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Living Traditions: The Museum as a Platform for the Promotion and Conservation of Asian Puppet Theatre

Introduction

The mission of the Taiyuan Asian Puppet Theatre Museum in Taipei is the preservation, conservation and promotion of the living puppet theatre traditions of Asia. The museum collects and preserves theatre artefacts (over ten thousand puppets, stages, libretti, prints, instruments and related objects), while at the same time arranging performances and cultural exchanges between Asian puppet theatre companies and scholars (fig. 1). The museum also plays an active



Fig. 1 Early 20th century southern Chinese glove puppet.

role in the local community by means of educational programmes and performances. The museum has its own Nadou theatre and the Taiyuan Puppet Theatre Company, the latter having performed in over fifty

countries around the world. In this paper I will chart the process of building bridges between different regions and communities and how the museum can play a central role in inspiring and promoting Asian theatrical traditions.

Asian puppet theatre

The name Asian puppet theatre implies a certain unity that transcends the geographical boundaries of countries in the region. However, Asian puppet theatre is amazingly varied and divided into different genres: string, rod, glove and shadow puppets, and some types that are so peculiar that they cannot be categorised. If we want to describe some of the unifying aspects of Asian puppet theatre then its long history and its close relation to religious ritual are two key elements, another being the importance of music in almost every type of performance. For centuries, Asian puppet theatre has been musical theatre aimed at entertaining both gods and mortals. The gods are often on stage, presenting blessings, giving warnings and exorcising evil. As such, puppet theatre is the treasure house of Asian grass-roots religious culture, history, ethics and pure entertainment.¹

With the rise of the era of mass communication, puppets were rapidly exiled to the fringes of entertainment and all over Asia puppet theatre companies are disappearing. In many countries puppet theatre companies have become cultural icons representing local identity, but they perform mainly the same shows for an audience of tourists and local schoolchildren. Although there are increasingly less performances in an original context, they can still be found in almost every country. While actors and theatre performances have disappeared in the mist of times, puppets are kept often for many hundreds of years. They come to us with a vivacity as if they were made yesterday. The beauty of the puppets and the exquisite craftsmanship represent some of the richest theatre cultures in the world.

Eternity and mortality

Puppets never grow old. They are symbols of a shared local or sometimes national identity. The immortality of puppets relates closely to their origins in religious ritual and ancestral worship. The need to deal with concepts of death, disease and many other natural phenomena resulted in many different belief systems.²

Humanity started early with the visualisation of these religious beliefs through the making of paintings and statues. In all cultures there was (and is) a need for deities, ancestors and demons to manifest themselves, to comfort and expel evil. This resulted in many different expressions: music, dance, mediums, trance, and rituals with masked people and of course also puppets. Puppets and masks are the logical vehicles for expressing the eternal truths of beliefs as they are unchanging and can be handed down from generation to generation. Puppets also provide a distance between the operator and the awesome powers that it confronts, often expelling evil spirits that can seriously harm people that are unprotected. We thus find that specific puppets (as well as masks) are consecrated and worshipped in the house of the puppeteer when not used in performance. This specific element of Asian puppet theatre never changed. Until the present, the deities take to the stage and cleanse it with their presence and ritual and bless the community. Every performance of traditional Asian puppet theatre is embedded in religious ritual from beginning to end, in most cases the performance itself is an offering to the deities.³

The magic and reality of Asian puppet theatre and the importance of the museum

In order to understand the magic of Asian puppet theatre, I will have to take you on a trip, possibly on the back of a truck or on a motorcycle, over winding roads. At dusk we arrive in a village, a stage is erected, there is live music, food, lights, incense burning, prayer and ritual, people gather and then it starts... on the stage the legends, history and gods come alive through the puppets with an elegance that goes back to the roots of civilisation. The music is loud and beautiful and we are amazed by the colorful spectacle. Food and drinks are offered and we sit down to enjoy the spectacle. What happens next?

After some time we realise the less magical element of the performance: it becomes repetitive and we cannot follow the seemingly endless dialogue in the local dialect. We find the younger generation gathering in a shed nearby to watch *Terminator* or some other action video. Pensioners continue to watch the puppet show. Young children are mimicking the movements on stage, but do not follow the show. Uneasily we check our watches. The mosquitoes are really start to bite and tomorrow we have to get up early, and so we leave for our air-conditioned hotel room, yet with the feeling of having experienced something unique. In this rapidly changing climate, the museum has a central role of collecting artefacts, creating close ties with performers in order to identify objects, aid with conservation, and find ways to promote the beauty of this art.

The Taiyuan Asian Puppet Theatre Museum: an innovative approach to museum exhibitions, conservation, promotion and education

The economic boom of Taiwan in the 1980s also led to a renewed interest in its own culture and roots. Puppet theatre always had an important status in Taiwan, because of its many companies (over 300 professional companies), its puppet television station and puppet film industry. Collectors started to move into China to collect puppets on a large scale.



Fig. 2 Dr. Paul Lin.

Some of these collectors were inspired by puppet museums in the west, such as the former Kwok On museum in Paris of Jacques Pimpaneau, which had one of the most fantastic collections of Chinese

puppets in the world (now in the Museo do Oriente in Lisbon). Paul Lin, a Taiwanese art collector, travelled the world to buy exclusive works of art for his collection (fig. 2). One day, in a museum in Japan, he came face to face with a beautiful nineteenth-century southern Chinese glove puppet and being confronted with the puppet

was a moment of awakening. Paul Lin decided to focus all his collecting energy on the puppet theatre of Taiwan (and soon including the rest of Asia).

The collection grew steadily to almost 10,000 puppet theatre artefacts from all over Asia, with an emphasis on China and Taiwan. The Taiyuan Arts and Culture Foundation, founded by Paul Lin, attracted a number of specialists to take care of the collection.

In the 1990s, a planning committee was formed to analyse the function of a modern puppet theatre museum in an Asian/Chinese cultural context. We were faced with the following problems:

- How to promote (traditional) puppet theatre inside Taiwan, where the youth is mainly interested in televised entertainment and game consoles?
- How to design exhibitions that inspire the audience to get really involved in puppet theatre?
- How to preserve over 10,000 puppets made of a wide range of materials?
- How to promote Asian puppet theatre around the world and preserve its heritage?

The rapid economic development, the rise of the internet and mass media culture, has in many cases alienated the youth from traditional culture. The museum is a foreign concept and the majority of museums in Taiwan were founded after the 1980s. In order to lower the threshold of the museum it was imperative to use the theatrical elements of the collection.

Our first action was to create a puppet theatre company that would integrate traditional puppet theatre, as well as find new and innovative ways to present it.⁴ The Taiyuan Puppet Theatre Company was founded in 2000, and its members were: old master Chen Xihuang (69 year old at that time), young puppeteers and modern theatre trained actors and designers. The first two plays that were created, *Marco Polo* (fig. 3) and *The Wedding of the Mice*, used traditional techniques and puppets, but with



Fig. 3 Scene from Marco Polo.

modern stage techniques and design. These shows proved to be a great success and to date each show has been performed around the world. The innovative approach of the museum and theatre company has inspired numerous other companies to follow in its footsteps and create new ways of presenting traditional culture.

The company has continued to flourish and has performed in over 50 countries around the world, at venues such as the Purcell Room of the Royal Festival Hall and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the rainforests of Central America, the Traditional Opera Theatre in Hanoi, Union Square in San Francisco, the Macau Arts Festival, the Asian Performing Arts Festival in Seoul, Casa Mila in Barcelona, the National Gallery in Cape Town, the countryside of Cambodia and, of course, the squares and theatres of old Taipei. Several co-productions were created with other traditional Asian puppet theatre companies. *Monkey Kings* was performed with the Joe Louis Company from Bangkok, featuring five different Asian monkeys on stage. *Shadows of*

Love was a production performed at the National Theatre in Taipei and a co-production between the Beijing Shadow Theatre Troupe and the Cengiz Ozek Shadow Theatre from Istanbul. All these productions helped to provide a fresh focus on the traditional arts, without compromising the original forms. All of the Taiyuan Puppet Theatre Company's production use live music, which is the essence of traditional Asian puppet theatre, often combining different musical genres.

The Taiyuan Puppet Theatre Company also started an outreach school educational programme. In 2000, the Tao-Thiu-Thia Puppet Centre (TTT Puppet Centre) was founded as an experimental puppet centre to study what kind of exhibit could inspire visitors. All exhibits in this centre were accompanied by a DIY installation where people could operate and play with puppets. Rehearsals and puppet making were all done in the exhibition space. The very interactive nature of the exhibits combined with solid academic research of different puppet traditions resulted in a very successful mini-museum.

In 2005, two buildings in the old part of Taipei were donated to the Taiyuan Arts and Culture Foundation by Ms. Shi Jinhua to commemorate her husband, the physician Lin Liu-Hsin. The Lin Liu-Hsin Puppet Theatre (later re-named the Taiyuan Asian Puppet Theatre Museum) was founded with a four-storey museum, and a puppet theatre (fig. 4). Later another office building and storage facility was added.



Fig. 4 The museum building (left) and the theatre (right).

The museum continued with its style of interactive exhibitions based on in-depth research. It aims to present exhibitions that illustrate the local environment, paying attention to both the ethnographic context, as well as the aesthetics of the exhibits. Every exhibition is designed for three levels of visitors: schoolchildren, families and individual visitors, experts and performers. The museum is a private museum and receives no structural support from the government, although it is recognised by both the Ministry of Culture and the Taipei City Government as an established museum. Part of the museum's funding comes from the Taiyuan Arts and Cultural Foundation, as well as corporate sponsors. Over 50% of the budget is derived from performances, rent of the theatre, exhibitions, museum entrance fees and tours and occasional government sponsored projects. As with most museums, every year it is a struggle to make ends meet.

The museum continues to add to its collection of Asian puppet theatre artefacts. The collection policy is to have representative examples of every Asian tradition. In the age of mass communication many puppet theatre companies stopped performing. This onslaught happened at different periods in different Asian countries during the twentieth century, but the damage has been done and many puppets and objects have just withered away. The museum wants to avoid throwing money around to buy the puppet heritage directly from the hands of the puppeteers (although new puppets and artefacts are commissioned), and prefers to promote local conservation. Yet, if there is little interest, sometimes artefacts are bought from the companies. The number and availability of Asian puppets around the world is dwindling fast. The museum also advises other museums and helps with the identification of objects.

Cooperation

The museum actively reaches out to puppet theatre museums, collectors and performers across the region. This results in cooperation in the field of research, exhibitions, performances and publications.⁵

A recent example is the Southeast Asian Glove Puppet Theatre conference in December 2015, which was arranged with an exhibition and puppet festival,

and in which performers and researchers from different Asian traditions came together to study one another's work and exchange information. This resulted in the publication of a book (in English and Chinese), *Glove Puppet Theatre in Southeast Asia and Taiwan*, and continued exchanges between the companies (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Publication of *Potehi, Glove Puppet Theatre in Southeast Asia and Taiwan*, with its authors Kaori Fushiki (Japan), Sooi Beng Tan (Malaysia), Carol Chia (Singapore), Alex Ma and Huang Liwei (Taiwan), Josh Stenberg (U.S.) and Robin Ruizendaal (Taiwan).

The museum provides photos and other materials to researchers around the world while also organising exhibitions and educational projects. The museum has close ties with puppet museums in the region and advises museums under construction, for instance, the puppet theatre museum in Gudo, Java. International attention to local culture can often have a positive effect, as both the local government and population will start paying more attention to the traditional puppet art. At the same time it has an inspirational effect on the local puppet companies and cultural workers.

Conservation

The conservation department, led by conservator, Kim Siebert, comprises several trained specialists, volunteers and interns drawn from the local and international community. An essential premise of the Taiyuan Asian Puppet Theatre Museum is the close consultation with the living tradition of puppetry in Asia, i.e. the people who perform and create the puppets. Thus, conservation of the puppets and related artifacts is guided by the identification of

different types of knowledge and processes that contributed to their creation, interpretation and performance.⁶

The museum now has the most complete collection of Asian puppet theatre artefacts in the world, with an emphasis on the puppet theatre traditions of Taiwan and China. This resulted in the book *Asian Theatre Puppets*, by myself and photographer Wang Han-shun, published by Thames & Hudson in 2009. The collection policy is based on obtaining complete sets of puppets from different Asian traditions, together with stages, scripts and instruments, complemented by fieldwork and research. The conservation department fulfills all related collection care, preservation, and conservation tasks, including the facilitation of a dynamic local and international exhibition and loans schedule. The museum now has three floors of completely climate-controlled spaces for the storage of the different puppets (fig. 6). The department fosters continuous study, research and sensitivity to the interpretations,



Fig. 6 Curator Alex Ma in the conservation department.

handling and preservation of the collection. The many different physical materials, their sometimes fragile condition, and the cultural diversity of the collection present particular considerations, including their sacred functions in their communities of origin. In this context, the conservation department works closely with experts in the field drawn from across the globe. This working experience is shared through our dedication to an intake of interns from around the world who spend a few months with our conservation department studying conservation techniques of traditional puppets.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork has been conducted in most Asian countries since the early 1990s. These fieldwork visits are organised by the author in collaboration with local performers and experts. The museum staff is also often involved in fieldwork trips to better understand the different traditions. In many ways these trips are short ethnographic studies, sometimes participating in the process of making puppets to better understand its workings, such as making shadow puppets in Cambodia (fig. 7). The results of the fieldwork are translated into exhibitions, workshops and further exchanges.⁷



Fig. 7 Traditional shadow puppet making in Siem Reap, Cambodia, by Ms. Nap Phan.

During fieldwork contemporary examples of puppets and other artifacts are collected to compare with objects in the museum's collection. Film and photographic material is also collected and edited.

Education

The Taipei City Government Arts Education programme stipulates that all second year elementary school students have to visit a puppet museum and see a traditional performance. Over the past few years this has led to a huge influx of visitors (and income). The museum focus includes the younger generations but the exhibits also provide information for all different levels of visitors.

Another important educational program is Touch Taiwan. Over the period of three years, the Taiyuan museum and puppet theatre company has been working with different aboriginal groups on the project Touch Taiwan. The project touches the core of Taiwan: its original stories.⁸ Staff at Taiyuan wrote the stories into a play and then asked the aboriginal people to translate the story into their own languages. We then worked together with the aboriginal communities to construct the shadow puppets, and after that the play was rehearsed and performed for the community. During the rehearsals children were often very playful and naughty, but on the night of the performance, once seated behind the screen and with the lights turned on, they gave an excellent performance in their own language that made the Elders cry with emotion. This was a very rewarding programme that is now part of the curriculum in several aboriginal schools. The programme was copied in Canada when working with First Nations artists, and also in France and other parts of the world. The program is also used in our area in old Taipei to create stories with the inhabitants and encourage social interaction and communication of traditional knowledge.

The museum also organises professional classes for puppeteers and academic lectures on Asian puppet theatre. The professional classes include carving, puppet making, embroidery, etc.

Conclusion

The museum is again moving into a new phase, as in 2021 it will move to its new buildings still in the old

part of Taipei. The new venue will be the base of the collection and the museum will continue to function on a national and international platform in the promotion of the traditional arts. Over the past twenty years we have found that the climate for the promotion of the traditional arts has improved. Globalisation and rapid economic development have had negative influences on traditional arts. However, recently the need to establish a local identity in Taiwan, and also in other parts of Asia, has made both government and non-governmental organisations realise that education in the local culture is essential. These are all hopeful developments. The museum will certainly try to accommodate this need for education and promotion of the traditional arts and puppet theatre.

Endnotes

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Summary

Operating a museum of the traditional living Asian arts in Asia can pose many problems. Globalisation and the distancing of many Asian societies from their cultural roots in the era of mass media has created challenges on how to present traditional culture in a museum environment. Many young Asians are often far removed from their own traditional culture. In the case of traditional (puppet) theatre, this is rapidly losing its entertainment value, as well as its significance as a bearer of social and cultural values. The Taiyuan Asian Puppet Theatre Museum in Taipei is trying to preserve and promote the different Asian

puppet theatre traditions by making them accessible to a modern Asian audience. Collection and preservation are part of its mission, as is the education of the younger generation and the promotion of this unique Asian heritage around the world. In this paper I will chart how a private Asian art museum developed and how its goals are realised.

Author

Robin Ruizendaal holds a Ph.D. in sinology from Leiden University and is director of the Taiyuan Asian Puppet Theatre Museum in Taipei. He has done fieldwork on puppet theatre in China, Taiwan and most Asian countries and is the curator of numerous puppet theatre exhibitions. He has published widely on puppet theatre in Asia and has been living in Taiwan and China for over 30 years.

Title

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