

HOW SUSTAINABLE IS TRADITIONAL FOLK ROD PUPPETRY IN THAILAND?

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ABSTRACT

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While various approaches to preserve rod puppets in Thailand have been implemented, research conducted after 2010 has found that the status of traditional folk puppetry is still vulnerable. This research aims to analyze the relationship between existing preservation approaches and the current state of traditional rod puppetry, as well as to propose further approaches to sustaining vulnerable traditional rod puppet performances. The research revealed that the three existing preservation approaches—1) teaching and learning puppet performance in academic institutions, 2) rod puppetry being recorded as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), and 3) holding puppet events in provinces catering to tourists—have shown little benefit in sustaining traditional folk rod puppet troupes. Accordingly, further preservation approaches are needed, as proposed from this research: 1) support the recording of traditional folk rod puppets as ICH; 2) use technology to record, disseminate and make learning traditional puppetry more accessible; 3) the extension of supporters to include local communities, including expansion of learning puppetry to public spaces; and 4) adding new puppetry stakeholders, including audiences, so that they understand the character and nature of traditional puppet performances. The expected results from implementing these approaches would be to increase the number of heirs needed to carry on the tradition, along with providing additional income, both of which are factors that can lead to the sustainability of traditional folk rod puppetry.

Keywords: Puppet performance; sustainability of puppet performance; rod puppet performances in Thailand; Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

The art of puppetry in the area of present-day Thailand has been recorded since the Ayutthaya period (14th–18th century), with puppet performances becoming immensely popular during the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910). In the past, the classification of “full body” puppets were categorized into three types: *hun luang* (royal string puppets), *hun wang na* (small-sized royal string puppets) and *hun lakorn lek* (small-size stick puppets), as well as “head and hand” only puppets called *hun krabok* (rod puppets) (*Contemporary Thai Puppet*, 2017, p. 13).

This research focuses on *hun krabok*, “... (rod puppets) that have only heads and hands. The bodies can be any kind of rods, mostly either bamboo or PVC, covered with cloth sacks that are finely decorated as costumes” (Prasarnvinijchai, 2019, p. 177). Rod puppetry originated in the northern part of Thailand during

the reign of King Rama V and became popular in Bangkok, the capital, and other large cities. Owing to its popularity, there were quite a number of well-known puppet troupes owned by elites in the court and common people in the local areas. However, the popularity of rod puppet performances has gradually diminished because of new forms of entertainment (Pannengetch, 1992, pp. E–F).

Previous studies (Maicharoen, 2009; Klaisubin, 2011; Watanasawad, 2012) suggested that the government sector, in particular, the Council of Cultural Affairs and Ministry of Culture, has played an important role in preserving puppet performances. In 2010, the Department of Cultural Promotion (n.d.) recorded rod puppets as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) at the national level, describing rod puppetry as being a “widespread practice.” Furthermore, many puppet events have been held in Thailand, including, in 2013 at Samut Songkram and Chiang Mai; in 2014 at Chiang Mai and Bangkok; in 2016 at Kanchanaburi; in 2017 at Bangkok; in 2018 at Phuket; in 2022 at Phetchaburi and in 2023 at Bangkok. Holding puppet events in tourist destinations is consistent with Watanasawad’s (2012) suggestion that puppet performances should be developed for cultural tourism. In order to preserve puppet performance arts, many academic institutions have established programs teaching puppetry.

Notwithstanding these approaches to preserving puppetry, research conducted after 2010 (Sripen, 2014; Sitthupahan, 2016; Sitivong 2016) revealed that the status of some puppet troupes is vulnerable. These findings would not appear to confirm the description of all types of rod puppet performances as being a “widespread practice.” Hence, the environment for rod puppets needs to be examined, especially in the terms of the relationship between preservation approaches and the continued existence of rod puppet troupes, particularly, traditional folk rod puppet troupes. Traditional folk rod puppetry is important because it is the bridge between the more formal rod puppets that started in the royal courts and folk entertainment. According to folk tradition, the know-how to perform traditional rod puppets, for instance, the repertory, the style of puppet manipulation and the style of puppet songs singing, were not recorded in written documents, but passed on only to family members or selected pupils through oral lessons. Therefore, the continued existence of traditional folk rod puppet troupes not only ensures the complete development of rod puppetry in Thailand, but also inspires the next generation of puppeteers to build their shows on traditional rod puppet performances.

Since rod puppetry was recorded as ICH in 2010, 2010 is used as the starting point for the scope of the research, which explored the following questions: How do the existing approaches to preservation of puppetry relate to the current state of traditional rod puppet troupes in Thailand? How do traditional rod puppet troupes gain benefit from the existing approaches to the preservation of puppetry? and What further approaches to sustaining traditional rod puppet performances in Thailand might be implemented?

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

Qualitative research was adopted, including document review, participant observation in rod puppet classes, rod puppet shows and puppet event, as well as in-depth interviews.

Since this research aimed to analyze the relationship between approaches to puppet preservation and the current state of existence of traditional rod puppet troupes, the key informants were extended from artists directly relating to rod puppet performances, such as puppeteers, playwrights, musicians and singers, to include multi-stakeholders in rod puppet performance, such as the heirs,¹ instructors and students. Moreover, supporters who are public and private officers who do not perform, but their work supports the dissemination of a wide range of knowledge about rod puppets, including creating databases, establishing rod puppet clubs in schools, creating policies for cultural preservations and providing activities about local culture learning, were included.

Snowball sampling was used to select the key informants, in which key informants introduced the researcher to interview other informants. The total number of key informants was forty-five stakeholders in puppet performance from seven provinces and sixteen rod puppet troupes, which can be classified into three

¹ Both descendants and inheritors are heirs in different aspects. Descendants are the children, nephew or niece of a puppet troupe founder who have inherited the right to own the puppets and continue the troupe, while inheritors are pupils of a puppet troupe founder who passed on the know-how to perform puppets. Inheritors have no right to continue the troupe because they have no right to own the puppets. Some puppet troupes have stopped performing because the descendants have kept the puppets and not allowed them to be used. However, some puppet troupes have continued because descendants married inheritors (A. Inyong & W. Klaisubin, personal communication, May 4, 2023 and May 19, 2023). It seems reasonable to note that the process to sustaining the puppet performance should focus on the inheritors because they play an important role in passing on the know-how and knowledge of puppet performances.

groups by using the characteristic of performance formats as the criteria² 1) traditional folk rod puppet troupes, which are the representative of traditional folk entertainment emphasizing funny and quick stories; 2) contemporary rod puppet troupes, which still performing for entertainment, but the manner of puppet manipulation and music have been adjusted to make the rod puppet performances more modern and attractive; and 3) applied rod puppet troupes, which use puppets to convey a message, so the performance elements, such as stage, are eliminated. as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: List of rod puppet troupes and the role of stakeholders selected as key informants

Location (Province)	Name of the puppet troupe	The kind of rod puppet troupes	Number of key informants	Role of Stakeholder
Tak	1) <i>Sangwansilp</i>	traditional folk	1	heir (descendants)
	2) <i>Pluluangwittaya School</i>	applied	5	1 instructor 4 students
	-		2	supporters for the inheritance of puppet performances
Nakhon Sawan	3) <i>Chor Charoensilp</i>	traditional folk	2	heir (descendants)
	4) <i>Mae Chaweng Onlamai</i>	traditional folk	1	heir (inheritor)
	5) <i>Khon Ruk Hoon (Takhli Prachasun School)</i>	applied	7	6 instructors 1 puppet troupe founder
	6) <i>Ramphai Nattasilp</i>	traditional folk	1	heir (descendant)
	-		1	supporter for the inheritance of puppet performances
Samut Songkhram	7) <i>Chucherdchumnansilp</i>	traditional folk	1	heir (inheritors)
	8) <i>Sit Phor Kru Wong</i>	contemporary	2	1 puppet troupe founder 1 performer (musician and play writer)
Phetchaburi	9) <i>Darunee Si Phi Nong</i>	traditional folk	2	1 puppet troupe founder 1 heir (inheritor)
	-		2	supporters for the inheritance of puppet performances
Nonthaburi	10) <i>Khun Rat</i>	contemporary	1	puppet troupe founder
Pathum Thani	-	-	2	instructors
Bangkok	11) <i>Baan Took Ka Toon</i>	contemporary	2	1 puppet troupe founder 1 puppeteer
	12) <i>Chakrabhand Posayakrit Foundation</i>	contemporary	2	1 heir (inheritor) 1 performer (musician)
	13) <i>Poh Chang Academy</i>	contemporary	4	1 puppet troupe founder 1 performer (musician and singer) 1 instructor 1 student
	14) <i>Department of Arts</i>	contemporary	2	2 performers (1 puppeteer and 1 play writer)
	15) <i>Kasem Bundit University</i>	applied	1	instructor
	16) <i>Panjasikhra</i>	applied	1	puppet troupe founder
	-	-	3	supporter for the inheritance of puppet performances

Following ethical standards, personal information of all key informants has been kept confidential. Therefore, the opinions of key informants are described in the form of opinions of each group of stakeholders.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles approved by the Office of the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects: The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts of Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. Consent all participants gave their written informed consent.

² For more details about the three types of rod puppet troupes, see Ratchatakorntarakoon (2024).

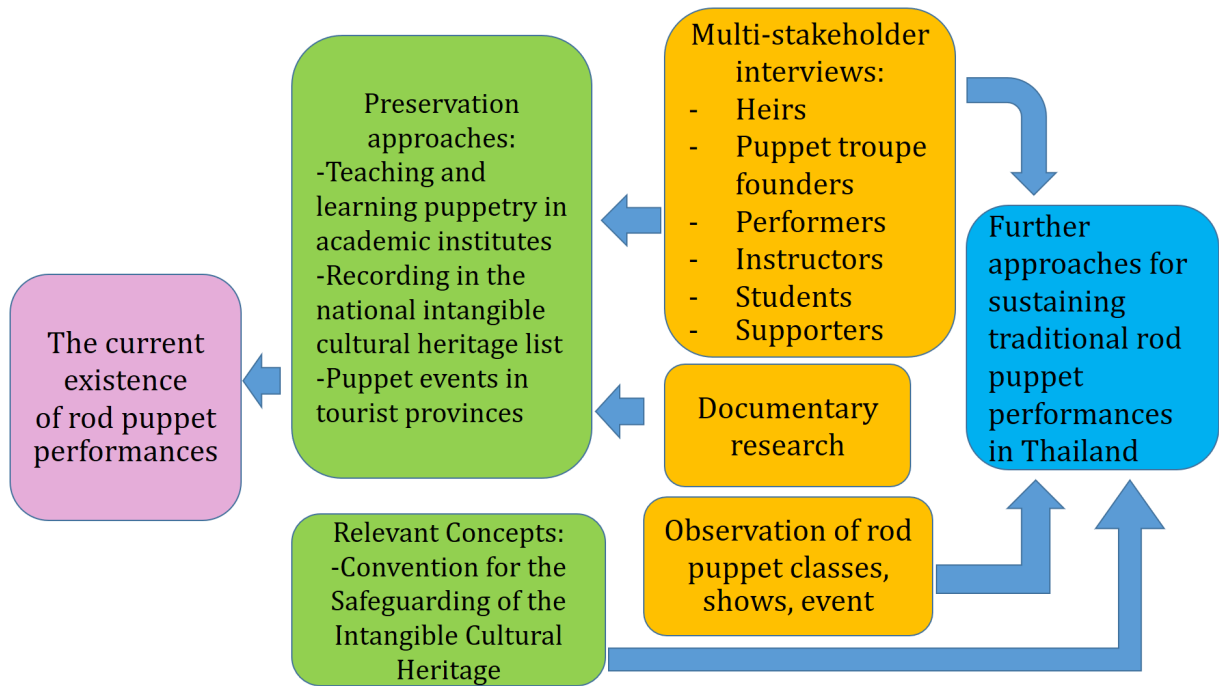


Figure 1: The conceptual framework

The research process started with an analysis of the relationship between the current existence of rod puppetry and the puppetry preservation approaches using two criteria: 1) preservation approaches suggested by previous studies and 2) approaches that were adopted to preserve rod puppets in many provinces. The outcome of this research is a formulation of effective approaches to sustaining traditional rod puppet performances in Thailand that have been synthesized from the suggestion of multi-stakeholders and participant observation by the researcher in puppet classes and shows. As a kind of performance art classified as ICH by the Department of Cultural Promotion, the convention for the safeguarding ICH as proposed by UNESCO was used in this analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The effect of the puppet preservation approaches on the current existence of rod puppet performance troupes

3.1.1 Teaching and learning puppet performance in academic institutions

Field studies from March to November 2023 revealed that many traditional folk rod puppet troupes have gradually discontinued performing. *Chor Charoensilp* and *Chucherdchumnansilp* are hired to perform only once or twice a year, with only *Chucherdchumnansilp* having clear heirs, both descendants and inheritors, to carry on performances. This confirms previous studies (Pannengpetch, 1992; Hemsrichart, 2002.; Juntarakam, 2007; Maicharoen, 2009; Klaisubin, 2011; Watanasawad, 2012; Sitivong 2016) that the decline in popularity and the lack of inheritance are two factors leading to the discontinuation of folk traditional puppet shows.

Another aspect of survival for traditional folk rod puppet troupes has been by transferring their knowledge to a school in a nearby area. For instance, the *Sangwansilp* troupe passed its know-how to manipulate puppets to the *Pluangwittaya School* troupe in Tak province and the inheritor of the *Chucherdchumnansilp* troupe is a music teacher in Amphawan School in Samut Songkhram province. Additionally, some founders of contemporary puppetry troupes have been invited as special lecturers to transmit their puppet know-how in universities and schools (N. Phaengdee, personal communication, March 21, 2023). Since the puppetry know-how is quite complicated, but the learning time is limited, the teaching and learning of puppetry in schools or universities has made the format of puppet shows change: "Owing to the limited time to practice, the puppet shows of the *Pluangwittaya School* troupe are quite short scenes, rather than an episode of a story" (N. Phaengdee, personal communication, March 21, 2023). Furthermore, the function of puppet performances has changed: "A characteristic of an applied rod puppet troupe is that they use puppets as media to communicate a message, i.e., admire the king or royal family, or present traditional

ethics, rather than strictly to entertain the audience" (P. Yooyangyuen, personal communication, May 17, 2023). For this reason, there is typically no puppet stage for the show and the duration is quite short, only 10–15 minutes: "In order to make the show more elegant, another kind of puppetry art, such as skin puppet (*nang talung*), is integrated" (N. Namkanitsorn, personal communication, June 23, 2023).

The rod puppet clubs in various schools and universities are strong evidence that teaching and learning puppetry in academic institutions is an effective approach to passing on rod puppet knowledge to the next generation. However, the know-how of traditional folk rod puppet troupes should also be included for the preservation of fundamental principles in order to create new formats of rod puppet performances. In this respect, academic institutions should have long-term funding plans that include a budget for the upskilling of instructors to deliver their knowledge to students, as well as a budget for traditional folk rod puppet performances so that students can understand all kinds of rod puppetry.

3.1.2 Recording as ICH at the national level: setting only one description of rod puppet performance

In 2010, rod puppetry was selected to be recorded by the Department of Cultural Promotion (2010, p. 38, as cited in Watanasawad, 2012 p. 77). in the ICH list at the national level, using only rod puppet troupes in Bangkok as representative of all types of rod puppetry and using a set of criteria that include a performance format that described contemporary rod puppet performances. Thus, the format used by such troupes was effectively chosen at the format to be supported since the Department of Cultural Promotion (2017) enforced the regulations that "only the recorded ICH are supported and preserved," to the exclusion of other types of troupes, including traditional rod puppet troupes.

Since the function of puppetry has gradually shifted from entertainment to preservation of cultural heritage, the designation of the function of puppet performances as cultural preservation has the advantage that puppet performances are now supported by the government; however, only selected rod puppet troupes have been chosen for support. This means that other troupes, most particularly traditional folk rod puppet troupes, have not only lost their function as entertainment, but also do not meet the criteria to be supported by the government, which now effectively considers "contemporary" puppet troupes to be a "widespread practice," rather than traditional folk rod puppet troupes. This can be seen in the description of the performance format: "the movements of the puppets are similar to the traditional dancing of humans and the puppeteers have dialogue when they manipulate the puppets" (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2010, p. 38, as cited in Watanasawad, 2012, p. 77). This describes a format for contemporary rod puppet troupes rather than the traditional folk troupes. In this regard, heirs (S. Supornkul & A. Inyong, personal communication, April 28, 2023 and May 4, 2023) of traditional folk rod puppet troupes explained that in their performance style: "the main stories will continue by the narration of the director of the puppet performance with intermittent singing because the characteristic of 'folk entertainment' focuses on a quick and fun continuation of stories."

Accordingly, the current recording in ICH is equivalent to setting only one description of rod puppet performance, which decreases the diversity of performance formats that come from the creative ideas of puppetry artists. The applied rod puppet troupes, whose performance format was adapted to be suitable to the function and the skill of the puppeteers, as mentioned above, is an obvious example. Thereby, contemporary rod puppet troupes essentially have become representative of all rod puppet performance and have gained more opportunities than other types of rod puppets to show in events held by the government sector. This can be seen, for instance, by the selection of a puppetry exhibition at King Rama II Memorial Park in Samut Songkhram that presented the puppetry manipulation style of the royal institute's artist (Thiengsurin, 2022, p. 230) whose puppet manipulating style is used in contemporary rod puppet performances, rather than selecting the *Chucherdchumnansilp* traditional folk rod puppet troupe that originated in Samut Songkhram province.

3.1.3 Holding puppet events in tourism provinces: useful but inadequate opportunity

In order to expand the opportunities for puppet performances, both national and international puppet festivals have been held in tourist destinations, such as Samut Songkhram, Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Kanchanaburi, Phuket, and Phetchaburi. Such puppet festivals not only open up an opportunity for many puppet troupes to perform, but also help build connections among puppet troupes. Nevertheless, the frequency of these puppet festivals is not enough to sustain many puppet troupes. In 2013 and 2014, two puppet events were held each year through a collaboration between the government and academic institutions. From 2016–2018, the festivals were held only once in year, followed by a three-year break due to the Covid pandemic. A puppet event has been held once a year since 2022. In addition, since puppet events are organized in tourist provinces where there is no established traditional rod puppet troupe, such as Kanchanaburi and Phuket, it cannot be expected that there will be long-term and sustainable advantages for those puppet troupes that perform where their bases are in other provinces.

As mentioned above, many sectors have taken part in puppet events and, therefore, in some puppet events, for example, the Harmony World Puppet Carnival in Bangkok, Thailand 2014 and the ASEAN Puppet Festival 2017, the 235th Year of Rattanakosin City, under Royal Benevolence, almost all types of rod puppet troupes were invited to perform (Sitivong 2016; *Contemporary Thai Puppet*, 2017). However, the puppet events held in 2022–2023 were organized with a selected theme, for example the Phetchaburi World Shadow Puppet Festival 2022 and the Harmony World Puppet Toys Robot Innovation Festival 2023. Moreover, the scope of “puppet” was expanded to include a wide range of puppets, for example string puppets and shadow puppets from many countries. For this reason, only one or two rod puppet troupes have had the opportunity to perform in these events and typically they are an applied rod puppet troupe because their performance can be adjusted to fit the event theme. For example, the *Takhli Prachasun School* applied rod puppet was the only troupe that had the opportunity to perform in the Harmony World Puppet Toys Robot Innovation Festival 2023. In May 2024, the Harmony Puppet Festival was once again held in Phetchaburi province and a rod puppet performance was included in the show schedule, despite the theme of the festival being “shadow puppet.” However, the contemporary rod puppet troupe from Bangkok was invited to perform, rather the Phetchaburi traditional folk rod puppet troupe. These examples indicate that just holding puppet events does not necessarily benefit traditional folk rod puppet troupes.

The three preservation approaches of rod puppet performance described above are in accord with the description by UNESCO of “safeguarding” in many aspects: transmission; identification and promotion, which are related to the teaching and learning in academic institutions; recoding in an ICH list; the holding of puppet events holdings. Notwithstanding, only a very limited number of traditional folk rod puppet troupes remain. While the decline in popularity has played a significant role in their discontinuation, existing preservation approaches have also had an impact on the difficulty of traditional folk rod puppet troupes to survive. In this regard, further preservation approaches are needed so that traditional folk rod puppet troupes can be preserved along with the other types of rod puppetry.

3.2 How is rod puppetry sustained in Thailand? How to support rod puppet troupes through heirs and income

The sustainability of rod puppet performances can be synthesized from the opinions expressed by puppet stakeholders in two aspects: 1) puppet troupes need to have more direct and indirect income and 2) puppetry know-how needs to be transmitted to the new generation in order to increase the number of heirs. With respect to contemporary and applied rod puppet troupes, the approaches involve all stakeholders in puppet performance, which has contributed to a sustainable inheritance. However, since traditional folk rod puppet troupes have gradually been discontinued because of the lack of heirs, as discussed above, the approaches to sustaining puppet performances should provide more focus on these aspects as they relate to traditional folk rod puppet troupes.

3.2.1 Support to record traditional rod puppet troupes in the ICH list

Many studies (Posayakrit, 1986; Pannengpetch, 1992; Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, n.d.; Watanasawad, 2012) have shown that contemporary rod puppetry, whose performance formats were developed from traditional rod puppetry, conform to the description of rod puppet that was recorded as ICH at the national level in 2010, as noted above. Alternatively, traditional folk rod puppets have not even been recorded in any provincial ICH list, the starting point to being recorded at the national level. Supporters explained: “Recording any type of arts in the provincial ICH list is demanding work, we need academic staff to conduct research about rod puppets to support us, especially in the aspect of data collection to fill the ICH form” (S. Inthap & W. Butjiamjai, personal communication, May 19, 2023 and June 3, 2023).

Recording traditional rod puppetry in the provincial ICH list would be the first step to help “safeguard” this performance arts following UNESCO’s convention since the recording process first requires data collection to describe what is traditional folk rod puppet performance. Therefore, this process would be equivalent to identification and documentation. This would not only make traditional folk rod puppets recognized, but would also establish the fact that traditional folk rod puppets are the root of other types of rod puppets. Moreover, recording traditional rod puppet troupes as ICH at the provincial level will expand the description about rod puppet performance as ICH at the national level since contemporary rod puppet troupes are currently the only rod puppet represented (S. Inthap & W. Butjiamjai, personal communication, May 19, 2023 and June 3, 2023).

Furthermore, recording in the provincial ICH list would open up opportunities for traditional rod puppets to be included in cultural events held by local governmental organizations following the Department of Cultural Promotion’s regulations that “only the recorded ICH are supported and preserved,” as mentioned above. By this means, traditional folk rod puppet troupes would have income, as well as a chance to hire new performers. The opportunity to perform conforms to “promotion,” which is a part of “safeguard” following UNESCO’s convention and would help traditional puppet performances to be supported and developed, and

would help create an income stream, which is one factor that would contribute to the sustainability of traditional folk rod puppetry.

3.2.2 Use of technology to record, disseminate and make puppetry learning accessible

The transmission of puppetry know-how appears to be a hindrance to passing on puppet performance knowledge. Puppet troupe founders and heirs shared their experiences about the transmission of the puppetry know-how:

Puppet making can be learned by self-study or by hiring a carpenter to carve the heads of puppets; however, manipulating puppets requires teachers to hold the hand of the learners. In addition, the teachers have to be officially appointed and blessed by their own teachers, which makes the already restricted training process even more limited. Without the teacher's appointment and blessing, a puppet performer cannot hold anyone's hand to manipulate puppets, even though they have been a puppet performer for many years. Moreover, good puppetry manipulators require considerable skill, which takes a lot of time to practice, so the new puppet learners must stay in the home of their teachers to learn how to manipulate puppets. That is why puppetry teachers were called "father teachers" or "mother teachers" since they must take care of their learners like parents. The selection of an heir plays an important role in the continuation of traditional folk rod puppet troupes since heirs can be either a descendant or inheritor. If descendants and inheritors come to an agreement on the inherent person and the process, that puppet troupe may continue to perform (P. Innate & S. Katekaew, personal communication, March 10, 2023 and May 5, 2023; W. Klaisubin, personal communication, May 19, 2023).

The experience of puppet troupe founders and heirs as described above indicates that the know-how to become a puppeteer, especially with respect to traditional folk rod puppets, is vulnerable since the transmission process is complicated and cumbersome. As an example, *hun luang* (royal string puppets) puppets, which is tangible cultural heritage, have only been preserved by being displayed in the national museum, while the knowledge to manipulate such puppets, which is intangible cultural heritage, has disappeared. As such, there are no longer performances of *hun luang*. The preservation of *hun luang* puppets makes it clear that the transmission of puppetry know-how needs to be revised. The process needs to be shortened and simplified, but still deliver complete puppet know-how. Accordingly, the process of preservation of the rod puppetry should include transmission of know-how, along with the rod puppet performances.

Some students and heirs suggested that both puppet performances and puppet teachings should be recorded and then disseminated on social media to provide more opportunities for students and those who are interested in puppet performances to view and learn how to manipulate puppets by themselves (S. Mechaisree & T. Juntawong, personal communication, May 8, 2023 and June 23, 2023; P. Sriprasertat & S. Supornkul, personal communication, March 22, 2023 and April 28, 2023). This appears to have started already with many video clips about how to manipulate puppets made by both mass media, such as Thai PBS, and the puppet troupe founders. Even though puppet manipulation is a specific skill that cannot be learned only through watching videos, such videos are useful for self-practice and as an inspiration to new generations.

Apart from video clips, open-access websites can be an effective tool for disseminating knowledge about rod puppetry (S. Suansri, personal communication, May 3, 2023). Clear evidence of this is the database of the *Khun Rat* contemporary rod puppet troupe published on the Open Educational Resources website, with the total number of viewers being around 50,000 (Pansaenchutipphan & Suansri, 2020). A large number of viewers have commented that rod puppetry is an interesting topic for the new generation, with many noting the beautiful puppet heads, ornaments and dresses. However, this database displays only information about the *Khun Rat* contemporary rod puppet troupe, rather than all rod puppet troupes because of a limited budget.

Even though the use of technology to record and disseminate knowledge about puppet performances is a practical method to transfer knowledge to the new generation, only contemporary rod puppet troupes, whose puppet performances attract more attention owing to the use of special techniques, really have this potential. It is clear that the founders of the traditional folk rod puppet troupes are not that familiar with new technology and they likely need technological support to help them record and disseminate their performances and know-how (W. Pansaenchutipphan & S. Katekaew, personal communication, May 1, 2023 and May 5, 2023; S. Sirilert & S. Suansri, personal communication, March 23, 2023 and May 3, 2023).

While the recording of puppet performances is a method to preserve the tradition of puppet performances, such a record is also a lesson for other puppet artists whose adapted puppet performances are built on traditional folk puppetry. This is similar to the foundation of the applied puppet performance troupes whose know-how to manipulate puppets was derived from the traditional folk rod puppet troupes, as discussed above.

Creating a puppet know-how database is a long process that requires on-going and large budget support from the government. Nonetheless, puppet troupe founders indicated that the financial support from the Department of Cultural Promotion has changed, that “the budget for the rod puppet manipulating training was replaced with producing and online publishing puppet shows” (N. Waewsamana, personal communication, March 3, 2023). This reflects that the government should implement a long-term financial plan for the continued support and fairly allocate the supportive budget, including puppet know-how transmissions and puppet shows, since the transferring of puppetry know-how to the new generation is an important approach to increase the number of heirs.

3.2.3 Extension of supporters to the community: expansion of puppetry learning to public spaces

The government has provided funding, as well as occasions for performance, and the educational sector has created courses on both knowledge and know-how of puppetry. Governmental and educational support is helpful, but not adequate to sustain puppet performances. Heirs and puppet troupe founders shared problems they were faced with (T. Kheowaumporn & S. Supornkul, personal communication, March 23, 2023, April 28, 2023 and May 19, 2023; S. Katekaw, personal communication, May 5, 2023):

“Funding support from the governmental sectors is inconsistent, furthermore the payment for a puppet performance does not cover the cost of traveling expenses, the wage for singers and for the Thai traditional band.”

“A puppet manipulating course was a good opportunity for students to learn how to handle puppets, however, the curriculum has been changed and this course was eliminated. Therefore, learning how to manipulate puppets should be provided both in and outside schools and universities.”

Based on the experience of heirs and puppet troupe founders, it is evident that more supporters are needed to sustain puppet performances. This conforms to the suggestion of supporters that puppet performances, especially traditional folk puppet performances, are the property of its own community, so the community, which means local artists, local intellectuals, academic staff, governors and even local activists, needs to be part of sustaining puppet performances as a supporter (S. Inthap & C. Buasuwan, personal communication, May 18, 2023 and June 3, 2023). Moreover, the platform for learning puppet knowledge and know-how should be expanded from schools or universities to public spaces, such as community learning centers and walking streets, to increase the number of puppet learners. This is especially true for young people who can play a prominent role in preserving and transmitting puppet performances. The opinion of supporters regarding the role of the community in sustaining puppetry is similar to that of UNESCO’s convention on the role of the community in safeguarding ICH (2022, p. 65):

In order to contribute to raising awareness about intangible cultural heritage and its importance, they are encouraged to:

- (a) be used by communities as cultural spaces in which their intangible cultural heritage is safeguarded through non-formal means;
- (b) be used as places for transmitting traditional knowledge and skills and thus contribute to intergenerational dialogue;
- (c) serve as information centres about a community’s intangible cultural heritage.

The above convention indicates that the community needs to take part in safeguarding ICH, which, in this research is rod puppetry in various aspects: as a cultural event space, an information center and a learning platform. That means the participation of a community in sustaining puppet performances is a long-term process that requires engaging cultural activity groups in the community and continued support from both local governments and academic staff. Furthermore, the academic staff needs to understand better the background of a rod puppet troupe in each community so that the sustaining process is based on the knowledge and know-how of the rod puppet troupe in the community rather than from outside.



Figure 2: A traditional folk rod puppet performance in Phetchaburi province
Source: (left) researcher (July 29, 2023); (right) Chumlong Buasuwan (September 30, 2023)

Figure 2 shows rod puppet performances in Phetchaburi province. On the left is an image of a rod puppet performance supported by the Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, and the Lookwa group, a cultural activity group in Phetchaburi province. In order to expand these rod puppet performances, a video was released on the YouTube channel of the Institute of Thai Studies and republished at the station for the cable car to Khao Wang historical park, which is not only a tourist destination, but also the workplace of the Lookwa group. Owing to the support of the Lookwa group, the heir of the Phetchaburi rod puppet troupe holds a rod puppet show on Phanit Charoen Road once a month, the cultural walking street held every Saturday, funded by the Phetchaburi Cultural Office, as shown on the right in Figure 2.

Although the traditional folk rod puppet performances in Phetchaburi are opportunities to perform for tourists, the puppet performers lack performance skills since they have not been hired to perform for a long period. Transmission of knowledge about rod puppetry requires systematic and continued support to develop the skills for carving the wooden heads and manipulating the puppets, as well as how to play music and sing songs to accompany the performances. In order to develop performance skills and increase the number of puppeteers, hands-on workshops should be held at the cable car station where the immersive exhibition about rod puppet performance can be displayed, following UNESCO's suggestion about the role of community as the information center of ICH.

The revival of rod puppet performances in Phetchaburi province through the context of cultural tourism indicates that the shift in the function of puppetry from folk entertainment to cultural tourism is a long-term process that requires continuous support from the community. Moreover, the format of rod puppet performance likely will need to be adjusted for several reasons. First, rod puppet performances for tourists require simplification and shortening, which necessarily means that the ideas, techniques and messages become significantly condensed because typically the performance takes place on a walking street where the concentration of alternate attractions means tourists can be easily distracted. Second is the limited performance skills of puppeteers, as mentioned above. Therefore, in order to establish a more suitable format of rod puppet performance in the context of cultural tourism, the Phetchaburi rod puppet troupe should conduct some trial performances that would include input from all community groups, such as the Lookwa group, Phetchaburi cultural officers and tourists. Perhaps, the format of Phetchaburi traditional rod puppet performances can be modernized through some types of hybridizing using contemporary songs or even melodramas from some TV programs. On the one hand, this can serve to attract a new generation of audience, on the other hand, there is the risk of jeopardizing the originality of their rod puppet performances. The puppeteers, and other stakeholders, including the heirs, need to weigh the pros and cons.

It has been argued that puppet events should be held in communities that have their own puppet troupe. The experience of the *nang talung* skin puppets of Phetchaburi province supports this suggestion. The Phetchaburi *nang talung* puppets were included in the 2022 Phetchaburi World Shadow Puppet Festival and have been used in performances continuously, whereas the Phetchaburi rod puppets lack a supporting heir and were not included in that festival. The Phetchaburi Harmony Puppet Festival was held in Phetchaburi again in 2024 with the number of *nang talung* puppet troupes increasing. However, the Phetchaburi traditional rod puppet troupe still do not have the opportunity to show, as mentioned in topic 3.1.3.

Puppet events are the platform that allows viewers to explore, learn and experience rod puppet performances, as well as other kinds of puppetry. Holding puppet events more often or adding puppet performances in cultural walking streets, such as in Phetchaburi, can enhance an understanding by the public

3.2.4 Adding new puppetry stakeholders: audience understanding of the character of puppet performances as a way to increase income

In the past, audiences were not considered rod puppet stakeholders because rod puppet troupes were hired for free shows on many occasions. The stakeholders of rod puppet performances in the past were the puppeteers, craftsmen and elites who sponsored the puppet troupes (P. Saengdokmai, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Instructors explained the behavior of Thai audiences:

“Thai audiences are accustomed to viewing traditional performances for free on special occasions, for example, the royal funerals. They did not realize that these performances have fixed costs that also need financial support from the audience. For this reason, audiences should be educated to understand both the nature and character of rod puppetry” (A. Thirakanont, personal communication, July 11, 2023).

Although many recordings of rod puppet performances are published on social media, in particular YouTube, the audience should understand a significant characteristic of rod puppetry is that it is a live performance. While these recordings may help foster the transmission of knowledge about rod puppetry, watching live rod puppet performances helps make the audience appreciate their charm and value (S. Suansri, personal communication, May 3, 2023).

According to comments by instructors, it is difficult to make audiences pay an admission fee to see a performance, but they can use some marketing strategies (P. Saengdokmai, personal communication, April 24, 2023; A. Thirakanont, personal communication, July 11, 2023). For example, rod puppet troupes can allow attendees to watch the performance process behind the stage or to manipulate puppets as a part of the performance. Sharing a real lived experience during a rod puppet performance not only makes people understand the nature of such performances, but can also inspire them to be puppet inheritors.

Heirs and puppet troupe founders suggest that traditional folk rod puppet troupes, similar to contemporary puppet troupes, only be can sustained if they have both direct and indirect income from puppet performances (V. Sodprasert, personal communication, May 23, 2023; N. Waewsamana & S. Jaengnan, personal communication, March 3, 2023 and April 20, 2023). In order to allocate the hiring of all puppet troupes equitably, a puppet association should be formed. Puppet troupes organize puppet performances by themselves so that they can expect some revenue from ticket selling. With respect to ticket fees, heirs and supporters propose that the price for tickets should be determined at a reasonable rate that is not so expensive such that young students cannot afford to attend, but not so cheap that those attending do not realize the value of rod puppet performances (V. Sodprasert, personal communication, May 23, 2023; S. Suansri, personal communication, May 3, 2023).

Indirect income for puppet troupes is derived from selling products or services related to puppet performances. For example, puppet troupes have modified their houses to be puppet learning centers and they sell tickets to visitors who want to see the puppet manipulating techniques and puppet head-making. In addition, they sell puppets as souvenirs (P. Saengdokmai, personal communication, April 24, 2023). The potential benefit of this approach depends on two factors. First is whether the puppet troupe is located in a tourist area. Second is the management and market skills of puppet troupe owners who probably need significant support to develop those skills. This is a strong reason why puppet events should be held in provinces where there are puppet troupes.

4. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to analyze the relationship between puppetry preservation approaches and the current state of traditional rod puppet troupes in Thailand from 2010–2023 and to propose further approaches to sustaining traditional rod puppet troupes. The current existence of rod puppet troupes and the further approaches to sustain rod puppet performance are shown in Figure 3.

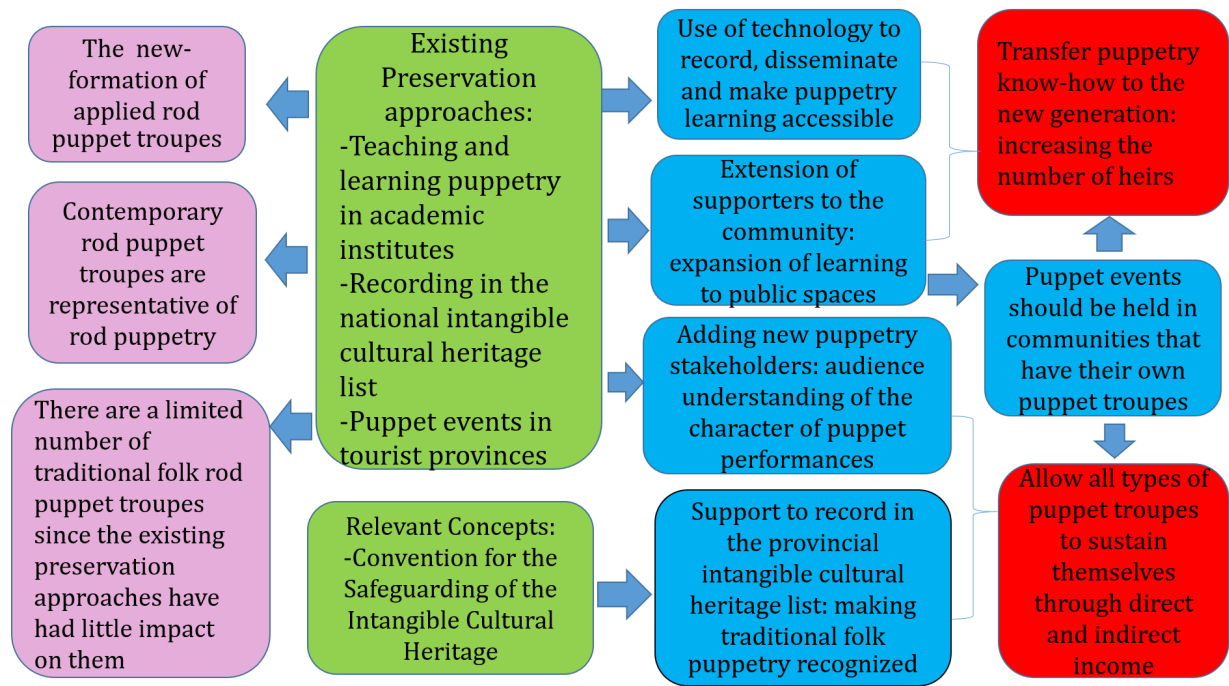


Figure 3: The result of preservation approaches on the current existence of rod puppet troupes and further preservation approaches to sustain rod puppet performances

Figure 3 details how the existing preservation approaches have had an influence on the existence of all types of rod puppet troupes. However, it was found that only a limited number of traditional rod puppet troupes continue to exist since the preservation approaches have shown little benefit for them. For this reason, further preservation approaches have been proposed, the goal of which is the sustainability of traditional folk rod puppet performance, particularly through additional sources of income and new heirs. The approaches for sustaining traditional puppet performance are closely related to each other since the process of sustaining rod puppet performance requires continued and long-term cooperation that requires many skills like technology to record and dissemination; marketing skill to persuade people to pay for rod puppet performances.

The findings of this research confirm previous research (Maicharoen, 2009; Klaisubin, 2011; Watanasawad, 2012) in that the situation of traditional folk rod puppets is vulnerable and requires support from the government. However, this research also identifies the community as an essential key to sustaining puppetry, an element that has not been identified before. In order to increase the number of puppet learners, puppet learning needs to be expanded to public spaces, along with educational institutions. Moreover, puppet events need to be held in communities that have their own puppet troupes, for example in Nakhon Sawan province where there are four such troupes.

This research also addresses the use of technology in communicating puppet performances, similar to Thiengsurin's research (2022). However, this research found that technology can be used to enlarge the preservation, transmission and dissemination of knowledge and know-how of puppetry, especially the traditional folk puppetry in local areas. Maicharoen (2009); Klaisubin (2011); Watanasawad (2012); Siththupahan (2016) suggest that income is a significant factor in the sustainability of the rod puppet troupes. This research furthers this suggestion by adding the audience to the list of stakeholders of rod puppetry by emphasizing the need for those attending live puppet performances to understand the unique characteristics of such performances, such as the feelings that are conveyed and a better appreciation of the difficulty of how to stage a puppet performance. Such understanding and appreciation have the potential to make the audience more willing to pay an admission fee, thus increasing the income for traditional puppet troupes.

The traditional process to transmit know-how and knowledge about puppet performance is complicated and incompatible for today's society in that it is not reasonable to expect children to stay in a teacher's home to learn and practice manipulating puppets. The teaching of puppet know-how in schools is a positive, but inadequate, approach to pass on to the younger generation because the program has the potential to be revised and interpreted by the Ministry of Education. Traditional folk rod puppet troupes need to be strongly and continuously supported by the private and governmental sectors. The transmission of know-how and knowledge through both formal and non-formal education, such as schools, universities, learning puppetry

in a community center or a local museum, should all be supported. Boosting the puppet learning channel contributes substantially to increasing the number of puppeteers who are neither descendants nor inheritors, but represent a new generation interested in rod puppetry.

The role of the community needs to be further studied through action research by selecting an area where there is a community group and local governmental organizations that have the capacity to work with rod puppet troupes. In addition, the convention for the safeguarding of ICH regarding the role of the community can be used as a framework to organize activities that support the continued existence and transmission of rod puppet knowledge and skill.

Some traditional folk puppet troupes, such as *Mae Chaweng Onlamai* and *Chucherdchumnansilp*, have their own plays for puppet performances. These plays should be digitized for preservation and further study, such as a comparison with plays of contemporary rod puppet troupes, for a deeper understanding of the characteristics of traditional folk puppetry.

It is clear that rod puppetry is a diverse entertainment and cultural medium. The adaptation of puppet performances by contemporary and applied rod puppet troupes makes it evident that this kind of art still thrives today. However, traditional folk puppetry, which is the root of all rod puppetry, needs to be fostered for its continued existence since each kind of rod puppet troupe has its own value and important identity.

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