

Project of Protecting and Salvaging Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage



Oral Histories of
Chinese Folk Arts and Crafts

CHINESE PUPPETS

Narrated by Xu Zhuchu ♦ Translated by Li Li ♦ Compiled by Wang Wenzhang



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Chinese Puppets

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Xu Zhuchu:

A Brief Introduction

Xu Zhuchu was born in September 1938, in Zhangzhou, Fujian province, the sixth generation in a family of renowned puppet craftsmen. His puppet carving and design have won national and international acclaim, and he presently serves as general art supervisor and curator of Zhuchu Puppet Art Gallery in Zhangzhou. One of the few experts who receives special subsidies from the State Department, he is also a research fellow of the China Art Institute and one of China's top-ranking artists.

Zhuchu's ancestor Xu Ziqing (1768-1858) set up his puppet workshop in Zhangzhou in 1807 AD, beginning the family's carving legacy. Over succeeding generations, the family continued to gain renown, and Zhuchu's father, Xu Niansong, was well known as a master puppet carver. In 1938, the Buddhist Hong Yi, invited to Zhangzhou to preach the dharma (Buddhist doctrine), became friends with his grandfather, and, becoming a neighbor, with Zhuchu's father as well. Hong Yi himself named Zhuchu, the designation declaring that he would grow up quickly and healthily like bamboo, and bring prosperity to his family.

As a boy of 10, he began in his father's footsteps studying puppet carving, his diligence displaying brilliant talent early on. In 1955, as a junior middle school student, he won the first-class award at the National Children's Science and Technology Exposition for three puppet heads - an occasion the China Central Press Film Studio made into the film *Child Sculptor-Xu Zhuchu*. After junior middle school graduation, his family's financial situation prevented him from pursuing advanced study



at China's prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts, and instead he started his career in sculpture at the Zhangzhou Arts and Crafts Cooperative. At 22, he began work in a professional puppet troupe that lasted until his retirement in 1998.

Over half a century, his skill as a craftsman has brought countless puppets to life. Having inherited his family's tradition of puppetry, Xu has combined their traditional techniques with his own innovations to form a personal style now representative of Zhangzhou's modern puppet-carving legacy. So far, he has created more than 600 types of puppets, each exquisite in its own way. His models fall into several different categories drawn from traditional dramas and the Buddhist, Taoist, and Chinese pantheons of monsters. Those based on the roles of traditional opera including "*sheng*" (a male role), "*dan*" (a female role), "*jing*" (a painted-face role), "*mou*" (a middle-aged man) and "*chou*" (a comic role). His puppets, beyond their use in performance, carry high artistic and ornamental value. They capture and hold the imagination in a way that makes it difficult for the viewer to step away.

Xu has drawn the praise of many celebrities in China. The famous Chinese writer Guo Moruo praised Xu's puppets as "bearing vivid facial expression." Famous sculptor Liu Kaiqu commended his works as "delicate carving with vivid expression". Wang Zhaowen, an authority on art theory, maintains that "most Chinese would feel proud of their motherland after looking at Mr. Xu's works." The well-known sculptor Liu Kaiqu lauded Xu's carving skill as "delicate and penetrating," and the famous dramatist Zhang Geng has complimented his works, calling them "lifelike." Another renowned dramatist, Weng Ouhong, sang Xu's praises in the following words: "Making the puppets more vivid than real person on stage, his delicate skills in carving reach into the soul and spirit; bestowed by the God and Goddess, he create all kinds of different puppet styles."

In late 1994, Xu helped initiate the cross-straits exchange



of traditional arts with a pioneering visit to Taiwan. His work has been exhibited worldwide at galleries in the United States, Singapore, China, and has been collected by museums in the United States, Russia, France, Japan, Hungary and other countries. The Art of Xu Zhuchu's Puppet Sculpture has been published by the China Fine Arts Publishing Group. He has also designed and carved puppets for more than 30 puppet movies and television programs.

Xu is a leading figure of traditional puppet carving in China. His art, lauded as “a treasure of Eastern art” and “a live cultural relic,” has won international acclaim in addition to its already great influence throughout China. Now retired, Xu remains in Zhangzhou managing his Puppet Art Gallery, where he continues to carve, and teaches young students with indefatigable passion for his art and the wish to pass on the tradition for future generations to enjoy.



Chapter One

Xu Zhuchu on the History of Zhangzhou Puppets

An Overview

This is the beginning of the interview in which Xu narrates the history of Zhangzhou puppets and the related local customs, and its historical role and impact. His narrative originates from his own experience, and is complemented by stories passed down by his forefathers, legends told to him as a child and other historical sources he has come across.

As an interviewer, I've done my best to remain true and objective. I neither stopped nor corrected him during the interview, nor did I insert my personal opinions when reviewing and arranging the material. However, I positioned some notes in places where I believe crucial information appears ambiguous.

For the reader's convenience, I do not refer to my questions during the interview, as the narrator often repeats them in his narration. All pictures are offered by Xu or taken by myself unless otherwise noted. This remains true throughout the book.

I. Zhangzhou Puppets: A Retrospective

Narrated by Xu Zhuchu the afternoon of Aug. 16, 2006 at Zhuchu Puppet Gallery

According to my knowledge, some of which comes from legend, and may or may not be factually correct, the tradition of puppetry in Zhangzhou is rather long standing.

The history of Zhangzhou puppets can be traced back over more than a millenium, with some legends emerging as early



ancient streets in the Tang and Song Dynasty, photo taken on September 1st, 2007.

as the Tang Dynasty. These earliest stories begin with Chen Yuanguang, who came to Zhangzhou from Henan about 1,300 years ago with ambitions to develop the region. At that time, Zhangzhou, along with most of Fujian province, was relatively desolate and uninhabited. Both Henanese culture as well as the broader culture of the Central Plains followed Chen to Zhangzhou, including the art of puppetry. (Note 1)

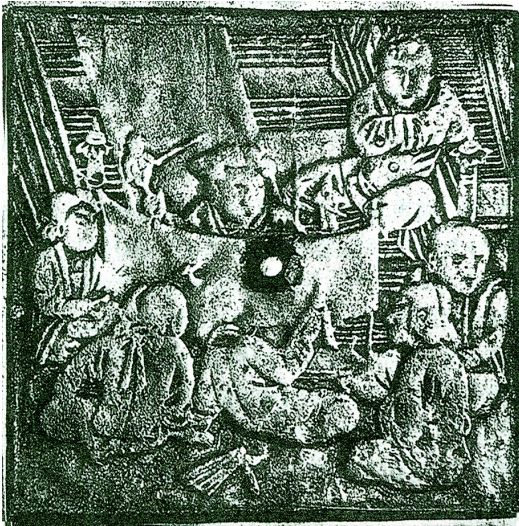
Why claim that this is how puppetry was introduced to Zhangzhou? There is no definitive evidence, but a number of factors support such an inference. Most importantly, it is clear that puppets existed in the Central Plains, including Henan, very early on. These early puppets were called “*kuilei*”. Of the unearthed puppet artifacts found in Henan, some date from the Tang Dynasty and others from the Song Dynasty. Among them is a Song era bronze mirror on which a man is depicted holding a puppet and surrounded by an audience of children. (Note 2) There has also been a pillow unearthed that is decorated with a small group of children who play with puppets very similar to those used in modern performance. (Note 3) The Dunhuang murals also include a girl holding a doll - it is in



the scene called *Nongchu*. (Note 4) The puppet in the mural closely resembles the “cloth bag” (*budai*) puppets made today, so one can say this type of puppet has a long history.

The next question to ask is what these puppets were principally used for. Generally, they formed part of religious rites, especially in rural festivals. In former times, puppet shows were essential to these rites, as they were believed to ward off evil forces. Zhangzhou is a historically famous Buddhist haven, where its residents believe deeply in the Buddha and where their prayers form an important part of daily life. (Note 5)

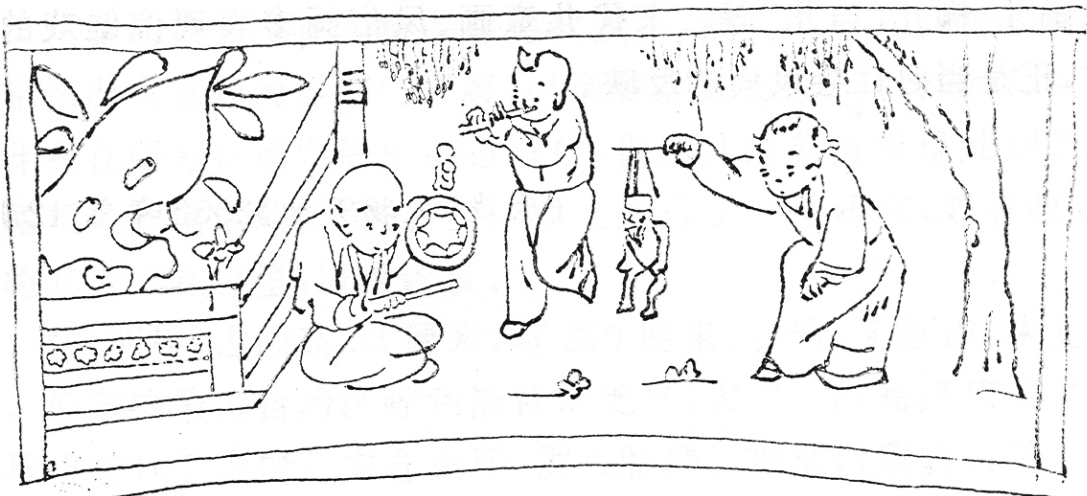
Zhangzhou is a hilly region and villages were separated by



A bronze mirror depicting a Song Dynasty puppet show, from the collection of the Chinese Historical Museum.



The Dunhuang mural scene *Nongchu*, in which a girl appears to tease another girl with a puppet-like figure in her hand.



A tri-colored pillow depicting puppets dated from the Song Dynasty, found in Jiyuan, Henan.



A portrait of Zhu Xi's sketching in the mirror, from the collection of the Palace Museum in Taipei.



the mountainous landscape, so getting from one place to another was not easy. Because traveling was so difficult, when people did gather to celebrate holidays, they would come from all around and hold large festivals. And how did they celebrate?

Of course there were a number of recreational activities. Principal among these was playing with puppets. You bring some puppets, I bring some puppets, everyone gathers together and puts up a simple stage with a stool and curtain - and there we have a puppet theater. These simple performances were very much like the telling of a story. Back then performances were always like this - simple, convenient and pleasing. Zhangzhou has always had this tradition, and it is one that everyone is familiar with, so you can say that it's long standing.

According to historical records dating back about 800 years to the Northern Song Dynasty, the famous Confucian scholar Zhu Xi served as magistrate of Zhangzhou prefecture. Afraid of their negative effects on farm work, he is credited with issuing an edict that banned all puppet performances during a



sensitive period of religious observances. Puppet shows played a key role in these observances and often lasted until morning, influencing farmers' ability to work the next day. (Note 6) The record of this ban in the *Zhangzhou Annals* indicates that puppets were used in religious practice over 800 years ago, and such customs continue today. Although the ban only specifically mentions “*kuilei*,” not cloth bag puppets, there was no word for cloth bag puppets, and it is likely that all puppets were called “*kuilei*” at that time. The document is all we have to go on, as unfortunately no material evidence survives.

When I applied to the government for the Nonmaterial Cultural Heritage status of cloth bag puppets, of the twelve ratified puppet types, only three places seemed to have cloth bag puppets: Zhangzhou, Jinjiang and a certain county in Hunan. (Note 7) I heard on CCTV that people from this county in Hunan had immigrated from Jiangxi, and that their cloth bag puppets had come with them and date back over 1200 years. This makes it clear that ancient cloth bag dolls have been handed down since at least the Song period.

There are two sayings about why Zhangzhou's puppets are referred to as “cloth bag” puppets. One is that in ancient times, when people got together for celebration or entertainment, as mentioned beforehand, they would carry their puppets in cloth sacks along with other items. Back then everyone walked, and



The inside lining of a puppet resembles a “cloth bag”.
photo taken on February 20, 2005.



Traditionally, a bag is kept backstage during a cloth bag puppet show. It contains the performance-ready puppets, and is also considered to be the origin of the term “cloth bag” puppet. photo taken on February 20, 2005.



walking from one village to another they would take these puppets out of their “cloth bags,” and so the phrase caught on over time. The other popular explanation is that there is a cloth lining inside the puppet which one puts one’s hand into when performing, and that this is the “cloth bag” that is referred to. These two explanations are widely told, but have no basis in historical evidence.

When I applied to the government for the Nonmaterial Cultural Heritage status of cloth bag puppets, of the twelve ratified puppet types, only three places seemed to have cloth bag puppets: Zhangzhou, Jinjiang and a certain county in Hunan. (Note 7) I heard on CCTV that people from this county in Hunan had immigrated from Jiangxi, and that their cloth bag puppets had come with them and date back over 1200 years. This makes it clear that ancient cloth bag dolls have been handed down since at least the Song period.

So why the cloth bag puppets in Quanzhou were called puppets of Nanpai? They sang mainly with southern-style music and a local form of Gaojia (Note 8). And why the cloth bag puppets in Zhangzhou were called puppets of Beipai since it is not the north? Previously, they mainly played Kunqu opera, later Han opera and Beijing opera in the areas of Longyan, Nanping. While in Nanjing and Pinghe of Zhangzhou, they played Han opera. Being so close to each other, why they played



the plan of manipulating a cloth bag puppet.

so differently? Because the traffic was not good at that time and there were too many dialects in Fujian province. As we know, Putian is not far away from Quanzhou, but they cannot understand each other due to the difference in dialects.

Han opera used to be popular in both Zhangzhou and western Fujian. I was told by the veteran artisans Yang Sheng and Chen Nantian that the earliest Zhangzhou puppets sang Han opera, and shifted to Beijing opera only within the past 100 years. Zhangzhou puppets are mainly characterized by martial arts-themed plays such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *All Men Are Brothers*, and *The First Myth*, which are of the Beijing opera style. It is relatively convenient to perform martial plays with cloth bag puppets because the puppeteer can easily command two roles at the same time, and so Beijing opera has remained predominant up to the present. Previously, Zhangzhou had not produced skit in opera that we sang *jinge*, a kind of folk music native to Zhangzhou. It is similar to the



Yang Sheng, a well-known cloth bag puppeteer in Zhangzhou.



southern music of Quanzhou, which has been listed in the cultural Heritage project. “Gezi” opera was also developed later.

There is another interesting story concerning a young Ming Dynasty scholar, I forget his name - something like Liang Binxi perhaps. He went to the capital to take the examination for Number One Scholar, a title conferred for first place in the highest imperial examination but failed, which made him gloomy. He disliked the exam officials and went to walk in the open air when he saw some worms making nest. The nest looked like a duck egg with holes in the bottom and can be operated by hand for fun. He thought it so funny that he too it home and carved into the shape of human body. He used it to tell stories to mock on those officials. (Note 9)

Again, this is only a legend. It contradicts historical fact by claiming that cloth bag puppets first appeared during the Ming dynasty. Of the legends I’ve related, the earlier ones rather accord with the facts. However, the truth still depends on historical records for which scholars in Quanzhou and Taiwan have been searching. Unfortunately, as far as I know, they haven’t had any success. That’s how these types of things are. They come about slowly.

In Chinese history, there are several written sources which claim to record the origins of puppetry: a poem by Tang Xuanzhong, the story about defeating the enemies by scarecrows in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and a Han Dynasty story of Chen Ping’s wooden figures of beautiful girls installed on the city wall. (Notes 10, 11) This great amount of historical material on Chinese puppets in general can be contrasted with the scarce historical records specifically regarding Zhangzhou puppets - a folk art that has received rather little attention.

In the past, puppets were essentially regarded as toys, and it was not considered necessary to preserve them as one might a work of art. Therefore, extant puppets are rare. Furthermore, during the cleansing of the Cultural Revolution, the older an object was the more severely it was destroyed, so there aren’t any old puppets left today, and it is very difficult to find material



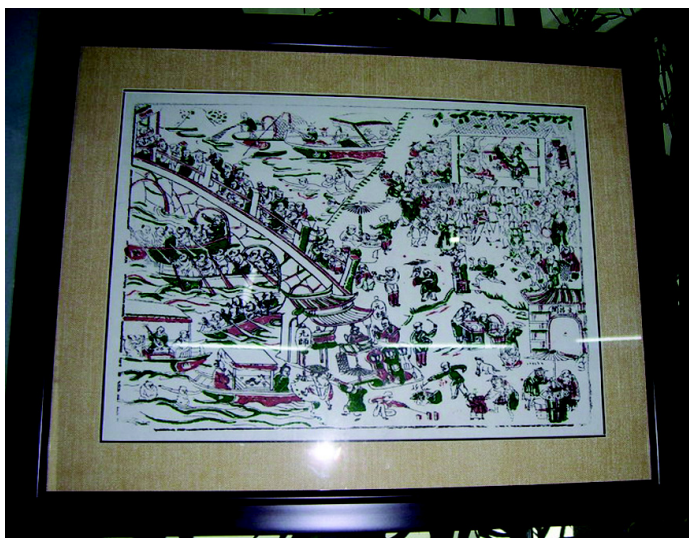
evidence on which to base Zhangzhou puppets' history.

Puppeteers have traditionally performed as amateurs and so did not have regular performances. They were not professionals. In rural areas they farmed, and in cities they were merchants. However, the professional carving of my family has been passed from father to son, preserving our skills and refining them further with each generation. That carving heritage continues into the present, and I am the sixth generation.

2. Customs: Zhangzhou Puppetry Uprooted

Narrated by Xu Zbuchu the morning of Aug. 30, 2006 at Zhuchu Puppet Gallery

It is customary to give a puppet performance on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month, the traditional Chinese Ghost Festival (“*guijie*” or “*zhongyuan jie*”). Why do they give puppet performances at this time? Because the puppets are able to stop the ghosts! On this night it is said that ghosts and spirits are released from the lower realm. These include the tortured and the wild souls are coming to search for new bodies. What can we do to prevent them from hurting human beings? We do sacrifice for a whole month. Every household puts out delicious food hoping that if the ghosts eat enough, they will not do us



Spring Festival Picture: The Dragon Boat Festival.