

The Environment for Rod Puppet Performance in Thailand From 2014–2023

Ratchaneekorn Ratchatakorntrakoon, Institute of Thai Studies Chulalongkorn University,
Thailand

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Abstract

The research for this paper aimed to explore the environment for rod puppet performances in Thailand from 2014-2023. Rod puppet performances were analyzed by examining the existence of various troupes and the occasions such troupes hold performances. Rod puppet troupes can be classified into three types: 1) traditional folk rod puppet troupes; 2) contemporary rod puppet troupes and; 3) applied rod puppet troupes. The occasions for which rod puppet performances are held indicate that the functions of such performances has shifted from entertainment to a form of cultural heritage that needed to be preserved. Losing the function as entertainment has had a significant impact on traditional folk rod puppet troupes in that they are no longer hired to perform, thus many have disbanded. Whereas, contemporary rod puppet troupes have revamped their puppet performances to be more interesting by adjusting the method to present the puppets, expanded the stories used for performance and used special techniques in puppet shows. This has provided the opportunity to perform on special occasions, for example, royal funerals, the royal coronation ceremony of the king, as well as other kinds of performances, such as *khon*-masked dance plays and *lakorn* classic dance plays as for applied rod puppet troupes, which includes puppetry clubs in schools and universities, such troupes have adjusted the functions of the puppets to present local or cultural content of each community and, thus, have been able to perform more constantly.

Keywords: Rod Puppet, Puppet Performance, Function of Puppet Performance, Cultural Heritage Preservation

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Introduction

Puppet art of Thailand has been recorded since the Ayutthaya period (14th-18th century), with puppet performances becoming immensely popular in the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). In the past, the classification of “full body” puppets were categorized into three types: *hun luang* (royal string puppets), *hun wang na* (small-sized royal string puppets) and *hun lakorn lek* (small size stick puppets); as well as “head and hand” only puppets called *hun krabok* (rod puppets) (*Contemporary Thai Puppet*, 2017, p.13).

This research focuses on *hun krabok*, “... (rod puppets) have only heads and hands. The bodies can be 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 and became popular both in Bangkok, the capital, and other large cities. Owing to its popularity, there were quite a number of well-known puppet troupes owned by elites in the court and common people in the local areas. However, the popularity of rod puppet performances has gradually diminished because of the new forms of entertainment (Pannengpetch, 1992, p.E-F).

In 2010, rod puppets were recorded as Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter ICH) at the national level and was described as being a “widespread practice” (Department of Cultural Promotion, [n.d.]). Furthermore, many puppet performance events have been held in Thailand, including, in 2014 at Bangkok and Chaing Mai; in 2017 at Kanchanaburi; in 2018 at Phuket; and in 2022 at Phetchaburi. Holding puppet events in tourist destinations corresponds with Watanasawad’s (2012) suggestion that puppet performances should be developed for cultural tourism. However, the effect of such puppet events on the preservation of puppet performances has not been studied.

A vast body of research about rod puppet performances indicates that the situation of many rod puppet troupes has gradually diminished since rod puppet performances have declined in popularity (Pannengpetch, 1992; Hemsrichart, 2002; Juntarakam, 2007; Maicharoen, 2009; Klaisubin, 2011; Somsri, 2014 and Sitivong 2017). These findings would not seem to comport with the description of rod puppet performance as “a widespread practice”, thereby the environment for rod puppets needs to be examined, especially in the aspect of the relationship between holding events and the continued existence of rod puppet performances. Based on this concept, 2014 is used as the starting point for the scope of time for the research. Accordingly, this research has examined rod puppet performance by exploring the following questions: What is the environment for the rod puppet performance in Thailand between 2014-2023?

Research Objectives

- 1) To explore the environment of rod puppet performances in Thailand between 2014-2023.

Literature Review

Rod puppetry is an important performance art and has been used as a subject in many pieces of research, however, some research topics overlap. The relevant research can be divided into four groups:

1) The history of a rod puppet troupe or rod puppet troupes in some areas. Most research has studied the history of one rod puppet troupe and suggested approaches to retaining the knowledge of each puppet troupe (Hemsrichart,2002; Juntarakam, 2007; Klaisubin, 2011; Sitivong 2017). Pannengpetch (1992); Maicharoen (2009) and Sripen (2014) studied the history of puppet troupes in the western part of Thailand, central Thailand and in the Bangkok area, respectively. Pannengpetch (1992) and Maicharoen (2009) investigated the relationship of rod puppet troupes in each area and discussed the factors leading to the discontinuance of rod puppet performances. Apart from the studies of puppet performance in one area, Phooyathip and Maneewattana (2019) studied the transformation of puppet shows of the central region and the northeastern region.

2) Elements in rod puppet performances. Rod puppet performances consist of many kinds of arts, including, singing, puppet making, music composing and play writing. A large amount of research has selected *Chakrabhand* puppets as a research subject, such as Imsuwanvitaya (2013), Uejitmet (1998) and Dinprang (2002), examining the approach to constructing the Chakrabhand puppets, as well as the songs in the puppet performances. Ratchatakorntakoon (2021 and 2022) studied the relationship between songs and plays, as well as the techniques used in play writing. Eimprakongsilp (2008) analyzed the story of Phra Aphaimani for puppet plays of the *Chucherdchumnansilp* and *Poh Chang* troupes. Kerdwara and Nakpee, (2017) studied music used in the puppet performances of the *Mae Chawang Onlamai* troupe. Finally, Leanglue (2021) studied Master Kanjanapakorn's vocal techniques found in his performance of the story of Phra Aphaimani.

3) The adaptation of rod puppet performances. As a puppet troupe owner and researcher, Waevsamana, (2015; 2018; 2021 A; and 2021 B) investigated the results of mixing new techniques, using an umbrella as a stage and high technology, 3D print scenes, in his puppet shows. Waevsamana's research is similar to Svetsreni's study (2010) that focused on the adaptation of puppet performance by blending traditional performances with Thai northern cultures. Sitthupahan (2016) discussed contemporary tradition-based practices of puppet theatre, both shadow, figure and rod puppets, and the efforts of practitioners to preserve and develop this performance form.

4) The use of rod puppet performance for cultural tourism purpose. Watanasawad (2012) studied the possibility of the development of rod puppetry for cultural tourism with the concept of intangible cultural heritage. This study built on the findings of previous studies that rod puppet performances have declined in popularity, so rod puppetry should be adapted for cultural tourism purposes.

These four groups of relevant research reflect two analysis paradigms of rod puppet performance. First is the preservation of puppet performances through an emphasis on the history of puppet troupes and the approaches to preserve them. Second is the adaptation or the development of puppet performances, especially elements of puppet shows that have new functions for the performance. This research tries to fill the gap of previous research by exploring and analyzing rod puppetry under the paradigms of both preservation and adaptation.

Research Method

Qualitative research was adopted, including documentary review, participant observation in puppet classes and rod puppet shows, as well as in-depth interviews.

Findings

The Environment for Puppet Performances in Thailand From 2014-2023

A profound and broad understanding of the environment for rod puppetry contributes to effective approaches that can be proposed to sustain this type of performance. The current environment for rod puppet performances can be analyzed in the aspect of the current existence and the occasions for performances.

The Existence of Rod Puppet Performance in Thailand From 2014–2023

Using the characteristics of performance formats as the criteria, rod puppet troupes can be classified into three groups: 1) traditional folk rod puppet troupes; 2) contemporary rod puppet troupes and 3) applied rod puppet troupes.

1) Traditional folk rod puppet troupes are troupes located in local provinces founded more than 50 years. The most significant feature indicating a traditional folk characteristic is the heads of the puppets that are carved from lightweight wood. Due to the complicated creation process of a puppet's head, traditional folk puppet troupes have only 10-15 puppets, for which wigs or clothes can be changed in order to change their roles in a performance. However, some traditional folk puppet troupes have changed from wooden headed puppets to paper or resin headed puppets in order to have a more beautiful appearance.



Figure 1: Wooden head puppets of the *Chor Charoensilp* and *Darunee Si Phi Nong* troupes
Source: Researcher: left (2023, March 23) right (2023, March 10)

Apart from the puppets, some standard features can be noted during a traditional rod puppet performance, such as a translucent screen, the performers sitting when they manipulate puppets, the style of story narration and the type of music ensemble.



Figure 2: Performer sitting behind a screen during a puppet performance of the *Chucherdchumnansilp* troupe

Source: Apichart Inyong (20 May 2023)

Figure 2 shows a performer sitting behind a screen during a puppet performance of the *Chucherdchumnansilp* troupe, which shows many features of a traditional folk rod puppet performance. First is that the screen is made from transparent fabric or is a bamboo curtain.

“The puppet performers can see the number and the reaction of the audience through the transparent screen, and the director of puppet performance will extend or shorten the puppet show depending on whether the puppet show retains the attention of the audience.” (heir, personal communication, May 6, 2023)

Second, the performer is sitting when manipulating the puppet.

“However, some traditional folk rod puppet troupes stand when performers manipulate puppets because manipulating the puppets while standing enhances the movement of the puppets and the performers are sometimes too old to sit for a long period.” (heir, personal communication, May 18, 2023)

“Most of the popular stories for puppetry are those that have been performed in dramas, except Inao and Unarut, which are slow-paced dramas. The favorite stories used for puppetry include Phra Aphaimani, Laksanawong, Kawi, Suwannahong, Chaichet, Graithong, Khun Chang Khun Phaen, Wongsawan Chantawas and Phra Pinthong. But only some episodes of the stories are selected and adapted into a presentation.” (Posayakrit 1986, p.102-103)

The most famous episode is about Phra Aphaimani, the scene when the hero flees from his wife giant, Phisue Samut, since this scene makes audiences experience emotions such as suffering; love and humor (heir, personal communication, May 3, 2023).

Apart from these well-known stories, the *Chucherdchumnansilp* troupe created its own stories, for instance, *Kumarakaiyasit*; *Mongkutphet Mongkutkaew*; *Rakakaew*; *Sritsuriyong*, and *Konthong* (Hemsrichart,2002, abstract); similarly, the *Mae Chaweng Onlamai* troupe had owned its own stories, for instance, *Phra phrot namaeo*; *Wen yom sanong wen*; *Phrachaimongkhon* and *Phraiwan ton prap asun* (Klaisubin, 2011, p.99). Creating their own stories for rod puppet performances reflects the high popularity of such performances in the past in that famous puppet troupes had their own unique stories to attract audiences to their performances. These stories had similar plots as existing puppetry literature, presenting an adventure and the love of princes and princesses. “The main stories will continue by the

narration of the director of the puppet performance with intermittent singing because the characteristic of ‘folk entertainment’ focuses on the quick and fun continuation of stories” (heir, personal communication, May 25, 2023). This also indicates the wisdom of the director of the puppet performance who organizes the limit number of rod puppets to perform a large number of stories.

2) Contemporary rod puppet troupes are troupes in Bangkok and Nonthaburi that started performing between 1975-2000. The characteristics of contemporary rod puppet troupes are that while they still perform for entertainment, some elements have been adjusted to make the rod puppet performances more modern and attractive. The most well-known contemporary rod puppet troupe is that of Chakrabhand Posayakrit, a famous artist whose puppet performances have been admired for their use of beautiful puppets and other elements. Chakrabhand has had a strong influence on the puppet industry. Sittupahan (2016, p.53) analyzed the effect of Chakrabhand’s work on other puppet troupes:

Following in Chakrabhand Posayakrit’s footsteps, younger generations of puppeteers have been shaping contemporary *hun krabok*. At one end of the spectrum, there are practitioners who are developing their practices within the framework of conventional forms. At the other end, there are those who have chosen to adapt elements from other cultures and integrate new idioms and techniques with what they have drawn from traditional Thai forms.

Apart from the influence of Chakrabhand Posayakrit, the development of rod puppetry has been influenced by the creative ideas of all puppet performers whose experiences have played a significant role in the adaption of puppet performances to meet the satisfaction of audiences. The adaptations of puppet performance to a contemporary style can be classified into three characteristics, as follows:

2.1) Methods to present puppets. The limitation of rod puppets is that they cannot move in delicate and beautiful ways as performers can, so some contemporary puppet troupes have adjusted their method by adding the role of live performers. Some troupes have changed the role of the puppeteers to performers by having puppeteers come from behind the screen to in front of the screen, whereby the elegant movement of puppeteers is similar to dancing. Another method that is used in many contemporary puppet troupes is switching between puppet and performer. This method is so famous that the technical term - *Hun Krabok Ook Tua* (puppet coming alive) was coined.

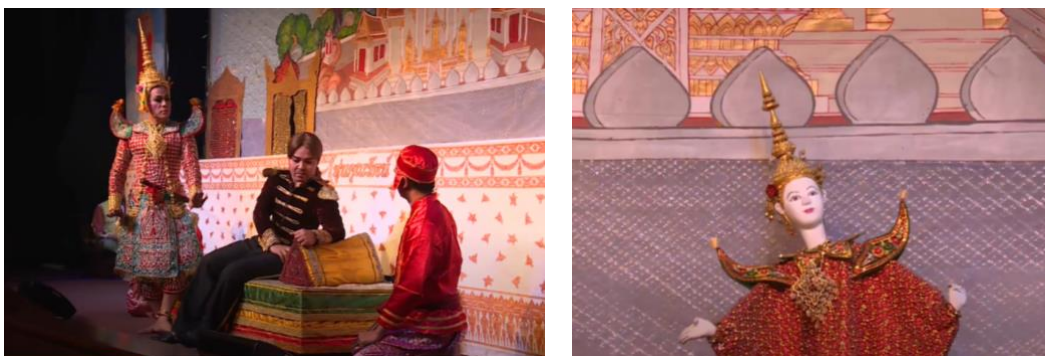


Figure 3: *Hun Krabok Ook Tua*, the rod puppet switch characters, of Khun Rat Puppet Troupe

Source: captured from the record entitled, *Hun Krabok Ook Tua* the story of *Phra Aphai Mani*, the episode of War of Nine Armies

Figure 3 shows the role of *Phra Aphaimani*, the hero of the story, being performed by both a puppet and an actor. In order to make the audience understand that the puppet and actor play the same role, the costume and the decorations of the actor and the puppet are similar. “*Hun Krabok Ook Tua* originated from the lack of experienced puppeteers in some troupes, so the beautiful dancing of performers was inserted to compensate for the puppet show. Nonetheless, *Hun Krabok Ook Tua* attracts some audiences who want to see their beloved performers in puppet performances” (heir, personal communication, May 25, 2023 and performer, personal communication, June 8, 2023).

2.2) Stories used for performances. Some contemporary puppet troupes have expanded the stories for puppet performance from drama stories to historical literature such as *Taleng Phai*, the elephant battle between King Naresuan of Ayutthaya and Mingyi Swa, the heir apparent to the Burmese throne (Ratchatakortrakoon, 2022) and *Punthai Norasingh*, the honest helmsman who insists on receiving the death penalty because he broke the bow of the Ekkachai Royal barge. Moreover, the performances of contemporary puppet troupes strictly follow the printed script rather than allow for improvisation by the director of the puppet performance. However, the scripts of contemporary puppet troupes also reflect the tradition of puppet performances, namely, beginning with an invocation, the traditional style of puppetry songs and the insertion of jokes (performers, personal communication, June 8, 2023).

2.3) Special techniques. As a result of a change of the location of contemporary puppet performances from a puppet stage to a theater, special techniques have been added to make puppet performance more interesting. For example, *Taleng Phai* of the Chakrabhand Posayakrit troupe uses smoke, lighting techniques, both spot lighting and intensity adjustment, and changes of settings and distance illusion to create atmosphere (Ratchatakortrakoon, 2022). While, *Punthai Norasingh the Musical Puppet Show* employs new technologies, including animation, contemporary music, 3D modeling scenery and modern lighting (Waevsamana, 2015).



Figure 4: Special techniques in *Taleng Phai* and *Punthai Norasingh the Musical Puppet Show*

Source (left): captured from “*Video clips of rehearsal for Taleng Phai*” published on https://chakrabhand.org/puppetry/index05_eng.as
(right) retrieved 11 August 2023 from <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/c6/9d/03/c69d032f35cb1b06b3df5e6b919cbc0d.jpg>

3) Applied rod puppet troupes are puppetry clubs in many academic institutions, both schools and universities. “Teaching and learning Thai performance is one of the missions of

academic institutions; that is the role to preserve arts and culture” (instructors, personal communication, May 9, 2023). A characteristic of an applied rod puppet troupe is that they use puppets as media to communicate a message, i.e., admire the king or royal family members, or present the tradition of ethics, rather than strictly to entertain the audience. For this reason, there is no puppet stage in the show and the duration is quite short, only 10-15 minutes. “In order to make the show more elegant, another kind of puppetry art, such as skin puppet (*nang talung*), is integrated” (instructors, personal communication, June 23, 2023).



Figure 5: The puppet shows of *Pluluangwittaya School* and the Lao Wiang ethnic puppet of *Khon Ruk Hoon troupe (Takhli Prachasun School)*

Source: (left) researcher (21 March 2023); (right) Sarut Janganan (9 June 2023)

Figure 5 shows the characters of an applied puppet show where the puppeteers perform without a stage. These shows are often included in local events, such as the annual festival of Tak province in remembrance of King Taksin, the Baan Takhli walking street in Nakhon Sawan province. This demonstrates both the role of academic institutions and puppet performances in sustaining art and culture, in this case, puppetry.

An analysis of these rod puppet troupes indicates that the kind of rod puppet troupe that probably are in the scope of “widespread practice”, according to the Department of Cultural Promotion, are contemporary rod puppet troupes, mostly inspired by the *Chakrabhand* rod puppets, and the applied rod puppet troupe, which have dramatically increased in educational institutions. Many researchers have reported that a large number of rod puppet troupes have gradually discontinued because their research data is focused only on traditional folk rod puppet troupes (Pannengpetch 1992; Hemsrichart, 2002.; Juntarakam, 2007; Maicharoen, 2009; Klaisubin, 2011; Sitivong 2017). However, the Department of Cultural Promotion’s description of rod puppet performances indicates that the situation of each kind of rod puppet troupe is more complicated.

The Occasions for Rod Puppet Performances: A Reflection of Rod Puppetry’s Function

During the Rattanakosin period (18th c to present), rod puppetry has been one kind of entertainment that has been held during royal events, along with other types of performances, such as *khon* and *lakhorn*.¹ These events include ceremonial events on public holidays and royal funerals. For the general public, rod puppet troupes were hired to perform at funerals, as well as in the past in casinos to lure men into gambling (Posayakrit, 1986, p.106).

¹ *Khon* and *lakhorn* are two types of Thai classical performances.

In the 1950s, rod puppet troupes were hired to perform at temple fairs, nowadays *likay*² troupes have replaced rod puppet troupes since audiences seem to enjoy watching *likay* (heir, personal communication, 25 May 2023). A number of supporters have noted that, as compared with other types of performance arts, such as *khon* and *lakhorn*, puppetry, especially rod puppetry, is underrated. They reveal that, “as organizers of the event about cultural preservation, *khon* is recommended to demonstrate in the event as the representative of Thai traditional performance because *khon* is familiar to audiences” (personal communication, 31 May and 27 June, 2023). Based on information from heirs and supporters, it seems evident that the interest of the audience in traditional rod puppet performances has declined. This is a strong reason why there are only two traditional folk rod puppet troupes remain, *Chor Charoensilp* and *Chucherdchumnansilp*, and they are only hired to perform once or twice a year.

Losing the function as a popular entertainment media has had a significant effect on traditional folk rod puppet troupes. However, because some contemporary rod puppet troupes have revamped their performances to become more interesting, they have received the opportunity to show on special occasions, most noteworthy, at royal funerals and the royal coronation ceremony of the king. Furthermore, on 2 April, Thai Cultural Preservation Day, which is the birthday of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, and the celebrations of King Rama II, which is held every February at King Rama 2 Memorial Park in Samut Songkhram province, both traditional folk rod puppet troupes and contemporary rod puppet troupes perform, along with *khon* and *lakhorn* with the support of the Department of Fine Arts.

Apart from royal occasions, some contemporary rod puppet troupes perform puppets on special occasions, for example, at the foundational day of Poh-Chang Academy of Arts, Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin, the Thai traditional music and performance support project of Chulalongkorn University, Chulawathis. For Chulawathis, the traditional folk rod puppet troupe, *Chucherdchumnansilp*, has sometimes been invited to perform. One of the most well-known episodes of puppet performances is *Phra Aphaimani* fleeing from his giantess wife. *Phra Aphaimani* was written by Sunthorn Phu, a renowned poet in the early Rattanakosin period. For this reason, puppet performances are included in many activities held on the Remembrance Day of Sunthorn Phu.

The occasions detailed above for rod puppet performances reflect that the functions of puppetry have gradually shifted from entertainment to preservation of cultural heritage. Accordingly, puppet performances are reserved to cultural preservation events held by the government or education sector. It can be said that the Chakrabhand Posayakrit troupe’s presentation of *Taleng Phai* from January to February 2019 has been the only significant puppet performance that is strictly entertainment. However, the number people attending the performances of *Taleng Phai* was very limited since the puppet performances were sponsored by a number of private sponsors and the tickets were not sold to the general public.

On the one hand, reservation of the function of puppet performance to cultural preservation has the advantage that puppet performances are supported by the government; on the other hand, only some of the rod puppet troupes have been selected for support. That means the other troupes, especially the traditional folk rod puppet troupes, not only have lost their function as entertainment, but also do not meet the criteria to be supported by the

² Folk singing performance presented by characters with sparkling dresses.

government, which has tended to be considered “contemporary” puppet troupes as a “widespread practice”, rather than traditional folk rod puppet troupes.

One aspect of survival for the traditional folk rod puppet troupes is by transferring their knowledge to a school in a nearby area. For instance, the *Sangwansilp* troupe passed its know-how to manipulate puppets to the *Pluluangwittaya* School troupe in Tak province and the inheritor of the *Chucherdchumnansilp* troupe is a music teacher in Amphawan School in Samut Songkhram province. The teaching and learning of puppet know-how in schools or universities has made the format of puppet shows change: “Owing to the limited time to practice, the puppet shows of the *Pluluangwittaya* School troupe are quite short scenes, rather than an episode of a story” (instructors, personal communication, March 21, 2023). However, it should be noted that short scenes are more suitable for the occasion of the annual festival of Tak province as mentioned above.

Conclusion

In order to expand the occasions for puppet performances, both national and international puppet festivals have been held in tourist destinations, such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Kanchanaburi, Phuket and Phetchaburi. Such puppet festivals not only open up an opportunity for many puppet troupes to perform, but also help build connections among puppet troupes. Nevertheless, the frequency of these puppet festivals is not enough to sustain some puppet troupes, since the festivals are only held every other year. Moreover, if puppet events are organized in tourist provinces where there is no established puppet troupe, such as Kanchanaburi and Phuket, it cannot be expected that there will be long-term and sustainable advantages for those puppet troupes where their bases are in other provinces.

The classification of puppet troupes indicates the dynamic environment for puppetry in Thailand in that puppet troupe founders and heirs have been trying to develop their puppet shows to be more interesting, as well as to create new functions for puppet performance, that is, using puppets as a medium to convey cultural content. The traditional folk rod puppet troupes have been in a delicate situation, except for the *Chucherdchumnansilp* troupe that has clear heirs, both descendants and inheritors, and is originated and located in Samut Songkhram province where many cultural activities are supported.

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Contact email: ratchaneekorn.r@chula.ac.th