

Puppet Theatre In Asia

By

INGE C. ORR

The genres

In Asia, unlike Europe, puppet theatre is still largely a living folk tradition. The puppets vary in size, modes of construction and composition. Yet, of the many types, subtypes and combinations of types we can clearly distinguish four basic genres.¹

1) Shadow puppets are flat and transparent leather or paper cut-outs, fastened to one supporting stick and manipulated by at least two other thin sticks or rods. Shadow puppets are popular in South India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and China. Imported from China, they are also known in Korea and Japan. Shadow puppets existed in India from about the time of Christ,² but in China reportedly only from the eleventh century A.D.³ While the South Indian and Indonesian shadow puppets are usually large sized silhouettes, those of China and Thailand and also Turkey are small and full faced.

2) String puppets or marionettes have spread throughout Asia (as also into Europe), presumably with nomadic gypsies whose

1. Sang-su Choe, *A Study of the Korean Puppet Play* (Seoul; Korea Books Publishing Co., 1961), p. 43, quotes the scholar Ozawa Yoshikuni, according to whom there exist four major types of puppetry in China today: (1) marionettes, (2) rod or stick puppets, (3) glove puppets and (4) the mechanical puppets. However, no mention is made of the popular Chinese shadow play which is probably assumed under type number 2.

2. Commission du Folklore de la Saison Liègoise, *Quand les Marionnettes du Monde se donnent la Main* (Liège, 1958), p. 482.

3. Otto Spies, "Türkisches Puppentheater", *Die Schaubühne* Bd. 50, 1959, p. 1 ff.

ancestral home was in Northwest and North Central India.⁴ In fact, marionette puppetry is still extant in modern Rajasthan and Orissa. These puppets are modeled of wood, or wood and cloth, paper maché or leather. Sometimes only the heads and trunks are formed, the puppets' legs being simulated under long skirts (Rajasthan and Orissa). They are manipulated by means of strings fastened to the joints. In Orissa the ends of the strings are tied to a triangular wooden frame or to a horizontal bar. In Rajasthan they are simply looped around the puppeteer's fingers. String puppets are assumed to predate the Indian classical theatre. Their first mention is in the Mahabharata of the fourth century B.C.⁵

3) Stick puppets are supported and manipulated by sticks or thin metal rods. This technique, as mentioned above, is commonly employed for the shadow puppets. But it is also used for the round or doll type puppet (the *wayang golek* of Java). The most primitive stick puppet is the puppet whose trunk is formed by a stick (often a banana trunk as in Thailand), the lower extension of which is the handle for its manipulation. In this, its primitive form, the stick puppet goes back to prehistoric times and is indigeous with all Asian peoples. We find stick puppets, for example, in Indonesia, Bengal, tribal India, Thailand, Korea, Japan and China.

4) Hand or glove puppets (the Punch and Judy type) are also considered to be among the earliest puppets. Because of their simplicity in form and manipulation, they are known all over Asia. Today they are mainly used for children's entertainment (India, Japan, China). It is interesting to note that the Bunraku puppet of Japan, for all its present-day mechanical and artistic sophistication, has derived from the glove type puppet.⁶

4. *Ibid.*, p. 9 and Choe, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-49. Also, Richard Pischel, *Die Heimat des Puppenspiels* (Halle a.S: Max Niemeyer, 1900), p. 22.

5. Pischel, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9. W. Ridgeway. *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*. (New York: Benjamin Blour, Inc., 1964) pp. 160-168, disputes Pischel and claims that the Mahabharata passage only refers to mechanical toys and there is no conclusive evidence for the eristance of Indian string puppets before the 10th century A.D.

6. Donald Keene, *Bunraku, the Art of Japanese Puppet Theatre* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1965), p. 36.

The stage settings

Puppet performances in Asian villages are usually informal, though often lengthy open air affairs (India, Indonesia, Japan). Marriages as well as births and funerals, religious as well as national holidays, all can become the occasion for a puppet performance. Frequently the performance takes place in a shrine or in the temple court yard (India, Japan, Thailand). A puppet performance is thought by simple village folk to be "auspicious, effective in warding off evil spirits and epidemics, avoiding drought and bringing rain."

The stage requisites, other than the puppets, are generally few. For the shadow plays are needed: a source of light and at some distance from it a screen. In South India, for instance, the screen consists of two full length saris of white cotton muslin, pegged together with thorns one above the other. A bamboo trunk is placed beneath the screen to hold the puppets for temporary positioning. In Indonesia a bamboo trunk serves the same purpose.

In China the shadow puppet screen consists of a cloth, five feet by three, (formerly of mulberry paper) attached tightly to a bamboo frame. A felt covered board forms the base into which the wire rods of the puppets are stuck whenever they are supposed to stand still against the screen.

The string puppet or marionette requires a regular stage. Elaborate or simple, in Rajasthan, for example, the stage consists ingeniously of two Indian rope beds, set on end, with the legs facing each other, about five or six feet apart. A cloth is strung below from bed to bed, while another one is strung across on top. The space in between serves as the stage opening. A black cloth forms the back-drop. Sometimes a third bed is used to support the back-drop.

A stage is also required for the stick as well as for the hand or glove puppet. It may again vary from elaborate to most simple. The Bunraku stage is an example of the former with its back-drop paintings, its trench-like passages on stage and its

7. E. Krishna Iyer, "Puppet Shows in South India", *Puppet Theatre Around the World*, ed. Som Benegal (New Delhi: Baratya Natya Sangh, 1960), p. 98.

separate dais for chanter and samisen player. Sometimes, in the Japanese (and also Chinese) countryside the stage consists of only a box, approximately sixteen by sixteen inches without a bottom floor, wherein the hands of the puppeteer are concealed.⁸ Sometimes the stage is simply the left forearm of the mendicant puppeteer, draped with a black cloth, as seen in India.

Musical accompaniment, either on stage (Indonesia) or off-stage in the wings (China, Japan), or just in front of it (India) is traditionally provided with all puppet shows. Music is essential for interpreting and underlining the puppet action. Music may be supplied by full sized orchestras such as the Indonesian *gamelan* ensembles, consisting of various percussion instruments, flutes and drums. Similar ensembles of cymbals, tambourines and flutes are found in the Chinese puppet plays. Often, however, as in China, the orchestra consists of only one man, playing the various instruments in succession. In North India background music is provided by the puppeteer's wife and children playing the drums and commenting in song on the puppet action (Rajasthan). Sometimes, in South India several singers are accompanied by the 'mrdangani', the clarinet and the 'jalar'.⁹

Ritualistic beginnings

Despite its present-day variety and widespread use, we know little about the origin of the Asian puppet theatre and we can only speculate about the cultural and social circumstances that first occasioned it. Of this much we can be certain: As long as man exists, that long he has fashioned images of himself, be it for purposes of religious worship, that is, as idols, or be it as toys to amuse himself and his children.

We have archeological proof for a number of prehistoric civilizations of terra cotta dolls and for some of them we have evidence of dolls with moveable limbs ("mechanical dolls"). For instance a toy cow with moveable head was found at the Harappa site of the ancient Indus valley civilization (2500 B.C.).¹⁰ Small ivory mechanical figurines, thought to be from

8. Keene, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

9. Iyer, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

10. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959), p. 21.

about 2000 B.C., were found in an Egyptian tomb. Human and animal figures manipulated by strings (marionettes) were found in Thebes and Memphis. The famed monstrous gods of ancient Egypt were moved by concealed mechanisms.¹¹

Simple hand or stick puppets were used in religious ritual in Japan in prehistoric times, and puppets still preserved at Shinto shrines all over Japan clearly point to such ancient use. In Northern Japan two-stick puppets are still used on special occasions by priests to illustrate their recital of spells and stories in the worship of the God Oshira. Also at two shrines in Kyushu simple stick puppets perform dances and wrestling matches on the occasion of the annual shrine festival.¹² The puppeteers of Awaji island, home of the Bunraku type of puppet play, yearly gather on temple grounds for an all-day puppet performance in memory of the ritualistic beginnings of their art as well as to honor its original founder, who was a Shinto priest.¹³ From the archeological evidence of the Indus valley civilization we know that in India the ritualistic use of human and animal figures predates the Vedic Aryan culture, and continued on *sub strata* until idol worship becomes characteristic again of later Hinduism (from about the 8th century A.D.)¹⁴

In the North of India, to this day, the Rajasthani puppeteer, apart from claiming divine origin for his hereditary caste, believes that his puppets are other-worldly beings; they are sacred objects. When a puppet is broken and beyond repair, he will not simply throw it away. Rather, he will let it float down one of India's sacred rivers, back to its heavenly origin. Much the same way Hindu idols are ritually submersed on the occasion of certain Hindu festivals.

The South Indian and Indonesian shadow puppets are ritually created. They are cut out according to traditional rules, whereby the heads and facial features are incised last, thus

11. Joseph Spencer Kennard, *Masks and Marionettes* (New York: 1935), pp. 99-100.

12. Keene, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

13. A. C. Scott, *The Puppet Theatre of Japan* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1963), p. 15.

14. Basham, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

ritually giving life to the puppet.¹⁵ This, according to the Dutch scholar W. H. Rassers, goes back to animistic ritual, whereby the ancestors were brought back to life by means of shadows for the purpose of initiating the youth.¹⁶

Throughout India, Indonesia and all of Southeast Asia the traditional repertory of the puppet theatre is still largely religious. It is based on Indian mythological tales and legends, principally, however, on the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. In Indonesia, and the peninsular countries of Southeast Asia, which all share a common stock of Proto-Malay myths and rituals (dating back to 2000 B.C.), folk theatre tied to animistic worship and community rites, such as the rice harvest festivals, did not simply disappear upon the arrival of more developed techniques and repertoires coming from India (from approximately 100 A.D.—1000 A.D.). But, rather, these new forms were altered and acculturated to the existing, indigenous ones.¹⁷ Development from the ritualistic-religious use of puppetry to the secular.

The development in Asia (as elsewhere) has been from the ritualistic-religious use of puppetry to the secular. Various types of secular repertoires, such as royal genealogies, romances, the heroic epos and the fairy tales have been added as have also technical improvement (e.g., the 15th century abstract and stylized shape of the Javanese *wayang kulit* or shadow puppets is due to Islamic influence). From approximately 1300 A.D. onward the Javanese *wayang kulit* cyclic puppet repertoire developed a number of sub-types with largely secularized reper-

15. Miles Lee, "Kathputli—an Experiment", *Puppet Theater Around the World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–110.

16. Witt. Rassers, *Panjis the Culture Hero* (The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1959), pp. 95–215.

17. James R. Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 11–12.

toires and some of them with doll type puppets.¹⁸

From among all of these only the *wayang kulit* (or *wayang purwo*) with its repertoire from Mahabharata and Ramayana remained popular throughout Southeast Asia. *Wayang golek* is popular in south-central Java, the others having largely remained court productions.¹⁹ Other forms have developed recently from the Wayang tradition, for instance, the *wayang suluh* of the guerillas or freedom fighters. Outside the Indonesian Wayang tradition stands the 20th century imported Do-the-hi. Chinese-clad glove puppets perform from Chinese folktale repertoires for the Chinese Buddhist communities on Java (puppet speech is Indonesian, however!).²⁰

The traditional puppet plays of China, itself, have three main repertoires: religious, military, and civil. The religious are taken from Buddhist and Taoist sources. The military plays are drawn from history, especially from the ancient wars of the Three Kingdoms. The civil plays are romances, comedies, themes from every-day life, farces, burlesques and also mimes.²¹

Although, groups of gypsy-like foreigners (the "kugutsu") were performing simple profane puppet plays in the Japanese countryside from the 8-11th centuries, indigenous secular puppet repertoire developed only slowly in Japan. Until the end

18. These sub-types are: (1) *wayang purwo* (or *kulit*), which is based on the religious tales from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. (2) *wayang golek*, (from 1584 A.D.) doll-puppets performing Islamic plays centering around the hero Amir Hamzah, (in West Java or Sunda, however, they traditionally play the Mahabharata and Ramayana cycles). (3) *wayang godek*, (from 1553 A.D.) shadow puppets performs the Panji cycles (Panji, prince from Java known all over Sumatra, Bali, Kelantan in Malaya, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, is a hero, based on the historical figure of Kameshwari, who ruled the Kediri kingdom of Eastern Java in the 12th century A.D.). (4) *wayang madya*, leather puppets portraying historical cycles about the lives of the kings of East Java. (5) *wayang klitik* or *krutjil*, flat wooden puppets relating stories about royalty of the Mahajapit kingdom of Central Java (1292-1500 A.D.). There also exist *wayang tengul* (leather puppets and Amir Hamzah stories) and *wayang djawa* (leather puppets relating the rebellion of Prince Diponogorro against the Dutch in the 19th century).

19. Brandon, *Ibid.*, p. 44.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

21. Olive Blackman, *Shadow Puppets* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 12.

of the 16th century puppet plays were still used to illustrate rites and sermons at Shinto and Buddhist shrines. Out of these sermons grew the 17th century morality plays.²² During the 17th century ballad recital and samisen musical accompaniment combined to form a uniquely Japanese style of puppetry (the "Ningyo Joruri"), the style characteristic of Japan's literary puppet theatre, the Bunraku which flourished at Osaka from the 18-19th century. Its repertory consists of play by Japan's leading playwrights, most famous among them, Chikamatsu, the Shakespeare of Japan (1653-1724).²³ His plays portrayed the life of the Osaka merchant class, a revolutionary idea for his day. Political, social, and commercial uses of the puppet theatre.

There can be no doubt that many of the puppet plays which extoll the deeds of ancient or medieval kings were originally meant to enhance their popularity and their power. Patronizing rulers commanded plays to proclaim their genealogies and their deeds. Indonesian rulers welcomed the Mahabharata and the Ramayana which attributed magical power and prestige to kingship.²⁴ But puppets were also used as a tool for protest against a regime. It is said that in ancient times in Southern India puppeteers protested and ridiculed the rulers in a way that no one else would dare to do. After all, how could a king stoop to suppress a tiny puppet?

Whatever their political role in ancient times, it is only in the last few decades that the puppet theatre has been mobilized systematically in the war of propaganda by several Asian governments. Between 1940-1945 the Japanese occupants used the various forms of puppet theatre indigenous to the areas under occupation systematically as a means for propaganda in Southeast Asia. Also at this time the persecution of dissenting performers set in.²⁵

Puppets played their part in the Indonesian independence struggle. They were not so used in India where the British

22. Keene, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

23. Yuu Yamamura, "The Development of Japanese Puppets", *Puppet Theatre Around the World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-110.

24. Brandon, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

colonial master allowed ample freedom of expression, unlike the Dutch rulers of Indonesia, who strictly controlled the radio, press and cinema during the years of the Revolution from 1945 to 1949. While the Dutch controlled the cities, student-guerillas slipped out to the villages with short puppet plays about the exploits of their nationalist leaders and guerillas in the fight for independence. This new puppet theatre was known as the *wayang suluh* (the torch or information puppet theatre). The Dutch went out of their way to search and destroy several hundred of these puppets. Following independence puppeteers in the employment of the Ministry of Information created a new form of wayang, the *wayang pantja sila* (the five principles wayang), which tried to overcome the crudities of the *wayang suluh* by retaining the appeal and artistry of the traditional *wayang kulit*. The five heroes of the Mahabharata became the five principles of the Indonesian state as proclaimed by President Soekarno. This play is built around the demon Colonizer, Miss Freedom and Batara Durga, wife of Shiva, the destroyer, who brings the demon back to life in the form of contemporary evils such as aggression, starvation, black marketing, inflation and loss of moral standards. Under Soekarno the Ministry of Information built up a network of offices at the national, provincial, regional, district, city, sub-district and village levels to administer its theatre propaganda program. At first the Ministry worked through existing professional troupes, but more and more it relied on its own puppet troupes.²⁶

Vietcong troupes in South Vietnam have been using itinerant puppet ensembles. This they may have learned from their allies in China, where after 1949 the communist regime seized upon the puppet theatre, as it also seized upon all other forms of folk tradition, as means of spreading its message of the class struggle. The Chinese puppet theatre and its repertoire, traditionally based upon folk tales, were revitalized and reconstructed along communist lines.²⁷

In North Vietnam the beautiful and unusual form of

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 286-288.

27. Li Ko-jam, "Chinese Puppet Plays", *Puppet Theatre Around the World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-122.

“puppet theatre on the water” is likewise being exploited to support a communist regime. In the ponds of Hanoi, the Vietnamese children may see enemy planes crash in flames, shot down by the heroic men of the Peoples’ Army to the accompaniment of fire crackers. The ancient theme of the dragon and the phoenix now reoccurs in modern garb, defeating enemy soldiers and sending them underground, i.e., under water.²⁸

In addition to its efforts to preserve and improve existing forms of the puppet theatre, the Government of India and several of its state governments—after the model of communist state use of the puppet theatre—are producing and distributing plays and skits in order to promote village development schemes.²⁹ However, India being a free country, it is possible to mind her words of caution about the dangers inherent in government manipulation of folk art.³⁰

In Japan (as in America) puppets are used by commercial advertisers for the purpose of selling commercial goods. Awaji puppet troupes perform for commercial movie theatres in between film shows as an added attraction. Some critics feel that this is a misuse of a folk art form,³¹ but this use of the puppet show is closely akin to an old Chinese tradition of using puppet shows to introduce classical drama. Also in Japan itself, in the mid 17th century, puppets performed alternately with *Noh* plays and became so popular that the *Noh* plays at one time were relegated to the intermissions.³²

The discussion of the use of puppet theatre by communist and other governments in Asia would not be complete without mentioning the fact that the United States Information Service also uses folk theatre to promote the objectives of the United States government, especially in South Vietnam and Laos.³³

Well intentioned, but ill-conceived governmental rehabilitation projects may do more harm than good if they lack a

28. Lorraine Salmon, “Water Puppets of Vietnam”, *Ibid.*, pp. 114–116.

29. Suresh Awasthi, “Indian Puppet Theatre”, *Ibid.*, p. 30.

30. Balwant Gargi, “Impressions of Indian Puppetry”, *Ibid.*, p. 40.

31. A. C. Scott, *The Puppet Theatre of Japan*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

32. D. Keene, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

33. Brandon, *op. cit.*, pp. 298–301.

profound understanding of the puppet theatre as a folk tradition: for example, the good-hearted, though naive attempt of a UNESCO expert, in the service of the government of India, to change or remove traditional elements from the Rajasthani puppet theatre. Traditionally the Rajasthani puppet does not speak in a human voice, but rather in a kind of whistle to indicate its supernatural origin. Also their faces are painted in an exaggerated, stylized way with overly large eyes and features, again to reveal them as other-worldly beings. The UNESCO expert out of ignorance was surprised at the resistance of the puppeteers to adopting voice parts in place of the traditional squeak. He also disapproved of their evident lack of color harmony and proportion in the manufacture of the puppets.³⁴

Social functions, change and decline

In the past, the puppet theatre of Asia fulfilled a variety of social functions in the traditional village setting. This still holds true, though everywhere there are now-a-days signs of change and/or decline as modern forms of entertainment are being introduced and as new functions are developed. In India, with its large-scale film production, itinerant movie theatres provide stiff competition to the traditional puppet theatre. In the more developed countries like Japan and Taiwan the general use of television deprives the puppet theatre of audience and much needed public financial support. In Korea Western culture and education (since 1894 A.D.) seem to have brought traditional puppetry to its present-day ruin.³⁵

The traditional social functions of the Asian puppet theatre are: (1) the magico-religious, (2) the educational, (3) the reaffirming of cultural and social institutions, (4) the reenforcing of traditional ethics and moral standards.³⁶

34. Miles Lee, "Kathputli—an Experiment", *Puppet Theatre Around the World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-79.

35. Choe, Sang-su, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

36. William R. Bascom "Four Functions of Folklore" JAF, Vol. 67, (Philadelphia, 1954), pp. 333-349. I have followed Bascom's model, but I have substituted "magico-religious" (for his "escape" function) which seemed more appropriate to the Asian situation.

(1) *Magico-religious*. The magico-religious was its original function and still is of primary importance. In Indonesia and throughout Southeast Asia, puppet performances are shown at important occasions in the life of the community as well as of the individual. The *rites de passage* (birth, marriage, death) are especially marked by puppet performances. Puppet shows are considered to be beneficial in times of stress. In Korea and China they were used in funerals and for the rituals designed to counter sad or unlucky events.³⁷ In Thailand it is common for people to donate public performances of puppet shows in recognition of prayers fulfilled to cure an illness or to get a son through his school examination. Puppet shows are offered today as in the past on the occasion of temple anniversaries and religious holidays such as the end of the Islamic fasting period in Indonesia, the lunar new year in Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and parts of Indonesia.³⁸ Puppets perform in India on the holy days of the Hindu calendar, at temple or idol inaugurations as well as at weddings. In Japan folk puppet troupes perform mainly at annual shrine festivals, (Awaji Island, Kyushu and in Northern Japan).

(2) *Educational*. To the illiterate Asian villagers the puppet theatre provides general education such as is contained in the repertoire of ancient tales, legends and myths. It also portrays historical events. The child of an illiterate community learns of his culture in two ways: (a) from the accounts of its elders and (b) from various kinds of itinerant dramatic performances including the puppet theatre on the occasion of family or community festivals.

(3) *Reaffirming culture and social institutions*. In times of crises it is important for the village to rally around its traditions. So, for instance, in Indonesia during the struggle for independence and in war time in Vietnam, puppet shows were and are used for rousing national sentiment, with themes and slogans related to their ethnic and national identity.

(4) *Reenforcing traditional ethical and moral standards*. The

37. Choe, Sang-su, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

38. Brandon, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

classical Indian puppet repertoire, based on the tales from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas, stressed and idealized the virtues of its heroes. Rama's righteous conduct and Sita's unquestioning loyalty and obedience to her husband, Lakshmana's brotherly love, Krishna's and Arjuna's devotion to duty, and the milk maids' exemplary devotion to Krishna, are extolled and expounded on all possible occasions. In Indonesia today people still identify themselves with the characters of the *wayang kulit*, e.g.: "So and so is like Bhima or Arjuna", and name their children after heroes and heroines from the Mahabharata and Ramayana and, unlike India, they will even combine such Hindu first names with Muslim family names.³⁹

A new function of the puppet theatre in Asia has developed during our generation: namely the use of puppets to explain government policies and development schemes to illiterate villagers in India, Indonesia and South Vietnam. We already have mentioned the use of puppetry in the communist countries of Asia to spread and foster the ideology of the class struggle. New also is the commercial use of puppetry, or puppet plays on television and movie programs in Japan in order to spread knowledge of it as a national tradition. Related to this attempt at preservation are the efforts of the government of India to revitalize puppetry in the interests of nationalism. These new uses of puppetry are perhaps also signs of its decline as a folk art tradition. The form now serves commercial, nationalistic, political functions. Its traditional content, however, of folk tale, folk legend and folk belief is beginning to be no longer socially useful.

In view of these signs of change and decline of the traditional Asian puppet theatre, one may raise the following questions.

1. Can the Asian puppet theatre survive as a folk art tradition?
2. Will it survive in a new social context, and if so what are the ideal conditions for its survival?
3. Or will it not simply be preserved as a museum item as in

39. Satyawati Suleiman, "Indonesian Puppetry", *Puppet Theatre Around the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

the West, used—apart from children's performances—only rarely in educational or artistic experiments?

4. Is the importation of Western puppet play and techniques an effective means of preservation and revival? If so, we are faced with problems of acculturation and adaptation.
5. Can government imposed changes in repertoire and techniques become genuine folklore?
6. Are we to consider the political use of puppetry in communist and other countries on the same level as its commercial and educational use in Western countries?

Summary

Puppet theatres throughout Asia have basic genres and stage settings in common. They all show evidence of their ritualistic beginnings and a development from the ritualistic-religious to the secular use. Everywhere they have served similar traditional social functions. Puppets and performances are considered to be auspicious and even divine, yet the social role of the puppeteer is ambivalent in traditional society. The gods Brahma and Shiva of Indian mythology may have presented the gifts of drama and dance to man, but actually the folk performers are often despised as outcasts. In general, however, the puppeteer's social status depends upon the art form in which he performs. Classical and literary traditions such as *wayang kulit* and Bunraku, where the performers have to be well educated, carry higher prestige.

Signs of change and decline of the puppet theatre as a folk art tradition are present everywhere as a result of Western education and modern forms of entertainment, principally movies and television, and also in the wake of communist or governmental manipulation. As the traditional social functions of Asian puppetry decline, its use for commercial, political and nationalistic purposes is on the rise.

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