

# Delineating Forgotten Figures in Taiwan's Dance History

– The Life of Lee HuiMei –

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## I. Introduction

Dance development in Taiwan was significantly influenced by Japan in the early twentieth century when Taiwan was under Japanese rule (1895-1945). A few young Taiwanese girls went to Japan to study dance in the 1930s, and during the post-World-War-II period, they returned to their hometowns and opened dance schools. This represented the earliest establishment of private dance education in different parts of Taiwan (Tai, 2009). These figures, including Tsai Jui-yueh (1921-2005), Lin Hsiang-yun (1926-) and Lee Tsai-o (1926-), are highly celebrated and remembered by dance scholars in Taiwan (Tai, 2010). Conversely, Lee HuiMei (Emiko Suzuki, 1918-2021), who shares a similar background, has not received similar acclaim regarding her contribution to Taiwan's private dance education sector.

This paper seeks to highlight the contributions of this notable dancer. In the following pages, I will point out what is distinctive about this research and explain the practice in the following sections. As a whole, such practice is a way of thinking about and explaining human experience through dance drama. In short, I will explain how projects like this one help people make sense of our dance society in the past and present time.

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## II. War and Dance – the life story of Lee HuiMei

In the field of dance study, incidents of war and dance can be found through various documents (Armstrong, 2004; Cvejic, 2015; Ritsonvaljos, 2005), and these documents record remarkable stories of dancers who overcome significant obstacles to achieve their success. However, there are also important figures with little recognition. One such artist is Lee HuiMei, a Japanese dancer came to live in Taiwan because of the war, and has since lived a life isolated from many other Japanese residents. She has contributed almost half of her life in private dance education in Taiwan but her contribution has not been studied in Taiwan's dance history before. The only written document about Lee's life story, published about two decades ago (Kao, 2001), is not a scholarly manuscript but rather a short story for the general public, and contains mainly biographical information. Also, a short description about her was listed in the Encyclopedia of Taiwan (Chen, 2009). Other than in these sources, she is almost forgotten in Taiwan's dance society. In order to draw a clearer picture of Taiwan's dance history, a more thorough research about her dance life is necessary and that would also contribute to the study of war and dance.

Lee was born in Tokyo in 1918 to a merchant father and her mother was a home maker. At a young age she began praying to the gods in the nearby temples for her parents to approve her request of taking dance lessons. It was not until 1931, after she turned thirteen years old, that her parents agreed to let her begin her dance lessons. She studied dance with various instructors and later became a professional dancer in Japan. During World War Two, she went to China to be with her sister, whose husband was sent to Manchuria for the war. While in China, she danced to entertain the Japanese soldiers. When the war ended she nearly returned to Japan, but then she met a young soldier from Taiwan and felt in love with him. She accepted his marriage proposal and accompanied him to Taiwan. A decade later, in 1956, she opened her dance school in FangShen District of Kaohsiung City, and from that time forward she trained many excellent dancers over a three and half decade career. Yet despite this accomplishment, her name has not been mentioned often and has been almost forgotten in Taiwan's dance field.

## III. The research process

I started this research about Lee HuiMei's dance life from an unexpected incident. One day in 2016, Wen-cheng Shih, a historian and a researcher at the National Museum of Taiwan History informed his wife, Shu-jen Tung (my colleague), about a chunk of artifacts donated to the museum. Tung, a former student of mine, is a dancer, actress and a part-time teacher at various institutions. She then invited me

to visit the museum together to study the artifacts. After the museum trip, Tung read Lee's biography which inspired her to produce a dance drama. She introduced Lee's biography to a class of dance students at my department and guided them to produce a one-hour dance drama. On the day of the informal showing of this dance drama, Lee's daughter and a few friends were invited to watch the production. After watching the informal showing, I proposed to extend the collaboration between Shih, Tung, the participating students and I for delineating Lee's almost forgotten figures in Taiwan's dance history.

After the dance drama was successfully completed in the Acting for Dancers' class, the next steps of this research process will be to incorporate Lee's story for more learning subjects such as Dance History for the students and to introduce Lee's story to the communities outside of university campus. For my part, I introduced Lee in my dance history class so that she can be heard by more students. For Tung, she has already extended her project to share Lee's story at the museum to a group of high school performing arts teachers from different cities. For Shih, more outreach programs to introduce Lee's story are in his plan besides the exhibition and the talk at the museum. Last but not least, an event was planned together by all of us. That is, another performance of presenting Lee's story by some of the students from the same class at the museum. This second performance reached a greater audience than the first one and received warm feedback from the audience.

When considering which method to use for this research, I first studied theories of diaspora but soon found them to be an inappropriate approach for Lee's situation. Although she had met a few Japanese women living nearby, they were not in the same diasporic community (Reis, 2004) and they did not share similar life style with her. Thus, I refer to her in this research as one of the Japanese diaspora in post-World-War-II Taiwan but do not use the diaspora theory to explain her situation. Also, since she was about one-hundred years old and living with Alzheimer's disease when we started this research project, her life story had not been easy to track solely through first hand interviewing with her personally.<sup>1)</sup> In the end, I decided to apply *a/r/tography* as the research methodology and found it appropriate for me. This method closely fits my position as a dance artist, researcher and educator and it allows me to apply my knowledge in presenting, studying and guiding this project.

According to Rita L. Irwin (Irwin 2013), *a/r/tography* is a research methodology, a creative practice, and a performative pedagogy. It is a form of practice-based research method within the arts and education (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). In Irwin and de Cosson's idea,

Art is the visual reorganization of experience that renders complex the apparently simple or simplifies the apparently complex. Research is the enhancement of meaning revealed through ongoing interpretations of complex relationships that are continually created, recreated and

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1) Lee passed away on 4 April in 2021 at the age of 105 in Kaohsiung City, Taiwan.

transformed. Teaching is performative knowing in meaningful relationships with learners. (2004, p. 31)

Although its original context was found in visual arts, the methodology's use is relevant here also. The pedagogy of performing arts shares similar concepts with visual arts, that is, knowledge and skills originate from practice. Thus, I follow Irwin and Sinner's method to apply a/r/tography, that is, "to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create relational and/or enhanced meanings" (Irwin & Sinner, 2013). In this project, I explored Lee's story with a group of mixed individuals including a dance professor, an acting instructor, a historian and several university students majoring dance who might become professional artists, educators, and researchers in the future. For the practices, I gave the students advices for their choreography for the dance drama while Tung guided them to prepare for the acting skills. As for the teaching part, I incorporated this process into my class of Dance History for introducing Lee's contribution which was not included before. For research, I investigated and carried out this study plan to draw a clearer profile of Lee's figure in Taiwan's dance society. My team of researchers worked alongside with me for the research process. Such collaboration also linked the relationship between the teachers and the students, the learning subjects in acting and dance history, and, the dance institution and the public services.

#### **IV. The collaborations and the outreach programs**

Insightful data has been collected from in-depth interviews with the participants in this project, especially the students who participated in the dance drama and shared their experiences. Additionally, the feedback from my coworkers and the researchers at the museum has ensured that the project has moved forward.

Cheng-chia Hsieh, the only male student in the class, performed all the important male roles in the story, including Lee's father, her dance mentor, her husband and her sister's boyfriend. He comments on the challenges from performing in this dance drama,

I am used to performing with my body expressions but not acting. Speaking lines of the story between dances was a practice that I have never had before. For the sake of passing my course, I gathered myself together and faced the challenge. I was terrified in the beginning but as the work progressed, my fear of speaking on stage gradually faded away. In fact, I am still not comfortable speaking on stage but the feeling is not as bad as it used to be. (Hsieh 2018, personal communication)

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Trained to be a dancer since eight years old, Hsieh never had any experience in acting before. This kind of performance anxiety is common between dancers who are not used to public speaking. This experience enabled him to find a new way to build a special relationship with his audience and thus develop the joy of meaningful connection to inspire his performance (Talbot, 2014). His feedback also reflects on the notion of a/r/tography that skills originate from practice. His skills and confidence of speaking on stage can be improved as long as he continues to participate in this project. Meanwhile, as an educator and researcher on the art of dance, I will continue to study and record the improvement of his performing skills in acting and dancing.

Another student, Yi-ting Tai, performed two different roles in the dance drama: a dancer on stage when Lee saw a dance concert the first time in Japan, and also as Lee's sister. She recalls her experience in preparing for the dance drama,

We worked with partners in small groups. Each group read Lee's biography together with partners, then chose some of the sections that our group prefers, and then used PowerPoint to explain to our classmates about what we understood from the reading material. The experience of team work was not easy but it helped us to explore our potentials in a way that we never discovered before. (Tai 2018, personal communication)

Her voice indicates the goal of this project which is that the experience of creating this dance drama collectively may enable the students to recreate similar situations in their learning for dance history. It was an example of a/r/tography for creativity and cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1987). Her voice also reveals that although many of them found it challenging to work collaboratively, they were able to work their way through for communication, decision-making, role-playing and problem solving.

Shu-jen Tung is one generation younger than me. She had never heard of Lee before the news of the museum donations was introduced to her. After she read Lee's biography, Tung felt it important to help the university students learn about Lee and her contribution to private dance education in Taiwan. She expresses her experience like this,

In my class [Acting for Dancers], I usually begin with leading the students to practice voice and diction in addition to the practices of observation, imitation and role playing. For this particular class of students, I also helped them to write the scripts and lines after they read Lee's biography and also select a director in each group and choose the roles to act. It was a good experience for the students and for me as the instructor. A few months later, I used this experience as the topic when the museum invited me to give a talk to a group of performing arts teachers from various high schools. (Tung 2018, personal communication)

Tung has shown an example of extending her teaching experience to the service outside of the university campus. This marked an extended step of the project. Lee's story was heard by many school teachers who may share the story to their pupils.

Wen-cheng Shih recalled the day when Lee's daughter contacted the museum about the donation of Lee's artifacts. He and his colleagues visited Lee's house and found the artifacts full of historical value. Thus they started the plan for an exhibition of these artifacts at the museum but did not realize it could be extended to a bigger project. He is happy to see the progress of the project and explains,

I should have planned better to include more activities than just an exhibition of Lee's donated artifacts. She is such a special person that was originally from Japan but went to China, and then finally resides in Taiwan. The story behind her migration was probably similar to many untold stories of other people during the post-World War Two period. I think we can plan for a continuing section for telling her story as part of the history outreach programs of the museum. (Shih 2018, personal communication)

Outreach is the museum's main focus for this project. This stage partly incorporated a performance in the university studio, an exhibition and a performance at the National Museum of Taiwan History. By performing the dance drama at the museum, we reached to more audience and Lee's story was told to more people.

## V. Conclusion

The steps of the project have completed the beginning and partially the middle sections. How much it can be extended is still uncertain. For the parts that are completed, the project has set an example of collaborations between the teachers and the students, the practical subject and the theory subject in dance, and, the dance department and the museum. The collaboration requires great effort from all participants to sustain teamwork. Participants' insights such as facing challenges and exploring their potential were discussed earlier, and as for myself, I learned more than I could offer in the process of the collaborations.

To list a few ways, I have, first of all, found a better way of teaching dance history by collaborating with colleagues rather than just lecturing on my own, and I have contributed to bridging the gap between my university and the museum with a dance activity. Furthermore, I have enjoyed seeing the students grow into mature young artists in their practices. As a whole, this experience benefits all of us who are the artists, researchers and teachers.

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Lee HuiMei (Emiko Suzuki, 1918-2021), a Japanese emigre who opened a dance school in Taiwan after WWII, is a little-known though significant figure in Taiwan's dance history. In 2018, a dance drama highlighting her life story was created to depict her dance training and experiences. This dance drama is based on Lee's biography, as well as a collection of dance artifacts donated to National Museum of Taiwan History and interviews with some participants in this project. The study contained here is conceived of as a/r/tography, where the research methodology, creative practice and performative pedagogy are conducted by the researchers. The ongoing project has now presented one informal showing at the campus of Tainan University of Technology and a semi-formal showing at the National Museum of Taiwan History. Studies like this one are important in order to understand the lived experiences and trajectory of dance educators and performers in Taiwan.

**Keywords:** A/r/tography(아토크래피), Dance artifacts(무용 아티팩트), Dance history(무용사), Lee HuiMei(리후이메이)