

Improvements with Side Effects: Changes of Taiwan Pili Puppet Shows in New Media Age

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How to cite this paper: Dai, Z.X. (2018) Improvements with Side Effects: Changes of Taiwan Pili Puppet Shows in New Media Age. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 6, 232-241.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2018.64020>

Received: March 11, 2018

Accepted: April 25, 2018

Published: April 28, 2018

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Abstract

This essay demonstrates the main changes of the puppet dramas in Taiwan in recent years, trying to find the new media elements it used in the puppet dramas now. Puppet show originally was invented in Fujian. But it prospered in Taiwan; and in 1980s it started being played on TV. Now the hottest puppet drama company uses websites to promote its DVDs and books about puppet characters and sells posters and puppets. The puppet drama as a traditional folk art prospered in modern society keeping attracting more people by absorbing new elements. New media and its new performing methods, such as special effects, satellite TV and websites provide a great help in spreading the influence of this art.

Keywords

Puppet Shows, New Media, Pili Puppet Series, Special Effects

1. Introduction

Generally traditional Chinese puppet show includes two kinds: the leather-silhouette show and the made-up puppet show (Huang, 2007) [1]. This paper would use the term *puppet show* to mean made-up puppet shows, mainly wood-made puppet shows. However, after being put on TV since the 1980s, TV series played by puppets have become very popular in Taiwan up till now. The official website and online communities have also attracted many fans both from Taiwan and mainland China. As a combination of ancient Chinese folk art and new media technologies (Li, 2016) [2], this phenomenon has got attention from many Chinese scholars (Lai, 1997; Ma, 2004; Chen, 2007; Chen 2008; *et al.*) [3] [4] [5] [6], but seldom articles in English has paid attention to it.

In order to fill this gap, this paper would focus on such changes brought by new media technologies, which could be concluded into three parts: special ef-

fects on the screen, changes of puppets and the rise as an industry. In the special effects part, the author would concentrate on weapons and fighting scenes as the visual effects, then talk about sounds and music, lastly the backstage including settings and props. For the part about changes of puppets, the author would follow this pattern: the appearances of puppets first, following the backstage part about the way to operate them. The final part about the rise of puppet shows as an industry would focus on its online networks first and then its satellite TVs also its related products.

2. Origins of Taiwan Puppet Shows

Traditional Taiwan puppet shows come from Zhangzhou and Fuzhou locating in Fujian province and Chaozhou in Guangdong province. The puppet show was in its prime in Fujian province during the middle of 19 century, which was the time that Taiwan puppet shows started to form and develop. From mainland to Taiwan, the development of Taiwan puppet shows could be generalized into 7 periods: the Fujian-artist period, the northern-music period, the ancient-drama period, the chivalrous-swordsman period, the Japan-occupied period, the golden-light period and the radio-and-TV period (Zhao, 2007) [7].

Since 1920s, the stories of Taiwan puppet show started to be based on chivalrous swordsman stories, especially with an emphasis on the Kung Fu of these swordsmen (Huang, 2007) [1]. After occupying Taiwan during 1938, Japan carried out the “Becoming Japanese” policy (Lai, 1997) [3]. As a result, the tradition of puppet shows was interrupted. For a time, only Japanese puppet shows were allowed to be performed, which means that the roles played by puppets, the settings of these shows and the language used all have to be Japanese (Zhao, 2007) [7]. However, during the golden-light period, the tradition of Chinese puppet shows again prospered, and more special effects were put into use, especially when presenting Kung Fu. This period has got its name *golden light*, because sometimes the roles could use golden light to protect themselves when being attacked (Zhao, 2007) [7]. The use of special effects like this was inherited and developed in the following radio-and-TV period.

In 1984, brothers Huang Qianghua and Huang Wenze started to put their puppet show series on TV, which was called the Pili series. The grandpa of these brothers is the master Huang Haidai in puppet show communities with high reputation and their father is Huang Junxiong, who financed the puppet movie *Journey to the West*. Given such a tradition, the Pili puppet show series quickly became popular. From then on, more and more special effects in movies were put into use and the appearances of the puppets, the sets and background music changed a lot.

3. Special Effects on the Screen

3.1. Weapons and Fighting Scenes

As Zhao (2007) [7] mentions, puppet shows played in theatres during the gol-

den-light period have used colored ribbons and fireworks to create special effects. After being put on TV, the effects became more various. In the first formal Pili puppet TV series named *Pili Golden Light* in 1988, roles performed by puppets were still using swords, halberds, knives and spears in their fighting movements. Each weapon was designed according to each role's personality in order to fit and enhance the role's characteristics. To achieve this goal, the weapon also would match the color of each role's costume and style. Tradition fighting scenes in puppet show theatres put more emphasis on the intensity of the atmosphere than the clarity and fluency of each action (Chen, 2008) [6]. When shot on TV, the fights could be watched clearly with close-up shots, while laser effects or explosions were rarely seen.

Entering the 21st century, the time was ripe for more computer-processed effects, which led to more and bigger explosions during fighting scenes. On one hand close fights were more fluent and natural. On the other hand, distant fights were shown and developed that some roles could even fight without solid weapons but laser lights. The fighting scenes in puppet shows are now more and more similar to real Kung Fu movies. The only major difference is that puppet stars do not have facial expressions.

However, is the trend of adding side effects being widely accepted? Zhang (2017) [8] has mentioned that there is a sway between sticking to traditions and adapting to new media environment. In fact, the number of fans complaining special effects being used too much has been increasing since 2007. A high school student named Chen Mengwen who had followed Pili puppet TV series for over 5 years summarized that the main defects of puppet TV series could be summarized into the tedious plot and the abuse of special effects (Chen, 2007) [5]. According to these fans, there should be a limit to the use of special effects used, otherwise these shows would have no difference with animations. Probably accepting these complaints, recent puppet TV shows have used less laser lights and tend to combine them with solid weapons. To be more well-presented, some 3D effects are adopted as well, showing an effort in finding its place between the traditional and the new.

3.2. Sound Effects and Music

All dialogues, singings, music and sound effects in puppet shows were performed by one person in tradition (Ma, 2004) [4]. Such a tradition was preserved to some degree in Pili puppet TV series that all dialogues were recorded by Huang Wenze.

When filming puppet show, all of the characters' dialogues are first recorded and then the theme and background music is added according to the script. All of Pili puppet TV series were filmed after the voices had already been taped. The director, cameramen and puppeteers had to listen to the dialogue to know the emotion of the characters and the story as well as how the characters would act. Even if the filmmakers first studied the script, they needed to hear the dialogue

to capture the drama of the story. After that the sound director reviewed the whole film to make sure everything matched properly and enriched the quality of the voiceovers, music and sound effects. In the latest movie shot by the Pili international multimedia Co Ltd named *Legend of the Sacred Stone* is not only the movie to use most special effects, animations and shots but also the first movie to use AC3 Duby SR.D system in its post production, which made the sound effects more stereo (Zhang, 1995) [9].

As for the music, every main character in the Pili TV series has his/her own music in the background when he/she shows up. A branch company under the Pili international multimedia Co Ltd named Everything But The Culture Ltd is responsible for all the music and songs in these series and also collects these songs and tunes to produce soundtrack CD-ROMs.

3.3. Settings and Props

Tradition puppet shows played in theatres are limited in a little stage which could only include 2 people to perform (Hong, 2004) [10]. When shot on TV, this defect completely disappeared. Puppet show are no longer played on a narrow stage, it is shot in different sets with different scenes, sometimes even shot outdoors. Take the movie *Legend of the Sacred Stone* for example; the film's sets can be divided into studio sets and outdoor, on location sets.

For the studio sets, a 36,000 square feet warehouse space was purchased. The first step in construction was the digging of a trench 5' wide and 5' deep. This was to provide a space for puppeteers to operate the puppets on the sets. The trench was used both for land and water shots. Studio sets included the "Porcelain Fairyland", "Ming-jian Villa", "6 Schools Reincarnation Cave" and many others. The construction of these sets took 10 months from initial design to completion. The process was slowed due to 2 or 3 months of heavy rain during which time construction had to be temporarily halted. The biggest difference between the set design for puppet TV series or movies and that of other TV shows or movies is the scale. The set must match the size of the puppets.

As for the props, the most important props in puppet series are weapons and the puppets of course. Instead of imitating the wind, sandstorms or waterfalls on the stage in the theatres, now almost all the effects are true. Waterfalls or snowflakes going with the size of the puppets are used instead of just imitating the sounds. For the puppets, not only were changes made in the puppets costume, accessories, and shoes, major improvements were made in the puppets heads and faces as well to make them more realistic in the movie. Real human hair was used for the puppets' hair. Also, since each puppet has a different size head, the hair had to be done by hand, a process even more expensive than for actual people. In order to make the hair show up vividly on screen and make the puppets martial arts movements look as dramatic as possible, the hair was put through a special conditioning process. Further, each puppet had different stunts for fighting and speaking scenes so as to avoid wear and tear.

4. Changes of the Puppets

According to Xu Bing's research, there are two periods of a puppet, one is the period in production, and the other is the period in performance (Xu, 2007) [11]. The changes of the puppets performed in the show could also be summarized in these two aspects.

4.1. Appearances

This is the "post mirror stage" of human beings as Jacques Lacan puts it, which divides the audiences as a "real group" and the characters as a "fictitious group", allowing the actors/actresses to exist as symbolic images (Huang, 2007) [1]. The roles in puppet shows could be recognized as 5 types: Sheng (male lead), Dan (female character type), Jing (character with painted facial make-up), Mo (middle-age male character) and Chou (clown/jester), which is similar to the types of roles in other Chinese operas.

In the past, Pili's television series puppets were 3' 3" in height, but this was later changed to two and a half feet. The puppets used in the movie were even smaller, approximately 2 feet high. Though puppets are small, their make-ups are no less delicate. Puppets made by the Xus in Zhangzhou perform well at a distance on the stage and look well closely under the stage, too. They are not only props for puppet shows but also art treasures themselves (Xu, 2007) [11]. The changes of appearances from tradition puppet to today are great. As the Japanese SD dolls become more and more popular in Taiwan, the appearance of such dolls has an influence on the style of Pili puppets as their faces become thinner and eyes especially pupils grow larger (from **Pictures 1-3**).

There are some breakthroughs in the materials to make those puppets, too. Traditionally, puppets' heads are made by carved wood, and this is an important aspect of the art, but in the film *Legend of the Sacred Stone* the major villain Mr. Boneskin's head is made of a special foam rubber, which allows his face to twitch when he is deep in thought or enraged. Unfortunately, this kind of head has a major drawback in that it can melt at fairly low temperatures, making it difficult to store.

4.2. The Way to Operate

Traditional puppets appear to be fat and short, which is not very good-looking. After the joint arms and joint legs were invented, the short and fat appearances exist no more and the puppets become as harmonious and graceful as real people (Chen, 2008) [6]. They are not made for admiration through glass windows, but made to move and act depending on skillful puppeteers to show their value of existence (Hong, 2004) [5]. In the past, puppets were small (usually 30 cm) without facial changes, operating by one hand of the puppeteer (**Picture 4**). After changes were made, the puppeteers could operate puppets more delicately with two hands, which allowed puppets to be larger to 74 - 80 cm (**Picture 5**). The eyes and mouth of puppets also became controllable.



Picture 1. Dan, late Qing Dynasty **Picture 1**, from: Huang Wenzhong, *Research on Quanzhou Puppets' styles*.



Picture 2. Female Character in Pili puppet TV series in 1989 **Picture 2**, from: <http://drama.pili.com.te/pili>.



Picture 3. Female Character in Pili puppet TV series in 2008 **Picture 3**, from: <http://drama.pili.com.te/pili>.



Picture 4. From: WIKIPEDIA on line.



Picture 5. From: WIKIPEDIA on line.

In **Picture 4** we can see that in the past, a puppet is controlled by one hand with the thumb to control its right hand and the index finger to control its head. **Picture 5**, there is a puppet way bigger, which could be controlled by joint arms with both hands of a puppeteer. Though without a complete presentation, comparison could still be made by comparing each puppet to the operator's hand.

5. Rise as an Industry

5.1. Networks

Official website of Pili puppet TV series was set up in 1996 and the company of EPILI Networks was set in 2000. This company is responsible for designing the web pages on the official website, selling products on line and offering a space for Pili puppet fans.

According to the data on the official website of Pili international multimedia Co Ltd, there are two kinds of fan club, one is for official Pili club members, and the other is for Pili club members online. The difference between official Pili club members and online members is that official members have to pay membership fees; in return they receive a journal each month and have other welfares. Online members don't have such welfares and don't have to pay membership fees but they can buy products online with a discount and can download

some Pili puppet TV series music and MV for popular puppet characters.

The number of fans in official fan clubs is 2536 (**Table 1**) and the number of fans in online fan clubs is 3801 (**Table 2**). Since a fan could only be allowed to join one club, the number of all registered club fans on Pili puppet website is over 6337. This data does not include the fans registered online without joining a fan club, that is to say the total number will be larger.

5.2. Satellite TV and Related Products

The Pili international multimedia Co Ltd set up Pili Satellite TV in 1995, playing Pili puppet TV series and some cartoons or Korean TV series. It's the first TV station in the name of puppet show series. The Pili international multimedia Co Ltd have developed many related products such as DVDs, PC games, comic books and novels. According to the fans of each character, the company sells different character's posters and pictures both in stores and on line.

6. Conclusions

In sum, the Pili international multimedia Co. Ltd. make Pili puppet shows and the products related become a complete chain of industry. Puppet shows are now still rooted in traditional Chinese culture, while there are also some trends that such a root is becoming shallow.

For instance, the tradition for one person to perform all dialogues is preserved to some degree in Pili puppet TV series, while singings, music and sound effects in puppet shows were performed by professional singers and producers. This can be seen as a division of labor in the so-called New Media Age, which could help to make the sound effects more vivid and diverse. But if this effect of the new technologies aggresses one step further and the producer of puppet TV shows let different performers to perform for each puppet role, I'm afraid that one of the important traits of puppet shows will be lost.

Tradition puppet shows played in theatres are limited in a little stage. But when shot on TV, they are shot in different sets with different scenes, sometimes even shot outdoors. Such a change is a great help to make the background of the puppet shows more realistic and delicate. But the producers should not let the settings take too much of their attention. Because all sets are designed for the story lines after all, otherwise they will be putting the cart before the horse. The same goes for the special effects on screen, the increasing number of TV puppet

Table 1. Numbers of fans in Official Fan Clubs Table: made by the author Data: <http://drama.pili.com.te/pili>.

Character	Chai	Su	Hutiechun	Fojie	Siwujun	Longsu	Haishang
Number	564	397	226	197	185	181	168
Character	Jianzi	Mushaoai	Chienhsieh	Mo	Shu	Au	Total
Number	159	120	118	92	88	41	2536

Table 2. Number of fans in Fan clubs on line Table: made by the author Data: <http://drama.pili.com.te/pili>.

Character	Cang	Tunfo	Zhuwu	Yenkuijen	Jiwuzong	Zhaomuzun
Number	319	278	277	264	240	225
Character	Zheshan	Tan	Mochenyin	Di	Yinhu	Sheshen
Number	224	172	164	161	158	151
Character	Kungsunyue	Chingyang	Yibulianhua	Hsiao	Bingx	Wojian
Number	151	149	133	126	109	108
Character	Jinzilin	Dao	Jimohou	Feng	Mainland	Total
Number	106	91	87	84	24	3801

series fans complaining the overwhelming special effects could be a sign. There should be a degree to limit the use of such effects, otherwise the fancy effects may cast the plots and story itself into shade. Most significantly, they may blunt the puppet-operating skills and make puppet TV shows no different with the animations.

7. Discussion

With a rich history, Chinese puppet shows should learn from foreign cultures on their way but never should be replaced by them (Ding, 1983) [12]. Pili puppet shows are popular in Taiwan for years and are becoming more and more popular in mainland. In such a new media age, when lots of traditional arts are fading, this could be considered a very exclusive phenomenon, to which the maturity in using and adapting to new media technologies have made great contribution, yet at the same time also bring some side effects. The puppet TV shows being popular can be considered as a result of the effects of both the new media technologies and the traditional arts, so the producers should avoid focus on only one of the two, instead, should try to strike a balance between them. This study intends to contribute to such a discussion, however, just like previous studies, the approach is mainly about the development of Taiwan Pili Puppet Shows as an industry. Also, the conclusion is too general with second-handed data, while more direct data could be added. Therefore, for future studies, approaches on content and audience could also worth scholars' attention. Especially audience analysis based on existing communication theories, as current studies are mainly about a general adaptation to audience's needs (e.g.: Chen, 2013) [13].

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