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Theater of the Palm of the Hands: A Taiwan Tradition

by Margaret Moody



AUTHOR WITH MONKEY KING (BY LI CHUAN-TSAIN OF I WAN JAN TROUPE)
PHOTO: JACEK ZUZANSKI

The first time I met puppetmaster Li Tien-lu, in Taiwan in 1982, he sat on a couch slurping tiny cups of *lau ren cha* (old man tea) and using his long, wiry hands to create puppets in the air. My French friend Vincent had said “you have to meet my teacher.” Li punctuated his hand movements with spoken rhythm: ta ta dzei, ta ta chang, ta ta dzei, ta ta chang, dzei ta dzei ta dzei ta CHOC that I learned, later, were an accurate representation of the percussion sounds accompanying traditional puppet shows.

At the end of the lesson, Master Li took out two threadbare puppets with chipping paint and allowed Vincent and I to play at being puppeteers. We twirled our hands to bring the puppets onto the low table serving as our stage, and walked them across in time to ta ta dzei ta ta chang.

When I went to Taiwan in 1981, my plan was to polish the Chinese language skills I’d gained in college. I had dabbled in puppetry but had no idea that Taiwan had exquisite puppet traditions, including Bu Dai Xi (cloth bag theater). Bu Dai Xi puppets have cloth bodies that fit the puppeteer’s hand, and equally weighted heads and feet that invite flips and twirls with just a little movement.

Li Tien-lu liked to use the more formal term Chang Chung Hsi — theater of the palm of the hands — to describe his puppetry. He created memorable voices for puppets from clowns to bureaucrats, and loved to

increase the drama in any story. Li had played music with a Chinese opera troupe in Shanghai years before, and delighted in changing the instruments and music to accompany his shows.

Puppetry was no laughing matter. Students should come to the house every morning to study unless he and his sons were busy. If the troupe had a performance, we should be there.

The I Wan Jan troupe (亦宛然掌中劇團) – Master Li, his two sons Chen hsi-huang and Li Chuan-tsain, frequently a Taiwanese apprentice, and four musicians — were hired to perform outside temples to honor the gods within. They’d arrive mid-day, unload trunks carrying puppets and their elaborately carved stage, and set everything up on a wooden platform near the temple. Then the sons would show their attending students elaborate puppet feats including an old man smoking; a three-puppet fight scene rendered, impossibly, by two hands; a lady opening her fan. They’d grin and ask if we foreign students would like to try. My attempts invariably brought on open-mouthed laughter, but I bore it, determined that I could learn to perform with the beautiful puppets.

In the evening, the temple masters lit the stage. Quickly, all ages of people came out of apartments and shops nearby carrying stools. They sat for two hours, taking in the show, the drums, the stringed instruments, some lyrical, some shrill. I understood less of the stories



LI YI-HSIEN, PHOTO COURTESY OF I WAN JAN TROUPE



MASTER LI TIEN-LU AROUND 1990, PHOTO COURTESY OF LI TIEN-LU PUPPETRY MUSEUM



than the tiny children dashing about between their elders’ stools. But, it was wonderful to identify the traditional roles Master Li had shown us in class: wen sheng (male scholars); wu sheng (male warriors) ; dan (women of many types and ages); chou (clowns, including many animals) and gwai (monsters of all colors).

The next day Master Li, who was in his seventies, would sleep late, so Vincent and I would wait a day, then turn up with cookies. Li delighted in recounting the performance, how the villains were acrobatically slain, and singing any opera song that had been included.

I spent more than two years studying with Li Tien-lu, supporting myself by teaching English. When I returned to the US, Master Li asked me to set up a US tour for the I Wan Jan Troupe. His first French student, Jean-Luc Penso, had taken I Wan Jan to France several times, and the media attention had been a boost for the troupe.

Puppetry was in a slump in Taiwan. The nationalist government suppressed rather than celebrated Taiwan’s unique version of Chinese culture. Li recognized that attention from art lovers in other countries would be vital to the future of Bu Dai Xi.

In 1985, I was able to invite I Wan Jan to tour my native Arkansas, and went with them to NYC and Chicago for shows arranged by Taiwan’s Ministry of Culture. In 1988, my friend, puppeteer Madeleine Beresford, went to Taiwan to study Bu Dai Xi with me. We persuaded two filmmaker friends, Oren Rudavsky and Peter Hutcheson, to film Master Li’s art for a documentary.

Taiwanese society had opened in every way since martial law had been lifted in 1987. Previously the broadcast of Taiwanese language programs had been restricted to one hour per day. Now Taiwanese opera and sitcoms played on television all day, and news could be delivered in Taiwanese dialect. Taiwanese pride extended to traditional arts. A puppet renaissance was underway.

Li’s sons were teaching puppetry in elementary and middle schools, and in community centers. The classes were once a week, which didn’t seem often enough. However, teachers at the schools were so dedicated to having performing troupes that they practiced with their students each day, and raised money to buy puppets and stages.

Madeleine and I were welcomed to puppetry classes taught by Master Li’s sons at Ping Teng elementary school, in the mountains above Taipei, and at the Sunday community classes. Li’s sons were stricter than Master Li had been with me. A poorly executed movement was called out and criticized. Tiny elementary school children quickly mastered flipping and spinning movements that had taken me months. I was humbled over and over. Watching Madeleine’s focused way of learning was very helpful to me. She kept her eye carefully on the puppet and soon learned many delicate gestures for wen sheng (scholar) and syau dan (lady) roles.

As a performing pair, we were taken more seriously than I had been as a solo American student. Master Li taught us two lively episodes of *Journey to the West*. I played Monkey King and monsters, characters known equally for their acrobatics and bad judgment; Madeleine played the loyal, clownish disciple Pig; female roles; and some notable deities. Master Li encouraged us to portray the Wind Mother with a masked puppeteer, a break in Bu Dai Xi style. “You are Westerners and Western theater mixes things up. Your audiences will love it.”

Our film, *Theater of the Palms: the World of Master Li*, debuted nationally on PBS in 1992, and was shown at film festivals in New York and Bombay. Director Oren Rudavsky recently sent me a digital copy. I have loved seeing Master Li’s face and hands, always in motion, and the young versions of people who grew up to be masterful puppeteers and musicians.



BACKSTAGE AT I WAN JAN PERFORMANCE

Last year the I Wan Jan Troupe performed at the Puppet Showplace in Boston. I Wan Jan is still a family troupe, led by Li Tsai Su-jen, Master Li's daughter-in-law. Her grandsons, who are, of course, Master Li's great-grandsons, are the troupe's lead puppeteers. Li Yi-hsien and Chang Chia-ming were only 20 and 21 when I saw them perform last year, and I marveled at their clear, beautiful puppet movements, perfectly accompanied by drums, flute and er-hu (two-stringed Chinese fiddle).

How could such young performers understand so much? Li Yi-hsien wrote to me about his puppetry training:

我從小出生於台灣有名的布袋戲家族，曾祖父（爺爺的父親）是布袋戲大師-李天祿。從小布袋戲就是我的玩具，直到小學五年級開始正式學習。由於台灣並沒有任何偶戲相關科系與學校，所以並沒有一套“系統化”的學習課程。

基本上都是家族，或是有興趣的學生自己尋找劇團學習，因此每個劇團的練習方式並不一樣，但是一開始的練習基本上都是一樣。

由於是家族的關係，只要有時間就會練習，餐廳吃飯的空檔、搭車的空檔、看電視的空檔，甚至是上小學時，也會在教室用空手練習。

I was born into a famous Taiwan Bu Dai Xi family troupe. My great grandfather was the puppetry master Li Tien-lu. From when I was little I played with Bu Dai Xi puppets, and in 5th grade I started more formal study. Since Taiwan has no academic system or center for the study of puppetry, there isn't a systematic curriculum. Most people learn from

families, or sometimes an interested student finds a troupe and asks to study with them, so the way the members of each troupe learn is different. But the basic things puppeteers study are the same.

Since I was learning from my family, any time we had free time I would practice. Waiting for our food in a restaurant, in the car, watching TV, even when I had free time in my classroom at school.

一開始雙手曲臂舉著15~20分鐘，慢慢增加時間。為了在演出時，訓練手的臂力，不讓戲偶沈下舞台。

In school classes, the beginning puppeteer stands for 15 to 20 minutes each day with both hands held up at shoulder height, adding time gradually, to develop arm strength. That way puppets won't suddenly sink below the playboard.

然後練習手指拉筋，有點像是芭蕾舞者一樣，只是我們拉的是手的筋，最後才是練習布袋戲的各種動作。直到熟練動作，才開始拿上戲偶練習。目前練習時間不固定。（幾乎天天）

Then we developed our finger muscles, as a ballet student would train their muscles. Finally, students could study all the different puppet movements. Only after studying the movements vigorously could we begin to practice with puppets on our hands. There was no rule about how long I practiced, but I practiced nearly every day.

Madeleine and I still perform several episodes of *Journey to the West*, the famous Monkey King epic. We use traditional Bu Dai Xi puppets and choreography, but our performance cannot be considered traditional. We don't perform with drummers who match each gesture with a beat. And in our short years of study we didn't attain the skill and elegance of true Bu Dai Xi masters, who practice diligently for at least 10 years.

But the Bu Dai Xi tradition has offered a treasure chest of movement possibilities and well-drawn character types, and I dip into it every time I put my hand in a puppet.

I asked Li Yi-hsien about how his study of Bu Dai Xi influences him as he creates non-traditional puppet shows for children:

因為從小學習傳統的布袋戲演出，所以在戲劇思維上，常常會很難脫離傳統布袋戲的框架，不過有一點好處是，傳統布袋戲的動作很細膩、很美。所以可以讓戲偶做更多像真人一般的細膩動作。也在發想新動作的時候，有更多的可能性。

Because I've studied Bu Dai Xi since I was small, when I think about theater, it's hard to step out of the "box" of traditional puppetry. The good thing, though, is that traditional Bu Dai Xi has exquisite movements. It is beautiful. So using the tradition allows the puppet to make delicate gestures that seem real. And there are so many possibilities for choreography.



CHANG CHIA-MING, BACKSTAGE, PHOTO COURTESY OF I WAN JAN TROUPE



FAIRY PUPPETS IN THE BU DAI XI STYLE
BY MARGARET MOODY AND SANDRA PASTRANA
PHOTO: JACEK ZUZANSKI

I asked this young, wise performer which roles are hardest to perform, and his words went to the heart of puppetry:

其中最難的大概就是小生、小旦、小丑，除了練習手部動作外，還必須抓到戲偶的感情。好讓戲偶就像有靈魂一般的自然。

The hardest roles are the young man, young woman, and little clown. Besides learning the movements, the performer has to understand the emotional life of the character to be able to give it a soul, to seem natural.

MARGARET MOODY puts her Bu Dai Xi skills to work through Margaret Moody Puppets, in Galapagos Puppets with Madeleine Beresford, and learns new tricks as part of Jacek Zuzanski's Dream Tale Puppets. She lives in Arlington, Massachusetts.