LOOKING WEST, TO REDEFINE OURSELVES

Sal Murgiyanto

1. Looking West, to Look at East

While still living in Africa, little Elsa Wolliaston was so happy when she heard that her family was going to migrate to Paris. By living in Europe, she thought, her skin would eventually change white. Three years passed, but there was no change. Elsa asked her mother why her skin didn’t change white and was so upset upon knowing that her skin would stay black. Elsa Wolliaston, now living in Paris, teaches, choreographs, and performs African dance for European dancers and audience. Her skin does not change, her dance does although not become completely white.

Whether one wants to become white or remain African is a personal choice. It depends on where and when one lives and what kind of socio-cultural context one has. Certainly, not everybody has the privilege to choose. Last year, in Hamburg, I met a young dancer of Indian descent who was born in South Africa, has a Canadian passport, and has performed with various modern dance companies in the USA and Europe. This young Indian dancer is more adept in ballet and modern dance than in Bharatanatyam or Kathak.

Rudyard Kipling once said, “East is east, West is west, and never the twain shall meet.” In his editorial for Esplanade: The Arts Magazine (September-October 1997), Phan Ming-Yen writes:

...in the West, Dance was once viewed as mere entertainment surrounded by sin (how could the spirit reach divine grace if dance glorified the body which was seen as vile?) and then as a form of education and performance in which the female was looked upon as a creature of mere grace and beauty.

In the East, however, the tradition of Dance was (and still is) regarded as inseparable from the sacred and the religious, a ritual that unifies the individual with the Supreme Being.

Today, however, when “fusion” and “postmodern” are catchwords of the time, multi-, cross-, and inter-culturalism is pursued and heatedly debated in various part of the world. Looking West, is not only an African but also Asian phenomenon. By looking West, Asians artists redefine their identity. At the Asia-Pacific Performance Exchange (APPEX) held in Los Angeles (August 20-23, 1997), well-known Taiwanese choreographer Lin Hwai-Min said that he was first exposed to Graham and
only in 1978 began interested in other Asian dances. In 1986, he went to Bali for the first time. This visit turned out to be a life experience.

*There, I learned how to keep my voice low and not to walk too fast. Encounter with Bali has calmed me down. In Taiwan people cut their rice fast with machine. In Bali they cut rice stem by stem, tie them together and spread beautifully when drying the rice in the sun. It takes time but Balinese have a good time in doing it. Why should be hurry if they can enjoy their time? Since then, I have visited Bali six times. There I found what we have lost in Taiwan under the name of economic growth: contact with nature and land as traditionally cultivated by our ancestors. I learned that artist must deal with the most essential: man's spiritual life.*

Stillness, slow but intense movements, contact with nature, and spiritual atmosphere are evident in Lin’s *Songs of Wanderers* as German dance critic Jochen Schmidt commented (*Ballet International/Tanz Aktuell*, January 1996, 39-40):

*Lin Hwai-Min has paradoxically, given the leading role to a figure that never move; for the entire performance, one-and-a-half hours, a young monk stands motionless down left with hands extended in prayer. When the piece begins, a narrow beam of light seeks out his shaven head and, with the light, golden grains of rice trickle down on him until, by the end of the performance, they have accumulated into a small mound....

With long gnarled walking sticks decorated at their points with little bells ten women and six men feel their way one by one, interminably slowly, onto the stage. Their bodies are bent at the knees and hips, their movements are at least influenced by the rituals of the Chinese shadow boxing Tai Chi...never lapse from their ritual character into banal gymnastics.

*Song of Wanderers* is a piece of the most celestial imagery but not of external action; few dance pieces are so focused on contemplation and meditation.*

Taiwan is an immigrant country where the first generation of immigrants brought with them a tradition of Chinese culture. They brought with them not just poor finances, but a poor, thin culture as well. So, with the following generations, Chinese tradition weakened and a contemporary culture started to rise instead. Today, it is this contemporary culture which Taiwanese art is best known for
and best appreciated by the present generation (Lisa Marie Tan, 1997: 17-18).

Lin’s dance language is rooted in his training of Chinese dance, Western classical ballet, and contemporary (Graham) technique. Yet, he has dealt with such Asian sensibilities in many of his work. As a choreographer he is sensitive to his people and his contemporary work is well received both in Taiwan and abroad.

Lin observes that like himself, many young Taiwanese dancers have to go to the USA or Europe to study ballet and modern dance. Some of them gladly adopt the way Western choreographers create new work. Lin comments,

_That is alright as long as they are really innovative and perform the piece for Western audience. Once they decide to go back to their own land, they must act and think differently. Cunningham work is beautiful, but Taiwanese audience do not have the proper cultural background to appreciate it. Young artists often blame local audience when they do not respond to their experimental works as they wish. In fact, it is the artists who do not understand the ecology of the art. They must not cut themselves from their own community._

2. Searching the Future through the Past

Slow movements and spiritual atmosphere also predominate the work of Indonesian choreographer Sardono W. Kusumo. The different, as I see it, Indonesian traditional art: Balinese, Javanese, Kalimantan have strongly informed Sardono’s work. New York critic Marcia Siegel commented on Sardono’s work _Passage Through the Gong_, “It showed us how traditional culture can be regenerated, and how it keeps its spirituality. It even suggests what we’ve long forgotten, that art can make a different in our lives.”

Closeness to nature, which Lin Hwa-Min saw in the traditional life of the Balinese is also predominant in Sardono’s work. He said, “My work is a search into the future through the past to recover the essential link between Man and Nature. I dance the man who has lost his cultural roots—or from whom they have been torn—wandering in our contemporary forest.” The imagery of Man’s physical and philosophical journey is central to Sardono’s work. Throughout his career, he has staged the tensions between centuries old ecosystems (both cultural and natural) and the “advances” of contemporary society that may jeopardize their very existence.

For Sardono, creating a dance is not just a matter of aesthetic and self-expression. Most of the time, his “inspiration” is a particular set of circumstances affecting the human condition with
向西眺望，以重新定位東方

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吉卜林的名言，‘西是西，東是東，而隔着是涇渭分明的。’不再成立了，尤其是在表演藝術領域中。今天，西方和東方的藝術表演者正受到其他文化型態的刺激而彼此熱烈的互動。這篇論著要探討四種截然不同的編舞方式，都是融合了西方及東方的要素，並呈現在三位亞洲編舞家：林懷民（台灣），柯素摩 Sardono W. Kusumo（印尼），香達賴卡 Chandrasekhar（印度），以及日本的舞蹈現象中。

林懷民的舞蹈語彙是植根於中國舞，西方古典芭蕾及葛麗德技巧的。然而他許多的作品裡探討的卻也是亞洲的情愫。柯素摩承受的是正統爪哇舞者的訓練，但加上了西方對創造力的高舉影響，在他的作品中藉由被遺棄未來。柯素摩並不強調創新，在需要時，舊的也很好。只是不夠時，才造出新東西。香達賴卡在更新印度舞蹈時，用的不是芭蕾或是現代舞技巧。他卻是鑽入了Bharatanatyam（一種古典印度舞蹈），用它的內在動力，它的基本語彙，加上瑜伽原理，及印度Kalaras省的Kalaritz功夫動作。香達賴卡努力在她的作品中把表演者和觀眾都放回人性化的位置，這在亞洲是被冷落很久的。

日本的舞蹈似乎一向拒絕西方的美學，也常因它特殊的表現被誤解。事實上，超越它表象的特殊，異國情調，真正的舞蹈表現出了日本精神裏的專注，細膩，及對‘ma’空間（即‘無’空間，相對於‘有’的敏銳。有些舞蹈團體逐漸在接西方的美學概念了。在這篇文章中值得紀念甘地，印度之父。的話。他說，‘我不願家中的四維高立，使人生窒息。我願各地的文風尚自由暢通，四面吹來。但絕不可被席捲翻覆。’