

TAIWANESE

GLOVE PUPPET SHOW

Glove puppetry in Taiwan takes many forms and is performed with greatest vitality. Through a long process of change and development, glove puppetry was transformed into a unique style of Taiwanese drama possessing Taiwanese cultural characteristics. It can be seen in government-sponsored cultural events; in temple festivals; and even on television.

A glove puppet performance is a conglomeration of many different aspects of culture, integrating various dialects, folk music, carving, color painting, embroidery, and puppet manipulation techniques. The puppeteers are the head magicians, whose mastery of the language and hand techniques guides and controls the drama's overall flow. The carved wooden puppet heads and stages are a manifestation of ancient engraving techniques, and the embroidered garments worn by the puppets are an expression of history, culture, and the art of embroidery.

The puppeteer is the key player in a glove puppet performance, and his training is much more demanding than an ordinary actor's. The puppeteer must learn how to mimic the tones and phraseology of characters of different age and gender, such as the male leads (*sheng* 生 and *mo* 末), female lead (*dan* 旦), supporting male role (*jing* 淨), jester (*chou* 丑), and other miscellaneous roles (*za* 雜). The puppeteer must also learn how to manipulate puppets to perform complex actions—such as writing letters, drinking, and fighting with weapons—and ensure that each puppet does so in its own distinct style and tone. Lastly, the puppeteer must be a storyteller, presenting the entire plot all by himself. Consequently, a puppeteer must be able to “tell a thousand ancient stories from a single mouth, and create a million troops with ten fingers” (一口道盡千古事，十指弄成百萬兵).

The music used in Taiwanese glove puppetry has changed considerably since its inception. During the early stages, performances used fixed tunes and voices, such as traditional *nanguan* (南管) music and Chaozhou-style ballads. In the middle stages, the highly rhythmical music of *beiguan* (北管) became dominant. After the 1950s, pre-recorded music began to be dubbed into the background for performances given in commercial theaters. With the advent of puppet shows for television in the 1970s, performances not only used dubbed music that had undergone editing and rearrangement, but also gave every puppet specific types of songs and music in order to contrast and exaggerate their roles from other characters.

The small puppets used in classical glove puppetry were roughly 30 centimeters in height and had hand-carved wooden heads from which the character's age and sex could be determined. In addition, each puppet's head was colored according to its personality, with black indicating a rough and uncultured character, red representing a loyal and honest one, and green signifying a sinister and diabolical one.

The costumes worn by puppets were also symbolic and showed which traditional social class a character belonged to. For instance, aristocrats dressed in gorgeous garments embroidered with animals, birds, and flowers, while the general populace wore plain and simple attire. In the 1970s, the puppets were enlarged further from 45 to 90 centimeters in height with a natural head/body ratio for televised puppet shows. The costumes worn by these puppets became blander and plainer, and no longer placed emphasis on the embroidery, but instead, focused on the puppet's sex and character.

The stage sets used for glove puppet performances also underwent many drastic changes over time. Classic glove puppet shows were performed on ornamental wooden towers that were quite narrow. By the 1950s, puppet shows were being performed on wider stages in front of simple painted backdrops so as to give the larger puppets more room to maneuver. In the 1970s, televised puppetry had left the fixed stage behind and was using complicated, ever-changing, three-dimensional sets for its performances, giving an even greater range of freedom for the puppeteer to manipulate puppets.

Taiwanese glove puppetry is a drama that is deeply embedded in Taiwanese folk society. In a different era, it served as the Taiwanese people's best outlet for recreation and relaxation. Today, though no longer Taiwan's most important drama activity, glove puppetry continues to adjust to changing trends to offer a glamorous and appealing drama.