

# An Adaptation of Thai Folk Puppet : **A Lanna Experience of Collaborative Art**

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## Abstract

This research presents the complete account of the experience working with Hun Lanna - an adapted form of traditional Thai Hun Krabok, from the onset of designing and the making of the puppets to organising puppet performances. It showed the processes of collaborating different art forms, affected by the both the tradition and the transnationalization of the present-day. The inspiration for the new form of puppet was largely due to the abundance of the Lanna cultural heritage and the pace of modernity.

Puppetry is one of the earliest theatre forms in Thailand. It has long been part of the traditions and inheritance of Thai society. Before the globalisation era which brought about the modern form of recreations, puppetry was widely used to teach and reflects the wisdom of the religions. It also served as an important means of entertainment. At present, this ancient art form of education and amusement is often considered rare and old fashioned.

This research also offers to identify and describe the key areas where the new identity took shape through the making of puppets. The adaptation reflects clearly the diverse impacts of transnationalism on Thai society. It appears

that under transnationalization, the world is in transition to a new phase of modernism and so is the old art form.

## Rationale

Puppetry is one of the earliest theatre forms in Thailand. It has been a part of traditions and inheritance of the Thai society for a long period of time. Puppetry was widely used to teach and reflects the wisdom of the religions. It also served as an important means of entertainment before the coming of modern day recreations.

This ancient art form of entertainment and education was considered rare and old fashioned. In Thailand during the 1970s, only few puppet masters and a handful of their creations remained. Some prominent figures at the time were national artists in performing arts - *Chusri Sakunkaew*, a master of *hun krabok* - *Sakorn Yangkhieosod* of the *Natayasa* *Hunlakorn Lek* or better known as *Joe Louis Puppet Troupe* and a national artist in visual arts - *Chakrabhand Posayakrit* who has keen interest in puppetry and initiated a great revival of Thai ancient royal puppets of *hun luang*, *hun lek* and *hun krabok*.

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The Students in The Art of Asian Puppetry Class, Thai Art Dept., Fine Arts Faculty, CMU.

Under transnationalization which began in the 1980s, the world has been in transition to a new phase of modernism and so has the art of puppetry. Puppets can now be seen not only in the museums or private collections but also at regular puppet performances venues and even feature in many other types of media. Undoubtedly, the worldwide scope of development during the past few decades has brought about various changes to Thai society. Lives are at a much faster pace and cultures became some kind of attractions that could be utilised as marketing ploys.

The reasons behind the resurrection of the art of puppetry may vary but one thing is certain. Many groups of puppets enthusiasts are emerging. The puppet scene has been refreshed. It has become more appealing to younger generations and those who enjoy the varieties. For example, there is a group of puppeteers studying the manipulation of the ancient Royal Thai puppets or *hun luang* and attempting to re-enact their performances. There are also several groups of puppeteers that pay particular attention to the manipulation of marionettes and shadow techniques.

It was more than 10 years ago that the Thai Art Department, Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, has started to offer an undergraduate course, titled *The Art of Asian Puppetry*, as a part of the Dramatic Arts curriculum. The main objective of the course is to give students some introduction to puppetry of Asia in general. It also aims to encourage students to see beyond the puppets. That is to know the historical background, to understand the development and to realise its current status. It also aims to give the students hands-on experience by requiring them to construct a set of puppets and produce a short puppet performance.

As the lecturer responsible for the course, the author realised the need for a new form of puppets that would allow the creators to incorporate some of their own creativities. This necessity was the result of limitations on learning the art of traditional puppets due to the customs, myths and beliefs surrounding Thai puppetry.

The idea of creating puppets anew was also conceived in the hope of making puppetry more appealing to the younger generations. Traditional Thai puppets are regarded as fine arts since they require remarkable skills in the making. The proper manipulation techniques according to the traditions take a lot of time and great patience to master. Additionally, traditional puppets tend to have an image of being sacred and therefore untouchable. Creating a new style of puppets allows a greater range of performing techniques and manipulations to be experimented freely. In this way, the creativity would not be hindered and at the same time, the traditions could be preserved.

## Identifying identities

From the onset of the experiment and research, it seemed only appropriate that this new form of puppets should incorporate some Northern identities. The Northern part of Thailand or the land of Lanna is rich in culture. Before becoming part of the Thai Kingdom in the 18th century, Lanna saw diverse settlements of various ethnic groups and had a few spells under Burmese ruling. As a result, the arts and cultural scenes surrounded Chiang Mai University are vibrant and easily accessible. Most of the University students are also from within the region and often already familiar with Lanna culture.

After some researches and many years of experiments, the resulting puppet took shape. It has the physical form of the traditional Thai *hun krabok* but instead of a cloth bag as a body, it has a proper figure similar to those of the Indonesians rod puppet - the *wayang golek*. The head of the puppet is controlled by the central rod. The two arms of the puppet are visible and are manipulated by two thin sticks. A combination of the manoeuvrability of *wayang golek* and the proportion of the Thai *hun krabok* make this new creation easy to control.



The Structure of Lanna Puppets.

Many of Lanna unique and interesting collection of art forms were incorporated into the fabrication of the new puppets. The first traditional skill utilised was for the making of body structure and the head. The rough shape of puppets head, the body, the arms and the hands were done by artisans specialising in carving Buddha images. Woodcarving has long been a part of the arts and crafts of Lanna. There are still craftsmen that inherited these skills living in a few districts such as around Baan Tawai in Hang Dong district of Chiang Mai and in provinces nearby such as and Baan Takad in Lampoon.



The Inspiration for the Lanna Puppets' Face Painting; the Mural Painting from Wat Phumin, Nan Province



The Inspiration for the Lanna Puppets' Costume Design; the Mural Painting from Wat Phumin, Nan Province.

Faces paintings and costumes design, which gave puppets their characteristics and identities, were chiefly influenced by mural paintings often seen in the old temples of provinces such as Nan and Chiang Mai. The costume designs were also inspired by mural paintings and sculptures found in the North of Thailand and Myanmar.

Puppets are adorned with cotton or silk costumes, some embroidered and some very plain, depending on their role and status. Traditional textiles weaving in Lanna dated back at least 400 years. In the old temples such as *Wat Phumin* and *Wat Nong Bua* in Nan and *Wat Phrasingha* in Chiang Mai, there are murals depicting costumes in many styles and for different occasions. They were the source of descriptions for women's wrap-around skirt or *pha sin*, women's shawls or *pha sabai* and men's loincloths called *teiw*, all of which worn daily by Northern Thai women and men. Embroidered costumes for characters of higher lineage were also inspired from those figures portrayed in the murals. Embroideries and designs have to be scaled down to make dress patterns, decorations and costumes accessories for the puppets.



The Puppet Face Painting during the Class, Thai Art Dept., Fine Arts, CMU.

The decorative motifs in the temples such as those on gold gilded pillars, on painted doors and on the ceiling found their ways to small accessories such as hair buns, hairpins and headdresses. Murals of Lanna court scenes also gave descriptions of patterns of headdresses for different orders of royal characters.

The identity was not established solely on the physical puppets but also on various aspects of puppet performance. Stories reflecting the Northern way of life and beliefs were adapted and written into scripts for performances. The stories were often taken from traditional tales of the Buddha's life before his enlightenment, better known as *Jataka Tales*. There are also some adapted local folktales.

In 1998, an excerpt of a local folk tale called *Suwat Na Hoi Sang* was first performed to the public by the first group of students from the puppetry class. *Suwat Na Hoi Sang* - literally means The Golden Conch, is also a popular episode in the central Thai traditional story for puppet performance. It was closely followed by the story of *Kinnaree Yungkam*, a story adapted from one of the Southeast Asian well-known *Jataka Tales* called *Panyasachadok*. One of the most popular is commonly known as a story of *Sudhon Manohra*, a romance story of a human prince and a mythical creature from the Himalayan forest. The main puppet character's serpent magic noose or *Nakabat* was inspired by a mythical serpent Nagas, often seen flanking the balustrade of many temples in Lanna.

A year later, there was *Yienli - Wizard of the Gourd*, an example of a story inspired by the diverse culture, beliefs and legends of the ethnic groups of Northern Thailand. Gourds usually symbolise fertility and are often used in holy rituals. They are also used to make musical instruments.



The Royal Court Costumes for Lanna Puppet Dresses.

The performing arts aspect such as the singing, the music and the dances were also taken care of by the richness of Lanna inheritance. Traditional Lanna music and music of various ethnic groups were adapted to be used to accompany the puppet performances. There are good collections of music to choose, ranging from a single string harp for a brief courtship to an ensemble of stringed instruments and percussions.



The Scenery and Set for Lanna Puppet Performance.



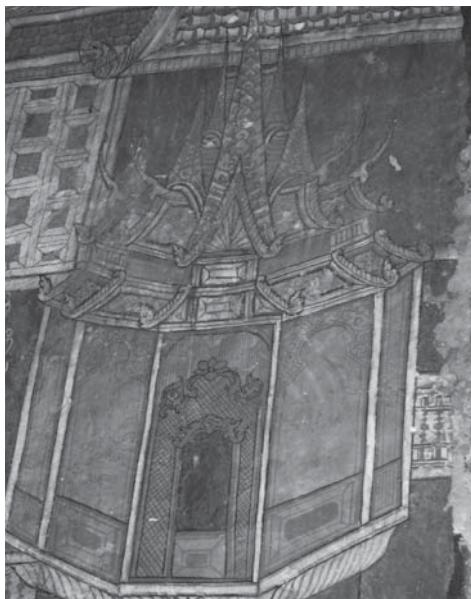
Lanna Music Ensemble (Chorkam Ensemble).

Northern musical instruments were selected to accompany puppet performance especially the unique Northern bamboo flute called *Pi Joom* and the Northern stringed instruments called *Salor* and *Sueng*. They are vital in defining the mood of puppets performances along with the singing, the narration, the dialogues and jokes. There are also many types of Northern singing each for a different occasion being used in addition to narrations called *Joi* and *Sor*.

The manner of traditional Northern dances was easily adopted. Having the mechanisms derived from traditional *hun krabok* meant that this new puppets still able to perform movements which are based on those of human dances. This, in turn, also enables the puppets to perform dance movements unique to Lanna.

The long-standing practise of paying respect to the teachers that normally take place behind the scene has been adapted into a form of Northern style procession. Puppeteer with the most respectable puppet character would perform a celestial blessing dance then lead the course for puppeteers holding puppets, flower offering and candles. The praying is done on stage to bring the audience and performers to focus their attention together.

The stage set is made from bamboo of different sizes which can be found locally. It can be taken apart and assemble quickly for ease of transport and storing. There are three levels, the front-most being the lowest and widest at 1.5 metres high



The Inspiration for the Lanna Puppets' Scene and Set Design; the Mural Painting from Wat Phumin, Nan Province.

by 2.5 metres wide. The next levels are 1.7 and 2.3 metres high and 2.0 and 1.5 metres wide respectively. The top most level was painted the outline of a rooftop of Lanna palace called *yod prasart*, influenced by the Burmese style of architecture. The black cloth is used for the backdrop behind the puppets with some paintings and decorations.

## Past and Present

A set of puppets and their performances were produced each year since the beginning of the introduction of this course. Coincidentally, during the period, the Thai government and the private sectors were turning to the aid of arts and cultures to propel their respective economic growths. There were financial supports for puppet performances available which gave the opportunity for this newly created form of puppets to be known to the public.



The Scenery and Set for Lanna Puppet Performance.



The Workshop for Schoolchildren in Chiang Dao Community, Chiang Mai Province.

Today, this form of puppets are called *hun Lanna* or *Lanna puppets* by the audience and many wrongly assumed, from their appearance and everything about them, that they are genuine traditional Lanna puppets with great antiquity.

Recently the process of creating puppets and their performances have been used extensively by the author as a medium for teaching the collaborative arts to schoolchildren and their teachers. The aim is to give the learners access to puppets without needing much background in arts and crafts in the hope that they would expand their interests into the refine arts of puppetry in the future.



The Audiences' reaction after the Performance at the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, Bangkok, Thailand.

## Finale

The processes of collaborating different art forms, from the onset of designing, the making of puppets to organising puppet performances, demonstrated the effects of both the tradition and the transnationalization of the present-day. The inspirations for the new form of puppet were largely due to the abundance of the Lanna cultural heritage and the pace of modernity.

Once its identity has been established, this new form of puppetry was used as a medium and a teaching tool for teaching collaborative arts. These are not only the performing arts, which are the singing, the music or the dances but also the handicrafts such as the woodcarving, the painting and costumes making. The focus is primarily on the local arts and crafts of the North that are increasingly less practiced.

The impact on both performers and audiences of this adapted form of puppets is the initiation of the appreciation of many local arts and crafts

through the making and performing puppets. The existence of this form of puppets helps to promote awareness of the Northern cultural heritage. These are not only the performing arts - the singing, the use of northern dialects, the music or the dances but also the handicrafts - the woodcarving, the painting and the costumes. The identity created by a collaboration of different art forms had helped bringing lives to puppetry.

The adaptation of puppets in order to be used as a teaching tool, whether to teach about puppetry itself or the collaborative arts that surround puppetry, reflects clearly the diverse impacts of transnationalism on Thai society. In the pace of modern days, the level of skills required are a prohibitive factor to achieve many forms of puppets that are for aesthetic purposes. The strict traditions of old also tend to limit an interest to the young generation who has no background in arts and crafts. It is true to an extent that giving freedom and gentle introduction could result in some productive learning.

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## หุ่นระบบอุตสาหกรรมไทยพื้นบ้านประยุกต์ :

### ประสบการณ์ล้านนา กับงานศิลปะหลาภยแขนง

งานวิจัยนี้นำเสนอประสบการณ์การทำงานกับ "หุ่นล้านนา" อันเป็นหุ่นระบบอุตสาหกรรมประยุกต์รูปแบบหนึ่ง ซึ่งกล่าวถึงแต่การเริ่มออกแบบหุ่น การประดิษฐ์ตัวหุ่น จนถึงการจัดการแสดงบนเวที โดยกระบวนการที่เกิดขึ้นทั้งหมดนี้ได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงการรวมกันของงานศิลปะหลาภยแขนง ที่ได้รับผลกระทบจากทั้งชาติ ประเพณีดังเดิมและการเชื่อมต่อโดยไร้พรมแดนของสังคมโลกในปัจจุบัน จนอาจกล่าวได้ว่า แรงบันดาลใจหลักในการสร้างสรรค์หุ่นระบบอุตสาหกรรมประยุกต์ คือความหลาภยลั่นของมรดกทางศิลปะและวัฒนธรรมล้านนา กอร์ปกัน จังหวะของการก้าวเข้าสู่ความเจริญของยุคสมัย

ลระบุหุ่น เป็นศิลปะการแสดงที่เก่าแก่ที่สุดประเพณีในประเทศไทย เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของประเพณีและเป็นมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมของสังคมไทยมาช้านาน ก่อนยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ซึ่งความบันเทิงหลาภยรูปแบบเข้ามานั้น ศิลปะระบุหุ่นได้ถูกใช้เพื่อการสอนสั่ง และสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความรู้ทางพุทธศาสนา นอกจากนี้ยังใช้เป็นสื่อสักดิญในการล้างความบันเทิงสนุกสนาน แต่ในยุคปัจจุบัน ศิลปะการแสดงจะหุ่นรูปแบบเก่าแก่ที่เคยถูกใช้เป็นสื่อให้ความรู้และความบันเทิงมักจะถูกมองว่าเป็นของหายากและถือว่าโบราณคุ้มครอง

งานวิจัยนี้ยังได้เสนอการบ่งชี้และอธิบายถึงแง่มุมอันเป็นที่มาของอัตลักษณ์ใหม่ของหุ่นประยุกต์ ซึ่งเกิดขึ้นโดยผ่านกระบวนการประดิษฐ์สร้างสรรค์ตัวหุ่น กระบวนการประยุกต์ดัดแปลงนี้ ได้สะท้อนถ่ายทอดเจตนา ผลกระทบของการเชื่อมต่อโดยไร้พรมแดนของสังคมโลกในปัจจุบันต่อสังคมไทย ซึ่งคุณประหนึ่งว่าโลกกำลังปูงเข้าสู่ความทันสมัยภายใต้ภาระการไร้พรมแดนของสังคม ศิลปะรูปแบบดังเดิมก็ย่อมต้องมีการเปลี่ยนผ่านไปเข่นกัน

ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ วิลาวัณย์ เศวตเศนี