**Liu Feng-Shueh (b. June 19, 1925, Qiqihar, Heilongjiang Province, China -- )**

**Summary**

Dr. Liu Feng-Shueh is a modern dance pioneer in Taiwan. She was the first person to conduct systematic experimentation with the formal elements and creative methods of modern dance in post-war Taiwan. Her research into historical Chinese dance since the 1950s has produced reconstructions of court and ceremonial dances from the Tang (A.D. 618-907), Sung (A.D. 960-1279) and Ming (A.D. 1368-1644) dynasties. This has enriched her interpretation of modern dance within the Chinese cultural context. As a choreographer, she has attended to the dialogue between tradition and modernity through upholding the value of individual freedom in creation while devoting herself to finding contemporary meanings for traditional dance forms and cultures. In a career that has spanned over six decades, Liu has studied the dance traditions of Taiwanese indigenous people and has choreographed modern dances inspired by them. These works raise important social and cultural issues faced by contemporary indigenous societies. In addition, she has been one of the most important leaders in Taiwan’s dance education with influence ranging from dance for children to professional training in higher education.

**Training and Background**

Growing up in Manchuria in northeastern China, Liu Feng-Shueh studied ballet with Russian teachers as a young child. In 1932, Manchuria was colonized by Japan (1932-1945), and as a result Liu was educated through the Japanese colonial education system until she was a junior in college. On the one hand, this led to a strong nationalistic, anti-colonial consciousness, exacerbated by the war between China and Japan, which did not end until 1945. On the other hand, the colonial situation gave her access to modern education, including dance-related training in Eurhythmics, kinetics, expressive gymnastics and modern dance, through her Japanese teachers at the Changchun Women’s Normal College (National Changbai Teachers’ College after 1945).

In 1948, Liu’s initial contact with Labanotaion and Laban-based modern dance ideas and practices came through Dai Ailian, who was a student of Kurt Jooss in the UK during the 1930s and who later became an instrumental figure in the development of dance in revolutionary China. Liu came to Taiwan with the Kuomintang Nationalist government in 1949 and started teaching dance in the Department of Physical Education at the National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) in 1954. From 1965 to 1966, Liu studied modern dance at the Tokyo University of Education while at the same time researching Tang Dynasty dance and music at the Japanese Imperial Palace. During this period, she also studied choreography with Japanese modern dance pioneer Eguchi Takaya, a student of Mary Wigman. In 1971-1972, Liu went to the Folkwang Hochschule in Germany to study Labanotation and choreography with Albrecht Knust and Hans Zűlich, an experience that left deep imprints on her as a choreographer and dance reconstructer. The training in Labanotation lent her a useful analytical and notative tool in the process of reconstructing ancient Chinese dances. Her first-hand contact with German modern dance enriched her understanding of temporal structure and spatial dynamics in dance composition. From 1983 to 1987, Liu completed her doctoral degree in dance at the Laban Center for Movement and Dance in London, UK. Her dissertation was devoted to the philosophical study of the spatial concept in ancient Chinese Confucius dance.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

From the 1950s to 2013, Liu has produced 127 dances. Her career has been defined by two parallel paths: the creation of modern dance pieces and the reconstruction of ancient Chinese music and dances. These two endeavours have nourished each other in important ways.

While teaching at the NTNU (1954 to 1985), Liu launched the first-ever modern dance course in higher education in Taiwan. In 1957, she began her life-long research into Chinese ancient dance by scrutinizing ancient scripts, notations, paintings, sculptures and poetry. At the same time, she proposed the concept of Chinese modern dance by integrating martial arts movements with modern dance creative concept as evidenced in works like *The Last Judgment* (1957) and *Ambushed from All Sides* (1958). 1967 marked an important turning point for Liu. In that year, Liu and her students held the first-ever dance concert outside the campus of the NTNU, with the theme of ‘Ancient and Modern Chinese Dance,’ which was followed in the next year by the concert entitled ‘Tradition and the Modern.’

The most distinguished feature of Liu’s modern dance creation is the dynamic usage of space, both the kinesthetic space around the dancer’s body and the physical space on the stage. In works like *Nilpotent Group* (1977), *Carmina Burana* (1992) and *Vast Desert, Solitary Smoke Rises Straight* (2000), the configurations of dancers in space and time create abstract designs that are full of dynamic forces resonating with the musical structures or emotional undertones in the choreographies. In dance dramas *Ts’ao Pi and Chen Mi* (1996) and *Wielding Sword Along Chilly Wujiang* (2012), Liu draws upon stories of heroes and heroines from Chinese history to ponder the universal themes of the temptation of power and the weakness of human nature In these dances, her knowledge of Chinese ancient dance is effectively synthesized with modern choreographic concepts, such as the symbolic deployment of abstract designs in space, to depict the psychological dimensions of the characters and the physical excitement of ancient battle scenes.

In addition, Liu’s decades-long fieldwork on the dance traditions of Taiwanese indigenous people has revealed to her the transformation as well as disintegration of their societies due to the encroachment of forces like capitalism, urbanization and assimilation into the Han Chinese culture. In her evening length *Subtlety of Ethnic Poundings* (1994), *Flying Fish in Silence* (2007) and *Land of Clouded Leopard* (2009), Liu draws upon movement motives from the indigenous people’s ceremonial dances, including the gesture of holding hands to dance. She then reworks them to address the irreversible changes taking place in their communities—threatened cultural identity, disintegrating social structure, the loss of traditional value systems as well as the problem of adaptation into the mainstream society.

Since 1963, Liu has reconstructed at least thirteen ancient Chinese dances, mostly from the Tang dynasty. In works such as *The Singing of Spring Orioles* (1967), *The Emperor Destroys the Formations* (1992), *Liquidambar* (2002) and *Whirl Around* (2003), all of which belong to the *Yanyue* genre (grand pieces of banquet music and dance) from the Tang court, Liu’s aim is not only to recover the lost forms and steps of ancient Chinese dance but also to understand the cultural, political, ethical and cosmic dimensions of these dance ceremonies. Hence, the reconstructed performances are often defined by solemn qualities of refined precision, sublimated spirituality, and intensive concentration of mind and body.

**Legacy**

In 1967, Liu founded the Center for Modern Dance Research in Taipei, which attracted many dance enthusiasts and became her base for spreading the seeds of modern dance. In 1976, Liu established her own dance company, the Neo-Classical Dance Company, which is one of the most important dance groups in Taiwan.

Liu has expanded the modern dance legacy of the Laban-Wigman she inherited by interpreting its ideals through her deep interest in ancient Chinese dance traditions and her incessant pondering upon the human condition in the contemporary world. A believer in the power of art and culture in promoting humanity, she has nurtured and inspired generations of dancers, choreographers, dance educators and scholars in Taiwan. Her most distinguished students include dance educators Chang Li-Chu, Huang Su-Shueh, Tseng Ming-shen and Lin Wei-Hua; choreographers Tsai Li-Hua, Liu Shaw-Lu and Lo Man-Fei; and dance scholars Chang Chung-Shiuan and Lu Yu-Jen.

**Chen Ya-ping**

**Selected List of Created Works:**

*The Last Judgment* 最後的審判 (1957)

*Ambushed from All Sides* 十面埋伏 (1958)

*Shooting Arrows into Pitchers* 投壺戲 (1974)

*Nilpotent Group* 冪零群( 1977)

*Terracotta Figurines I—Han Figurines* 俑之一—漢俑 (1992)

*Carmina Burana* 布蘭詩歌 (1992)

*Terracotta Figurines II—Chiang* *Figures* 俑之二—羌俑 (1993)

*Subtlety of Ethnic Poundings* 沉默的杵音 (1994)

*Song of Youth* 青春之歌 (1995)

*Black Hole* 黑洞 (1996)

*Ts’ao Pi and Chen Mi* 曹丕與甄宓 (1996)

*Not Until the Hell is Empty Will I Become a Buddha* 地獄不空誓不成佛 (1998)

*Yellow River* 黃河 (1999)

*Vast Desert, Solitary Smoke Rises Straight* 大漠孤煙直 (2000)

*Flying Fish in Silence* 沉默的飛魚 (2007)

*Land of Clouded Leopard* 雲豹之鄉 (2009)

*Wielding Sword Along Chilly Wujiang* 揮劍烏江冷 (2012)

**Selected List of Reconstructed Works:**

*Pa-Tou* 拔頭 (1967)

*The Singing of Spring Orioles* 春鶯囀 (1967)

*The Emperor Destroys the Formations* 皇帝破陣樂 (1992)

*Liquidambar* 蘇合香 (2002)

*Whirl Around* 團亂旋 (2003)

*Sogdians Drink Wine* 胡飲酒 (2003)

**References and Further Readings:**

Chao, Chi-fang. (2012) ‘Holding Hands to Dance: Movement as Cultural Metaphor in

the Dances of Indigenous People in Taiwan’ in *Identity and Diversity: Celebrating Dance in Taiwan*. Eds. Wang Yunyu and Stephanie Burridge. London: Routledge.

Lee, Hsiao-hua. (1998) *劉鳳學訪談* *Liu Feng-shueh Fangtan* (*Interview with Liu*

*Feng-shueh*). Taipei: China TimesPress.

Liu, Feng-shueh. (2000) *與自然共舞：台灣原住民舞蹈 Yu Ziran Gongwu: Taiwan*

*Yuanzhumin Wudao* (*Dancing with Nature: the Dances of Taiwan’s Indigenous*

*People*). Taipei: Business Weekly Press.

Liu, Feng-shueh. (2012) ‘A Study of Banquet Music and Dance at the Táng

Court (618-907 CE)’ in *Identity and Diversity: Celebrating Dance in Taiwan*. Eds. Wang Yunyu and Stephanie Burridge. London: Routledge.

Lu, Yu-jen. (2011) ‘Decolonized Imagination: Modernity and Modern Dance in 1970s

Taiwan’ in *Arts Review* (Taipei National University of the Arts). No. 21: 1-38.

**Moving Image Material**

I suggest to have the official documentary from the Neo-Classical Dance Company, which includes clips of Liu’s important modern dance pieces as well as ancient Chinese dance reconstructions. The documentary is either in English or has English subtitle.

Contact E-mail address: neo@neo.org.tw

Official website: http://www.neo.org.tw/en/index.htm

**Paratextual Material**

I suggest to have the photos of *Ambushed from All Sides, Nilpotent Group, Carmina Burana, Terracotta Figurines I—Han Figurines, Subtlety of Ethnic Poundings, Liquidambar, Whirl Around, Sogdians Drink Wine.*

Contact E-mail address: neo@neo.org.tw

Official website: http://www.neo.org.tw/en/index.htm