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New Idioms in Contemporary Thai Tradition-based Puppet Performance

Abstract

Puppet performance was among the most popular forms of entertainment in the central part of Thailand. However, with the introduction of new forms of entertainment and the changing Thai society, its popularity went into decline until almost disappearing from Thai consciousness. It is only in recent years that we began to witness a new surge of interest in traditional puppet theatre and the emergence of new performance idioms. This paper seeks to provide a survey of contemporary tradition-based practices of puppet theatre, and of the efforts that the practitioners have put into the preservation of the performance form. First, it will elucidate the socio-historical background of the form and the challenging issues that the practitioners have to face in contemporary Thai socioeconomic climate. Next, it will focus on aesthetic and practical concepts employed by contemporary practitioners in their search for new performance idioms. At one end of the spectrum, practitioners with a background in traditional Thai arts like Charkrabhand Posayakrit, Somporn Kaetkaew and the members of Joe Louis Theatre have chosen to develop their practices within the framework of conventional forms such as *Hun Krabok* and *Hun Lakorn Lek*. At the other end, practitioners coming from other educational backgrounds have chosen to look into other cultures and incorporate new idioms and techniques into the elements that they drawn from traditional Thai forms.

Puppet theatre once held a very special place in Thai culture. A puppet performance was not a mere theatrical entertainment; it also formed a part of ritual and folklore that was once embedded in the Thai way of life. Since the changes in Thai political order in the 1930s, its popularity has gone into decline until almost disappearing from public consciousness. It was only recently that a new surge of interest in this traditional theatrical form began to emerge. This article will provide a survey of contemporary practices in Thai tradition-based puppet theatre, and will identify socio-cultural challenges to its development through documentary research, and interviews with contemporary tradition-based puppet artists.

Traditional Puppet Theatre and Tradition-based Practice

Generally, there are two forms of traditional Thai puppet theatre – *nang* or shadow puppet and *hun* or doll puppet. *Nang* is considered to be the oldest form of Thai theatre and to be the origin of *khon* dance drama. The word *nang* literally means ‘skin’ or ‘hide’. As a theatrical form, it denotes a puppet performance that employs a set of two-dimensional hide-figures in its enactment of dramatic stories. *Hun* can be translated as ‘body’, ‘model’ or ‘sculpture’, and therefore refers to puppet performance with the use of three-dimensional figures. These two puppet forms can also be classified further into several sub-forms, in terms of differences in technical and performance conventions as shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Forms and sub-forms of Thai puppet theatre

<i>Nang</i> – Shadow puppet	<i>Hun</i> – Figure puppet
<i>Nang Yai</i> - large shadow puppet performed in front of the screen	<i>Hun Luang</i> - large figure puppet of the royal court
<i>Nang Talung</i> - small shadow puppet performance of Central and Southern parts of Thailand	<i>Hun Lek</i> - miniature-sized figure puppet of the royal court
<i>Nang Pramotai</i> - small shadow puppet performance of the Northeastern part of Thailand	<i>Hun Krabok</i> - small to medium-sized puppet of popular entertainment
	<i>Hun Lakorn Lek</i> - <i>bunraku</i> type puppet of popular entertainment

Traditionally, the arts and crafts of puppet theatre was transmitted within a family of puppeteers with few changes over the generations. Thus, the term ‘traditional puppet theatre’ will be used here to refer to the practice of puppeteer associated with this form of training. On the other hand, the term ‘tradition-based puppet theatre’ will be used specifically to refer to the practice of puppeteers who came from different social and educational backgrounds from that of traditional puppeteer. In this article, I will focus only on contemporary tradition-based practices of *nang yai* and *hun* performance.

***Nang Yai* in the Changing Thai Socio-cultural Context**

Nang Yai, or simply *nang*, rose into popularity when the city of Ayudhya became the royal seat of a newly founded kingdom of the same name in the fourteenth century. It is believed that *nang yai* was

a form of visual communication to promulgate the idea of the demigod monarch among its ethnically diverse population. As a result, *nang yai* is considered to be a ritualistic performance than being a form of entertainment. All of its existing repertoires are strictly derived from the Ramayana cycle. Although two new plays based on Buddhist themes were commissioned in the mid seventeenth century, there has been no evidence that they have ever been performed.

The production of *nang yai* is a colossal and costly venture. A normal sized puppet is about 2 meters in height and weights around 5 kilograms. Each one takes 3 to 4 months to be finished. There is no record of the cost of a puppet in the past; but one simple puppet could cost around 20,000 Bath today. For each two to three hours episode from the Ramayana, 150 or more puppets are normally required. Additionally, the staging of a performance also involves a large amount of work force associated with royal patronage and compulsory military recruitment. With the introduction of western style military training in late nineteenth century and the dissolution of absolute monarchy in 1931, it was not a surprise to see *nang yai* starting to loose its significance and popularity in Thai society. After many decades of puppets being left to decay in storage, a group of aging puppeteers from Wat Khanon temple began the idea of reviving *nang yai* performance in the early 1980s. Today, there are three *nang yai* troupes actively performing across the central plain region. They are Wat Khanon temple troupe in Ratchaburi province, Wat Bann Don temple troupe in Rayong province and Wat Sawang-arom temple troupe in Singhaburi province.

The first major challenge posed to the process of the *nang yai* revival is clearly the issue of work force. It is not an easy task to recruit and to train new generations of puppeteer in the climate of modern Thai educational and labour structure. In traditional Thai society, Buddhist temples were the centre of education and the community. Since the secularization of the Thai education system in the late nineteenth century, this responsibility has been transferred to the Ministry of Education; whose mission is to raise the nation's literacy level and to prepare the labour force for its economic production. Although many schools are still located within the monastery compound, the temple has lost its intellectual along with administrative influence over the school. Of the three monasteries, only Wat Khanon has a school attached to it, and all of its performers are students attending the school. Wat Baan Don and Wat Sawang-arom, have no school attached to the temple. Hence, their performers are students from other schools in the area. The temple, therefore, has needed to convince the schools and parents that *nang yai* training will not interfere with, but will complement their education. In place of compulsory recruitment, the students are persuaded to voluntarily join the troupes at the age of 7 or 8. They will attend daily training session in the evening and during the weekend as a part of their extracurricular activities. Most performers remain with the troupes until they leave schools at 17 or 19 years old. Only a few of them have been able to stay on to continue training and performing. Accordingly, the troupes' inclination to conceive fully trained performers and a new creation of full-scale repertoire remains quite a challenge.

Another challenge for the troupes is how to find a way to bring *nang yai* performance to the changing aesthetic sensibility of the modern audience. Due to its rigid performance structure and conventions, *nang yai* has never been inherently and enjoyable thing to watch (Eiwsriwong 1995). With the emphasis on the beauty of court style poetry along with highly choreographed *nhaa phat* music and movements, *nang yai* was meant for the taste of aristocrats who were trained to appreciate these refinements. The commoner, on the other hand, would probably enjoy *nang yai* for its spectacular staging and battle-like procession; but as P. Posakrishna (cited in Nawigamune 2003) wrote in 1990 that *nang yai* performance is generally "too slow as and too repetitive. The audience

will be fascinated at first, but will gradually find the performance couldn't keep up with their own pace.”

Regarding the issue of performance structure, the three *nang yai* troupes took a drastic measure in cutting a full-length performance that usually lasts all night to one to three hours' performance. However, they still retain some of its rigid conventions, for example, the lengthy “*berk nhaa pra*” (the invocation of deities) and “*chab ling huakam*” (catching monkeys at dusk) that marks the beginning of the performance, and the rule that once the story has been told it should continue to the end. In other areas of performance, each temple has adopted different approaches in entertaining an audience that results in their distinctive performance styles. Wat Khanon troupe has gone for a more conservative approach. They have sought collaboration with educational and art institutions in conducting a number of experiments and research projects to reclaim the authenticity of the art. As a result, Wat Khanon has been able to reproduce *nang* puppets with old construction techniques and to re-imagine *nang yai* performance in an archaic style. Wat Khanon's performance style is considered more vigorous and masculine than other two troupes, and is delivered by all male performers even when playing female roles. Wat Khanon does not train any female performers or let them touch the puppets. This is due to the belief that *nang yai* is of Hindu origin and the puppets are inscribed with male sacred power. In this matter, Wat Sawang-Arom holds a similar approach to Wat Khanon's even though the troupe is generally more open towards experimentation. Wat Baan Don, on the other hand, possesses a different attitude towards the issue and has also trained female performers for some years. The temple has also collaborated with contemporary theatre practitioners such as Patravadi Meejudhon who brought in contemporary staging technique and the use of the method in *khon* dance drama training to train the puppeteers.

The most difficult challenge to the *nang yai* troupes is probably the issue concerning performance outlet and patronage. Traditionally, *nang yai* would be engaged as a part of important festivities and funerals sponsored by the state or a wealthy person; and it would be staged in an open public space like temple grounds free of charge. Nowadays, the troupes get less of this form of engagement as *nang yai* began to lose its meaning in Thai society and its traditional patronage system gradually disappeared. Accordingly, the troupes have had to find new performance outlet and new form of patronage in different contexts. One form of patronage comes through the Tourism Authority of Thailand, who often engages the troupes to perform in state occasions and to represent the country at numerous international events. Another form of patronage comes as occasional financial grants from local government or from charitable foundations. This money is used by the troupes to set up a museum and a small permanent theatre. Every Saturday, the troupes will put on a special performance that includes demonstrations and lectures for students and tourists. Increasingly, donations from these visitors become essential to the livelihood of the troupes and the museum.

Diverse Practices of Contemporary *Hun* Performance

In contrast to the ritualistic nature of *nang yai*, *hun*, or figure puppet, has always been a more popular form of entertainment. With its less strict performance conventions, this puppet form has always been open to new elements and changes. Throughout its history, diverse forms of *hun* have constantly be conceived as well as being reinvented. Yet, there has been very little material evidence of these diverse practices left to us. This is probably due to the belief that a puppet carries a trace of its owner's soul as well as having its own soul. In the past, it was customary that the puppet would be cremated after the death of the puppeteer. Although some puppets have survived in temple and museum collections, we hardly know how they would have been put to perform.

Hun Luang (หุ่นหลวง) and Hun Krabok (หุ่นกระบอก)

The courtly puppet form of *hun luang* is a classic example of such a case. A set of *hun luang* puppets have been in the collection of Bangkok National Museum since it was opened; and yet we know little about how it works. The first record of this puppet form can be found in a seventeenth century Buddhist cannon, *Pra Nemiraja*, where it is mentioned alongside *khon* dance drama and Javanese *topeng* as a part of royal festivity. *Hun luang* is a large-sized marionette type puppet of 1 meter in height. It is carved out of wood and dressed up in the manner of a *khon* dancer. In contrast to western style marionette, its complicated mechanical strings are hidden inside the body to be manipulated from the underneath. It is believed that *hun luang* used the same script and performance convention as *nang yai* and *khon*. *Hun luang* was at its height during the early nineteenth century and came into extinction after the suspension of the Royal Performing Arts Department in 1926. There have been several attempts to revive *hun luang*. However, this effort has yet been artistically successful.

Hun krabok is a much simpler form of puppet than *hun luang*, with similar mechanism to the western rod puppet. At the height of its popularity in the late nineteenth century, there were at least 10 puppet troupes in Bangkok area alone. Its repertoire came mostly from folktales and folk literature. Only a few troupes under aristocratic patronage performed stories from the Ramayana or Javanese *Panji* cycle. Its popularity went into decline after the Thai government introduced the cultural policy of 1942, prohibiting public exhibition of non-Thai cultural activities. This included forms like *hun krabok*, which had been thought of, quite mistakenly, as having foreign origins. However, *hun krabok* had gained another surge of popularity during the 1950s when Mr. Piak Prasertkul's troupes held a regular show on television. It was this television show that drew Chakrabhand Posayakrit to the world of *hun krabok*; and began his lifelong quest to reinvent and perfect the art form. Following in Chakrabhand Posayakrit's footsteps, younger generations of puppeteers have also joined him in the pursuit of 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 look into other cultures and incorporate new idioms and techniques into the elements that they have drawn from traditional Thai forms.

Chakrabhand Posayakrit

The works of Chakrabhand Posayakrit fall into the first category. Chakrabhand is a graduate of the Thai Arts Department at the privileged Silpakorn University. He is a skilled and innovative artist who excels in a variety of artistic activities, and whose artworks are mutually universally admired. He is considered to have brought glamour to the world of tradition-based art. His work with *hun krabok* began in the early 1970s under the guidance of Mr. Piak's daughter, Mrs. Cheun Sakunkeo. Gradually, he began to design and construct his own puppets. Chakrabhand's puppets are very delicate and exceptionally beautiful. His style of performance is also extremely refined and technically complex. One can easily observe the influence of court theatre on his aesthetic ideal and artistic execution.

Chakrabhand works with a close-knit group of assistants many of whom have been with him since the beginning. Although there is no shortage of people who want to join this elite group of practitioners, the lack of work force is still evident due to the scale of his works. For Chakrabhand, *hun krabok* is a labour of love, and not for his personal monetary gain. Accordingly, Chakrabhand took a liberty to disregard the need of the audience and to focus on perfecting his production. He

pushes the art of *hun krabok* to its limit, technically and aesthetically. His performance has been praised for the refinement of puppet animation and exciting repertoires. Besides traditional *hun krabok* repertoire such as *Ramayana* and *Pra Apaimanee*, Chakrabhand also looked for his material from other sources. For instance, he staged a production of *Sam Kok* based on the Chinese 'Romance of Three Kingdoms' in 1992. His current project is *Taleng Pai*, a historical play based on the actual event of the sixteenth century Siamese-Burmese war.

Somporn Kaetkaew

Another contemporary practitioner belonging to the first category is Somporn Kaetkaew. Somporn is one of the country's most accomplished traditional fiddle makers. His Siamese fiddles or *sor* are very much in demand and could fetch exceptionally high prices. Somporn originally came from a family of farmers. After completing his compulsory education, he came to the Mae Klong region in the west of Bangkok to learn the craft of *sor* making. The Mae Klong region is regarded as the cradle of central Siamese arts; and is a home to many accomplished musicians and performers including *hun krabok* puppeteers. *Hun krabok* of the Mae Klong region is different from those in other regions for its vivacious and inventive choreography. Somporn studied and performed under the direction of two of Mae Klong's famous puppeteers – Mr. Wongse Ruamsook and Ms. Chit Rodphai.

After the death of Mr. Wongse, Somporn decided to run his own troupe and invited former members of Mr. Wongse's troupe to perform with him. This venture, however, did not last long. In the early days of his development as an artist, Somporn looked up to Chakrabhand Posayakrit as a career model. Nonetheless he has gradually developed a distinctive style of performance to suit his own aesthetic ideal and cultural context. While Chakrabhand draws his inspiration from court art, Somporn based his creation on folk arts and crafts. After he saw that a *hun krabok* puppet is usually expensive, he started idea of creating *hun krabok* from everyday materials like coconut shell. He also draws inspirations from television soap opera and from the popular music scene, to expand its source of repertoire and to make puppet theatre more accessible to the mass audience.

The issue of work force is also a major challenge to the development of puppet theatre in Somporn's view. Besides the recruitment of puppeteers, it is equally difficult to find a group of traditional musicians who are responsible as the same time as being talented. There were many occasions when he found his musicians too busy for a rehearsal or too drunk to perform. Accordingly, Somporn developed a form of solo puppet performance to be accompanied by recorded music. He began to perform in unusual settings like on the platform of a provincial train station or in a local marketplace during the weekend. He also had an open-air theatre built for him in the middle of his orchard. This is an outlet for occasional performances for devoted audiences.

Vilawan Svetsreni and the Hobby Hut Puppet Theatre

The work of Vilawan Svetsreni and the Hobby Hut took a different direction from that of the puppeteers previously mentioned. Although their form of *hun krabok* appears Thai, its origin is strictly a cross-cultural one. Vilawan is a drama graduate from Thammasart University, who had a chance to study *hun krabok* with Cheun Sakunkaew at the university's Drama Department. After spending some years at the University of London, Vilawan came back home to start lecturing at the school of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University (CMU). Her starting point was in a classroom where Vilawan and her students agreed upon doing an art project on puppet theatre. The classroom project later developed into a permanent puppet troupe. At one time, the troupe was supported by Chiang Mai University's arts centre. Later on, Vilawan independently ran the troupe herself under the name

of 'Hobby Hut Puppet Theatre'. Most of her troupe members are the graduates who attended her class. Vilawan and her students experimented with the idea of borrowing some constructing techniques from Sundanese *wayang golek*. Thus, Hobby Hut's *hun krabok* has a full realistic body instead of the baggy costume of the traditional puppet. What has made her performance interesting is the way she brings together the art forms, whose origin are from the central plain, and the distinct Lanna culture.

Historically, the north of Thailand, or Lanna, has gone through a different historical and socio-cultural transformation to that of the Central plain. Similar to other ethnic or regional cultures, the cultures of Lanna was regarded as inferior to that of the Bangkok court. Only for the past 10 to 15 years has Lanna culture begun to get a new breath of life with the Hobby Hut puppet theatre being a part of the Lanna resurgence movement. Vilawan and her colleagues researched into traditional Lanna arts, which became the basis of their creations. Most of their repertoire is based on northern folktales and literature. The troupe performs in Lanna dialect and innovatively employs northern style music to accompany the performance. During their period at CMU Arts Centre, their audience mostly came from intellectual and expatriate communities. Vilawan and the Hobby Hut Theater have also been invited to perform around the country and abroad. After they moved out of the CMU Arts Centre, a permanent outlet for their performance became an issue. As a result, they have adopted the management style of a mobile theatre to perform upon request.

Hun Chang Fon

Another puppet troupe from Chiang Mai is Hun Chang Fon. The troupe is a labour of love of a husband and wife pair, Pasakorn and Saphawee Sunthornmongkol. Pasakorn, who is a graduate of Silapakorn University, is responsible for the design and the construction of the puppets; while Saphawee, a native of Lanna, is responsible for the choreography and puppet animation. Their inspirations came from *hun luang* and from Lanna arts. Similarly to Vilawan's puppets, their form of puppet theatre is truly an innovation with noticeable traditional Lanna flavors, in terms of the style of the performance and repertoire. The pair began performing as amateur street performers at various open-air events in Chiang Mai; and they still continue to do so even after winning a prize at Prague's World Puppet Festival in 2009.

Hun Lakorn Lek (หุ่นละครเล็ก)

Another form of contemporary Thai puppet theatre is *hun lakorn lek*, a type of puppet constructed and animated in the same manner as the Japanese *bunraku* puppet. The period of its popularity lasted from around 1914-1920 until the outbreak of the Second World War. According to Chakrabhand Posayakrit (1984 pp76), *hun lakorn lek* became less popular due to the difficulty of puppet manipulation and its slow performance pace. Just before his death, Master Krae, a master of *hun lakorn lek*, dumped almost all of his puppets into a river to prevent other people from copying his craft. In the 1980s, a former member of Master Kare troupe named Sakorn Yangkeawsot, or Joe Louise, began to reconstruct *hun lakorn lek* puppet just for his own amusement. His work caught the attention of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), who took *hun lakorn lek* with their tourism exhibitions across the globe.

Mr. Sakorn was a *khon* mask maker by profession. After the initial recognition by TAT, he started to train the members of his family to perform *hun lakorn lek* under the name Joe Louis Theater. The troupe performed as a traveling company for many years before deciding to have a permanent theatre built for them on the family ground outside Bangkok. The theatre was burnt down, but with some financial aides they were able to rent an old a gymnasium at Suan Lum Night Bazaar in

central Bangkok to establish a new theatre. Joe Louis' Natayasala became the only permanent puppet theatre in the country at the heart of Bangkok's commercial area. In the early 2004, the theatre was threatened with closing down due to the high cost management. The grant from Princess Galyani Vadhna had helped prolonging its life; until a new development plan for Suan Lum Night Bazaar forced the theatre to officially close itself down in 2010.

Of all the puppet theatre troupes, Joe Louis Theater is probably the only one that earns a living from its performance. It is hence important for them to embrace the audience, Thai and tourist. The troupe's main selling points are their unique performance conventions and the exoticism of Thai-ness. During their run at Natayasala, their performance normally lasted about two hours, and composed of a documentary about *hun lakorn lek*, a choreographed performance showing how the puppet is manipulated, and a scheduled play. The performance would be followed by an episode from the Ramayana presenting the monkey Hanuman attempting to capture the ogress Benyakaya. To these days, this is still an act that they often perform since it allows the two characters to interact with the audience and to receive gratuitous tips from them.

Without a permanent theatre, the troupe have had no space for their full-scale performance. Their attention has been directed towards developing short performances for commercial promotion events and for international festivals. After Natayasala at Suan Lum Night Bazaar, there have been several attempts by the troupe to set up a dining theatre, first in Pattaya and now in Bangkok, as an outlet for performance and as an additional source

After the closure of the theater, former members of the Joe Louis Natayasala have been involved several *hun lakorn lek* projects one of which is the founding of Aksra Hoon Lakorn Lek Theater, a new business venture of the King Power Group who is better known as an operator of duty free shopping malls in Thailand. The Aksra Theatre was established in the group's flagship store in central Bangkok to provide an extravagant experience of Thai culture for visitors to the country. Their one-hour performance composes mainly of different forms of Thai dance reenacted by *hun lakorn lek* puppets, as well as their interpretations of International performing arts, particularly Japanese, Korean and Chinese Dance.

Another newcomer to the world of *hun lakorn lek* is Kum-nai Thai Puppet. The young troupe was founded by a group of graduates from Silpakorn University, with an ambition to develop their own performance style and aesthetics. The troupe works and performs at the Artist's House, a non profit artist commune outside Bangkok. With a permanent performance outlet, they can direct their goal towards achieving artistic and technical brilliance. Kum-nai Thai Puppet' style of performance is understated when compared with that of the other two *hun lakorn lek* troupes. They perform in the open air without sets, which allows them to focus on achieving precise puppet animation. The troupe gives a daily performance and provides a workshop in puppet animation for visitors free of charge. Their eventual goal is to establish a training centre for the art of puppetry.

Conclusion

From a few examples of practice described in this article, one can observe a series of recurring challenges to the existence and the development of contemporary Thai tradition-based puppet theatre. The first and the most difficult challenge is the provision of working and performance spaces for puppet theatre, fully or partially subsidized by the state or a charitable organization. Such support will provide the partitioners with a freedom to solely invest the energy and time into their artistic pursuits. With a permanent performance space for puppet theater, it will also allow puppet

companies to develop a more complex full-scale production; as well as allowing the audience the opportunity to regularly attend puppet performance.

It may be an appropriate time now for Thailand to establish a training centre or a study program devoted to the art of puppet theatre. This will help solve the problem of the lack of skilled work force in the field. As we have seen, there has never been a shortage of people who wish to enter the world of Thai puppet theatre. Each person comes with original ideas and the intention to bring puppet theatre through the time of socio-cultural changes. Formal as well as informal pedagogic institutions would be equally beneficial to the education of the audience as to the formation of puppeteers. Above all, it could also act as a platform where practitioners can interact and consider the future of contemporary Thai puppet theatre together.

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