

布袋戏观后感 Reflections on Glove Puppetry



(我在课上操纵布袋戏偶, 可以体验演师的辛劳。 I am manipulating the puppets in class to sense how skillful the puppeteers are!)

柯登伟 Will Crichton

82-440: Chinese Folk Performance Traditions 中国民间演艺传统

China is renowned for its many traditions accumulated over its long history as a nation, yet not all of those traditions make it into the public eye. Lion and

dragon dancing, erhu and other Chinese instruments, and even shadow puppetry are commonly known to even passersby of Chinese culture. 布袋戏 Bùdàixì, or glove puppetry in English, is a lesser-known but equally fascinating performing art common in the southeast of China, particularly in Taiwan. This fact, perhaps, contributes to its relative obscurity—as the art is not widespread throughout China, it falls through the cracks of Chinese culture curricula, and is instead treated as primarily Taiwanese culture. To be fair, the Taiwanese have certainly adopted glove puppetry and developed a unique form of it that they can call their own. Whereas the more traditional versions of glove puppetry feature small, elegant puppets and instrumental mastery which are similarly important in other traditional Chinese arts, modern Taiwanese glove puppetry such as 霹雳布袋戏 Pīlì bùdàixì includes special effects like smoke and neon lighting as well as much larger puppets and more impressive staging. Despite its apparent obscurity to us as Westerners, Taiwanese glove puppetry actually enjoys a surprisingly large audience among the Taiwanese, particularly college students.

Its change in style to accommodate the interests of modern audiences may come at a cost, however. While Pili glove puppetry enjoys broad exposure and a captive audience, more traditional forms of the art are dying in exchange. Enormous productions that used to take a live orchestra and several puppeteers are now reduced to the puppet master and his wife running the whole show with prerecorded music and dialogue. Here, the lack of Western interest hits hard, as when many of these great puppet masters pass away, few will be willing to take their place and learn their arts. Popular Chinese traditional culture like the lion and dragon dance or erhu and guzheng are taught widely around the world—at my high school in Iowa, for example. Even if those skills faced a decline of interest in China, thousands of others around the globe would be willing to support the art.

Taiwanese glove puppetry, however, is relegated to just a small corner of the world. As today's audiences look towards entertainment with greater flash and faster pace, e.g. the Pili style, art forms like traditional glove puppetry are forced to accept the realities of modern society. It's worth noting, however, that lack of cross-cultural interest can also simply be attributed to different tastes across cultures. For example, in February 2006, Cartoon Network aired an English-edited version of Pili called Wulin Warriors, but took it off the air after only two episodes due to poor ratings as well as complaints that its style did not fit with the rest of the network.

Besides the cultural reach of glove puppetry, it's also a fascinating field to study as a learner of Chinese since it offers a more accessible way into Chinese culture than old poems or ancient tomes. The accompanying visuals of the scenes paint a clear picture in my mind of the folklore of ancient China, and even if I cannot fully understand all the Chinese—particularly the Taiwanese—I can pick up the basic ideas behind the story. Some puppet shows do not even feature dialogue at all, instead spinning a yarn solely through puppet mastery and music. In that regard, Chinese and Taiwanese glove puppetry offers a unique opportunity to language learners to engage in the culture and absorb famous stories from Chinese history. Even if interest may be declining amongst the populace, the language learning community still has a lot to benefit from this art form.