations. Sometimes she impersonated the gentle Goddess Mazu, protector of those who needed help and rescue; at other moments she proved to be as strong and determined as men. She used to be unyielding and tenacious, up to the point of losing her femininity. In *Portrait of the Families* the woman’s figure reappeared many times, but her image became more and more varied. She was not invincible, although she retained her tenacity, she also lost her sacred dimension, becoming more human and commonplace. In the third part, called “The Bride” (“Xinniàng”) she turned into the titular bride, wearing red and being tied with a rope. She wanted to free herself and pulled the rope along when moving forward and then tensed her body and the rope to the limits of endurance, and finally fell to the floor. An invisible force dragged her backstage. She fell again, rose and again made the effort to go forward. She showed her tied hands and gagged mouth to the audience. After a few minutes of vain and silent struggle, the invisible power finally dragged her backstage.

In the next part, “The White Dress” (“Baiyi”) the woman was wearing a simple white gown. Her body was torn by convulsions. She fell on the floor, only to rise again. She fell and got up once more. The more her balance was upset, the more determined was her struggle to get back on her feet. This part was accompanied by a story of a woman speaking in Taiwanese: “March 12, 1947. Father was taken away by plain-cloths policemen. Mother lost her will to live. Her spirit went away with Father. We took her to a hospital. Out of religious faith, Mother decided to live on. But she had one condition. All father’s belongings had to be burnt. Nothing was to be left”.³⁴

Finally, in the seventh episode, “Peony” (“Mudan”) a woman ran into a crowd which stood against the background of photographs showing an army. She was followed by a man. After being caught, she was forced into a traditional dress and placed on a chair. A bunch of peonies was put in her hands. She was sitting motionless, slowly tearing the petals away, as if dazed. She slumped down in the chair for a moment, then straightened herself and returned to tearing the peonies, with increasingly aggressive motions. Then, in her madness, she put a flower in her mouth and hung limply on the chair, bending her body in an unnatural way.

However, the woman also turned into a mother who knelt praying to some deity, giving an offering by removing coins from one bundle into another. The sequence was performed

³³ Recalled after Chen Ya-ping et al., *Yunmen – Chuanqi*, p. 132.

³⁴ “Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, *Portrait of the Families, Voices*” (updated version, August 24, 1998), p. 3, a recording of texts spoken during the performance, provided by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre archive in Taipei.

against a story told in Taiwanese by a male voice, recalling how he was drafted in the Japanese army in 1943: “I was sent to Indo-China. My first younger brother was dispatched to Pan-Hu. The next brother, to an Air Force factory in Japan. With three of her four children drafted, Mother went to the temples to ask for blessings. She promised to do 100 kow-tows if we were returned safely. Mother was overjoyed when we made it home alive. So she went to the temple to do her thanksgiving. She was not good with numbers and was worried that she would lose count, thus insulting the goddess. So we prepared 100 coins for her; after each kow-tow she removed one coin from the pile. Mother had made promises at temples in Hsin-Kang and Bei-Gang, 100 at each. So at the end of the war, she did 200 kow-tows”.³⁵

The woman was also able to impersonate a shamanistic character. In the ninth episode, “Long Haired Girl” (“Changfa buhai”) she was a black-haired beauty who performed a violent, unsettling, sensuous dance. A similar shamanistic woman figure reappeared in the twelfth part, “The Black Gown” (“Heiyi”) in which the dancer in black, hidden behind a semi-transparent, black screen, performed an amazing dance of her right hand, lit with white light against the dark stage. The figure of the woman was reduced for the moment to a beautiful hand, naked forearm and arm which performed a sequence of harmonious, elegant movements. Suddenly, the movements changed into violence, and the hand began to shake convulsively. The black screen was lifted, disclosing a shamanistic dancer in black, with her long, jet-black hair. This sequence was the prelude for the most beautiful, unsettling and ominous fragment of the dance drama. Three semi-transparent screens were lowered on the stage, equipped with vertical, flexible wires, bending under the weight of dancers. Three dancers positioned behind those screens seemed as if they wanted to get through those flexible wires. However, the wires, shining with gold in the limelight, kept them on the other side of the screens, as if behind prison bars. The only accompaniment measured were, shallow beats, similar to the tolling of a bell or ticking of a clock which inevitably counted the remaining time. The screens went up and the dancers hung on them, pulling up their legs and hanging heads down, holding to the bottom frames. Finally, they fell down. There woman dancers entered the stage and made chalk outlines of their bodies. The ritual of cruel death was executed in almost complete silence. Only the measured, shallow beats amplified the terror. The previous part – dance of the naked hand – was accompanied by classical music, but now both the music and the narrative went dead.

Death and destruction were present also in other parts of the dance drama, including the dramatic eighth episode, in which a mother’s prayer for her saved son clashed with a dance of men who pulled up their T-shirts covering their heads. Their bodies were bent, hands and legs moved as if tied with a rope. They fell to the floor, looking like shot convicts.

Dreary, fearsome sequences were intertwined with funny and absurd ones. During “Washing Faces I” (“Xilian I”), woman dancers washed their faces with quick, diligent movements of their hands, against the background of photographs of soldiers. This episode clashed with a story told by a man in Mandarin dialect, narrating how he, after many years, found the grave of his father who disappeared when the story teller was a child:

In the forties, my father ran a trading business in Shanghai, Taiwan and Hong Kong.
In 1951, he left for Hong Kong, after spending Lunar New Year with us in Shanghai.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

We got a telegram from him, saying that he [is] leaving for Taiwan. We have never heard from him since. Because of the situation between China and Taiwan, we couldn't do anything about searching for my father. In 1984, I went to study in the States and started the work of looking for my father. In 1985 and «86 I ran ads in major newspapers in Taiwan. There was no clue at all. In 1987, a former colleague of my father»s finally resumed contact with my mother. He said he had been sent to pick up my father at the harbour. He did not find my father. Ten days later, they learned that my father had been arrested. In fact, he was executed three months later.³⁶

Episode ten was a comical scene of a swimming lesson. The next scene showed teeth brushing ritual performed with a military precision. Undisciplined and late participants were punished in a variety of inventive ways: they had to make jumps, bows, stood with their hands raised, or run around the stage.

The grotesque neighboured the absurd, the fun – with terror, the common, everyday life was set aside its monstrous, unnatural form. On one hand, the audience was terrorised by omnipresent death, images of massacred bodies and people shot without blink of an eye, on the other – they laughed and felt slightly embarrassed by the banal character of the present day life. A woman told a moving story about her wartime fate: “In 1944, the Americans start[ed] bombing Taiwan. Everyday, on my way to work, I could see bodies without legs, bodies without arms, or heads without bodies. I also saw burnt bodies being carried to the hospital. I would go to work with tears in my eyes. My colleagues and I were all young girls of 17 or 18. We were scared, so we decided to do something about it. Everyday, before going to work, we would put on make-ups: lipstick, rouge, perfume, everything. We were so young. We did not want to die, but we decided that if we were going to die, we would die beautifully”.³⁷ A contemporary teenager told about her day, showing a completely different image of the world, which can be called scary only in reference to the routine and regular rhythm of everyday activities: “My days are like this: I wake up early, and start studying after breakfast. Then lunch, and a little nap. Then I study some more before dinner. After dinner, I take a bath, then go on studying until midnight. Life is painful”.³⁸ The tragic sense of history, the drama of death which was a common thing for the generation of her parents was replaced with the deadly boredom of everyday life, accidental and momentary relations, dire problems with identity and trifle problems such as the fact that the telephone did not ring.

Towards the end of the performance it seemed for a moment that it would end similarly to *Legacy*, with some kind of folk fair. As if to confirm this some actors in red appeared, carrying some idol in a litter. Traditional Chinese music began to play and a crowd of dancers came out. But suddenly, the atmosphere changed. A dancer impersonating a medium with naked torso, face covered with thick theatrical make-up, in richly ornamented headgear appeared with burning incense sticks in his hand and began his unsettling trance dance on the stage covered with bodies. His dance, full of acrobatic figures and shamanistic dynamics was contrasted with slow movement of dancers walking on the stage as if in a dream. A huge photo of a colourful boat was projected on a stage screen; an equally colourful yacht moved against it, small as a toy. Then an image of conflagration would appear: a burnt ship

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

and black and white photo of a burnt car. The mad, oblivious dance of the medium was broken by two other dances who carried the medium away. The remaining dancers repeated the trance movements. Photographs in the background overlaid one another, so that only fragments were visible. A network of red ropes criss-crossed the stage. The measured beats began to sound again. The photographs disappeared and the audience could only see a tangle of ropes and lighted faces of a few actors seemed to be ghosts or ancestors, looking at the viewers from the other world. The faces were lighted with projectors held by dancers in their hands. After a while, they directed the light away from their faces and towards the audience. The light became a mysterious link between the viewers and those who passed away many years ago, but their unsettling presence was still felt among the living. They were unable to depart for good because their losses had not yet been made up for and no forgiveness was granted. It was necessary to complete the expiation ritual but would one empty gesture be enough? Women brought in basins with water. Actors who used to hold the projectors bent down and washed their faces; everyone could hear water splashing. A dancer started to speak but after a while her voice ceased to be audible. A male dancer followed her example, but he was not heard, either. He was just standing there with the basin in his hands, moving his lips. His voice became audible for a while, but then it went off, lost in the stage space. Then, the actor poured water over his head, as if performing the ritual cleansing. A girl came to the man soaked in water and extended her hand towards him. Colourful houses-lampoons entered the stage from the back. The girl took the boy by his hand, and they looked together into the infinite blue space of clouds, sky and water, visible between arcades in the background. The lampoons slowly moved across the stage. One of them stopped in the centre. The light darkened.

Chen Ya-ping pointed to the numerous sequences including water and bathing, washing one's hair, washing the face and brushing teeth in the dance.³⁹ Naturally, one can interpret them as everyday, common activities, but they can be also seen as purification rituals. They can also be associated with shamanistic and exorcist rituals, popular in the folk culture of South-Eastern China and Taiwan. Explaining the symbolism of a boat, Eberhard recalled the popular custom of letting boats made of paper and thin wood off into the sea and setting them on fire in order to prevent plagues.⁴⁰ According to Chen Ya-ping, the figure of the medium performing the trance dance belonged to the same tradition. The dancer was an exorcist who purified the space and made it sacred. He released evil powers from a place, obtained the approval of ancestors and deities for his people, made his people live in an orderly, harmonious world. The exorcisms were performed on stage to cleanse the historic events occurring on Taiwan during 20th century. The shaman expelled demons of evil, crime and injustice. The spirits of ancestors incarnated in people from old photographs and talked to the audience with voices of their closer relatives who told tragic family stories, hidden in memories for a long time. Ghosts haunted the living demanding atonement. The only thing which we could do for them was to retain them in memory and light lampoon houses for them. This symbolic gesture completed the purification and thanksgiving ritual which started an hour or so before, with the dance of the lion which was an animal of good omen.

³⁹ Chen Ya-ping et al., *Yunmen – Chuanqi*, p. 136.

⁴⁰ See "Boat" entry in: Wolfram Eberhard, *Symbole chińskie...*, p. 143.

In *Portrait of the Families*, noble and trivial things existed side by side and the tragedy neighboured comedy, just as in everyday life. The more fear, scare and ugliness there occurs in real life, the more we dream about peace, order and beauty. The more we feel accidental and disposable, the more we wish for setting roots and learning about our origins. The stormy history of Taiwan – no man’s land, unwanted and appropriated so often – put together in the performance as if it were a collage made of fragments of photographs which recorded human life with all its ephemeral and accidental qualities, was actually the history of every man who was incessantly forced to seek his own place on earth. Perhaps this is the reason why the last story of a woman telling in Mandarin about her father stayed so long in the memory:

When Father was 91, I took him to his home town in China. That was his first homecoming in 59 years. We went to the field to pay respect to his parents’ graves. Suddenly Father said: “Let’s go home.”

“Home? Aren’t we already home?”

“No,” he said. “Our home in Ping-Dong.”

Throughout his life, he had been homesick. I was surprised he took Ping-Dong for his home.

After returning home, Father was calm and happy. Finally, I realized that Taiwan was the place he wished to have his body buried.⁴¹

“Let us go home” – these simple words of an old man are the wisest answer to recurring identity crises which torment the people of Taiwan, who in the last century were aggravated by constant changes of rulers, starting from Chinese emperor, including Japanese occupation forces, and ending with Guomindang’s dictatorship. In fact, the power is of no significance whatsoever. The only thing that matters is the place on earth which one accepts as his own and chooses to be the place of his rest.

⁴¹ “Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, *Portrait of the Families, Voices*”, p. 8.

Notes on Contributors

HAIFA A L A N G A R I, Independent Researcher from Saudi Arabia

AGNIESZKA A Y Ş E N K A I M, Department of South Slavic Philology,
University of Lodz

MAGDALENA C Z E C H O Ń S K A, Section of the Chinese Literature and
Culture, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan

BILAL G Ö K K I R, Faculty of Theology, Istanbul University

BEATA K O W A L C Z Y K, Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw

IZABELLA Ł A B Ę D Z K A, Section of the Chinese Literature and Culture,
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan

MICHAŁ M O C H, Laboratory of Arabic Language and Culture, Kazimierz
Wielki University, Bydgoszcz

DOROTA R U D N I C K A - K A S S E M, Institute of Regional Studies,
Jagiellonian University, Cracow

MARIA ROMAN S Ł A W I Ń S K I, Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental
Cultures of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

TERUJI S U Z U K I, Department of Constitutional Law, Kozminski University,
Warsaw

KARIN T O M A L A, Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures of the
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

BOGDAN Z E M A N E K, Institute of Middle and Far Eastern Studies,
Jagiellonian University, Cracow