

Creation Through Co-learning: Phetchaburi Rod Puppet Performances in the Context of Creative Tourism

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the factors and processes in the enhancement and revision of Phetchaburi rod puppet performances to help promote tourism in a creative context. Community participatory-based research was adopted as the method. Rod puppet artists, Chatr drama performers, musicians, teachers and students, officers of the province's cultural section, cultural activists, local wisdom scholars, and local media were selected as the stakeholders. The findings reveal that a number of limitations imposed on puppet artists and inheritors, along with the changing purpose of and the area for staging the performances, played critical roles in the form and nature of such enhancement and revision. The process started with a rod puppet performance workshop in one selected school. In order to continue performances of the rod puppets, even after the termination of the research project, the making of rod puppets was included in a workshop, along with training for singing puppet songs and rod puppet manipulation. With the participation of all stakeholders, a new puppet show that could be used to promote Phetchaburi's tourist destination was created during the workshop and will receive continuing support to be able to perform on Phetchaburi's walking street.

Keywords: rod puppet, puppet performance, creative tourism, Phetchaburi province, intangible cultural heritage

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Introduction

“Hun krabok or rod puppets have only heads and hands. The bodies can be made from any kind of rods, mostly either bamboo or PVC, covered with cloth sacks that are finely decorated as costumes” (Prasarnvinijchai, 2019, p. 177). Rod puppet performances originated in the northern part of Thailand during the reign of King Rama V. However, the popularity of such performances has gradually diminished because of new forms of entertainment (Pannengpetch, 1992, pp. E-F). In 2010, the Department of Cultural Promotion (n.d.) recorded rod puppets as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) at the national level.

Because of the precarious status of the rod puppet performance art, prior research has proposed employing cultural tourism as a strategic approach in order to sustain this traditional form of artistic expression (Ratchatakortrakoon, 2024; Watanasawad, 2012). This method aims to not only secure financial viability for a rod puppet troupe, but also to provide ongoing performance opportunities. Such a recommendation is in line with numerous scholarly works that have emphasized the crucial role of cultural tourism in fortifying the sustainability of performing arts on a global scale (Chen, 2022; Dunbar-Hall, 2001; Kico et al., 2020; Lim & Bendle, 2012; Liu, 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2020). Advocating for the integration of performing arts within the context of cultural tourism is an effective strategy for long-term sustainability, but the process of redefining the role of performing arts necessitates a comprehensive analysis. Since the circumstances surrounding each performing art and the context of each society vary, the intricacies of their interactions are unique.

In the case of Phetchaburi province, Thailand, transitioning the Phetchaburi rod puppetry from “folk entertainment” to “a creative tourism activity” is challenging because of the limitations in the expertise of the puppeteers. The puppeteers are hindered by the ability to receive adequate knowledge and techniques from their instructor because the instructor has not received formal permission from their mentors to provide instruction. For this reason, the Phetchaburi puppet troupe lacks the necessary expertise to pass on to potential inheritors who could contribute to the enhancement of rod puppet performances. The process of transforming Phetchaburi rod puppets in a creative context should, therefore, result in both performance revision and new inheritors. This research analyzes the situation of Phetchaburi rod puppets by addressing the research question of why the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances necessitate revision and how such performances can be enhanced.

Research Objective

To analyze the factors and processes in the enhancement and revision of Phetchaburi rod puppet performances in order to help promote tourism in a creative context.

Method

According to UNESCO's (2022, p. 65) convention, each community plays an important role in transmitting intangible cultural heritage, which in this research is rod puppet performance. For this reason, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) was embraced as the research methodology.

A total of 65 stakeholders contributed their ideas and suggestions regarding the enhancement process and the development of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performance format, including local and external rod puppet artists, Chatri drama performers and musicians, teachers and

students, officers of the province's cultural section, cultural activists, tourists, local wisdom scholars and local media. After non-participant observations of rod puppet performances on Panichcharoen Road, a comprehensive methodology was implemented, encompassing in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observations in rod puppet workshops to collect insights and suggestions from the stakeholders.

Results

Showing Rod Puppets on a Walking Street Demands a High Level of Performance Skill: A Pivotal Element Contributing to the Refinement of the Performance Format

Panichcharoen Road is “an art and culture walking street” where tourists can enjoy engaging in cultural activities such as creating traditional art pieces and watching traditional performances, including rod puppet shows. The Phetchaburi rod puppet troupe has been hired by the municipality of Phetchaburi to perform once a month since September 2023. This regular engagement offers a prime opportunity for the Phetchaburi rod puppet troupe to hone their puppet manipulation skills and enhance their performances. Additionally, showing rod puppetry on a walking street increases the visibility of this traditional art form, potentially serving as a source of inspiration for the younger generation to consider becoming puppetry inheritors.

However, showing rod puppets on a walking street faces many challenges. The researcher examined, two key factors influence the adaptation of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances (Ratchatakorntakoon, 2024, p. 449). Firstly, the rod puppet shows created for tourists necessitate a level of simplification and brevity. This implies a significant condensation of ideas, techniques, and messages because the performances take place on a public street where numerous other activities can easily divert the attention of tourists. Secondly, there is a constraint on the performances because of the limited proficiency of the puppeteers, as previously mentioned. Hence, in order to establish a more suitable framework for the rod puppet performance within the context of cultural tourism, it is imperative to address these challenges effectively.

The author's analysis established a correlation between the performance context and the skill level of the puppeteers. In a situation where the audience may easily become distracted, the puppeteers must possess exceptional performance skills to captivate the audience. This accentuates the importance of performance context, which is in alignment with William Bascom's (1954, p. 343) suggestion regarding the context of performance that:

The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless. As we have seen, the interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. ... The performance, again, has to be placed in its proper time-setting-the hour of the day, and the season, with the background of the sprouting gardens ...

In the case of Phetchaburi rod puppets, Panichcharoen Road may not be a “proper time-setting” for a rod puppet performance, yet it stands as the sole platform where the art of rod puppetry can persist. However, the proficiency of the Phetchaburi puppeteers may be considered limited to perform in this venue, as mentioned in the introduction. For these two reasons, Phetchaburi rod puppetry requires some enhancement and revision to the performance format that is suitable within the context of creative tourism.

Co-learning and Co-creation of the “Khok Saetthi Rod Puppet Show”

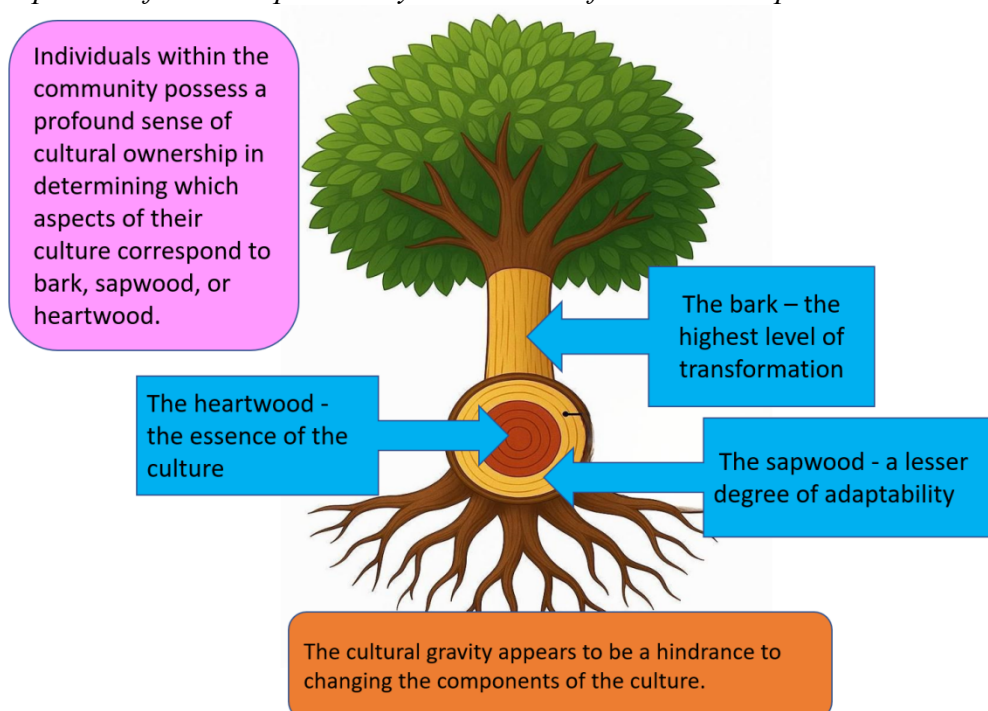
Employing Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), the processes involved in the enhancement and revision of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances commenced with soliciting suggestions from all stakeholders. The local and external rod puppet artists, Chattri drama artists and musicians contributed their knowledge and expertise to selected students through a collaborative workshop that resulted in the “Khok Saetthi rod puppet show” being co-created with the support of cultural activists.

How to Enhance the Phetchaburi Puppet Show From the Perspectives of All Stakeholders

In the course of focus group discussions on November 4, 2024, the leader of cultural activists proposed the adoption of Kanjana Kaewthep’s theory on the tree of cultural adaptation as a method for analyzing the enhancement and revision process of the rod puppet performance. Kaewthep drew an analogy between the composition of a tree and the elements of culture. The bark of a tree symbolizes the aspect of culture that resides at the highest level of transformation, while the sapwood embodies a component that exhibits a lesser degree of adaptability. The heartwood represents the essence of the culture, which should be preserved. Moreover, individuals within the community possess a profound sense of cultural ownership in determining which aspects of their culture correspond to bark, sapwood or heartwood. During the process of cultural adaptation, the cultural gravity appears to be a hindrance to changing the components of the culture (Kaewthep et al., 2006, pp. 30-34). This process is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Depiction of Kaewthep’s Theory on the Tree of Cultural Adaptation



Source. Figure generated by ChatGPT, with the content synthesized by the researcher

Adopting the theory of the tree of cultural adaptation to analyze the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances, all stakeholders unanimously agreed that the essence of Phetchaburi rod puppetry, the heartwood, lies in the puppet itself that must be preserved. The songs and singing style associated with the rod puppets can be likened to the outer layer of the tree, the sapwood, which can be modified or shortened. As for the stories or content, they can be likened to the bark of the tree, as they are open to transformation from traditional melodramas to new narratives that cater to tourists. This aligns with the context of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performance mentioned earlier, which necessitates revision because of the presentation on a walking street.

To maximize the benefits, the cultural activists and local wisdom scholars have committed to conducting a workshop at the Suwanrungsarit School. The workshop aims to enhance the Phetchaburi rod puppet show and groom the attending students as rod puppetry heirs.

Making Their Own Puppets During the Workshop Creates a Sense of Belonging Among Participants

Suwanrungsarit was selected because this school is dedicated to preserving and promoting local cultural heritage. Three teachers and forty students from the dance and traditional Thai music clubs were included as participants in the workshop. The workshop process consisted of eight sessions dedicated to training in puppet show skills. These sessions encompassed watching the traditional rod puppet show, the art of crafting one's own puppets, mastering puppet manipulation techniques, vocalizing puppet songs, showcasing puppet music, and ultimately, the creation of innovative puppet shows. In light of the limited expertise of local puppet artists, external puppeteers, Chatri drama performers, and musicians were enlisted to instruct the students in vocalizing puppet songs and showcasing puppet music.

The creation of personalized puppets is a key component of the workshop for three primary reasons: firstly, the rod puppet represents the essence of rod puppet performances, as acknowledged by community stakeholders; secondly, participants have the opportunity to hone their skills and stage their own puppet shows even after the workshop concludes; and thirdly, the act of creating one's own rod puppet enhances the sense of ownership and connection to this art form. This corresponds with Nunn (2020) who emphasized the significance of artistic creation in a participatory arts-based research project as an exceptional sphere of belonging within and beyond the project.

Apart from the creation of rod puppets, a new rod puppet production entitled “Khok Saetthi”, which is based on an ancient heritage site of Phetchaburi province, was developed through a collaborative workshop. The teachers proposed the legend of Khok Saetthi and a researcher authored the script with the assistance of local stakeholders regarding the veracity of the information, then Chatri drama performers and musicians curated the songs and designed the singing style. Additionally, the students who manipulated their own rod puppets were responsible for creating the dialogue for the puppet show. Because of the complexity of vocalizing rod puppet songs, a sound recording was produced for the Khok Saetthi puppet show.

Khok Saetthi Puppet Show on Panichcharoen Road

At the opening of the “Fun School Break Festival” organized by the cultural activists on 15 March 2025, the selected students from the workshop were granted the opportunity to

showcase the Khok Saethi rod puppet show on Panichcharoen Road. The use of this show examined the hypothesis regarding the appropriateness of the enhancement of rod puppetry within the context of creative tourism.

To gather feedback from all stakeholders, interviews with tourists and focus groups with rod puppet artists, as well as cultural activists, were conducted. Most of the tourists appreciated the captivating new content showcasing the Khok Saetthi heritage site; however, the duration of the rod puppet show, which spans approximately fifteen minutes, may be deemed too lengthy for presentation on a walking street. This aligns with the perspective of cultural activists who suggest that the rod puppet show should be condensed by segmenting the entire narrative into shorter chapters.

Conclusion and Discussion

This research aimed to analyze the factors and processes in the enhancement and revision of Phetchaburi rod puppet performances to help promote tourism in a creative context. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) was adopted as a research method. The theory on the tree of cultural adaptation was used to analyze the process of enhancing and revising rod puppet performance within the context of creative tourism.

Presentation of the new rod puppet show on the Panicharoen walking street plays a pivotal role in elevating the quality of the performance and making it more captivating for the audience, particularly tourists. This contrasts with the continued limited proficiency of local rod puppet artists, as mentioned previously. Therefore, a rod puppet workshop was held by cultural activists and local wisdom scholars as a means to enhance and refine rod puppet performances, as well as to increase the number of new puppet heirs.

The outcome of a workshop was not only new rod puppet learners, but also a new rod puppet performance titled “Khok Saetthi”. However, these outcomes do not definitively prove the sustainable presence of rod puppetry art in Phetchaburi province. All skills required for rod puppet performance, such as singing, vocalization and puppet manipulation, necessitate consistent and extensive practice. In this case, the ongoing involvement of the engaged students is significantly influenced by the support and instruction offered by their teachers.

Viewing through the lens of cultural adaptation, the Khok Saetthi puppet show needs further enhancement and revision. The songs and singing style, the sapwood, require condensation and enhancement. The content, the bark, can be transformed into the topic of well-known tourist destinations, encompassing various segments suitable for a three to five-minute rod puppet presentation. The progression of the rod puppetry in the context of creative tourism necessitates continuous support and active engagement from all stakeholders who are the owners of intangible cultural heritage.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT in order to generate a figure, the tree of cultural adaptation. After using ChatGPT, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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