

**Between the Real and the Imagined:  
*White Snake Variations*, Front Stage and Back Stage**

**Cheng Shu-gi (TUNG CHEN Shu-Gi)**  
Taipei National University of the Arts

**Introduction**

*White Snake*, a Chinese folktale with never-fading popularity, is famous for its examination of the tragic distinction between incarnation and incarceration. When performed as a traditional Chinese Opera, *White Snake* almost always invites tears throughout its full-scale performances spanning multiple evenings. Its story remains a frequent subject for adaptation as modern drama for movie scripts and television episodes.

The story of the *White Snake* is as follows: Once upon a time, the spirits of the White Snake (Bai Su-Zhen) and Green Snake fall in love with an upright, young scholar named Hsu Hsien. To be near him, they transform themselves into the forms of a lady and her maid. The White Snake causes rain to fall and seduces Hsu Hsien when he offers his umbrella. After their marriage, the White Snake reveals her original form by accident. The terrified Hsu Hsien flees to seek help from a Buddhist monk, Fa Hai. Fa Hai captures the White Snake with a Buddhist spell and imprisons her under a pagoda. Hsu Hsien then realizes his betrayal to his beloved wife and the destruction of her happiness. Through baseless fear, a loving couple was tragically torn apart. However, their union produced a son, Hsu Shi-lin, who starts another chapter of this long-lasting folktale.

In 1975, greatly inspired by its Chinese Opera version, Lin Hwai-min of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre condensed *White Snake* into a 25-minute dance entitled *The Tale of the White Serpent*. Between September of 1975 and July of 2007, 455 performances were staged.<sup>1</sup> These performances were only possible through the hard work of Wu Su-chun, who performed as White Snake over 150 times; Yeh Tai-chu, who performed as Hsu Hsien (Scholar) and Fa Hai (Monk) about 150 times; and Lo Man-fei, who performed as White Snake 50 times<sup>2</sup>. I performed as the White Snake (about 15 times) and Green Snake (over 85 performances).



Poster of *The Tale of the White Serpent*, choreographed by Lin Hwai-min for Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. Photo by: Yao Mong-Chia (top) and Wang Shin (bottom). Used by permission.

In 1994, Wu Su-chun, Yeh Tai-chu, Lo Man-fei and I retired from Cloud Gate Dance Theatre and jointly established the Taipei Crossover Dance Company to pursue a long-term goal of breaching the boundary between dance and life. Inspired by Jiri Kylian's (1947-) Netherlands Dance Theatre III, we dreamed of spreading the aesthetics and art of dance to a younger generation of dancers. In 1994, at age 39 Lo Man-fei was the youngest among the four of us. Although we were all at a challenging age for professional dancers, we were not deterred from our pursuit of dancing our dream of innovation.

In 1995, we were privileged to participate in a collaboration with the noted, Hong Kong-based choreographer Helen Lai<sup>3</sup>, who injected new life into the Crossover. Inspired by the classic Chinese Opera *White Snake* and *The Tale of the White Serpent*, as choreographed by Lin Hwai-min for Cloud Gate, Helen Lai choreographed *White Snake Variations* for the Crossover Dance Company. Her work was warmly welcomed by audiences in Taiwan. Helen Lai would eventually work with the Crossover four more times<sup>4</sup> between 1995 and 2004.

*White Snake Variations* (referred to as *Variations* from this point on) stands out for its uniqueness: it contains tremendous volumes of dialogue and multiple spatial-temporal pacing, all with mixed and changing properties. Instead of a narrative to connect the ten sections of the dance, we wave our limbs to produce a montage effect, which marks the difference between being on and off stage. We, the dancers, express our emotions towards performing the first act of *White Serpent* by showing our inner conflicts about the dance and conveying events from our personal lives. The four of us perform both as ourselves and as the roles we assume: these roles are who we are, on the inside and

the outside. It is this blurring distinction between fact and fantasy which has profoundly fascinated me as a dancer, and led me to critically reflect upon *Variations*. Viewers are purposefully intrigued to wonder about these “crossing overs” between life and art, whether they are sitting in front of the stage, or standing behind the curtains and peeking into the dancers’ private rooms, seeing them as real people struggling to prepare for their first performance of *White Serpent*.

The purpose of this study is to analyze *Variations* for its classical heritage as well as to document the challenges it poses to the dancers. Since I am one of the dancers in the process of composing and performing *Variations*, I hope to offer a diverse range of observations, analysis, and conclusions. Additionally, through interviews with Helen Lai (choreographer of *Variations*), Wu Su-chun, and Yeh Tai-chu (performers of *Variations*), my reflections upon *Variations* will explicitly examine both sides of the curtain, i.e. – the many details of the performance including stage voices, stage lines, and stage music, as well as the role confusion portrayed and then realized through the use of replication, reversal, and rearrangement.

### **Unique Aspects of *White Snake Variations***

Divided into ten sections, without any specific plot, *Variations* attempts to portray a “real unreality” as well as an “unreal reality.” Actually, the original Chinese title invokes the word “legend,” literally translated into English as variations of the White Snake legend, a term that evokes the notion of collage. Hence, *Variations* can be construed as a tale that explores the differences between what is seen and what is perceived, between what is real and what is imagined.

In the following sections, I will discuss and analyze four of the unique aspects of *Variations*: (1) integration of personal lives of dancers, (2) innovative uses of stage, sets, and props, (3) intriguing dialogues and monologues, and (4) taking on and off costumes on stage.

#### **1. Integration of Personal Lives of Dancers**

In performing *Variations*, we were encouraged to connect our daily lives with what we were to perform on stage. This connection attempted to dissolve the distinctions between daily realities and stage scripts. We, the dancers, were asked to write our own personal stories and then intertwine our narratives with the original plot of *White Snake*. Every movement on stage was meant to provoke the audience to ask the question: Is this a drama in life or a life in drama?

The four dancers, who had been performing Lin Hwai-min’s *White Serpent* since 1975, struggled to meet the respective challenges presented by this novel staging. By conducting regular discussions between the choreographer (Helen Lai) and

the four dancers, we managed to integrate our personal life experiences into our roles. Though this integration of dancers' experiences can be found in all ten sections of the piece, I will discuss only three particular examples.

- a. Man-fei's Solo: A dance expressing the conflicts between preparation and performance caused by the anxiety of being unfamiliar with performing classical Oriental roles.

In 2006, the choreographer related to me in an interview how Man-fei was deeply frustrated when performing *White Serpent* for the first time in 1979. Man-fei was new to Cloud Gate, she was not a college graduate of dance, and she was not familiar with the formal disciplines of Chinese Opera. Besides feeling distant from the vocabularies and movements of Chinese Opera, Man-fei was inclined towards occidental or Western dance styles. This last issue seemed to be the decisive factor impacting her performances of White Snake. She noted that, in this case, practice just did not make perfect. She was unable to persuade herself of her ability to be as graceful and delicate as the White Snake performed by Wu Su-chun. This inner conflict was then written into the first and eighth sections of *Variations*. On the stage of *Variations*, she put powder on her face and danced solo across a bridge between East and West – a distinction representing her actual uneasiness with the stage performance of this piece.

- b. A duet by Tai-chu and Su-chun: A dance exploring reality and unreality.

In *White Serpent*, Tai-chu performed the role of Hsu Hsien (the husband) and Su-chun performed the role of Bai Su-Zhen (the wife). This stage relationship actually coincided with their roles in real life; at that time, they were indeed a couple. But, on stage, Tai-chu sometimes also played the role of the Buddhist monk Fa Hai, who stood between the married couple Hsu Hsien and Bai Su-Zhen (White Snake). As a result, the triple identities of Tai-chu caused notable confusion on stage and off stage.

- c. Shu-gi's solo: A dance expressing hesitation, struggle, and contradiction.

In *White Serpent*, Green Snake is a role requiring great physical strength, performance skills, and emotional expressions – significant challenges and pressures for me as the dancer. In fact, though I experienced great love for this role, I also felt overwhelmed by its actual performance. However, it is from playing this role that I really matured as a dancer.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this role demanded so many refined details, that I managed only after many years of effort to feel that I had found an inroad into

the nuances of this performance. Keenly observing my struggles, the choreographer inserted this subtle conflict into my solo in section three of *Variations*. She even asked me to shake my whole body while putting on the Green Snake costume to express the struggle.

## 2. Innovative Uses of Stage, Sets, and Props

Choreographer Helen Lai showed her talent not only as a choreographer, but also as a stage designer in several sections of *Variations*. For instance, she partitioned the stage into different spaces and created the effect of a post-modern collage, which provided the possibility of spatial-temporal transformations for dancers to pass between reality and illusion, contrast and conflict, and between what is supposed to be seen and unseen. Here are some of the examples:

An upstage support-frame was used as a costume hanger, which simultaneously served as the staging for dancers to show backstage activities.

In section 1, Man-fei sat in front of a mirror doing her make-up, while other dancers passed around her – as if the audience was actually viewing backstage activities.

In section 7, the stage was decorated as a dressing room. In her solo, Su-chun fiddled with costumes to create a fascinating, visual effect building up to an image of a dancer searching for her true role on and off the stage.

Two different stage-spaces were used to reveal two different realities of life.

In section 5, Tai-chu and Su-chun performed a romantic duet on the floor as if making love in bed. At the same time, I laid on a red table for a solo dance mimicking a painful delivery. Both scenes occurring on two different stage spaces revealed two different realities of life<sup>6</sup>.

In the last section of *Variations*, the support-frame serving as a costume hanger was slowly raised while all the dancers turned their backs to the audience and took off their costumes one piece after another, leaving only their under-skirt. Suddenly, bright lights illuminated from upstage and the dancers dashed forward as if they were about to begin a performance – leaving the audience feeling as if they were backstage with the performers. Then the lights faded-out, and the curtain call began.

In *Variations*, two umbrellas were used as props: a

colorful, huge umbrella held by Tai-chu, who performed alternately as Hsu Hsien and as himself in section 6, and a smaller, traditional-paper umbrella used for the aesthetic flirtation between Tai-chu and Su-chun.

Two fans were also used in the performance: a golden fan, held by Tai-chu and Su-chun in section 2; and a shiny, blue fan, held by Man-fei in section 4.

*Variations* also used wigs and hair as props. In different sections, Su-chun and Man-fei took their wigs on and off to express their frustrations and nervousness back-stage as they prepared to perform. In section 9, Tai-chu manipulated Hsu Hsien's wig as if it was a dance prop. As I had very long hair, Helen Lai asked me to loosen my hair and use it for more expressive visual effects. Besides taking advantage of the dancers' long sleeves the same way, the choreographer also incorporated the use of combs and cosmetics for the back-stage scenes.

A red, tailor-made table was left on stage for multiple theatrical functions – as a dressing table, for a scene of competition between dancers, a delivery bed, or just as a plain table of everyday life. The great versatility of this table – as borrowed directly from traditional Chinese Opera, produced amazing results on stage. Undoubtedly, the choreographer knew just how to extract the essence of classic Chinese Opera to realize a post-modern collage effect.

### **3. Intriguing Dialogues and Monologues**

In *Variations*, the dancers did a great number of dialogues and monologues which required the dancers to be able to simultaneously negotiate the precise timings of dancing and speaking. In my interviews, all the dancers recalled the great challenge of measuring and adjusting lines for their rhythm, volume, and intensity; it took serious practice to accurately recite the dialogue (or monologue) while dancing. Trained only as dancers, Man-fei and I had to learn to catch the tricky inhale or exhale between words, all while matching the dancing tempo and dramatic plots to the music. It was quite a task to hold the rhythm while reading lines and moving limbs.

Tai-chu, for example, acknowledged that *Variations* demanded much more than dancing alone. For him, the dancing and the reading of lines carried the same weight. For instance, between the reciting of lines, there might have been a long pause into which a clear-cut limb movement must fit to achieve the effect of overall connection. He recalled experiencing so much stress

with the monologue in his solo when trying to achieve this movement-text relationship. Several lines were recited quite out of context. He had to move his limbs and make other movements to connect the dots of words – a difficult, but valuable skill for dancers to acquire<sup>7</sup>. I would like to give two specific examples:

a. Dialogue between Su-chun and Tai-chu in section 2:

Borrowed from the script for *White Snake*, the lines below were mixed with what was actually happening in the lives of Tai-chu and Su-chun. The middle name of *White Snake*, Bai Su-Zhen, coincides with the middle name of the dancer, Wu Su-chun. This overlap is used to create fantasy, intricacy, and intrigue:

Su-chun:

My last name is Wu, and my first name is Su-chun;  
My husband's last name is Yeh, and his first name is Tai-chu.  
My child is Yeh Tian-chan. [These are their actual names.]  
My last name is Bai, and my first name is Su-Zhen,  
My husband's last name is Hsu, and his first name is Hsien.  
My child is Hsu Shi-lin. [These are their role names.]  
My last name is Wu, and my first name is Su-Zhen.  
My husband's last name is Hsu, and his first name is Tai-chu,  
My child is Yeh Shi-lin.  
My name is Bai Su-chun, my husband is Fa Hai, and  
My child is Xia Qing. [Here, their names are jumbled and mixed.]  
From 1975 [the first year of *White Serpent*] to now, I have been  
called Bai Su-Zhen. From 1978 [the year of their marriage] to now,  
my husband has been called Yeh Tai-chu. From 1978 [the year their  
daughter was born] to now, my child has been called Yeh Tian-chan.  
Since 1953 [the year of her birth], I have been called Wu Su-chun.  
My husband is called "Big Daddy" [Yeh Tai-chu's actual nick name  
as used by Cloud Gate dancers]. My child is called Yeh Tian-chan.

Tai-chu:

My last name is Hsu, and my first name is Hsien.  
My wife is called Lady Bai. My child is called Yeh Tian-chan.  
My name is Yeh Tai-chu, and my wife is Xia Qing.  
My name is Fa Hai, and my wife is Wu Su-chun.  
My child is Yeh Tian-qi [their second daughter].

Tai-chu: I am Yeh Tai-chu.

Su-chun: I am Bai Su-Zhen.

Tai-chu: You are Wu Su-chun.

Su-chun: You are Hsu Hsien.

Tai-chu: I am Hsu Hsien.

Su-chun: I am Wu Su-chun.

Tai-chu: You are Bai Su-Zhen.

Su-chun: You are Yeh Tai-chu.

Tai-chu: You are Fa Hai.

Su-chun: Are you Fa Hai?<sup>8</sup>

b. Dialogue between Man-fei and Shu-gi in section 4.

In *White Serpent*, Wu Su-chun, Lo Man-fei, and Cheng Shu-gi had performed Bai Su-Zhen, or White Snake, for many years. In *Variations*, the choreographer exaggerated our competitiveness for the back-stage performance. Parts of our dialogue follow<sup>9</sup>:

Shu-gi: In 1978, I was Bai Su-Zhen, because Su-chun delivered a baby [a fact]. Meanwhile, Hsu Hsien was petrified by the true appearance of White Snake.

Man-fei: In 1981, I was Bai Su-Zhen, and we went to Europe for our performance [also fact]. Meanwhile, Lady Bai [Bai, as in “White” for the White Snake] was trapped and locked up under Lei Feng Tower [pagoda] by Fa Hai’s gold bowl.

Shu-gi: Not that early, was it? In 1981, I was still Bai Su-Zhen [a fact]; that year, Lady Bai [White Snake] stole magic herbs to save Hsu Hsien.

Man-fei: In 1980, I was already Bai Su-Zhen (with a triumphant tone); in the same year, I injured my knee [a fact]; however, Lady Bai already met Hsu Hsien in Broken Bridge [the place they first met in the story].

Shu-gi: Not that early, was it? The same year, Hsu Hsien and Fa Hai went to the mountain, and Lady Bai was looking for him. Whatever, I was there!

Man-fei: In 1979, you were not Bai Su-Zhen; that year, you delivered a baby [a fact]. Whatever, I was there! (Delivered with a confrontational tone.)

Shu-gi: Not that early, was it? In the same year, Lady Bai dispatched soldiers of lobsters and crabs to flood Jin-shan Temple. Whatever, I was there!

At the end of the dialogue, Man-fei and Shu-gi grabbed lipstick and powder puff to do our make-up and turned our faces into Japanese geishas. Finally, we both jumped onto the table for a stage fight. At the same time, from the accompanying recorded music, a woman repeatedly says “I was there” to emphasize the motivation for this scene.

After some chaotic moments of stage fighting, Man-fei ended the fight by pulling my long hair straight. The choreographer then wrote my delivery of my daughter into the lines. With a disappointed voice, I read the lines, “In 1979, I was not Bai Su-Zhen; I was lying on the delivery bed for my baby.”<sup>10</sup> This scene is followed by that of my daughter’s delivery on the red table.

#### 4. Taking on and off Costumes on Stage

Four sections of *Variations* depicted how the dancers struggled between putting on and taking off their costumes in order to express their inner-conflicts – a tricky staging device to reach

and enrich the dance steps. In short, it was difficult for the dancers to find a good angle for picking up or dropping the costumes between the dance steps. The measurements of the time and space between steps definitely needed extensive practice. I will show how the dancers were able to do so in section 3 and 9.

**Section 3:** In an interview with Helen Lai, I told her that I loved to perform Green Snake, but always worried about not performing the character well. The choreographer suggested I try to express this feeling by trembling as I put on my costume. That is, I would express my anxiety about my performance through the awkwardness, initially, in taking the costumes on and off. This clumsiness perfectly expressed my troubled feelings towards the role of Green Snake – a feeling of love and worry about not being able to bring out the best character possible. I embodied these feelings into myself, such that when performing Green Snake, I actually portrayed myself. Only after countless practices and rehearsals did I manage to find the right way to quickly put on the costumes I just took off with nervous actions. As I learned to smooth my movements while sliding in and out of the slippery silk costumes, I finally mastered the necessary expressiveness of the steps.

**Section 9:** In this section, Man-fei carried on an extensive dialogue with the other three dancers as she danced across the stage to put on – piece by piece – the costume she had just removed in the previous section. But, the pieces of costume were never left in the same place - thereby injecting an element of improvisation into every performance of this section. Amazingly, Man-fei always managed to keep the necessary timing for her performance.



*White Snake Variations* (1995), a piece by Helen Lai for Taipei Crossover Dance Company. Back-stage scene presented on stage as performed in Aachen, Germany in 1996. Photo by Tang Ching-jung. Used by permission.

In 1996, *Variations* continued its second season in Aachen and London. However, at both theaters, the ceilings were too low for the support frame to rise for the final scene. In order not to ruin the crucial ending, and therefore affect the underlying spirit of *Variations*, the choreographer worked with us to find a solution. After much discussion, she decided we would not only turn our backs on the audience, but also take off all our costumes and dash in nude into the spaces between the costumes hanging from the frame. None of us had ever exposed ourselves to full nudity. However, to be true to the spirit of the scene, we performed this new choreography, which was very warmly received.

In November, 1998, at the invitation of the 17<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Art Festival of Asia in Hong Kong, Su-chun, Tai-chu, Man-fei, and Shu-gi performed *White Serpent* together for the last time. At the same event, we also performed *Variations*, *Requiem*, and *The Dark Side of the Moon*, although, we were already in our mid-forties and certainly felt the physical challenges of this combination of dances. For example, right after *White Serpent* and *Variations*, Man-fei performed the dance titled *Requiem*, which is a solo piece choreographed by Lin Hwai-min involving spinning in place over 300 times. Afterwards, the other three dancers performed the 40-minute piece titled *The Dark Side of the Moon*<sup>11</sup>, which was one of Man-fei's classic works and one of the most popular in the history of the Crossover. Although we were exhausted, we felt satisfied with our achievements. We had danced well at this festival, beyond the usual age depicting careers of dancers. Moreover, our latest work allowed us to really inhabit our roles. That is, we danced just as we were, on and off the stage.

## Conclusion

Seventeen performances of *Variations* have taken place between 1995 and 2000: 4 were in Taiwan and 13 were overseas. Since then, *Variations* has disappeared from the stage. Its last performance was in the year 2000 in Beijing. Unfortunately, *Variations* can no longer be performed, as Lo Man-fei passed away in 2006. For this reason, I have tried to keep the memory of *Variations* alive with this paper. In fact, I feel *Variations* deserves a place in the history of dance.

From the many performances of Cloud Gate's *White Serpent* in Hong Kong, choreographer Helen Lai had already learned much about the discipline and expertise of specific dancers in the company. Still, as she was working on her choreography, she sought to know them better by conducting interviews with the dancers in person or collecting materials about them. From my interview with Su-chun, she recalled how just a few words were enough to inspire Helen Lai to choreograph long phrases of steps, while complex stories would be condensed into details of staging or performance. In this way, Lai was able to construct the necessary movements, monologues, and dialogues from the

personal stories of the dancers. More importantly, this construction was a process of manipulation, interpretation, and invention, which invited the dancers to reflect upon their own careers and personal lives.

When *Variations* was performed in Europe in 1996, some of us were concerned about the language barrier. As it turned out, we did not need to worry. The audience reacted as if they understood every word of Chinese. Apparently, our limbs and movements were just as effective as words. Later, we performed *White Serpent* and *Variations* on the same stage in Malaysia in 1997 for a show dramatically comparing and contrasting what is seen on stage (*White Serpent*) and what is unseen off stage (*Variations*). We were thrilled at the tremendously warm response of the audience. Afterwards, during a discussion with the audience, we entered into deep conversations about our performances. We even discussed whether actual identity confusion or confrontation might have improved our dancing. After these conversations, I was convinced that *Variations* was much more important and far-reaching than a piece of choreography.

As I wrote this essay, I also recalled the significance of *The Tale of the White Serpent* to my career. At one point in time, this particular piece deeply frustrated me. I remember I was so disappointed with my ability to perform this piece so that I almost gave up dancing. Later, as I trained for and performed *White Snake Variations*, my original frustrations served instead to inspire me by invoking the delicate, turbulent relationships between real life and dance, after all, to dance is to tell stories about the ups and downs of life. Every dance asks the question: Do we dance as reality or does reality dance through us? One way, perhaps, *Variations* manages to answer this question by crossing, literally, the bridge between stage and life.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Tale of the White Serpent* archives of Cloud Gate Dance Theater.

<sup>2</sup> Based on figures obtained from the archives of Cloud Gate Dance Theater.

<sup>3</sup> From the biography of choreographer Helen Lai. See Attachment.

<sup>4</sup> See year-based schedule of collaboration between Helen Lai and Taipei Crossover Dance Company in Attachment.

<sup>5</sup> I had performed as Green Snake since 1975. By 1995 I had performed Green Snake in more than 80 performances with Cloud Gate Dance Theater. From Cheng Shu-gi's autobiography written in 1996. See p. 29 of Cheng Shu-gi's *Dance Performances: An Autobiography* (mimeograph).

<sup>6</sup> Tai-chu and Su-chun at that time were real couple, I gave birth to my only baby in 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Most of modern dancers in Taiwan were trained to be versatile in doing bodily movement without talking, so doing movement while talking needs a lot of practice. It is a special skill. From interview with Yeh Tai-chu on March 11, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Dialogue in *White Snake Variations*, written by choreographer Helen Lai and compiled by the author.

<sup>9</sup> Monologue in *White Snake Variations*, written by choreographer Helen Lai, and compiled by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *The Dark Side of the Moon*, a piece choreographed by Lo Man-fei in 1998, had a total of 30 performances (11 in Taiwan and 19 abroad).

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## **Biographical Information**

CHENG Shu-gi (TUNG CHEN Shu-Gi) is an Associate Professor, Chair of Dance, Taipei National University of the Arts; she received an MFA from Texas Christian University. She is the founding dancer, choreographer, and rehearsal director of Cloud Gate Dance Theater (1973-1987), (1991-1998), and has performed more than 500 performances with the company throughout the world. Cheng is also the founding member of Taipei Crossover Dance Company in 1994 and has performed with the company in more than 90 performances in Taipei and overseas, i.e., Jacob Pillows Dance Festival (USA), Hong Kong, New York, Germany, London, Malaysia, Beijing, and Kungcho. She has performed every year since 1968 for more than 40 years.