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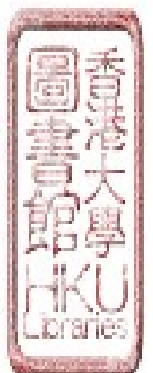
**VANISHING PUPPETS:
THE DEMISE OF A CHINESE TRADITIONAL ART FORM**

FRANCIS LAI SIU LUN

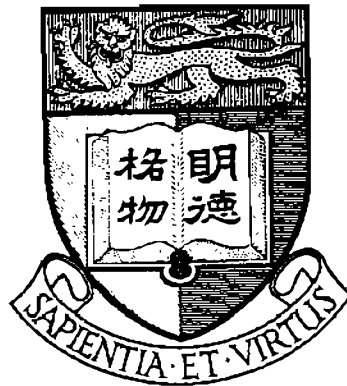
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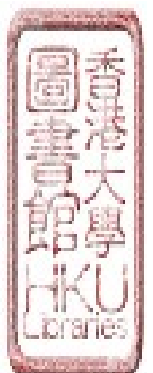
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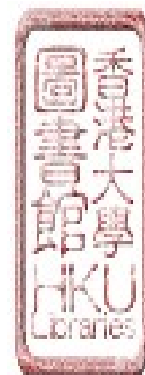


After getting all the set-ups ready, Yang Qing Yi, 52 years old and 190 pounds, leaps off the stage and rushes to the back to tell his troupe's puppeteers to get ready for the performance. This outdoor performance of Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group¹ at the football pitch in Shatin in the New Territories is going to start promptly at 7:30 p.m. Yang likes it that way. Even though there are only a few patrons scattered around the football pitch waiting for the show to begin, Yang is a professional, and professionals start on time.

The show begins. One puppet, shaking with exaggerated body movements, shouts to another, "Run, the flood is coming, we would be drowned!" The background music is a little scratchy and the narration is not clear. But the movement of the puppets is very lively. Unseen hands make it seem that a flood is coming.... and the puppets slowly submerge and appear to drown.

"If I don't keep performing these shows, the traditional Chinese puppet arts in Hong Kong will vanish," Yang Qing Yi will say later. "I am now forced to seriously consider my total retirement from the field because I am very frustrated!"

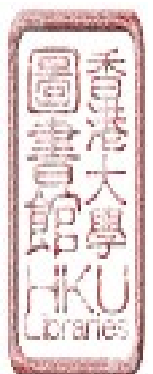
¹ The Chinese name of the Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group is 香港飛鵬木偶藝術團



If he carried out his threat to retire, it would be bad news for the puppet arts. Yang owns Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group, one of only two active traditional Chinese puppet troupes in Hong Kong. This compares with nearly ten troupes in the 1970s and 1980s. The word “vanishing” is appropriate to describe the traditional puppet scene in Hong Kong.

During outdoor performances, Yang always wears a dirty grey shirt, black overcoat and deep-blue trousers. No need for a puppeteer to dress well because a puppeteer always hides in the small, crowded space of the puppet stage. The audience sees only the puppets, never the puppeteers behind the scenes. But the puppeteers work hard. During an open-air performance on a cold Saturday evening in January of 2001, Yang’s face became very red. His forehead dripped with sweat; soon, his shirt was wet too.

The show lasted about an hour and thirty minutes, just as it was supposed to, according to troupe's contract with the government's Leisure and Cultural Services Department -- the only regular presenter of traditional puppet performances in Hong Kong. Most of the puppets in the show showed signs of age -- dirty paint

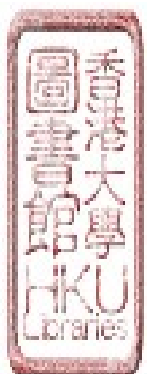


and shabby costumes -- but they were still presentable from a distance and on a well lit stage.

"I have seen this performance several times before," said a patron. "I don't mind."

In the heyday of traditional puppet performances, troupe leaders regarded every aspect of a performance with extreme seriousness. Each puppet was painted neatly and maintained in good condition. Instead of cassettes, the leaders used real musicians and singers. The cost of staging a performance then was double that of the simplified version staged nowadays. But what troupes and performers earned from a well organized and sophisticated performance was also more than now.

They earned more because they were in demand, by the former Urban Council and by many public and private organizations. The main public agency that organized traditional puppet performances was the Hong Kong Tourist Association. It's now the Hong Kong Tourism Board, but the job is the same -- marketing Hong Kong as a travel destination worldwide.

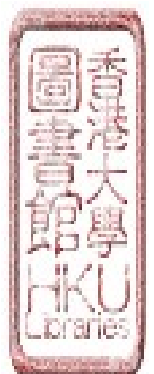


The Hong Kong Tourist Association organized many performances for tourists and sent some troupes on promotion tours overseas. They offered good pay and boosted development of the local puppet scene.

The private organizations also treated puppet groups well. They invited the best groups to perform the so-called “shengongxi” (theatrical performances within a ritualistic environment) at events serving villagers or community residents. Such events usually lasted for several days, with two performances per day (around one o’clock in the afternoon and seven in the evening).

The performances were an important social occasion. Organizers paid good artist fees, and the troupes in turn invested more in the performances. Today, there is no demand for such “shengongxi.”

What is the Chinese traditional puppet theatre that Yang's troupe performs? There are three types, and Yang's troupe performs all three -- the rod puppet, the string puppet and the glove puppet.

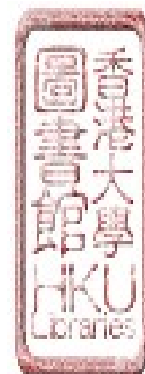


The rod puppet theatre was once called “shoutuojingxi” (hand-held Beijing opera) during the later part of the nineteenth century because the Cantonese opera was banned by the Qing court after the failure of the Taiping Rebellion in which a Cantonese opera singer, Li Wenmao, took part². Cantonese opera singers in Guangdong performed under the name of Beijing opera in order to survive. The puppet theatre, which was nearly the same as the Cantonese opera except in its use of puppets instead of the human actors, was also performed under a different name as handheld Beijing opera.

The rod puppet popular in Hong Kong originated in the Dongguan and Huizhou areas of mainland China. A rod puppet measures between two and three feet in length and is composed of three parts: head, shoulders and arms. It has no legs. The head is about the size of a human adult; in proportion to the head, the shoulders and arms are small.

The head and neck -- usually carved from a single piece of durable wood -- is

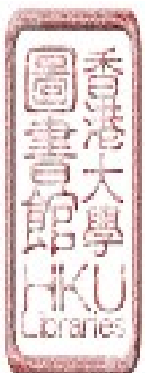
² - Tsao Pen-yeh, Chapter II - Chinese Puppet Theatre, *Puppet Theatres in Hong Kong and their Origins*, the Hong Kong Museum of History, the Urban Council, Hong Kong, October 1987, 83 - 91



made hollow to reduce weight and to allow fitting of moveable eyes or lips that are controlled by device located on the neck in some more sophisticated puppets. The puppet's face is painted according to the facial design of the character types and personalities of the traditional Cantonese opera.

The neck fits in a hole in the flat, elliptical shoulder board that supports a shirt or other costumes. Shielded from the audience's view, the puppeteer grasps the neck with one hand inside the costumes. Holding the neck means holding the whole puppet because the neck supports the shoulder board and the costumes. With the other hand, the puppeteer grasps the two arms of the puppet; these are actually two curved bamboo sticks sewn inside the costumes. Wooden hands are attached to the end of the arms permanently.

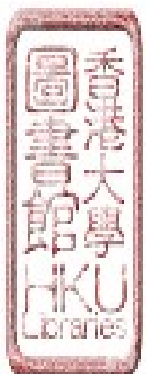
The hands are usually open or shaped like a fist, with a hole, for holding a horsewhip, sword, fan, or other prop made necessary by the script. With its costume, headwear and beard, the puppet is ready for performances.



The stage for the rod-puppet performances is made of wood planks. The front has a shielding screen about five feet high to conceal the puppeteers. The other three sides are enclosed so backstage activities cannot be seen. The performing and backstage areas are roofed. The performing area behind the screen must be large enough to accommodate puppeteers, singers and musicians and is usually twelve feet long and eight feet deep. A backdrop cloth separates the front and back-stage areas.

The repertoire, characters, and music of the rod puppet theatre adopted for performances in Hong Kong are based mainly on Cantonese opera, folk, instrumental and /or vocal music, with the puppets substituting for people. The performances are generally less sophisticated, compared to the human operatic counterpart. Most used by local troupes are those used by troupes of the mainland, adapted to the local Cantonese dialect.

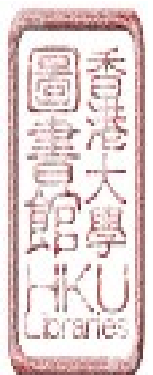
The string puppet, another kind of puppet popular in Hong Kong, originated in the southern part of the Minnan on the mainland. The puppet is about two feet in length and weighs about four to seven pounds. The head is made of camphor wood



that is insect resistant. The body has bamboo frameworks covered with cloth, making up the upper and lower portions of the body for greater flexibility for body movements such as bending. The head, body and the limbs are loosely linked together by threads for free movement.

The puppet's hands are made into the shape of a fist, with a hole for inserting weapons or other objects. The sophisticated ones can be hands with jointed fingers that can be manipulated to hold objects. The legs are made of coarse fibers with wooden feet attached at the ends. The costumes covering the puppet bamboo framework are the same as those in real human opera. Puppets are permanently dressed in one costume, according to performances needs. A performing troupe usually needs more than thirty puppets of various character roles.

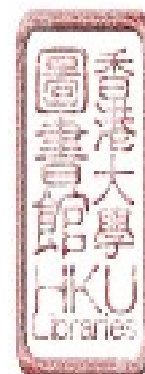
The stage is three feet above the ground with its top and two sides covered by cloth. Behind the backdrop there is a platform that is around two feet above the front stage floor. The puppeteers stand on the platform and manipulate the control board of the puppet with strings attached from the board hanging various parts of the puppet body below.



Puppet movement is caused by tilting or rocking the control board, and by withdrawing the appropriate strings connected to the body part. The number of strings ranges from seven to twenty-four. The more strings, the more sophisticated the movement of the puppet.

The glove puppet, the third kind of puppet in Hong Kong, originated in the Fujian Province of the mainland. Glove puppets have a sack-like hollow cloth body that allows the puppeteer to conceal his hand. The puppeteer's fingers fit into the head and the arms and move to create motion. Size of the puppet varies from eight to eighteen inches long. The two-inch head, with its one-inch neck concealed under the costume, is usually made of wood, paper or rubber material.

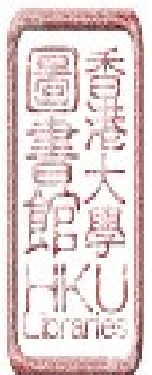
The hands and legs are also made of wood. The hands are usually made in a shape of fists with holes to hold sticks, weapons and other props. Usually, the puppeteer uses his first finger to go into the puppet's head, and the thumb and other three fingers to go into arms respectively.



The puppeteer should be able to manipulate two puppets at the same time. For puppets with legs, the legs can be controlled by the puppeteer's other free hand or by another puppeteer to create leg movements such as walking, running and kicking.

Since the control of the glove puppet is in the hands of the puppeteer, many special movements similar to those of their human opera counterparts can be created. The traditional performing area of the stage was without the stage floor; instead there is a box-like structure of six feet in length, four feet in height and two feet in depth. The puppeteers manipulate the puppet above the box, but remain hidden from the audience by the shielding covers of the box. The performing area exposed to the audience is usually decorated by the backdrop only.

Yang was born in Fujian in 1949. He was accepted as a student of the string puppet theatre when he was only thirteen by the Quanzhou Puppet Troupe, then the top puppet group in the region. It was a testament to his youthful talent – it was not easy to be admitted to the Troupe at that time.



Yang graduated some three years later, then stayed in the troupe as a puppeteer. He came to Hong Kong in November, 1974, and joined a then top local puppet troupe, Dongfang String Puppet Troupe³ as a puppeteer.

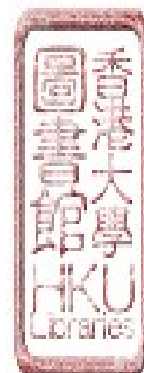
Around the time Yang arrived, the puppet field in Hong Kong was reviving after a long period of stagnancy brought on by the 1966 and 1967 riots in Hong Kong that were related to the Cultural Revolution on the mainland China. .

Analyzing social problems that contributed to the riots, the Hong Kong government considered that social services must have a stabilizing effect and could lessen class conflicts and contradictions⁴. While there could not be a solution to all social problems, the government began providing more cultural and entertainment programmes and recreational activities for Hong Kong citizens.

For the cultural and entertainment programmes, the government spent more

³ The Chinese name of the Dongfang String Puppet Troupe is 東方木偶劇團

⁴ Nelson W.S. CHOW, Chapter 6 - The Review of Social Policies in Hong Kong, Hong Kong Society - A Reader, Writers' & Publishers' Cooperative, 1986, 137 – 154.



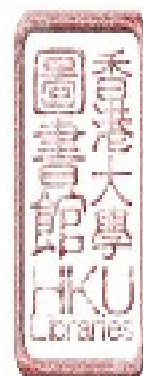
money on various traditional, modern and popular programmes for participation by all walks of life. The traditional puppet theatre, being one category of traditional Chinese art forms, shared a part of a bigger cake and received more performance opportunities.

At the time, TVs, computer games and movies were not yet commonly available and affordable. People liked free cultural and entertainment programmes, mainly outdoors at the parks, playgrounds and community centres provided by the government. They spent several hours at the playgrounds or parks before going back to their small, crowded living homes to eat and sleep.

With more performance opportunities, puppeteers formed troupes of various puppet types. There were several active traditional puppet troupes in Hong Kong in the 1970s and the early 1980s. These included the Hon Wah Nin Cantonese Puppets Art Troupe⁵, which specialized in rod puppet, formed by the local veteran puppeteer Mai Shaotang in 1973; the Dongfang String Puppet Troupe formed by Huang Gu in 1973; the Winning Glove Puppet Troupe⁶ formed by Lee

⁵ The Chinese name of the Hon Wah Nin Cantonese Puppets Art Troupe is “漢年華”杖頭木偶團

⁶ The Chinese name of the Winning Glove Puppet Troupe is 溫陵掌中木偶團



Yee Kuen from Fujian in 1974; the “Xinxing” String Puppet Group⁷ formed by Huang Rongcan in 1978; the Winning Rod Puppet Troupe⁸ formed by Lee Yee Kuen in 1983 after he formed the Winning Glove Puppet Troupe, and the “Huashan” Cantonese Rod Puppet Troupe formed in 1985.

“It was the golden era of the puppet field in Hong Kong, ” Yang recalled. “Each troupe could have around four performances per month, compared with only five to six performances per year now!”

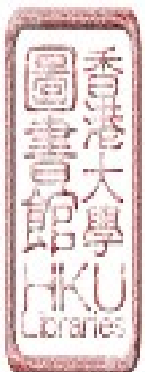
For better self-development and to earn more money, Yang, after being the troupe member of the Dongfang String Puppet Troupe for five years, also formed his own puppet troupe, Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group, in 1979.

The golden period of the puppet field did not last long. Hong Kong experienced rapid industrialization. Wages and the standard of living began to rise, pushing up the consumption ability of the populace⁹. Economic affluence enabled the people to consume leisure activities according to their own needs, not necessarily

⁷ The Chinese name of the “Xinxing” String Puppet Group is 新興提線木偶團

⁸ The Chinese name of the Winning Rod Puppet Troupe is 濶陵杖頭木偶團

⁹ K. K. CHAN, Chapter 8 - The Culture of Hong Kong: A Myth or Reality?, Hong Kong Society Reader, Writers' & Publishers' Cooperative, 1986, 209 – 230.

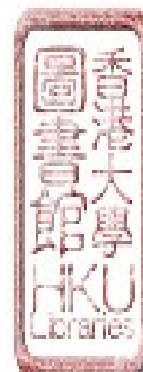


the free ones provided without choice by others.

Technological advances also diversified the choices of daily leisure activities. TV and radio became the main forms of mass entertainment. TV programmes drew the populace back to home, not necessarily to stay in the parks and playground. Other new activities that could attract the populace with affordable prices included cinema, bars and home video recording.

An outdoor primitive entertainment programme such as a traditional puppet theatre held in an outdoor setting in hot or cold weather could hardly hold audience to stay before their stage anymore.

In 1982, the “Xinxing” String Puppet Group and Dongfang String Puppet Troupe disbanded. The Hon Wah Nin Cantonese Puppets Art Troupe disbanded after the leader Mai Shaotang passed away in 1987. The “Huashan” Cantonese Rod Puppet Troupe was offered no performances by the former Urban Council since 1987 because of the troupe’s poor performance. The Winning Glove Puppet Troupe became inactive in the recent few years after original leader Lee Ye Kuen changed profession and became active in China trade in the late eighties.



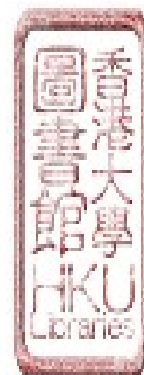
By the 1990s, Yang's Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group was the remaining active puppet group.

Most of the puppeteers in his generation in Hong Kong have passed away, retired or changed jobs. And since not many new followers are willing to learn puppetry, many puppet groups could not exist after the original owner was unable to run the group.

The Winning Glove Puppet Troupe is a vivid example of what happens when there are no successors to run the troupe. The Winning Glove Puppet Troupe became inactive, though not yet disbanded, after the original leader Lee Yee Kuen, a veteran puppeteer, left the profession and withdrew from the Chinese traditional puppet field in the late 1980s.

Lee moved from Hong Kong to China a few years ago and now lives in Shenzhen so that he can concentrate on his manufacturing businesses.

Lee was a puppeteer of the same generation as Yang. He was born in Fujian on

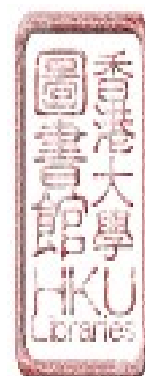


the mainland in 1949. His families were doing puppetry for generations. Lee started to learn puppetry when he was eleven years old and later joined the Jinjiang Qingyang Puppet Troupe in China. He came to Hong Kong in 1974 and founded his puppet group, Winning Glove Puppets Art Troupe, after just one month.

Lee was then a very active puppeteer. Besides running his Winning Glove Puppets Art Troupe, he began to expand his puppet activities by sending his student and member of the troupe, Huang Hui, to Hunan Puppet and Shadow Puppet Troupe to learn rod and shadow puppet.

After learning the new types of puppet, they taught rod and shadow puppets to other members of the troupe. Later in 1983, Lee formed the Winning Rod Puppet Troupe, specializing in rod and shadow puppet performances. By the time in the 1970s and 1980s, Lee and his troupes took a leading position in the local puppet field.

According to Mr. Lee, there were many performance opportunities then. Besides the former Urban Council, the governmental organizer of events, the Hong Kong

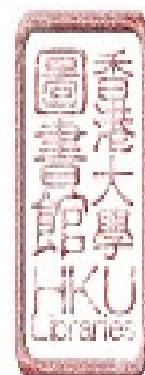


Tourist Association (now called the Hong Kong Tourism Board), private organizations, community organizations, hotels, large companies, and TV stations all regularly engaged the puppet groups to perform. Lee's troupe also gave performances of puppets in Australia, New Zealand, Israel, France, Austria, West Germany, United States and Holland in his prime stage.

However, the demand for puppet performance dropped drastically by the late 1980s and early 1990s. Smaller audiences and subsidies for puppet performances from the government and private sectors and a drain in human talent all contributed to the decline. Compared with four to five performances per month, each group had only around five performances every year. Most were engaged by the former Urban Council, and the artist fees were not enough to support the group.

That's when Lee turned to earn his living on China trade in the late 1980s. He is now completely withdrawn from the Chinese traditional puppetry.

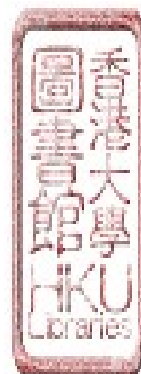
Lee passed his puppet groups, the Winning Glove Puppets Art Troupe and the Winning Rod Puppet Troupe, to his forty-year-old son Lee Tak Yee.



Lee Tak Yee is based in Hong Kong. He has full-time job, as a businessman like his father. Lee treats his father's troupes as sources of part-time jobs. The son Lee frankly admitted, "I totally don't know how to perform puppets of any kind. I am now just responsible for coordination of performances for the puppet troupe, if any. If someone requires our performances, I would coordinate the puppeteers to perform."

In fact, for the puppet troupes now under the son Lee, there is no more difference between the Winning Glove Puppets Art Troupe and the Winning Rod Puppet Troupe. They choose only the glove puppet and repeat the same excerpts for performances. The puppet troupe does not have permanent members. All are part-time members reaching retiring ages who do not rely on the performances as main income sources any more.

The son Lee said, "Every performance now is considered a social gathering chance of the troupe members, who are all my uncles, and we just take the occasions of performances to gather, to have meals or afternoon tea. The artist fees are just too meager that we cannot rely on it to earn a living. We now just



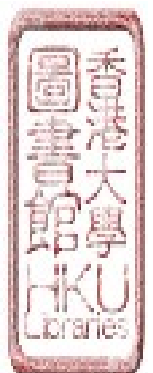
take them as leisure activities.

“The troupe would continue to perform until no one engages us any further or when all the puppeteers in the groups do not perform any more.” The son Lee added, “I would not invest in the troupe and not pursue to re-activate the troupe.”

If that happens, people today won't see what people of yesterday saw when they came to watch Lee's group.

“I am not drunk. I would kill you, the devil tiger!” shouted the puppet hero Wu Song to another puppet in the guise of a tiger. Against the backdrop of a forest at night, and rising, racing musical rhythms, the puppet tiger ran around the stage to evade the drunken puppet Wu Song's blows for several minutes.

The puppet tiger finally could not avoid the chase and strong blows by the fist of the puppet Wu Song, and it fainted to the ground. The background music gradually died down. The puppet hero Wu Song stood behind the tiger and gave no motion for a moment and then fell onto the fainted tiger, drunken!



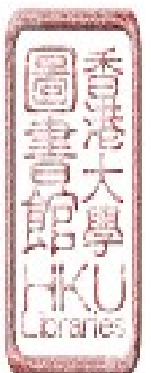
This was an episode of the puppet excerpt performed by the Winning Glove Puppets Art Troupe for hundreds of times in the past. The Troupe will not perform this puppet excerpt anymore, because the troupe will soon disappear.

While the story of Mr. Lee Yee Kuen, now only in his mid-fifties, symbolizes the “brain-drain” of the puppet field for economic reasons, the case of Mr. Hung Ngor For, the founder of the new Chung Ngai Puppet Troupe, reflects the struggle of some puppeteers for a better existence.

Hung came to Hong Kong in November 1974. Before he came to Hong Kong, he received full-range puppet training in some puppet groups in the mainland China. Once he was in Hong Kong, many puppet troupes liked to employ Hung as puppeteer.

“I was a very experienced puppeteer with good artistic capability,” he said.

“Every troupe liked to engage me as the main puppeteer in the group. But at that time I did not want to work for only one puppet group. I prefer to work as a free-lancer so that I could work for different troupes to increase my sources of incomes.



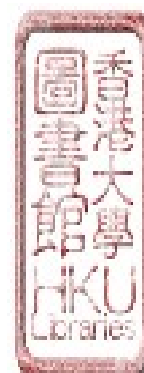
”My total monthly income at that time was very handsome. The monthly salary was surely higher than that of a teacher graduated from the University of Hong Kong.”

As a freelancer, Hung could work for different troupes and could have many performances opportunities. “My total income was even higher than a leader of a famous troupe though I was not the boss because my opportunities for different troupes were a multiple of that of a single puppet troupe.”

However, the decline of the puppet market and the decrease of the number of the puppet troupe, ultimately left only one active puppet group, namely Yang’s Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group, on the local scene by the mid 1990s.

Hung was forced to learn that he should work for himself rather than working for others with no name. So Hung decided to set up his own troupe. In 1998, he set up his own puppet troupe, Chung Ngai Puppet Troupe¹⁰, which became the second of the two active traditional Chinese puppet groups in Hong Kong now.

¹⁰ The Chinese name of the Chung Ngai Puppet Troupe is 綜藝木偶劇團.

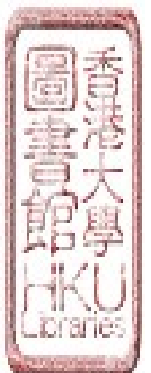


The thin and short Hung demonstrated his skills for a reporter. He straightened his body and stood up to hold two puppets with both hands and gave the puppet delicate movements for several minutes before retreating back to the backstage.

It was hard to believe that Hung could control the two complicated motions of two large and heavy rod puppets simultaneously behind the stage during performances. A novice can hardly handle one rod puppet well at any one time, but Hung can handle two simultaneously.

Hung said that it was a difficult time when he was setting up his own troupe. “I knocked at the doors of those frequent organizers of puppet performances and requested them to give me the performing chance. I am not presentable and no one believed me.”

Hung recalled, “Though some organizers knew my background and believed my capability, I did not have enough money to invest to provide the puppet performances as required.

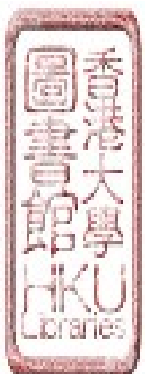


“The governmental organizer finally dared to register my troupe and gave me performance opportunities,” Hung said, gratefully.

Miss Alice NG, the Manager of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department says that the Department will follow standard procedures to verify applications from performing groups, including puppet groups. If the performances of the group are up to the required standard, they will be registered as regular groups and performances will be arranged for them. However, the availability of performing group depends on the supply side of the art field.

“But I can have only around five performances per year. I don’t know how long my troupe can last, unless I can get some subsidies for running the troupe!” said Hung, who wants to extend the existence of his troupe as far as possible before he retires.

“It is very difficult to attract new puppeteers. Even as experienced as I am cannot earn my living as a full time puppeteer. People now learn puppet as leisure activities at most,” he said.



A dying art form, however, can be revived in a museum.

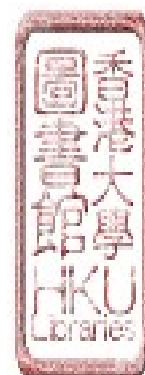
Yang Qing Yi, the leader of the Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group, once said, “Usually, the puppets and any other related costumes and accessories of the discontinued groups are sold or donated to the local museums in one way or other. A lot of people now have the concept that the puppets should be put in museum!”

For example, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum has recently approached Chan Kam To, the owner of an inactive puppet group, Wah Shan Traditional Puppet Chinese Opera¹¹, to request him to donate his puppets to the museum as heritage exhibits.

CHAN refused the request. “I prefer that I can do something to preserve the dying art,” said Chan. “But only if I have spare capacity and time because I am busy in doing my performances of other art form, Cantonese operatic song, which is much more popular in Hong Kong.”

However, Yang Qing Yi, leader of the Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group,

¹¹ The Chinese name of the Wah Shan Traditional Puppet Chinese Opera is 華山傳統木偶粵劇團

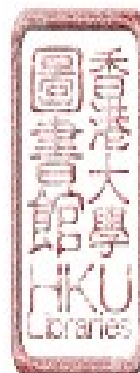


has recently approached different local arts organizations to see if any sponsorship can be secured or more performances opportunities can be arranged for his troupe.

“The main financial support of my troupe now is from the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong Government of the Special Administrative Region, which sponsored an average of seven performances per year for my troupe compared with around twenty to thirty performance per year in the troupe’s prime period in the late seventies and early eighties,” Yang said.

“Because of small chance of performance, the troupe members are gradually draining away for other more stable jobs. They do not perform even in part-time basis because of merger wages for performances. Without new bloods, the existence of the troupe will be affected...”

Yang said that the government could allocate seven performances to the group in 2000 compared with thirteen in 1999. Yang complained that even the government did not actively support the puppet art form now.



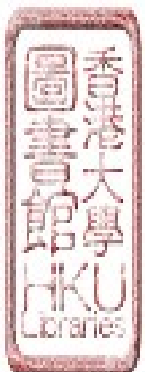
As a new puppet group, Hung of the Chung Ngai Puppet Troupe also actively seeks sponsorship and support from various financial sources such as the Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

“It is difficult to get financial support since my group is new without established good track record. My group can only get a small sum of funds for performances compared with well-established troupes. But I must accept without other choices if I want to exist.”

The spokesman of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, however, said their sponsorship depended mainly on the scale of performances to be performed by the artist groups, not the history of the group.

Miss Alice Ng, the Manager of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, also said that the department would sponsor according to the scale of the accepted proposal from the artist groups.

“But I am poor, I can’t start something big without money. If I can’t start something big, I can’t get the big money to start,” Hung said.

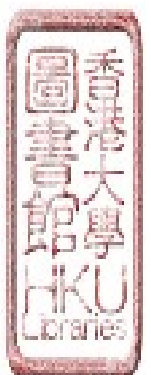


It seems to be a chicken-and-egg problem to enable some puppet performances of higher quality.

In addition to the decreasing number of performances is the problem of fees. They have not kept pace with the cost of living. The artist fee per performance has remained around HK \$7,000 for many years, according to Yang of the Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group. With the artist fee, Yang will pay the transportation fees of around HK \$2,000, meal fees and also each of five to six puppeteers at a previously set fee ranging from HK\$200 to HK\$300 per performance.

Yang will retain the remainder as his income. But the income of around \$4,000 per month is not enough to sustain a living.

Hung of the Chung Ngai Puppet Troupe said his situation is even worse. His troupe can get only around \$4,500 per performance as a relatively new troupe. "I feel quite sorry that I cannot pay more to my troupe members even if they have supported me wholeheartedly to set up the troupe," Hung said. "If I cannot give



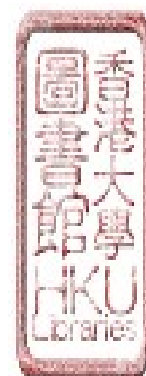
the troupe members enough reward, they may change to other profession and the troupe will disband.”

Yang Qing Yi, the leader of the Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group, has recently gotten the support of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department to organize a series of training courses and seminars on Chinese traditional puppet at Ngau Chi Wan Civic Centre in March to May 2001. Most of the students learn puppet arts as leisure activities. Rarely do the students choose to go deeply into puppetry as a puppeteer for performances or for the purpose of research.

The active Yang have also secured a funding from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council to write a book on the puppet scene in Hong Kong after approval of a proposal submitted by Yang.

“It seems that I am writing a conclusion chapter of the puppet scene in Hong Kong, with a full stop at the end of the book, ” Yang said cynically.

The leaders of the two active puppet groups, namely Yang of the Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group and Hung of the Chung Ngai Puppet Troupe, still have the



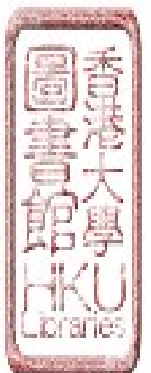
passion to keep their own troupes alive.

Yang of the Hong Kong Sky Bird Puppet Art Group said, “While I can get some support from official organizations, I cannot run my troupe just for leisure or interest. It costs me much to maintain the troupe, not to say to develop the troupe and the art form that is beyond my ability. I prefer to save some money for my retirement life.”

Hung pictured a similar outlook for his troupe. “I don’t find any new followers to pick up the puppet arts locally. I can get puppeteers to help me only from the mainland China if required. I think there is no chance for me to find anyone of the local younger generations know what puppetry is and is willing to pick up the puppetry seriously.”

In addition to the economic and cultural factors, the decline of the traditional puppet theatre may be attributed to some internal factors rooted in the puppet art form itself.

Puppet performances cannot give the practitioner much for their living. The job as



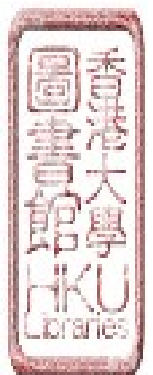
a puppeteer is also not prestigious, according to the present social status standard.

No one likes to join the profession as a puppeteer, not to mention the brain drain phenomenon.

Someone might ask, who would care about the disappearance of this art form in Hong Kong. From a culture heritage point of view, it is a sophisticated art form that carries the artistic, cultural and history elements in a local setting and so therefore should be preserved as far as possible.

The puppet shows tell us stories; the local puppet scene also tells us stories. They are stories of social developments, local arts and cultural development. The vanishing of this art form carries away many important heritages that are important to the society. If we consider that the art form is important while we understand that the art form's appeal to the audience is decreasing, the question becomes who should exert the effort to raise the appeal of this traditional puppet art form to the audience.

Interestingly, the traditional puppet art form is vanishing in Hong Kong, but not on the mainland or in Taiwan.

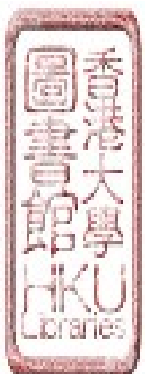


On the mainland, there are still a lot of traditional puppet art training schools for training puppeteers. The puppet art theatres still have mass market, performed at various venues and regions, with new quality performances. In Taiwan, the puppetry is enjoying a cinematically propelled resurgence in local society: A recent glove puppet movie “Legend of the Sacred Stone” was a hit among young and old audiences alike¹².

Like movies, puppet shows can be fun to watch.... the 90-minute traditional puppet show performed by Yang’s troupe at the outdoor football pitch in Shatin in the New Territories in January is drawing to a close. The last excerpt is called “The Joyous Parade”; it involves all the puppeteers. It is approaching 9:00pm. The weather is still cold but all the puppeteers are hot and sweaty. A few patrons are watching, under a moonless, dark blue sky. They are preparing to leave, knowing that the show is coming to its end.

The stage is well lit. The joyous background music begins. The puppets go out on to the stage one by one. Each puppet is performing a different kind of acrobatic

¹² Glove puppetry alive and well, 3 May 2001, Taipei Journal, taiwanheadlines.gov.hk

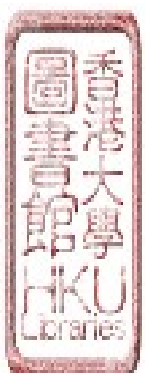


act, Chinese instrumental music or dance.

One puppet is throwing plates to the air and catching them as they fall; one puppet is somersaulting; one is singing opera; another is dancing; one more is playing a Chinese instrument called Pipa. How can so many puppets perform so many acts without interfering with each other?

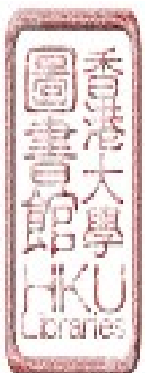
The puppets' parade depicted a happy episode as a town celebrated the Chinese Lunar New Year. The background music continues as the curtain falls on what seems a happy ending, satisfied and smiling audience members now making their way home.

But the ending for the puppet theatre is not happy. Yang and others want to continue the show. But the curtain has fallen, and they have no choice but to stop.



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