

# Trace of Force: Lin Hwai-min's *Water Stains on the Wall*

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Chieh-ting Hsieh

## TRACE OF FORCE IN *SHU-FA*

Drawing inspiration from the tradition of *shu-fa*, i.e. the Chinese art of writing, Taiwanese choreographer Lin Hwai-min has choreographed a series of dances: *Cursive* (2001), *Cursive II* (2003, later renamed as *Pine Smoke*), and *Wild Cursive* (2005). *Water Stains on the Wall* (2010) is the last work in the series. Although *shu-fa* is often translated as *Chinese calligraphy* it is different from the Western concept of calligraphy, of which the etymological meaning is *beautiful (calli-)writing* (-graphy) and which is therefore more related to »decoration« (Billeter 1990: 11ff.). In Chinese, *shu-fa* – in which *shu* means *writing* and *fa* means *law* or *way* – means *the law or the way of writing*. In the tradition of *shu-fa*, the law of writing is concerned with the ways of manoeuvring the forces that bring forth the dynamics, which make *shu-fa* so adored by the Chinese literati as the art of writing.

In one of the most important treatises about the art of writing, *Array for the Ink Brush*, Wei Shuo, the *shu-fa* artist in the Eastern Chin dynasty, clearly indicated, »to let the brush fall onto the paper to write the strokes, one must use the force of the entire body to bring them forth« (Huang Chien 1981: 22)<sup>1</sup>. Wei Shuo explained the different ways of manoeuvring the force to write different strokes with the different imagery. For example, she mentioned writing the horizontal stroke should be like »the clouds emerging in array that ranges into the distance«, writing the dot stroke should be like »the rock's falling from the mountain«, and writing the turning stroke should be like »the heavy bow's being released« (1981: 22). Nonetheless, it is important to note that the imagery is not concerned with the figure of the stroke but the way of manoeuvring the force. In other words, when the *shu-fa* artist writes the stroke with the imagery in mind, it is not about making the figure of the stroke like the outer form of the things in the imagery but about making the force that one uses to write like the

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1 | All the translations in this article are mine.

force in the imagery, i.e. the force of emerging, falling, releasing etc. As the title *Array for the Ink Brush*, implies, the way to manoeuvre the force is like the way to array the battle force. This analogy is significant. It is important to note that the battle array is never formed for itself. Rather, it is intended to forge more advantageous conditions in the battle. The battle array and the battle conditions are never still. They are intended for the changes. Therefore, when one uses the force in one particular way to write, that force does not predetermine only one figure of the stroke. For example, when one writes with the force of falling, the force of falling can still bring forth different figures of the dot stroke.<sup>2</sup>

Since it is through the use of force that the figure of the stroke emerges, the stroke as the ink line in *shu-fa* is not only the line but also the trace of forces. In the tradition of *shu-fa*, the work of *shu-fa* is also termed *shu-chi*, in which *shu* means *writing* and *chi* means *trace*.<sup>3</sup> According to an ancient Chinese dictionary, trace means »the place where one steps« (Hsu Shen 1981: 70). Ancient Chinese thinker Chuang-tzu also mentioned that »trace comes from the steps« (Wang Shu-min 1999: 546). In the anthology *Chuang-tzu*, there is one story in which the editor Chuang-tzu made up a conversation between Confucius and Lao-tzu: Confucius complains to Lao-tzu that he has been researching the works of the ancient sages for his life and that he thinks he has grasped the principles of their works but the kings never accept his ideas; Lao-tzu answers that the works of the sages are only the traces and that »the trace comes from the steps. Trace is, nonetheless, not the steps«; in the end, Lao-tzu emphasizes that what is more important than researching the traces, i.e. the works of the ancient sages, is to grasp *tao*, i.e. the way the things change in the universe (1999: 546). This story implies that Chuang-tzu considers what left the trace as more important than the trace. Chuang-tzu's argument is inspiring, but in my interpretation, it does not mean that the trace is not important at all. Rather, the trace is only referred to as the trace because it is regarded as something left over by something else. What left the trace is important because it is what left the trace that defines the trace. In other words, there is no trace in and of itself; the trace must be and can only be the trace of something else.

I argue that the force of writing in *shu-fa* is often left out when the ink line in *shu-fa* is not regarded as the trace but only as the line. What does it mean to regard it only as the line? It means that the configuration of the line in *shu-fa* is regarded only as the composition of white and black.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, the work of *shu-fa* is only like an image. Although one can still sense the dynamics, the sense of the dynamics comes more from the composition of white and black rather than the force that brings forth the line. The line in itself does not ask

2 | For different figures of the dot and the other strokes, see Billeter 1990: 58-59.

3 | See also Obert 2013: 533 f.

4 | For research on the composition of *shu-fa*, see Ch'iu Chen-chung 2005: 10 f.

one to trace back to the force. Therefore, the sense of the force is often left out. Only when one regards the ink line in *shu-fa* as the trace of the forces does the line ask one to trace back to the forces that bring forth that line. In other words, to regard them as the trace of force is also to trace the force.

## SE AND THE SENSE OF WEIGHT

In the tradition of *shu-fa*, the most fundamental principle in manoeuvring the force is *se*, which means the sense of roughness. Nonetheless, what does it mean, what is writing with the sense of roughness, what is the way to manoeuvre the force while writing with the sense of roughness? As Tsai Yong, the *shu-fa* artist in the Han dynasty, explained, to write with the sense of roughness is to manoeuvre the force as though »forging on while fighting against« (Huan Chien 1981: 5). Nonetheless, fighting against what? For Liu Hsi-tsai, the *shu-fa* artist in the Ching dynasty, it means »to move the ink brush forward but as if there is some resistance force and so one has to use more force to fight against it« (1981: 710). Liu Hsi-tsai's explanation indicates that when writing with the sense of roughness, one must not only exert the force to move the ink brush on the paper but also sense the resistance force into which the brush runs when it goes over the paper. What one has to fight against is the resistance force. While writing, one must let the resistance force interact with the force being exerted. Nonetheless, to let in the resistance force does not mean to become stagnant. Rather, the resistance force must be overcome so that the ink brush can be moved forward. It is important to note that this overcoming of the resistance force here must be like fighting against it. How to have the sense of overcoming like fighting against? For me the answer is in the sense of weight. I argue that it is important to let in the weight of the writer's body. To let in the weight means to let in the weight as the gravitational force that can bring on more resistance force so that one has more sense of fighting against. When one is indifferent about the gravitational force and writes only with the exertional force, there is still a resistance force, but that resistance force is only the indispensable one. When the resistance force is completely overcome, there is no fight. To write with the sense of roughness, it is important to *let in* the weight of the body.

The sense of the weight is also implied in the term *luo-pi*, which indicate the movement of *beginning to write*. In Chinese, this term means *to let the brush (pi) fall (luo)*. It implies that the weight of not only the brush but also the writer's body must be *let in* as the gravitational force in or before the beginning of writing. This is related to the posture of the hand that holds the ink brush. In the tradition of *shu-fa*, the hand is often suspended in the air while writing. This gives the wrist and the hand more space to move around while writing. Nonetheless, to suspend the hand in the air means to suspend the weight at the same

time. As the term *luo-pi* implies, to suspend the weight is intended to let the weight fall as the brush is let fall onto the paper when one begins writing. In short, to sense the weight of the body is important to the way of manoeuvring the force in the tradition of *shu-fa*.

## TRACE OF FORCE IN LIN HWAI-MIN'S *WATER STAINS ON THE WALL*

Having traced the force and explained the sense of weight in *shu-fa*, I argue that it is also important to regard Lin Hwai-min's dances, which are inspired by *shu-fa*, as the trace of the forces. In other words, it is important to trace the forces. How are the forces in the dance and music in Lin Hwai-min's works inspired by *shu-fa*? Being inspired by *shu-fa*, Lin Hwai-min also noticed the importance of the forces. While he was choreographing the first dance inspired by *shu-fa*, he asked the dancers to learn *shu-fa* and to forget the outer form of their body and the Chinese character while dancing. Whether the dancer forgot the form or not for me the choreographer did not. The dance in *Cursive* (2001), which is the first work inspired by *shu-fa*, is still rather based on the outer form of the Chinese character. As the dancers wearing black clothes dance against the white background on the lighted stage, they are like the Chinese characters. The figure of the dancer's body is changing like the figure of the Chinese character is changing while being formed. In a scene in *Cursive*, the dancer dances in front of a screen on which the ink trace emerges at the same time. Since the dance movement corresponds to the movement of the ink trace, from which the Chinese character *yung* is formed, the dance is like writing. In a later scene, the dancer wearing clothes with long sleeves dances to the side of and in front of one Chinese character on the screen. The long sleeves swaying and circling in the air are also like the ink lines of the character. It is clear that these scenes are intended to make the figure of the dancer's body like the figure of the Chinese character.

Although these scenes are often mentioned in the research to argue for the correlation between the dance and writing,<sup>5</sup> these scenes are somewhat limited by the outer form of the body and the Chinese character. As I have argued, when one regards the ink line only as the line in itself and regards the configuration of the lines in *shu-fa* only as the composition, the sense of force is often left out. It is the same with the dance. The correlation of the dance and writing for which the researchers argued with these scenes is based more on the outer form rather than the force, which is important to the tradition of *shu-fa*. How are the forces used in the aforementioned dance scenes? In the scene in which the dance movement corresponds to the movement of the ink trace on the screen, since the dancer faces the audience instead of the Chinese

5 | For example, see Szeto 2010: 424-425; Schwan 2015: 137.

character on the screen, the movement of writing, the stroke going downwards from right to left, becomes the movement going downwards from left to right in the dance. The dancer's movement is opposite of the writing movement. In the scene in which the dancer wears black clothes with long sleeves, although the dancer faces the character on the screen in the beginning, her movement is not the same movement as writing that character on the screen. Instead, her movement is intended to make the figure with the long sleeves swaying and circling in the air like the figure of that Chinese character. Therefore, the correspondence between the figure of the dancer's body and the figure of the Chinese character should not be regarded as an indication of the correspondence between the force of the dance and the force of writing.

It is in Lin Hwai-min's *Water Stains on the Wall* that the sense of weight, which is important to the tradition of *shu-fa*, becomes more manifest because of the unusual stage setting: the stage is slightly inclined to the downstage. The inclined stage requires the dancer to sense their weight to retain the balance while dancing. The weight is let in more often as the gravitational force with which the dancer retains the balance. As the dancer springs, the sense of weight is often still retained. The weight is overcome, but the weight is not overcome as if one can completely escape from the weight so that one can dance lightly without the weight. Rather, the weight is only being suspended. It reminds me of the posture of the hand that holds the ink brush in the *shu-fa* tradition: to suspend the weight is intended to let the weight fall. The force in the dance in *Water Stains on the Wall* is closer to the sense of roughness in the tradition of *shu-fa*. In another scene, the dancer's spring was imposing because of the sense of weight it manifests. The dancer's spring there is not intended to manifest the lightness in the air but the heaviness of landing on the ground. Although the ground is slightly inclined, when the dancer lands after that spring, she is not once in danger of losing her balance. The weight falls on the stage but it falls to retain the balance. The force of the dancer's landing reminds me of the imagery in Wei Sho's treatise, which describes the force of writing the dot stroke: »rock's falling from the mountain, clonking while falling down« (1981: 22). Here the dancer's landing is like the rock's falling. It also results in a sound of »clonk«. It is not only the falling that is indispensable because of the weight. Rather, the weight is *let in* as the gravitational force that results in the landing that is like *anchoring down* or, more precisely, *beating down to* the stage. The weight is suspended to be let fall to retain the balance.

The music in *Water Stains on the Wall* is composed by the Japanese contemporary composer Hosokawa Toshio. As Hosokawa mentioned, it is the Western contemporary music, which is concerned with not only the harmonic relation of the tones but also, and more importantly, the existence of the tone, that makes him re-listen to Japanese traditional music, which praises the transience of the tone (Hosokawa 2015). In Japanese traditional music, there are continu-

ous changes of the tones, which make one take note of how the tones emerge and die out and therefore sense the existence of the tone. Hosokawa's music is inspired by Japanese traditional music in this respect. In his works, the transience of the existence of the tones is also emphasized through the continuous changes of the tones that emerge through different performing techniques. I argue that the music in *Water Stains on the Wall* should also be regarded as the trace of forces.

The music in the scene in which the dancer's weight is emphasized through the dancer's spring is Hosokawa's composition *Fragmente I* (1988), which is composed for the traditional Japanese instruments *shakuhachi* (the flute), *koto* (the zither with the bridges) and *sangen* (the plucked lute). Although the music is contemporary, it relates to the tradition of these instruments, in which the different performing techniques are intended for the different changes of the tones. For example, in one of the most ancient Japanese scores of *koto* music, *Jinchi Yoroku*, there are already indications of the different performing techniques, including the techniques to pluck the string outward or inward with the thumb or the forefinger of the right hand, the techniques to slide along the string or to do a circling movement with the finger of the left hand while pressing the string etc. (Yeh Tung 2001, 78ff.). In Hosokawa's *Fragmente I*, the performing techniques are clearly not limited to the traditional techniques. As the music has broken away from the traditional harmonic relation and rhythm, the changes of the tones have also become more drastic. Through these drastic changes of the tones, one can also sense how drastic the forces that the musicians used to perform are. There are the forces such as slashing, gliding etc. Most of these forces in music are strong and harsh, and the sense of the forces in the music is often influenced by the sense of the force in the dance. For example, when I hear the strong and harsh tones of the *sangen* along with the subtle tones of the *koto* right after I hear the »clonk«-sound of the dancer's landing with the fall of weight, I have the sense that those strong and harsh tones in the music also come from a fall, as if there was also a fall of weight in the music. While I sensed the roughness in the dance in which the sense of weight is retained, the roughness of the tone of the *shakuhachi*, which often begins so quiet and becomes louder, was also like the roughness I sensed in the dance. In short, as I regard the dance and music as the trace of forces and trace those forces, I find myself becoming immersed in those forces that correspond to each other.

## WATER STAINS AS TRACE OF WEIGHT

*Water Stains on the Wall*, the name of Lin Hwai-min's dance, is the imagery mentioned in a conversation between Huai Su and Yen Chen-c'hing, the *shu-fa* artists in the T'ang dynasty: After listening to Huai Su's explanation that

he learned *shu-fa* from »the cloud in summer that often merges and surges in the form of the strange mountain« and that writing has to be like »the way the wall ruptures«, Yen Chen-ch'ing said in the end, »how about being like the rain leaking into the room?« Huai Hsu rose from his seat and said, »you have grasped it [the essence of *shu-fa*]«. (Huang Chien 1981: 283) It is important to note that although the imagery is translated as *Water Stains* for Lin Hwai-min's work, in Chinese it is actually *the trace of the rain leaking into the room* (*wu-luo-hen*). Here the imagery of the trace of the rain is not concerned with the form of the trace. Instead, it is concerned with the unpretentiousness of the trace of the rain leaking into the room. Leaking, as I see, also implies the weight, and what can be more unpretentious than the act of the weight?

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