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ACTA ASIATICA VARSOVIENSIA

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Professor Roman Sławiński  
(1932–2014)



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## Introduction

Dear Readers!

We are presenting you yet another, already the 28th, issue of *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia* devoted to the countries and culture of Asia. Over the years of its activity the journal started to be issued in English and it has hosted on its pages many eminent experts on Asia, yet still it remained faithful to its formula which was proposed thirty years ago by Professor Roman Sławiński, the founder of the journal and its permanent editor in chief. This formula stipulated that the Asian cultures should present themselves in the journal and talk directly with their own voice. The idea was both: to include in the group of authors and editors of the magazine scientists who grew up in Asian cultures, as well as to publish materials based on or referring to the texts – philosophical, linguistic, historical, sociological, religious studies or political studies – which were created by the Asian culture. These could be proper names as an object of linguistic research, religious texts, political documents, ideological declarations, but also biographical materials, historiographical elaborations, experience of meeting other cultures and mutual acculturation phenomenon resulting from the relations.

Professor Roman Sławiński left us in November 2014. The more time passes from his death, the more I feel his absence and the more I realize how unique a character he was in the world of research on China. Professor Marianne Bastid-Bruguière, a prominent French scholar from Institut de France in Paris, who met Roman Sławiński in the times of his studies in Beijing, writes about that fact. Most striking is the variety of interests and multidimensionality of research on China which he ran. He was trained as a linguist, and he knew perfectly well not only the classical language, but also many dialects. There was even a time it was appreciated by Mao Zedong himself. Roman Sławiński was interpreting a conversation of the Chinese leader with the Polish state authorities. During the conversation Mao Zedong changed as usual from the classical language to the dialect of Hunan province, which was his place of origin. When he realized he was using the dialect, he noticed that it was not a slightest problem for the interpreter to understand his statements. Then he asked: „Who is that young man who understands the Hunan dialect?” It was known that many Chinese from the surroundings of the Chairman did not understand him when he spoke in the native dialect. It so happened, that Roman Sławiński knew the dialect.

He was interested not only in the language. History, politics, culture as well as China's economy were the subject of his interest and research. His views, opinions and insights on these matters were the inspiration for many researchers of China, some of which are the authors of the materials contained in this issue. Of the many research interests of Professor Sławiński in recent years at least two may be mentioned. First one became Confucianism, especially its latest colours and shades. Professor persistently sought and discovered them in the texts of Chinese scientists, government documents, archives and everyday citizens of China. In this regard he was a dedicated explorer and a keen observer. Even the slightest detail was important to him. Minor personnel changes on the bureaucratic ladder were important for the formation

of general conclusions. From my conversations with him, I got the impression that he was rather skeptical about the possibility of a revival of Confucianism under the supervision of the communist authorities. So he concluded after examining many texts of the so-called new wave of Confucianism in China. His works on the latest Chinese historiography constitute an invaluable contribution to global research on contemporary China. His second passion was the research on the minorities of China Southern. The field research among the peoples of Miao and Tujia that he ran and in which I had the opportunity to participate assumed getting to know the nature of change in the cultural identity of these minorities in the era of globalization and accelerated socio-economic transformation in China. These studies had not been completed, and we can only hope that one of the students of Professor will continue them in the near future.

The arrangement of contents offered to you in the 28th issue of *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia* refers to the research passions of Professor Sławiński. The first article, written by Stanisław Tokarski – Indologist and long-time associate of Professor Sławiński, concerns dialogue between the East and the West and the possibility of mutual understanding and agreement. Understanding another culture is also the ability to read the symbols contained in the letters and that aspect of the intercultural dialogue interested Professor Sławiński in particular. The question of so-called Asian values – presented in the articles written by Adam Jelonek, Adam Raszewski, Artur Kościański and Larisa Zabrowskaia – was very close to Professor Sławiński and he dealt with it for many years as part of his research on the so-called new Confucianism. The issue of Chinese migration in the world was also in the interests of Professor – mainly in the context of global economic and social phenomena. This part of the research on China is presented in the article on the Chinese migration to France by Nicolas Levi. The issue of Chinese language was obviously important for Professor Sławiński as a linguist and he always welcomed in the columns of *Acta* the authors writing about language and linguistic issues. This area of research is presented in the current issue in the article on Chinese names written by Irena Kałużyńska. On the other hand, the artistic part of the culture is referred to in the articles by Izabella Łabędzka, Lidia Kasarełło, Ewa Chmielowska, Fu-sheng Shih and Diana Wolańska. The first three of these articles relate to Taiwan, where Professor conducted research for many years which resulted among others in a monograph *History of Taiwan*. The further three articles penned by Waldemar Dziak, Iwona Grabowska-Lipińska and Anna Mrozek-Dumanowska refer to the political sphere. Political sphere is inextricably linked with the ideology which was also the case of China. Confucianism and the new Confucianism emerged and developed in the shadow of the emperors, presidents and chairmen of the Chinese Communist Party. Researching them without the analysis of the political scene was not possible. The part of articles is closed by two texts unrelated with China, but with the Middle East. Their authors – Dorota Rudnicka-Kassem and Marcin Styszyński present materials based on the Middle Eastern sources and thus relate to the traditions of *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*. The issue is closed by the report from field research in southern China by Professor Sławiński and me. For me it was a unique opportunity to get to know at least a little piece of China – a unique one, because my guide was Professor Sławiński – such a great scholar and such a seasoned expert on Asia.

I would like to thank the authors – students, colleagues and friends – for participation in the preparation of the issue, and the Directorate of the Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures of the Polish Academy of Sciences for the possibility to dedicate the anniversary issue of *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia* to Professor Sławiński.

Jerzy Zdanowski

IZABELLA ŁABĘDZKA

## Taiwanese Contemporary Dance: From the Chinese Body to Intercultural Corporality<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper is devoted to three “Chinese” dances from the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (Yunmen Wuji) choreographed by Lin Huaimin: *The Tale of the White Serpent* (*Baishe zhuan*, 1975), *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng*, 1983) and *Nine Songs* (*Jiuge*, 1993). The author analyses the dances and their cultural context. The paper traces how the Taiwanese choreographer reaches not only for Chinese topics taken from traditional poetry, prose and religion / mythology but also uses the movement and gestic conventions typical of the Beijing opera. The focal point of the analysis is to show how Lin Huaimin merges them with the Western modern / contemporary dance and classical ballet techniques, Asian dancing traditions, and Japanese *butō*, thus creating a new form of inter-cultural body aesthetics and a dance theatre which crosses the borders of the arts.

**Key words:** dance, theatre, Taiwan, body, corporality

### *The Tale of the White Serpent*

Almost forty years' long, the choreographic career of Lin Huaimin<sup>2</sup> abounded with dances inspired by traditional Chinese culture, literature, theatre and dance. His drive towards the “sinicization of contemporary dance”<sup>3</sup> was particularly noticeable in the first stage of Cloud Gate's development, in the years 1973–1976. The choreographies created in that period included *Wulong Yuan* (1973), *Han Shi* (1974) and *Na Zha* (1974). Lin Huaimin reached not only for Chinese topics but above all he used the movement and gestic conventions of the Beijing opera, creating *Revenge of a Lonely Ghost* (*Qiyuan bao*, orig. *Tiandao renxin*, 1974), *The Tale of the White Serpent* (*Baishe zhuan*, orig. *Xu Xian*, 1975) and *Little*

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

<sup>2</sup> A contemporary Taiwanese dancer and choreographer, founder of the famous Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (Yunmen Wuji, 1973) and its artistic director.

<sup>3</sup> A phrase used by Chan Hung Chi, quoted by Chao Yu-ling, ‘Embodying Identity: The Socio-cultural Significance of the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre Repertoire (1973–1997) in Taiwanese Society’, in *Lin Huaimin – Wudao Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui lunwenji. Lin Hwai-min. International Dance Conference Proceedings. 2005.8.2–3, Taipei 2005*, p. 7.

*Drummer* (Xiao gushou, 1976). The choreographer was inspired by ancient customs, local tales, as well as poetic and prose works. 1983 saw the performance of one of the classic Cloud Gate choreographies, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng), based on a well known Qing (1644–1911) novel by Cao Xueqin, and ten years later the company created *Nine Songs* (Jiuge) referring to the ancient poetic work from the anthology *Songs of Chu* (Chuci). Elements of Chinese culture were ever-present in Lin Huaimin's choreographies, not only as topical references and dance movement aesthetics, but also in costumes, stage sets and music. They hardly ever appeared in pure form and usually were combined with elements of local Taiwanese culture, other Asian traditions and primarily with aspects of Western culture. The resulting forms were intentionally mixed, multi-cultural, and resisting easy classification.

*The Tale of the White Serpent* became one of the classics in Cloud Gate's repertoire.<sup>4</sup> This time the inspiration came from the local folk literature. The Snake/serpent is one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac. This venomous animal was the embodiment of many negative features in Chinese tradition. It was seen as clever and treacherous at the same time, gifted with an ambivalent nature. It could harm people but also bring them good luck. In Chinese fairy tales, serpents often brought valuable jewels to people (e.g. pearls) but also – being river deities – they could demand sacrifices in the form of young girls. Even today, Taiwanese people consider snake meat and liver as having medicinal properties, while snake skin is supposed to bring wealth. According to tales, demons with the bodies of serpents and human heads lived in Mainland China, in Guangxi province, and it was ominous to respond to their call.<sup>5</sup>

It might be worth noting that Nüwa, one of the most important characters of Chinese mythology, the cultural hero and mother of mankind, was depicted in early Chinese writings as a snake with a human head. On sepulchre paintings of the Han era she was often shown with her brother Fuxi, painted as a man with a snake's body. "Both had human heads and serpent bodies, with their tails often weaving together."<sup>6</sup> It cannot be excluded that the cult of the serpent developed in ancient China under the influence of Indian culture, in which *nagas* (Sanskrit: snake, most often a cobra) were considered to be mystical, semi-divine beings with human faces, serpent tails and characteristic, cobra-like hoods.<sup>7</sup>

The vivid presence of serpent motives in Chinese folk culture was reflected in *The Tale of the White Serpent* – a tale which had been known for many centuries and enjoyed particular popularity in the Ming era. The plot focuses on the metamorphosis of a serpent into a beautiful woman who married a man for love and made him rich. When she was expecting a baby, a Buddhist monk persuaded her husband that she was evil. After delivering the baby,

<sup>4</sup> My analysis of the dance is based on the DVD recording *The Tale of the White Serpent/Baishe zhuan*, Taipei: Jingo Records, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> See entry 'Wąż', in W. Eberhard, *Symbole chińskie. Słownik. Obrazkowy język Chińczyków* (original title: *Lexicon chineseischer Symbole. Die Bildsprache der Chinesen*), Kraków: Universitas, 1996. pp. 277–278.

<sup>6</sup> See entry 'Nüwa', in Li Huiyang, Deming An, J. Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> See entry 'Naga', in S. Schuhmacher, G. Woerner (eds), *Encyklopedia mądrości Wschodu* (original title: *Lexicon der östlichen Weisheitslehren*), Warszawa: Warszawski Dom Wydawniczy, 1997, p. 225.

the woman was expelled to a pagoda on the famous Western Lake (Xihu) in Hangzhou. Her grown-up son who became a renowned scholar visited her mother showing her due respect.<sup>8</sup>

Before Lin Huaimin created his dance version of *The Tale of the White Serpent* in 1975, he made two choreographies adapting two Beijing operas: *Wulong Yuan* (1973) and *Revenge of the Lonely Ghost*, (1974). Both of these choreographies, inspired by traditional Chinese music drama, were considered to be the most valuable part of early period of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. At the beginning of the 1970s, before creating these performances, Lin embarked on an intensive study of the Beijing Opera. He not only watched such operas, but he also studied the secrets of that theatre under the guidance of Yu Ta-kang (Yu Dagang), a Taiwanese historian of Chinese theatre. As a result, Lin created an original dance style merging elements of Martha Graham's technique with gestic and movement conventions of the Beijing opera. In her dissertation, Chen Ya-ping provided a clear explanation concerning the merger of these two choreographic conventions and named reasons for which the dramatic, expressive and psychologically complex aesthetics of Graham's dance was so well rooted in Taiwan during the initial stage of the development of modern dance there. She also quoted a fragment of Lin Huaimin's interview granted to the *New York Times* in 1971 in which he had described his strategy of composition: "Abstract dance is against the Chinese nature. The Chinese like to know what's going on – we are very meaning-oriented."<sup>9</sup> Chen Ya-ping pointed not only to the preferences of the audience of that time, for whom Lin created his works, aware that his spectators were brought up in the tradition of Taiwanese opera, puppet theatre and TV soap operas and appreciated good plots and dramatic expression. She also specified certain reasons of a more practical nature. She rightly noted that Lin Huaimin began his dance and choreographic career very late, as a man of more than twenty years of age:

"(... ) Lin did not have the technical prowess to compose sophisticated choreography in pure spatial and somatic terms. Yet, as a former fiction writer, he had an excellent command of narrative structure as well as a superb mastery of literary techniques such as symbolism and metaphor and the construction of imagery. To facilitate the transfer of his story-telling skill from words to movement, Lin first turned to the Peking Opera for inspiration. The theatre's highly stylized body language and symbolic stage presentation proved to be convenient for an adaptation into the dramatic dance idiom. However, its codified character types and conventionalized expressive modes, formulated centuries before, were not only distant from the modern viewers' experience but insufficient in conveying the emotional range Lin desired. At this critical juncture, the appearance of Graham's work on Taiwan's stage provided Lin with the crucial link between symbolic language and psychological depth, between tradition and innovation, in other words between Chinese theatre and modern dance. Influenced by Asian traditional theatre forms, especially in the economic yet highly suggestive stage settings designed by Noguchi and the dramatic expressions of tragic characters such as Medea, Graham's dance theatre would prove to be a congruous match with the histrionic conventions of Peking Opera".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Eberhard, *Symbole chińskie...*, p. 278.

<sup>9</sup> Chen Ya-ping, *Dance History and Cultural Politics: A Study of Contemporary Dance in Taiwan, 1930s–1997* (unpublished PhD dissertation), New York University 2003, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Chen suggested that the serpent-like movements of Medea's body in *Cave of the Heart* directly inspired Lin Huaimin and his project of telling the story of passionate love, using for the purpose a well-known Chinese folk tale adapted for choreography. According to her, dances of female characters were constructed by Lin based on the key principle of Graham's techniques – contraction and release, and located the dancer's energy centre in the pelvis and torso, as Graham advocated.<sup>11</sup>

The ancient tale was used by Lin Huaimin as a pretext for telling, in the language of dance, his own story about passionate feelings which are defeated by a clash with different values and different dimensions of human existence. The Taiwanese choreographer, a master of the dramatic short story, based his compact narrative on the conflict of two models of life: sensual and spiritual. He juxtaposed life in which people are mastered by others and in which they are their own masters. The tale was told by simple, yet sophisticated means. The choreographer preferred precisely structured, appealing images which deeply impressed his audience. The stage was almost empty, with hardly any stage set. This minimalism was naturally bringing to mind the sparse stage settings in the Beijing opera which left plenty of freedom for the imagination of the audience, using just a few stage props, single pieces of furniture or decorative items which were used to build most complex imaginary realms.

A striking feature of Lin's dance was the contrast between intensive colours: dancers were clad in blue, white, green, red and yellow. Simple stage sets consisted of a few tree boughs, curved like snakes and cleared of bark, a semi-transparent bamboo mat and a naked framework of a Chinese umbrella – all in the natural colour of bamboo. Chen Ya-ping suggested that it might have been inspired by one of Graham's dances: "The rattan sculpture, made by the famous sculptor Yang Ying-feng, reminds one of the brass wire 'tree' in Graham's *Cave of the Heart*. Yang's creation, though distinctly Chinese in its formal design and use of material, was very possibly inspired by Noguchi's modernist piece for Graham. While the metallic coldness and spiky shape of Medea's 'tree' signifies the heroine's supra-human nature as the embodiment of hate and evil, the snaky contour of the rattan sculpture in *The Tale of the White Serpent* not only suggests the identity of Lin's heroines, White Snake and Green Snake, but resonates with their serpentine body movement in the choreography."<sup>12</sup> The semi-transparency of the set gave the impression of ethereal lightness, which the dance itself was often and intentionally missing. Many sequences of the dance were rather full of sensual heaviness and violence.

The main characters of Lin Huaimin's version of the tale were a young man, a monk, and two serpent ladies – green and white. Both of them appeared before the man. The white one symbolized grace, elegance and noble behaviour. The dance of the green one was full of mischief, playfulness and joy. Critics often underlined the contrasting features of both characters. According to them, the Green Serpent had more animal features and personified the primeval liveliness of an animal. This part was performed mostly in a horizontal position. The White Serpent had more human features and her seducing technique was more subtle. She used for the purpose an elegant stage prop – a white fan. She was most frequently dancing in a vertical position.<sup>13</sup> However, both proved to be able rivals in their struggle for the man.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 97–99.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> Yu Dagang, 'Cong dongwu zai Zhongguo de diwei tan Yunmen Wuji de xin wuju 'Xu Xian'' (Animals in China. About 'Xu Xian' – a New Dance of Yunmen Wuji), in Yao Yiwei et al., *Yunmen wuhua* (On Yunmen's dances), Taibei: Yuanliu Chubanshe, 1981, p. 12.

Creating perfectly co-ordinated White and Green Serpent dances, the choreographer used many hand gestures and steps characteristic of the Beijing opera and classical Chinese dance. The white fan in the hand of the white dancer was used to emphasize lightness and elegance of hand and arm gestures, in a similar fashion to the Beijing opera, and the gestures themselves were sophisticated and precise, reminiscent of the codified gesticulation of traditional Chinese theatre forms. A simple stage prop – the fan – was given by the choreographer variable symbolic meanings, depending on the phase and character of the dance. According to Chen Ya-ping, “(...) the fan stands for authority when White Snake snaps it open sharply at Green Snake to stop the latter’s flirtation with Hsu behind her back. Then, it becomes an object of charm and seduction when she flutters it like a butterfly to lure the indecisive hero away from the side of Green Snake and later when she twirls it enchantingly with a finger, followed by Hsu and his wheeling umbrella, across the stage, creating one of the most beautifully designed moments of the choreography. Finally, White Snake folds the fan and tucks it into Hsu’s robe belt as a token of love before the two consummate their marriage symbolically in a duet behind a bamboo shade lowering down from the ceiling”.<sup>14</sup>

The gesticulation was correlated with background music which consisted of traditional-like or traditional music accompanying classical music dramas. The music provided dance rhythm and emphasized dance positions. In addition to the gestures, many steps and mannerisms of circling the stage, the positioning of the bodies and adopted poses were based on the Beijing opera. Chen Ya-ping provided a detailed list of all the borrowings.<sup>15</sup> Among others, they included the convention according to which a character first appearing on the stage was supposed to introduce him-or herself to the audience. In this case, Lin Huaimin replaced words with brief dance self-presentations. The dancer acting as Xu Xian walked in a circle, which, similarly to the Beijing opera, symbolized a long journey. Some Beijing opera gestures and steps reflected the features of character of the protagonists, such as their femininity, indecision or hesitation. The fight scenes between the monk Fahai and the snake ladies were also stylized after the fashion of traditional Chinese music drama. Chen Ya-ping noted also the relationship between the music accompaniment and traditional instruments with Lin Huaimin’s choreographic style in the dance: “Echoing the musical texture of Lai’s [Te-he] composition, Lin’s method of choreography can be best described as a ‘writing’ of dance sentences that often end with a dramatic moment of a frozen gesture known in Peking Opera as ‘liangxiang,’ a theatrical convention similar in effect to ‘mie’ in Kabuki. This distinct rhythmic structure gives the dance narrative a sense of dramatic tension that is unambiguously indebted to the theatrical aesthetics of Peking Opera”.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of these obvious borrowings, *The Tale of the White Serpent* complied with the aesthetics of modern dance. Gestures and movements typical of the Beijing opera were particularly useful whenever it was necessary to express seductive finesse through the dancing body. Chinese beliefs associated snakes with sensuality. The increasing passion and amorous rivalry between the White and Green Serpent was expressed by more and more violent, accelerated, almost trance-like movements, both in solo and in duo dances. The dance changed its character in different sequences of the performance. Elements of traditional Chinese dance were replaced with choreography typical of modern dance. The

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<sup>14</sup> Chen Ya-ping, *Dance History and Cultural Politics...*, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93–100.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

character of the music also changed: in the first part of the performance it chiefly marked the rhythm and underlined the gestures/movement of the dancers. Afterwards, classical music was combined with modern tunes, played on traditional instruments and based on traditional scales. This gap between tradition and modernity was the entrance point for the Buddhist monk. This character, with his dryness and stiffness which resulted from intentional restrictions on his motion dynamics, reminded the audience of the gap between all the things sensual, bodily and passionate and things of the mind and spirit. His static figure performed from time to time clumsy, sweeping motions, with which the monk fought with nimble, whirling, swift as lightning snake women. Finally, the static figure “defeated” the dynamic ones. The White and Green Snake were sent away, one after the other and they hid behind the tattered bamboo mat. And the young man? He was left alone, unsure of his future, although a moment ago, when he tore the bamboo shade, it seemed that he had left the world of the White Snake for good, leaving the bodily and sensory world behind. However, afterwards when he was hiding behind the Monk who seemed to defend him against excessive involvement in the world of colours and shapes, he gradually lost his confidence. He slouched and extended his hand helplessly as if unsure of what to do now.

### *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Another of Lin Huaimin’s dances, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng*, 1983), was based on a well-known Qing novel of the same title, authored by Cao Xueqin (ca. 1715–1763/4). That dance, which had already become legendary, was a realm of intensive colours. The stage set was ascetic, as usual.<sup>17</sup> It was made of horizontal screens of varying width, positioned at the back of the stage, displaying a variety of colours in the course of the dance tale of the history of a rich family, through its days of glory and into its decline. Initially the screens were bright grey, after which they acquired the hue of mature red wine and in the end, turned grey and black. Huang Yin-ying noted that Lin used in his work the empty space principle, developed and perfected by traditional Chinese painting:

“Rather than attempt to represent the magnificent architecture, pavilion and garden of the book in a realistic fashion, his stage is almost empty, leaving much to the imagination. It is through the moving image of the performers as they dance that the audience can picture the setting for each scene. The only actual sets are six semi-transparent pieces of cloth, each of a different colour, positioned horizontally at the back of the stage. These pieces of cloth are elevated or lowered at different moments during the piece, suggesting the rise and fall of the family. Perhaps just as important, is Lin’s borrowing of the “less is more” philosophy from Chinese art which also results in giving the dancers more room to move”.<sup>18</sup>

The curtain went up, revealing a figure of a monk in a bright red gauze robe. The floor was brightened with a blue-red circle made of silk. Among these intensive blue and red colours, Nüwa, the mother of mankind, delivered a young man Baoyu. The short prologue

<sup>17</sup> My analysis of the dance is based on the DVD recording provided by the Yunmen Wuji Archive in Taipei in 2011. The première: October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1983 (revised version: 1994), Taipei Shejiaoguan, choreography: Lin Huaimin, music: Lai Te-he (Lai Dehe), stage set: Ming Cho Lee (Li Mingjue), lighting: Lin Keh-hua (Lin Kehua), costumes: Li Jingru.

<sup>18</sup> Huang Yin-ying, ‘Lin Hwai-min’s Dance Works Inspired by Literature’: *Nine Songs* (1992) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1983), in *Lin Huaimin – Wudao Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui lunwenji*, p. 49.

included both elements of Chinese and Western culture: the figure of the Buddhist monk, the positions of dancers alluding to Pietà, and local folk characters. The medley of various dance conventions was the basic feature of the whole performance.

Huang Yin-ying noted Lin Huaimin's masterful skill of distilling the essence of the long and complex, multi-thread narrative written by Cao Xueqin and the arranging of selected episodes in chronological order according to seasons of the year: spring-summer-autumn-winter. This order reflected the growth and decline of a traditional Chinese family of Jia Baoyu, described in Cao Xueqin's work. Huang Yin-ying posed an interesting thesis that the seasonal succession was inspired by horizontal scrolls of Chinese paintings. The story developed from a spring full of vital energy, through a hot and sensuous summer, into an autumn which heralded decline and withering, and inevitably towards a winter which is the season of chill, death and decay.<sup>19</sup>

"Spring" was a reverie of light and colours, personified by willowy dancers in multi-coloured capes decorated with floral and flower motives (plum and peony) with symbolic meaning. Whirling their capes, they looked like blossoming flowers or fluttering butterflies. They moved around the stage with tiny steps, as if swimming or whirling in space. The dynamics of their movements, the flow, momentary slow-downs and sudden accelerations increased the impression of a fairy-like, elusive, female world. Their dance, performed along the axis of a circle seemed to be an allusion to the aesthetics of traditional Chinese group dance. Duos of Baoyu and his love Daiyu, included many elements from classical ballet. The combination of these two significantly different styles created a chilly elegance of the episode, along with lightness and subtlety which characterized not only the season but also the awakening of feelings.

"Summer" had a distinctly different character. Summer was the season of awakened sensuality, a theme which dominated the duos performance of this episode. Conventions of classical ballet were replaced here by modern dance techniques, with dominating horizontal sequences. The partners danced in close proximity, the distance between them disappeared, dance sequences almost imperceptibly evolved towards horizontal arrangements and curved, bent lines. Extreme body bends emphasized the sensuality of the dance. Summer was the domain of a sensuous, slowed-down body, which was lazily revealed in the physical presence of the partner. The atmosphere of sensuality was enhanced by the red wine hue of the lighting at the back.

"Autumn" brought about inevitable reverie and sadness. The episode began with fog and smoke. Dancers moved across the scene as if dispersed by some chaotic event. The duo of Daiyu and Baoyu once again acquired a ballet-like chill and elegance. It entered a world of different feelings and different means of expressing them. The monk, sitting motionlessly in a prayer position and a strange, unsettling group of three characters who majestically crossed the scene under a bamboo umbrella<sup>20</sup> with a dry tree bough, inescapably heralded the arrival of winter, the time of death. The colour hue, costumes and stylization referred to the convention of Japanese *ukyo-e* woodcuttings (images of the floating world).<sup>21</sup> This

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> The umbrella is a Buddhist symbol. In China it symbolizes the purity and dignity of an official; during the wedding ceremonies it is used by a bridegroom on his ritualistic way to his bride; umbrellas are believed to shield people from demons. See Eberhard, *Symbole chińskie...*, pp. 190–191.

<sup>21</sup> *Ukyo-e* is one of the main genres of Japanese art during the Tokugawa era (1603–1867). The images of the floating world, true to their name, depicted life in entertainment districts, figures of

part of the choreography was permeated by a skilfully built up atmosphere of horror. Daiyu, wearing a figure-hugging beige costume was throwing petals on the floor, with mechanical movements, as if she were absent. Crouching behind her, was an ominous figure in a loose black skirt/cap, with a face painted in white and with long black hair – Death. Death wrapped the girl in her cape and, with the assistance of another character clad in black, lifted her high, with her hands spread. The girl seemed to be naked and helpless, as if crucified. The contrast of natural, body-colour beige and blackness was immensely powerful. It was additionally amplified by the red robe of the monk who remained on stage.

The dance had many more painting-like images built of contrasting colours, set to remain in the memory, a phenomenon further accentuated by the minimised and slowed down motions. Among them was the image of a woman walking with dignity under a Chinese umbrella carried by her servant. The umbrella, being a particularly expressive stage prop, had already been used in *The Tale of the White Serpent*. A powerful counterpoint was also the figure of the monk in his red robe who seemed to be a character from another world, immersed in the tale of human passions and the illusionary nature of the world. The meditating or praying monk seemed to be an indifferent observer of the events rather than a participant. Huang Yin-ying thought that the character was derived from traditional Chinese painting, and served as a kind of authorial comment. The choreographer expanded the part of Zhen Baoyu, which was a secondary figure in the original novel. The critic said: “While ‘*Jia*’ means ‘unreal’ in Chinese, ‘*chen*’ [*zhen*] means ‘real’. Chen is thus the protagonist’s alter-ego, and Chen Pao-yu becomes more of an observer of the various scenes of Jia Pao-yu’s life and there is even a moment when they meet. I believe that, as he appears in the dance, Chen can be interpreted as the choreographer himself. The role of Chen is effectively Lin’s ‘signature’ in his dance piece.”<sup>22</sup> In the final scenes, Baoyu appeared against a white-and-bluish, waving cloth which was spread out into the horizon, as if it were a patch of snow. Standing in the centre of the immeasurable whiteness, silence and emptiness, wearing his red robe, he stood immobile in a bowing position. “With the entire stage covered with white cloth symbolizing snow and emptiness, Pao-yu bids farewell to his Parents and decides to become a monk. The ‘scroll’ has fully unfolded”<sup>23</sup> – wrote Huang Yin-ying.

### *Nine Songs*

*Nine Songs*, (*Jiuge*, 1993) was another example of a hybrid dance form which merged elements of Western modern dance and Asian dance traditions, both old and new. Lin Huaimin drew his inspiration from Javanese court dances, the gestic and movement conventions of the Beijing Opera, Japanese *butō* and also Martha Graham’s dance techniques and contact improvisation. The bodies of the Cloud Gate dancers could present in this performance all their mastery, versatility and extraordinary fitness. The episodic structure of the choreography facilitated the introduction of diverse dance techniques. The music was equally diversified, merging harmoniously the instrumental and vocal pieces by Taiwanese aborigines, the prayer chants of Buddhist monks, the characteristic sounds of a traditional Javanese orchestra and the muffled sounds of an Indian flute.

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courtesans, and city life scenes. They were usually woodblock prints which skilfully merged realistic and decorative elements.

<sup>22</sup> Huang Yin-ying, ‘Lin Hwai-min’s Dance Works Inspired by Literature...’, p. 49

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The work, with its diversified form, was inspired by Lin Huaimin's travels across Asia between 1988–1991 and also by his metaphorical journey through dance history and traditions in Asia and the West. One should also remember about the broader, metaphysical dimension of any journey, and particularly shamanistic journeys, leading to faraway, strange realms, which always symbolize a quest for knowledge, transgressing the borders and limitations of one's body, mind and imagination.

*Nine Songs* consisted of eight separate episodes which unambiguously referred to an ancient collection of poetic texts under the same title, which formed a part of the *Songs of Chu* (*Chuci*) anthology, traditionally associated with an outstanding pre-Han poet, Qu Yuan. The dance was inspired by the rich traditions of shamanistic and exorcist cultures of Southern and South-Eastern China, but it was also a very special dialogue of the choreographer and his dancers with modernity. *Nine Songs* was an artistic tribute to those that fell in Tian'anmen Square on June 4, 1989 and also to the victims of the 'February 28 Incident' (1947) and the uncountable victims of persecution, harassment and repression in the long history of continental China and Taiwan, which was strongly emphasized by the final episode of the performance.

The *Jiuge* poetic anthology is an invaluable source of knowledge about Chinese shamanism, ceremonies, dances and performances in the basin of Changjiang. It consists of eleven pieces: nine shamanistic songs, a hymn to the fallen and a short poem ending the shamanistic ceremony. In ancient times, the digit nine was probably a general name referring to ritual songs. Research on the local dialect proved that the number nine from the title (*jiu*) actually meant the ghost (*gui*), the deity (*shen*) and divine ancestor (*zushen*). In light of this interpretation, the name *Jiuge* would mean *Songs about Ghosts / Gods / Ancestors*. Their numerous ranks included gods of the sun, mountains and waters. The most numerous were water deities, with many references to travelling by sea and descriptions of a palace located on the Eastern Sea. Such a cult was considered typical of farming cultures in which the vegetation of the basic crop, rice, depended on the supply of water. The mythology of people living in Southern China, between its eastern coast and western regions, was rich in myths and characters related to water. Lin Huaimin introduced into his performance yet another water-related symbol: the lotus flower. However, this concept was not inspired by shamanism but by Buddhism. Lin Yatin wrote: "Dancers are dressed in white robes, as if participating in a ritual, part of the orchestra pit is transformed into a lotus pond, and the proscenium stage is framed with enlarged lotus drawings by the Taiwanese painter Lin Yushan. The lotus, which represents the life cycle of birth and rebirth in Buddhism, was in fact inspired by Lin's visit to Bali".<sup>24</sup>

The symbolism of the lotus in Chinese tradition, particularly the Buddhist one, was extremely rich. The lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) – a type of water lily from the *Nelumbonaceae* family – was a symbol of purity, as a plant born in mud yet remaining pure. Its round leaf symbolized a lack of attachment, as it was floating on the water and yet remained dry. Just as the lotus leaf, the adept in spiritual development should live in the world yet remain unmoved by the world. In Buddhist iconography, the lotus was also the symbol of beauty and holiness,

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<sup>24</sup> Lin Yatin C., 'Dancing in the Age of Globalisation – the Cloud gate Dance Theatre and the Political Economy of Touring', in Chen Ya-ping, Chao Chi-fang (eds), *Dance Studies and Taiwan: The Prospect of a New Generation*, Taibei: Guoli Zhong Zheng Wenhua Zhongxin/National Chang Kai-Shek Cultural Center, 2001, p. 205.

the true nature of man unblemished by the mud of this world and realized by enlightenment.<sup>25</sup> Water was the universal symbol of transformation and purification; due to its life-giving and fertilizing powers, it represented the female aspect in many cultures.<sup>26</sup> It was similar in China, where water symbolized *yin* which was the female primeval power. When united with *yang* which symbolized masculinity and fire, it created “ten thousand things”.<sup>27</sup>

The songs making up *Jiuge* came from various regions of Southern China and their literary form was perfected in the process of creating the anthology. They were diametrically different from the poetic works from the North shaped by court ceremonies and etiquette. Also, *Jiuge* differed from the northern traditional works by its richness of imagination and characteristic symbolism inspired by plant and animal life. *Jiuge* absorbed many features of local shamanistic culture with its deities, rituals and props.

Shamanism was one of the oldest and most fascinating forms of religions developed by the people of China. In ancient times, under the Shang (XVI–XI century B.C.) and Zhou (XI–III century B.C.) dynasties, magic ceremonies were performed by shamans, or medicine men. Their main tasks were to intercede between the world of gods and people, maintain the link with ghosts of the deceased, the calling of the rain, explaining dreams, healing, and predicting the future. To do so, they performed a variety of ceremonies which were often accompanied by dances, songs and music. Even in the most ancient times, there existed a clear division of functions. Female shamans (*wu*) were primarily performing rituals related to the cult of fertility. In matriarchal communities, they were responsible for calling the rain. During the Shang dynasty, these women impersonated the ‘demon of drought’ who had a female form. Under the Zhou, the ceremony of exposing female shamans to the sun became an official ritual. The ecstatic dance of female shamans in the burning sun or in a circle of fire was supposed to stop drought.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to female shamans, their male equivalents (*xi*) were mostly involved in exorcising evil spirits. However, these divisions disappeared with the passage of time. Male shamans took over the functions of female ones and dominated them in later centuries. The role of shamans in ancient China stemmed from their ability to mediate in contacts between Heaven and Earth, between divine and human spheres and their skill in maintaining the delicate equilibrium of the Cosmos. People thought that in the times of chaos the division into the two spheres disappeared and ghosts mixed with people who lost respect for them. As a result, mankind suffered various disasters. Shamans were also venerated as depositories of divine wisdom indispensable to wielding political power. Ancient kings actually possessed shamanistic features.<sup>29</sup> Shamans could exorcise because they themselves were thought to be possessed by ghosts (*shen*) who had divine

<sup>25</sup> See entry ‘Lotos’, in S. Schuhmacher, G. Woerner (eds), *Encyklopedia mądrości Wschodu...*, pp. 198–199.

<sup>26</sup> See entry ‘Woda’, in W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1990, pp. 475–479.

<sup>27</sup> See entry ‘Woda’, in Eberhard, *Symbolie chińskie...*, pp. 287–288.

<sup>28</sup> See J. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 132–139 and L. Wasiliew, *Kulty, religie i tradycje Chin*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974, pp. 74–78.

<sup>29</sup> See the chapter ‘Shamanism and Politics’, in K.C. Chang, *Art, Myth and Ritual. The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*, London: Cambridge, Mass., 1953, pp. 44–53 and M. Eliade, *Szamanizm i archaiczne techniki ekstazy* (original title: *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994, p. 442–444.

abilities to oppose, exorcise or destroy demons (*gui*). This ability was expressed, amongst others, by ecstatic dance. People also believed that shamans were able to accumulate huge quantities of *yang* which was associated with the sun, brightness, energy and masculinity.<sup>30</sup> That feature enabled them to penetrate the world of darkness and notice demons. Young men were thought to have particularly vast quantities of the male element, and therefore very young teenage boys were appointed as shamans or they accompanied adult men during the ceremonies. They performed ecstatic dances in full sunshine during drought-combating rituals or participated in exorcist ceremonies which were regularly arranged in palaces of dukes. Shamans-exorcists were also considered to be skilful doctors. This was understandable, because shamanistic tribes always believed that diseases were the effect of possession by demons. An exorcist used spells and fakir's feats to defeat demons and heal patients, which was equivalent to freeing them from demonic power.

The physical and spiritual abilities, as well as the skills and abilities of Chinese shamans, particularly female ones, must have been awesome, as one of the descriptions of their work, coming from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D, showed them as women of striking beauty, wonderfully dressed, singing and dancing beautifully, possessing the ability to turn invisible and skilled in fakir-like tricks such as driving swords through their tongues without bleeding, swallowing knives and spluttering with fire.<sup>31</sup> One can find traces of such theatrical, dance and circus-like abilities in ancient *Jiuge*. According to research, these songs were sung and performed as a masked 'dumb-show' during rituals celebrated in the palaces of rulers, while their original folk performances were a significant element of local religious ceremonies. The songs of the discussed cycle were formed as an invocation of male or female shamans to deities and often had a clear erotic undertone. Shamans met gods as lovers did. They created idealized images of the being whom they were expecting, wore seductive clothes and behaved as lovers would. The structure of the text reveals elements of proto-theatre: dance, songs, music, basic acting and costumes.

In his *Nine Songs* Lin Huaimin mixed the elements of ancient shamanistic culture with contemporary ideas and figures.<sup>32</sup> Some of characters of Lin Huaimin's choreography seemed to be incongruous with the performance as if they were alien to the plot and other characters. The 'Traveller', wearing a dark suit and holding a suitcase, crossed the stage slowly in silence. The young man on roller skates was going around in circles, waving a flag with symbolic paintings of clouds; a boy and girl were cycling. These unsettling characters coming from our contemporary world, penetrated Lin Huaimin's choreographies, yet often stayed incompatible with the ritualized reality of the stage world. Huang Yin-ying described the 'Traveller' in the following way: "The traveller is Lin's invention; there is no such role in Chu Yuan's [Qu Yuan's] work, the literary text. I believe that the 'traveller' can be seen as representing the choreographer himself, Lin, a modern Taiwanese person who travels back to the world of ancient dance rituals described by Chu Yuan in *Nine Songs*. In my opinion,

<sup>30</sup> See J.J.M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, Vol. VI, p. 1195.

<sup>31</sup> A. Waley, *The Nine Songs. A Study of Shamanism in Ancient China*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1956, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> My analysis of the dance is based on the DVD recording *Jiuge/Nine Songs*, Taipei 2003, Jingo Records. The première: August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1993, Taipei Guojia Juchang/National Theatre in Taipei, choreography: Lin Huaimin, music: Taiwanese and Asian folk music, music arrangement: Qu Xiaosong, stage set: Ming Cho Lee (Li Mingjue), lighting: Lin Keh-hua (Lin Kehua), costumes: Lin Huaimin, Lo Ruey-chi (Luo Ruiqi), masks: Lin Shufen, Wang Junyao, projections: Zhang Huiwen.

the insertion of this traveller in dance echoes the idea of inserting the painter's voice in a traditional Chinese painting, the technique of 'inserting of the self'.<sup>33</sup> However, none of these characters could be considered only as a link between two orders: the past and the present. The past and present world, although similar to each other and filled with similar suffering, dreams and desires, existed independently, or perhaps parallel one to another. The Traveller did not participate in events occurring in spaces through which he passed, but he seemed to be rather an observer who looked coldly and indifferently at the persons and events. This mysterious and silent character was a reminder of the situation of all of us – people who appeared here for a brief moment, witnessing rather than fully participating. The characters of the 'Traveller', 'Cyclist' and 'Roller Skater' were a reference to typical, meta-theatrical techniques and constituted an attempt to change the perspective of the audience who was reminded of the illusive character of art and life, of the play of appearances and masks, of the manipulation of others and being subject to manipulation, but also of the painful reality of sacrifice and suffering. The simple technique which disturbed the stage illusion made the spectator stop, consider and reflect: one could pass through the world in haste, looking at it from a distance, or turn into a person full of empathy, a sensitive participant in the reality in which he or she happened to live.

At the beginning of the performance, the Traveller in a modern-style suit crossed the dark stage, holding a suitcase in his hand. Before he reached backstage, a dancer in a white, long, loose robe tied at his waist appeared. He was followed by another dozen similarly dressed dancers. They sat cross-legged in a circle, leaving its centre empty. Soon a woman Shaman appeared, dressed in a bright red, long dress with one arm naked. Her long hair was adorned with small flowers. She washed her hands in the lotus pool on the proscenium and entered the circle of dancers dressed in white. She began a trance-like dance, bending her body more and more violently. The onlookers encouraged her with a rhythmic beat of long twigs stomping the floor and increasingly loud, wild cries. Finally, the Shaman fell on the floor, exhausted with her dance. The curtain at the back of the stage opened and the Ruler of the East (Dongjun, the Sun God) appeared in the bright opening. He was carried in standing position by two dancers supported on bamboo sticks. The Ruler of the East appeared on the Earth by jumping down from the arms of the other dancers. Clad only in a loincloth, wearing a stylized mask with solar motives he began a dignified dance over the Shaman, still lying on the floor in her red dress.

Dancers in white, bearing their long twigs, gathered centrally on stage and squatted, waving their twigs. The Shaman and Ruler of the East began their duo dance, first at the side and then centrally. Its violent moments intertwined with peaceful ones, and the whole sequence was permeated with eroticism and passion. This encounter of lovers kept them strangely apart, distant and away from each other. During their ever-changing dance, the white dancers moved along the stage, as if creating a background. Their dance was generally static, but sometimes it accelerated. During the culmination, when the dance of Shaman and Ruler of the East turned into a struggle of lovers, the onlooking dancers began to cheer them with violent shouts and a fast stomping of their twigs on the floor. After the culmination, the sun god danced alone with twigs in his hands which symbolized sunshine rays, surrounded by white-clad dancers. Suddenly, the Shaman appeared. The young man in an unbuttoned cloak cycled between the performers. The movements of the white dancers

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<sup>33</sup> Huang Yin-ying, 'Lin Hwai-min's Dance Works Inspired by Literature...', pp. 47–48.

turned more violent and slightly off-rhythm. Their behaviour was contrasted with the static, dignified movement of the Shaman who headed towards the proscenium. With a group of dancers whirling behind, she slowly poured over herself the water from the lotus pond and then gathered the twigs ('rays') left on the floor. The group turned their backs against her and stood motionless. She slowly crossed the stage, still holding the twigs. The Traveller appeared from the side, cycling across the stage space with his suitcase.

Lin Yatin noted that the choreography of these two sequences was strongly influenced not only by Martha Graham's technique but also by local religious traditions. She wrote about the Shaman's dance: "She displays her deeply inscribed Graham contraction technique, while also echoing a Taiwanese shaman gone into a trance".<sup>34</sup> Discussing the duo of the Shaman and the Ruler of the East, particularly the bent body of the Shaman and the straight, angular motions of Dongjun, she saw a clear reference to the duo of Jason and Medea from Graham's *Cave of the Heart*, staged in 1946.<sup>35</sup> Both episodes were based on strong visual contrasts, also with respect to the costumes and stage set. The background of the stage was dark and neutral, adding expressiveness to the juxtaposition of white and red costumes. The kinetic sphere also followed the principle of contrast. The rhythm of the dance of soloists and accompanying groups was slow or accelerated; the static movements of groups clashed with dynamic soloists. Contrary to the opinion of the author of the book on *Nine Songs*, the dancers in white costumes did not seem to be mere observers of the ceremony who did not participate in it.<sup>36</sup> Their role was more ambiguous. At times, they seemed to be just observers creating a neutral background, but they also turned into active participants. Therefore, their role ranged between cold indifference and active involvement. Their white costumes may naturally lead to associations with the robes and traditions of Chinese men of letters and science. Although it would be tempting to juxtapose Confucian rationalism, intellectualism and transparency to shamanistic entanglement, imagination and sensuality, such a thesis – choreographic layer of the dance considered – seems difficult to defend.

In another episode of the performance, "The Lord of Fate" ('Siming'), the dancers clad in white went through a sudden metamorphosis. Some of them were running and removed their costumes. Their faces turned stone-like, expressionless, uniform, fierce, intense and empty. Their eyes seemed unable to see and understand. Their dance turned into a series of acts of violence, aggression, blackmail and manipulation. Men manipulated women, women manipulated one another, men manipulated other men, the strong manipulated the weak. The manipulators pushed, lifted and threw the manipulated. The manipulated imitated mannequins or puppets adopting poses enforced on them by the manipulators. No sphere of human existence was left free from the overwhelming power of manipulation, which embraced even love and sexual encounters. It seemed to be a self-propelling, never-stopping mechanism. In this section, the choreographer used strategies typical of contact improvisation. Lin Yatin wrote: "Lin depicts male dancers' harsh manipulation of female dancers. Lin achieves such effects by adding context to a formerly 'meaning-neutral' contact improvisation exercise known as 'Moulding Your Partner' – where one person passively accepts the instructions given by the partner's push or tug. Originally used to explore how

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<sup>34</sup> Lin Yatin C., 'Dancing in the Age of Globalisation...', p. 205–206.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> Jiang Xun, *Wudong Jiuge* (Dancing *Nine Songs*), Taipei: Yuanliu Chuban Shiye Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 2007, p. 126.

a different point of initiation can shape bodies, as well as to enhance understanding between dance partners, his exercise was cleverly transformed to depict inequality between male and female, colonizer and colonized".<sup>37</sup> The episode might also remind the audience of Pina Bausch's dance aesthetics.

Then, two Lords of Fate appeared on the stage: one was black and the other red, one was small and the other big, as folk tradition had it. Siming was the god of death, although in this case the literal translation "the Lord of Fate" seemed more adequate. Siming belonged to the most important gods of religious Daoism, but its roots went back to Chinese shamanism. He was venerated by Chinese shamans eight centuries before the birth of Christ. Being the Lord of Fate, he had the power to determine the life expectation of every human. He made records in a book of merits and vices of people which was a register of human lives used to decide whether life should be prolonged or cut short.<sup>38</sup> 'Small Siming' (Xiao Siming) made decisions on the death of young people, while 'Big Siming' (Da Siming) was the lord of death for old people. Both 'Lords of Fate' tied black and red girdles around their waists and wearing symbolic masks, performed a dance duo. Their movements were sweeping, broad, violent and angular. These characters came from folk tradition, and for that reason their movements brought to mind crude, clumsy motions of dancers performing during religious parades and ceremonies. Meanwhile, the other performers ended their dance of manipulation and violence. The cruel game came to its end. They began to roll on the floor to the right and left with their legs up in the air, unable to stand up. The bodies tangled helplessly, not knowing which direction to take. This fragment brought to mind paintings of the Last Judgement. Man was suddenly reduced to the size of a tiny figurine from a Breughel or Bosch painting, thrown into the endless universe, forced to hasten by others or by unidentifiable, mysterious forces. Two huge figures of scaffoldings/dolls clumsily entered the stage, carried by two dancers positioned in the centre of their empty frameworks made of sticks. The figures moved around, swaying to the right and left, with hands hanging powerlessly down. They were met by the Traveller with his suitcase, shaded by an umbrella. However, he did not pass them by, but looked carefully at them and at the tangled bodies on the floor. Perhaps he saw the end of his journey or observed from a distance his own life, this amazing and repetitive parade of acts of manipulation, violence, powerlessness and despair.

"The Lord of the Fate" episode was governed by repetitions. Just as in human life, all events on stage repeated themselves: gestures, movements and sounds. The lethal oppressiveness of repetitions was amplified by the monotonous incantations of Buddhist monks and depressive, and the low tone of their voices. The Traveller, with his ridiculously big suitcase and slightly absurd, open umbrella, who passed with uncertain steps the tangle of bodies appearing before his eyes, actually proved to be the only truly human persona among the sad crowd of puppets, mannequins and 'body-things' which were left behind, being of no use to anybody.

The appearance of 'Lady of the Xiang River' (Xiang Furen) was announced by the entrance of five women in floating dresses who carried flowers in their hands. They approached the lotus pond at the proscenium and washed their hands. Two servants carried in the Lady on horizontal bamboo sticks. The woman, supported by willow tree sticks was covered with

<sup>37</sup> Lin Yatin C., 'Dancing in the Age of Globalisation...', p. 206.

<sup>38</sup> See entry 'Siming', in Schuhmacher, Woerner (eds), *Encyklopedia mądrości Wschodu*, pp. 306–307.

a veil several meters long. A court lady helped her down and removed the veil, but soon it proved that the face of Xiang Furen was doubly hidden; the veil was covering a mask. It was strikingly simple: the chalk-white face had only tiny, black openings for the eyes, nose and mouth. The mask was expressionless. This dead and flat surface contrasted with the dignified, light and noble movements of the dancer who performed this role; conversely, the lifeless mask paradoxically complemented the elegant gestures, amplifying the impression of distance and the gap between this ethereal character and the real world. A static dance began on the side of the lotus pond, against a background of a full moon hidden behind clouds. It was modelled on Javanese court dances performed to gamelan music.<sup>39</sup> It created a harmony of subtle hand gestures and body bending, with swaying movements similar to floating on a watery surface. The dancer's body escaped the law of gravity, belonging to the element of water with its incessant waving and swaying, rising and falling, approaching and regressing. The Lady of the Xiang River was truly a river goddess.

“Water as the natural element has properties which can be experienced directly with the senses: it can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. Referring to the ancient meaning of the world *aisthesis* which was the sensual experience, one can conclude that water and earth are the most aesthetic of the elements.”<sup>40</sup> Watching a video recording of the performance, one could hear the murmurs of the water. Dancers washed their hands in the lotus pond. Small droplets went down their arms and torsos. One could almost smell the fresh aroma of water. According to experts on the water element: “The world of water is not built of fragments, separate items to which we are used to while living on land, but it is made of forces, energies and joint relations with all the other parts of the cosmos. In the water world, all things are inherently related and continuous. Even time and space are felt as more closely related and interdependent. In the water world, movement is slower, due to the higher density of the element.”<sup>41</sup> The dance of the river goddess reflected the “watery” continuity, slowness and rhythmic wave motion. However, even that dance was not free from contrasts: the upper part of the dancer's body along with her hands were moving according to the rules of Javanese dance, but here movements from the waist down followed the principles of modern dance. Her static dance, full of peaceful energy was juxtaposed with the dynamic dance episode performed by a few male and female dancers. This sequence was also a striking merger of various dance styles: Javanese dance and

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<sup>39</sup> Gamelan – ‘the indigenous orchestra type of the islands of Java and Bali, in Indonesia, consisting largely of several varieties of gongs and various sets of tuned metal instruments that are struck with mallets. The gongs are either suspended vertically or, as with the case of the ‘knobbed-centre’, kettle-shaped gongs of the *bonang* are placed flat. Percussive melodic instruments include the *bonang*, the xylophone (*gambang kayu*), and various metallophones (instruments with a series of tuned metal plates, either suspended over a resonance trough or on resonance tubes). A sustained melody is played either by the bamboo flute (*suling*) or by a bowed stringed instrument (*rebab*) or is sung – he last especially when, as often occurs, the gamelan is used to accompany theatrical performances, or *wayang*. The voice is then part of the orchestral texture. Dominating these two groups of instruments is the drum (*kendang*), which unites them and acts as a leader.’ [*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2002, CD-ROM.]

<sup>40</sup> See Z. Kalnická, ‘Woda’, in K. Wilkoszewska (ed.), *Estetyka czterech żywiołów. Ziemia, woda, ogień, powietrze* (Aesthetics of Four Elements. Earth, Water, Fire, Air), Kraków: Universitas, 2002, p. 78.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

modern style fused together with lifts and poses from classical ballet. The Shaman in red, known from the earlier parts of “Welcome to the Gods” (“Yingshen”) and the “Lord of the East” (“Dongjun”), introduced yet another dance element. It was the element of earth. The Shaman removed the mask from Xiang Furen’s face and put it on. She imitated the dance of the goddess, but her movements were more sensual, intentionally stripped of the ethereal, floating charm. Her lowered centre of gravity moved her dance closer to the earth and subjected it to the earthly principles. One could notice in the dance of the Shaman some elements of Martha Graham’s style. The sequence ended with a background dance of female and male dancers holding the veil of the goddess. The Shaman disappeared leaving the goddess alone. The scene was witnessed by the equally lone Traveller who crossed the stage again with his inseparable suitcase.

“Xiang Furen” was a subtle and sophisticated story about loneliness and a futile wait for someone and something. For love? For a lover? It was a tale about focusing on one’s own reflection in the water and on looking inside oneself. The dancer performing the part of the goddess performed her final dance with the veil, wrapped herself into it, lay on the floor and separated herself from the outer world. The veil fulfilled a symbolic role in the dance. “As it was explained by Eses, the veil means the symbolic retaining of things, in contrast to releasing them to any person who asks for them; it adds strength during times of loneliness, refers to one’s potential and protects the internal ‘I’ of a woman against unwanted intruders”.<sup>42</sup> However, the veil was also the symbol of the river/water ruled by Xiang Furen. That peaceful, strangely distanced woman was looking melancholically at her reflection mirrored in the peaceful water surface, as if she was asking: “Who am I?” Her frail, elusive and meek character was of a watery nature. The dance of three court ladies heralded the departure of the goddess. Servants with bamboo sticks which served as a litter reappeared on stage. Xiang Furen, covered with her veil, departed quietly, with dignity, carried away by her servants. She flowed away unnoticeably like water, into invisible, distant realms.

Joyce Liu placed the two women – the Shaman and Lady of the Xiang River – against a broader context of artistic transformation which occurred at the beginning of the 1990s in Lin Huaimin’s work. *Nine Songs* – said she, recalling words of the choreographer – was created as a result of reconsidering the curious events of the second half of the 1980s, both of a global nature (the downfall of the USSR, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the abolition of Marshall Law on Taiwan) and of a local and personal character (the death of a prominent Cloud Gate member, and suspending the work of the group for financial reasons). The performance was created after Lin Huaimin had to stop and consider the point of life, death and rebirth. The Lady of the Xiang River and the Shaman became symbolic characters in the aforementioned context. They represented two opposing traditions and two feminine models. “The Lady of Xiang River”, said Joyce Liu, “wearing a piece of long white cloth, represents the traditional Confucian virtues of modesty, obeying order and place in the ideological hierarchy, while the priestess, with her shamanistic wild and forceful body movements, represents power from the southern part of China, power from the margin, and the power of the regeneration.”<sup>43</sup> The Shaman was also the symbol of

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> Joyce Chi-hui Liu, ‘Religious Icons in Culture and the Goddess in the Contemporary Taiwan Dance Theatre’, [www.srccs.nctu.edu.tw/JoyceLiu/mworks/mw-taiwantheatre/dancetheater.htm](http://www.srccs.nctu.edu.tw/JoyceLiu/mworks/mw-taiwantheatre/dancetheater.htm) (accessed 10 February 2010).

mature femininity, with its expansive power which was pushed to the margin, reminiscent of shamanistic culture which had been ignored and despised for centuries by the dominating Confucian ideology. Liu continued her discussion on the new model of spirited femininity which was prioritized in Lin Huaimin's choreography:

She dances happily because she takes the fortune of the people as her own. When the priestess sits besides the lotus pond, holding the dead body on her lap and cleansing it with lotus pond water, Lin specifies that this scene should echo the pose of the mother in the Pietà, full of pity and great love. Therefore, we can see clearly that the duty of regenerating the culture, according to Lin the choreographer, is carried by the mother-like priestess.[...] To be more precise, this 'mother' created by Lin Huaimin in *Nine Hymns* is not a mother who suffers and endures all burdens, but a 'mother-goddess-priestess-witch' of different faces who is skilled in seduction, ecstasy, procreation, destruction and rebirth. An artist who attempts to create and bring forth new cultures, in terms of Lin's definition of new culture, should act like a goddess and re-enact the process of creation, destruction and recreation. When Lin deals with Oriental religious icons on his stage, we notice that he tends to either use it as an icon to signal the aeons and remoteness of the ancient Chinese culture to his Taiwanese audience, or to rely on the vocabulary of the folk religion, especially that of the goddess, so as to subvert the canonistic Confucian tradition. This borrowing of the folk religion and of the goddess images shows an underlying intention to resist the male-dominated, mainland [Chinese] culture. To my mind, the goddess in Lin Huaimin's dance texts discloses the artist's design to endow Taiwanese culture with the power of regeneration. I would call it 'the culture of the goddess' in contemporary Taiwanese. Such a 'culture of the goddess' deviates from the past 'culture of [an] orphan' which is based upon loyalty to a certain ideology, i.e. forever seeking its parents. The 'culture of the goddess' allows the artist to dance playfully as a mature woman, changing the masks and the identities all the time, stimulating new desires, and breeding new lives.<sup>44</sup>

The following episode entitled "The Lord in the Clouds" ("Yunzhongjun") was a unique display of equilibrium and acrobatic/gymnastic skills from the Cloud Gate dancers. Among billowing clouds and fog, carried on the arms of two dancers in modern dark suits, Yunzhongjun appeared on stage, wearing only a loincloth and hiding his face under a rectangular mask. The rhythm of the dance remained unchanged, without acceleration or slowed-down moments. Its tempo was determined by the fact that the dance was performed on the arms of the two dancers, more than 1.5 m above the floor. The successful performance of all the acrobatic figures depended on the harmonious co-operation of the three dancers. The supporting dancers were responsible for keeping balance and stability. To further complicate matters, the sequence included difficult, high lifts and forward rolls performed on the arms and backs of the supporting dancers. The pair, wearing their dark suits, were reminiscent of stage props or puppet operators performing in other forms of Far Eastern theatre. They did not attract attention, although they were indispensable for performing the sequence. They looked rather like gymnasts, more so than dancers, focusing on the correct performance of their task. In contrast, most of the gestures and movements of the dancer acting as Yunzhongjun were based on conventions from the Beijing opera and dances performed during religious, Taiwanese

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem.

street processions, with angular gestures of hands, sweeping movements of legs, movements preceded by the backward swinging of a leg or hand etc. The dancer eagerly covered the space with his whole body. His dance was heavy, subject to gravity and struggling to overcome it. In spite of the fact that it was performed “in the clouds” it was by no means light, floating or ethereal, although the air is considered to be the most subtle of the elements. The heaviness was due to the special character of the “transport vehicle” used by Yunzhongjun. His two dancer-assistants were ascribed to the element of earth and subjected to the restricting power of gravitation. They moved with great physical effort. The audience could see their shivering hands, legs and deeply bent backs. Nobody tried to hide that effort or subject it to useless stylization. In spite of this, Yunzhongjun’s heavenly stroll symbolized a yearning for freedom and the desire to free oneself from the earth. It was a manifestation of power, but a power which was mindful about retaining safe points of support.

The beauty of that difficult episode was disturbed only by the appearance of the young man on roller skates, who circled the stage, bearing a flag with stylized clouds. Such symbolic drawings on a piece of cloth were used by the Beijing opera. However, the roller skater was an unnecessary intruder, a dreadful clash, an all too easy and obtrusive merger of the past and the present. Jiang Xun who interpreted that dance perceived the young man who sped along streets of a modern city as the opposite of the assistants in black clerical suits and saw him as a symbol close to the ‘Lord in the Clouds’. The young man was seen as close to god-like by his love of unlimited freedom, liberty and power.<sup>45</sup>

The next episode, “The Mountain Ghost” (“Shangui”) referred to the stylistics of Japanese *butō* dance. A sparsely clad dancer attracted attention of the audience with his sculpted body and cat-like nimbleness, softness and flexibility. His face, painted in white, shone in the darkness of the stage with the only set item being a greenish full moon half-hidden behind the clouds. The dancer’s torso was also marked with a green dash. White faces and a dark stage typify *butō* convention. Susan Blakley Klein, a renowned expert, explained them in the following way: “originally these bizarre encrustations were part of the attempt to turn the dancer into some alien ‘other’”.<sup>46</sup> Further on, she added: “At the same time, the white make-up and shaved head, and often the lack of costumes, strip the body of the usual identifying characteristics of the individual, i.e. any expression of personal ‘taste’, leaving only the body’s movement as the marker of difference.”<sup>47</sup> Klein also pointed to the fact that the white powder made the actor more visible in the darkness on stage, while the darkness itself lent mysterious beauty to the created images. In “Shangui” the choreographer, following *butō* and *nō* theatre conventions, skilfully contrasted light and darkness, building up the extraordinary, unsettling atmosphere. The rhythm of the dance was a sequence of accelerating and slowed-down moments. Movements which were initially slow and lazy, acquired violent and animal-like qualities. Softness turned into acrobatic, gymnastic skill. No wonder, as Shangui was a strange, half-human and half-animal character, and also an androgynous being. This duality was reflected by different ways in which the Mountain

<sup>45</sup> Jiang Xun, *Wudong Jiuge...*, pp. 152–159.

<sup>46</sup> S. Blakley Klein, *Ankoku Butō. The Premodern and Postmodern Influence on the Dance of Utter Darkness*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

Ghost moved: female delicacy and flexibility was contrasted with male, predatory violence. The dance had much more contrasting elements. The beautiful, fit body of the dancer was set against the ugliness of his white-painted face with its strange, over-expressive facial expressions. His sad, alien face was twisted by a grimace. Then it turned immovable with its mouth remaining open for a long time, as if in a silent scream. Gestures and facial expressions reflected fear, anxiety, fatigue and also insecurity, undefined desire and sadness.

The dance also had other characteristics of *butō* aesthetics, specified by Sondra Fraleigh in her work: deliberate laziness and zen-like slow patience, together with elements of surprise.<sup>48</sup> The American researcher pointed to the cathartic function of *butō*: “Likewise, catharsis is the aesthetic heart of Butoh, the reason behind its exposure of clumsiness, its distorted faces, and sublime emptying of the self. ‘Killing the body’, they call it. Like Dogen Zen, Butoh ‘casts off the body and the mind.’ It plays between emptiness and form, light and dark, beauty and ugliness in its cathartic transformations of the body, tendering the Eastern metaphysical origins of Zen”.<sup>49</sup>

After a while, the mood changed dramatically. Dancers clad in white entered the stage. A girl cycled in. A dancer in a white dress with a sword in his hand, washed himself with water from the lotus pond. He bowed respectfully to the group of dancers, who were also wearing white and held swords. He adopted a pose expressing concentration, typical of sword-wielding martial arts. The dancers in white crowded around in concentration and stood motionless. The scene marked a transition to the final sequences of the performance.

Backstage partition walls were set on both sides of the stage, decorated with paintings of dim-emerald lotus leaves set against a goldish background. The modest, symbolic stage set – let us not forget that the lotus symbolizes purity – and dancers standing in pairs on the right side of the stage (as viewed by the audience), in long white robes, with their hands stretched out and bent at the elbows and the hands joined on their chests in a characteristic pose, expressing concentration, attention and respect, served as background for a soloist who performed an elegant and precise dance – a series of martial arts postures with the sword. At the end of that presentation, the dancers bowed low and knelt on the floor. Suddenly, they jumped up to run. Their motions became violent and panicky. Dry sounds were heard of increasingly loud gunshots. The stage was crowded with convicts with bared torsos, wearing black pants and wicker baskets on their heads. With crossed or rather tied hands, they moved in a long, slow file across the stage and back. They stopped, turned towards the audience and approached the proscenium. A long list of the names of victims and convicts in the long history of China and Taiwan was recited like a litany. Bodies of dancers shook in convulsions; one by one, they fell on the floor and the wicker baskets rolled on the floor. Then they stood up, slowly walked again towards the proscenium and regrouped. Then they fell again on the floor as if shot once more. They jumped up to run and fell down again. The sequence was repeated. The poses of the actors were full of pathos. Bodies of killed men covered the floor. A woman dressed in red came running to hold a wounded man. The positions of their bodies reminiscent of Pietà. A man slumped down with his arms spread wide. The woman, overwhelmed with pain, rose and bowed again, went around the body and carefully arranged it in a peaceful pose with hands crossed over

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<sup>48</sup> S. Horton Fraleigh, *Dancing into Darkness. Butoh, Zen and Japan*, Piitsburgh: University of Piitsburgh Press, 1999, p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

the chest. The traveller with his suitcase, indifferently crossed the stage. The woman in red departed slowly and performed a fragment of her shamanistic trance-like dance, just as in the first part of *Nine Songs*; this time, however, it had none of its former violence and passion. Each of the victims was commemorated by a cemetery light placed on the stage; finally, flickering lamps created a glimmering, meandering path/river which led towards the horizon. A Taiwanese aboriginal song commemorating the dead resounded.

Lin Huaimin's *Nine Songs* were a sacrificial ritual, a recurrent story about dreams and desires, loneliness and sadness, violence and death. It was a tale of the desire to transgress the limits of earthly existence, knowledge and contacts with the imponderable and inaccessible. It was also a dream about love and dissatisfaction. It showed brutality, violence and manipulation which destroyed human plans, and pure, sublime things defeated in a clash with reality. Nearing the end of their wanderings, humans either encountered a beautiful and dignified death, or just an incongruous ragtag kind of demise. *Nine Songs* was a dark tale which sometimes turned horrifying, but it was also surrounded by the aura of mystery, built not only by varied choreography but also by musical diversity – a collage of sounds, songs, litanies and noises which were always perfectly correlated with the dance and emphasizing its character. In *Nine Songs*, high and noble resonance merged with more grounded lowly tones, pathos and dignity juxtaposed everyday, common things, sophistication and subtlety existed side by side with simplicity and roughness. "We can sense in *Nine Songs* a kind of vitality and unadorned beauty often seen in primitive art",<sup>50</sup> said Huang Yin-ying. Seeking a new "tone" for his choreographic work, Lin Huaimin drew from ancient Chinese literature and culture, but he also enriched it – as the researcher noted – with elements of local Taiwanese culture and elements of many Asian traditions. As a result, he created an intercultural work in the good sense of the word.

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<sup>50</sup> Huang Yin-ying, 'Lin Hwai-min's Dance Works Inspired by Literature...', p. 51.

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