

Stimulate puppets' law of motion in the natural relaxation An interview to puppet master and educator Mr. Tan Zhiyuan

Wang Xiaoxin¹

Preface

It's a pleasure that the Móin-Móin wants to hear the voice of contemporary Chinese puppet master and educator Mr. Tan Zhiyuan who was the vice chair of the China National Puppet Arts Troupe. With deep thoughts and outstanding capability in puppetry, Mr. Tan has performed and created more than 60 characters through puppetry in the past 50 years and now he is invited to make an interview on the subject of "Performing Techniques and Training in Modern Chinese Puppetry".

Rod puppet is an important form of Chinese puppet. Its structure and performing techniques are quite different from that of marionette and hand puppet. Rod puppet can be manipulated by a main-rod (connected to a puppet head) and two hand rods (connected to puppet's hands), known as "three rods", and it is named as "rod" for its resemblance to old man's walking stick. In China, the most representative rod puppet troupe

¹ Interview Time: February 12, 2015, at 4PM -10PM. Interview Venue: Tan Zhiyuan's home. Interviewed by Wang Xiaoxin (hereinafter, WANG), lecturer of Shanghai Theatre Academy Puppet Program, M.A. of Peking University, Special Research Fellow of Yale University Drama School. Interview to Tan Zhiyuan (hereinafter, TAN), Former Vice Chair of the China National Puppet Arts Troupe, First-grade Puppeteer, Member of Chinese Dramatists Association, Member of Council of China Puppetry and Shadow Arts Association.

is China National Puppet Arts Troupe², in which Mr. Tan used to work.

Part One: Learning Experience

WANG: When did you start learning puppet performing? How did you finally choose to work in the field of puppetry? Where did you learn to be a professional puppeteer? How and how many years did you learn?

TAN: Puppet art is the love of my life. Since I was young up till today, I have developed an inseparable relationship with puppets, from unknowing to knowing, to perfecting myself in controlling puppet and finally integrating with it. It's interesting to travel between the world of puppetry and that of human, exploring the symbolization of puppets and the relationship between human and puppet. Over the past decades, I realized that the "manipulating" technique of puppetry is more charming than that of other dramatic forms. I love puppetry and it has become an integral part of my life.

"Your parents are artists, right?" Someone once asked me. I answered "No." "Do you have families who engage in puppetry?", and my answer was also "No." My parents were born in peasant's families and moved to city later.

I was born in 1946 in a farmhouse in Laizhou, Shandong province. Later my father was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Trade of PRC. So I moved to Beijing with the whole family when I was five. I had no idea about puppetry at that time.

Maybe I was destined to know puppetry. When I was in primary school, the China National Puppet Arts Troupe performed a large-scale puppet show *Tall Ivan* in our school, directed by a puppetry director from former Soviet Union. I was attracted by the wonderful performance and was very excited. It was my first time to watch a puppet show, from which I got the idea of puppetry.

Several years later, I graduated from a primary school and was admitted to a junior middle school where I became a member of Children's Choir due to my good voice. I practiced singing in holidays. At the end of my second year, a teacher in the Children's Choir told me that there was a joint recruitment organized by art troupes in Beijing and suggested me have a try. I thought it was interesting to work in a troupe. I gladly went to the troupe with my classmates and submitted the application without too much consideration.

² China National Puppet Arts Troupe is a new-style puppet troupe. It was established by the Ministry of Culture in 1955, combined a temporal Puppet Team called Western Liaoning Arts Troupe, which was transferred to Beijing, and the Central Drama Academy Puppet Research Group, under the care of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai.

But my parents opposed that, which made me dumbfounded. My parents did not agree. What could I do? Finally I made a "rebellious" decision and attended the entrance examination of joint recruitment.

Shortly afterwards, I received the letter of admission and was very glad to show it to my parents. When I talked with my parents, actually, I was very worried. My father looked at the letter and asked "Are you really willing to go there?" I said "Yes!" I was very determined. Unexpectedly, my father did not insist on his opinion. "Try your best to do a good job once you made decisions", my father said earnestly. I finally entered the China National Puppet Arts Troupe in August 1960 and began my career of puppetry. I was only 14 at that time³.

Later I learned that my father hoped me to continue my study in school and work in foreign trade field like him. I went against his wish. But I always keep his word in my mind.

After entering the China National Puppet Arts Troupe, I was trained for basic qualities like vocal, dialogue, physical movements, and drama acting, etc. With the principle of "inheriting the tradition, learning advanced experience from foreign countries, establishing a new-style puppetry", China National Puppet Arts Troupe sent us six trainees to Hunan Puppet and Shadow Art Troupe⁴ to learn traditional puppet performing (manipulating) techniques from the famous puppeteers Li Haixuan⁵ for one year. This year was very important in my lifetime.

WANG: How did you learn puppetry from Mr. Li Haixuan?

TAN: I studied rod puppet with Mr. Li Haixuan. "The basic performing skills of rod puppet are lifting, entwisting and walking", my teacher said this. How simple the three words are! These three profound words have always been accompanying my puppetry career! With the development of my career, I have a deep understanding of lifting, entwisting and walking, which is the starting point, the developing point and the base that supports the world of puppetry.

My study started from lifting, entwisting and walking.

What is lifting? Puppeteers should manipulate puppets behind a 1.6 to 1.7 meter high curtain to make puppets perform over the curtain. So the first step to practice basic skills is lifting. A puppeteer should lift a 1.5 to 2 kg puppet over his head steadily, uprightly and straightly for over 30 minutes. This is the basic requirement for a rod puppeteer.

³ There were 12 rod puppeteers entered the Troupe in 1960.

⁴ It is now renamed as Hunan Puppet and Shadow Protecting and Inheriting Center.

⁵ An old artist, born in three generations of puppet performance family, member of Hunan Literature Federation, provincial CPPCC member.

WANG: By now, what impressed you the most in your early learning experience of puppetry?

TAN: At that time, I was ambitious just as "newborn calves are not afraid of tigers." "Hey, it is just lifting, no big deal!" I was only a teenage boy and did not treat small puppets seriously. I was delighted to pick up a heavy puppet. After we six children got ready, our teacher taught us the right methods to lift puppets. As soon as hearing the command of "start" by our teacher, we began to lift puppets and our teacher began timing. When I look back now, I feel touched, because this is a real start for me and my puppetry career. One minute passed, everyone felt good and looked at each other. Two or three minutes later, we were not able to hold on. Somehow we were not able to keep lifting for five minutes. The whole body became tense, the belly kept sticking up and the arms were painful and kept falling off. We toughly kept lifting with grimace. We felt that we were not able to keep lifting it anymore. Our teacher asked us to stop and have a rest. He commented that "the lifted puppet should not reel right and left or front and back. Instead, it should be like an actor standing straightly on the stage." His comment was like a ruler for us to learn the correct method. I kept practicing every day, from 5 minutes to 10 minutes, from 10 minutes to 20 minutes. My arms did not pain and I also did not felt tired. Finally I got used to it and could keep lifting a puppet for 30 minutes, which laid a good foundation for the skill of lifting.

I once tested my limitation. I could lift a 3kg puppet above a 1.7 meter high horizontal line and remained stationary for two hours⁶.

The second step is entwisting. In order to perform puppets, puppeteers must lift puppets and make movements with hands. Thus entwisting is very important among the basic skills.

Puppeteers should use left hands to control and entwist the two rods which are connected to puppets' hands. He needs to hold the rods and at the same time use each finger to activate puppet's hands by entwisting, twisting, pushing and pulling to make them perform like human hands which can move and wave. This is very important and should be treated seriously.

At that time, my five fingers always went against my will. They did not move but it's time to move and always move when it's not necessary. They could not cooperate well. The moment of entwisting, twisting, pushing and pulling was not properly controlled. Sometimes the rods cannot be entwisted (the method was incorrect), and sometimes the rods would fall down. Unqualified performances happened frequently. I was almost anx-

⁶ Ordinarily, a puppeteer can remain stationary for 30 minutes.

ious to cry. Our teacher, a strict and patient old man with asthma, found this. He patiently explained every movement and tirelessly demonstrated it to me again and again. I kept practicing according to his guidance. During our lunch break, I brought my lunch to his room for guidance of entwisting skills. So I quickly mastered the techniques and was overwhelmed with joy. My memory is evoked that he nodded and said "well done" after my show and quickly picked up a hunk of meat into my bowl. Just at that moment, he found two bleeding blisters on my hand. (There was not enough time for me to hide them.) He took my hand and asked "Is it painful?" "No", I withdrew the hand and said, "It doesn't matter, teacher." I then took my bowl and went back to the rehearsal venue happily.

To be honest, how could it not pain? Every day I lifted a puppet and entwisted it hundreds and thousands of times. Hands were afflicted with blood blisters which made me feel painful especially after some rest. However, I was not able to stopping practicing, otherwise, all my previous efforts would be wasted (a senior fellow apprentice in Hunan Puppet Art Troupe also said this). I withstood the great pain and kept entwisting. Later there were thick calluses on my hands and my abilities were improved a lot. A puppet's hands could move freely, which provided the foundation for practicing the skill of walking. I was very delighted.

A puppet is lifted and its hands can move freely. But to perform it, a puppeteer must have the ability to make it walk around.

The third step is walking, for which we should practice to integrate and coordinate with puppets. This is a key step to convey a puppeteer's sensation of motion into a puppet. Lots of stupid mistakes were made at the beginning. For example, I could walk naturally without carrying a puppet. But I did not know how to step forward while lifting a puppet. I was very rigid just like a cartoon figure. When a puppet swung its hands, my arms and legs suddenly began to move out of phase. There was no shortcut. I had to practice each movement like a baby learning to walk. When stepping out with my left foot, I entwisted a puppet's right hand to make it move forward, and when stepping out with my right foot, I entwisted the puppet's left hand to make it move forward. I needed to think about the law of motion as well as the method to entwist the rod at the same time, so as to keep the upper (puppet) and lower (puppeteer) coordinated to move naturally and smoothly.

On the rehearsal venue which was about dozens of meters in length, we walked from one end to the other end, over and over again. I had no idea how far we walked and how much we sweat. I still remember that one day we had walked back and forth many times and had sweat a lot before our

teacher came. Our teacher looked at us and said "keep going". Nobody dared stop. We continued yelling the cadence of "1—2—1, 1—2—1". But our teacher always said "keep going". That was bad. Every one sweat profusely. The sweat dropped to the ground from time to time. My hair was wet and the sweat went into my eyes, which almost did not allow me to open my eyes. We were forbidden to stop entwisting to wipe perspiration with hands. We pathetically looked at our teacher. However he turned a blind eye to that. We were not able to walk steadily and the bodies were out of shape. We walked and yelled, half-jokingly, "Teacher, I'm not able to walk any longer!" "Teacher, my hands are exhausted", "Teacher, I am tired to die!" Meanwhile all of us kept entwisting and walking. Our teacher smiled and said slowly "S-T-O-P". All of us were just like paralyzed person. Some of us sited on the ground, some squatted on the ground, some bent over tables, I sited on the ground askew, and some even lay on the ground. We patted our backs and wiped away the sweat. "Teacher, you are so ruthless", I said. Some of my fellows laughed. Our teacher also smiled and said "But you managed it, right? You should keep in mind that "a minute on the stage takes ten-year practice." The hard work paid off. We basically mastered the basic skills. For consolidating the basic skills and learning to represent roles with what we had learned, our teacher let us to play some scenes of puppet shows. All of these laid a very solid foundation for my future career.

Part Two: Performing and Making

WANG: In your opinion, what are the basic skills of puppet performing?

TAN: I have to talk about the method to manipulate. One hand should control two rods and each finger has its own task. You can see this finger. This finger and another finger control the rod, the pinkie and the third finger control the other rod. It should be like this after practicing. Kick it out and get it back, kick it out and get it back, kick it out and get it back. This is the basic skill, entwisting. Lifting, entwisting and walking are all basic skills which do not allow any perversion. These actions should be done by the fingers and should have rhythm sensation and be clearly cut without vacillating and staggering. Fingers must perform in place. This is the basic skill, which should be practiced like this, forward and backward always. So I think the basic skills are from the natural state of the world. The function of puppet itself also originates from the real life. For example, I saw dolls when I was a kid. Sometimes I put a puppet here, and sometimes put a puppet there. I did not know how to manipulate puppets. But I saw the doll was very good and I liked it very much. So I took it up. How to take it? I took it in this way. It could move. How should I hold it to set it in motion? I hold it in this way

so that both of its hands could move. So I was able to manipulate it step by step, from which I can gradually summarize the methods. Basic skills are the methods to manipulate puppets.

WANG: Why did you specially emphasize the natural state of puppet performing?

TAN: Puppeteers' body can stay relaxed by manipulating puppets according to the inertial law of puppets' motion. And the inertia can be generated itself. It is the natural law and I can utilize it. You can see how I utilize it to make a movement. This is the law of puppets' motion. We can stimulate the law of motion, control and utilize it as a basic skill for puppet performing.

A puppet is an inanimate object. It has neither natural reaction nor capacity to move. All the activities of human are the natural expression and instinctive reaction of the body. But all motions of a puppet are created by a puppeteer. It's very important to emphasize the natural state of motion as well as the sensation and expression of a puppet, which can bring more sense of life into a puppet.

A puppet's motion derives from the law of its movement. One important factor in this law that could not be ignored is "inertia". We can utilize the inertia to manipulate a puppet, which is indispensable for basic skills. The inertia is very good. What can it do? It can generate continuity, smooth, rhythm, inner personality, feeling and emotion. We should make use of the inertia and the law of a puppet's motion as well as the skill of entwisting to make a puppet's hands swing naturally. After constant practices, we'll be able to obtain the skill, and we should master this skill to move a puppet's arms and make various movements. This is essential for the entwisting. That's why I emphasize it frequently. A puppet's motion, no matter it is big or small, exaggerated or imitated from human body, must be complete, must be accurate, must be rhythmic and must be smooth: this is called "Four Must." A puppeteer's body should stay relaxed and practice basic skills under natural state so as to fully activate the body. Therefore, only when puppeteers makes the performance under natural state can they release energy of puppets (including inertia functions of each part).

Also pay attention to: this law should be flexibly applied to different forms of puppets⁷ according to their features, because their art means are different. Puppeteers should think about the law of a puppet's motion so as to summarize basic methods to manipulate.

WANG: What's the purpose to point out basic skills?

⁷ It is generally acknowledged that Chinese puppet includes: rod puppet, hand puppet, marionette, iron-wire puppet and fireworks puppet.

TAN: Like any other arts, this is to express a dramatic character's personality, psychological action, and subconscious response. For puppet performing, these basic skills are what we need to practice. On this basis, we develop it to express the character's action and the inner emotion. The movements of basic skills are not isolated. Instead, they are connected with each other.

WANG: You always said "puppeteers should be considered when making puppets." In your opinion, what is the relationship between puppet making and puppet performing? What kind of changes in the field of Chinese rod puppet making you experienced in the past fifty years?

TAN: There is an old saying "carving wood to make a puppet, and using the puppet to give performances", which clearly states the nature of puppetry. The old saying means two steps: firstly, carving wood to make a puppet, and secondly using the puppet to give performances. Puppet making, a very important step, is the first-step creation ranging from design to production, while puppet performing is the second-step creation.

As with puppeteers, puppet makers also do creative works. They should find the best creative method to animate puppets. If a puppet brings burden to a puppeteer and cannot allow a puppeteer to manipulate it freely as his wishes, it'll be a lifeless object even it's manipulated by a good puppeteer. That's why a puppeteer should know puppet making and puppet structure. A puppet should be made with high quality and flexibility. It should be lifelike with a puppeteer's simple manipulation. A puppeteer can give it life. A good puppeteer would make a puppet himself or take a puppet from others and improve it individually.

In the old China, a Chinese rod puppet is usually supported by a simple main-stick. In 1950s, Suo Wanjin, a puppet maker of the China National Puppet Arts Troupe, invented handles of pistol after his observation and study in Europe. He found European handles of pistol⁸ and remodeled them. Meanwhile, it was first time that wire spring was used in Chinese puppet making by Suo Wanjin. It's really an important invention. He learnt this from Obratzsov Puppet Theater. Although the principle is similar, he made it more simple and easy to manipulate puppets. That's why I say Suo Wanjin is a master who can be written into history.

Since then handles of pistol become important, so I have to talk about this. Puppets cannot be used if handles of pistol are not properly made. The thickness is very important. Puppet makers should know well which parts should be thick and which parts should be thin to make it

⁸ Handle of pistol: a mechanism device which can be used as a handle to manipulate puppet. It gets the name due to its resemblance to pistol trigger.

well matched with puppeteer's hands.

WANG: Does a puppet breathe?

TAN: A puppet breathes. It can naturally act human breath. You do not need to consider how to make it breath. And let's analyze the breath of human. As a person inhales, he will slightly lower the head and have the subtle feeling that the back gets tightened upwards and backwards. When he exhales, we see the feeling of stretching outward, and the head and body will get back to the original position. So does a puppet's breath. But we should pay attention to the inner feeling of the movement when a puppet breathing. When it inhales, it seems that its lung would like to swallow the intake air all at once, or to slowly and continuously pull the big gulp of air into it. Actually, this is the sensation of a puppet's movement. This is the movement of a puppet's breath: bowing its head and keeping its chest slightly inward, and this is a combination effect, i.e., bending thumb and index finger downward to withdraw the puppet's head and raising the wrist upwards and backwards. Please pay attention to the following points: 1. Properly controlling the extent and the power when bending right thumb and index finger's downwards. 2. Properly controlling the extent when raising wrist upwards and backwards. Please note that the neck is a fixed point and it should be coordinated with the movement range and rhythm of the head. 3. This is not only the movement of a puppet, especially it's a sensation of the movement. 4. The power to swallow "a big gulp of air" is from the interior of the body, the point in its lung. Especially the sense! So does cry.

WANG: How to act crying?

TAN: Puppets can make different kinds of cryings. Let's analyses the crying which is the movement combination of a puppet's head, hands and body—stooping down, lowering the head and covering puppet's eyes by hands. Let's keep this gesture. This can be set as the original point. To make the movement of sob, we should follow these steps. Firstly, raising the wrist upwards and backwards and at the same time withdrawing the head (push down it) to make the body act like inhaling and not to move the hands from eyes. Secondly, making the movement of exhaling to make the head and body get back to the original point (which has been set as above). Repeating the movement of raising the wrist, withdrawing the head and sobbing, and getting back to the original point of the movement of the head and the wrist. It is the crying when we do these movements repeatedly and continuously, isn't it? "Raising wrist, withdrawing head and getting back to original point" is the decomposition of human crying. I apply this decomposition way in my teaching to make my students understand the context and sensation of the movements as well as the relationship and cooperation of different parts

manipulated by basic skills, so that they will know how to transfer the movements, emotions and feelings to puppets. For example, when I teach students to create the crying, I would ask them to decompose the movement and practice to raise the wrist, withdraw the head, get back to the original point, raise wrist, to withdraw head, back to the original point. We use this hand on that side. It must be not like this. The body should not be too straight. You must use the wrist and add slight tremble of sob. These are the ways to express a character's emotion and the inner affection.

Raising the wrist and withdrawing the head are the ways to represent personality of characters, emotion and inner affection. That means you can dissect a human movement. This is the method I teach my students. For example, when I guide students to make the crying, I would ask them to practice the wrist firstly, to raise the wrist, to withdraw the head. You can use your hands on that side. You see, it must be not like this. It must follow you.

WANG: The teaching method of wrist skill⁹ is very different from the conventional teaching method. Is it originally created by you?

TAN: I summarized it from my practice. When I studied in Hunan province, my teacher said three words: lifting, entwisting and walking. The practice of entwisting skill is based on lifting, from simple to complex, including double entwisting and single entwisting. I was required to control rods flexibly with proper strength to lay a good foundation of performing. Over 50 years, since I started to learn it at the age of 14, I finally learned the simplest truth: we should master the range and law of a puppet's each part, only we know puppets well them puppets love and reward us.

WANG: In a puppet performance, what's the relationship between a puppeteer and a puppet? What does the puppeteer feel? What do you think about the puppeteer's performing capability? How important is the body expressiveness in puppet performing?

TAN: When manipulating puppets, we should pay attention to the unity between puppeteer and puppet, and the unity between up and down. Generally speaking, a puppeteer's performance is a revelation of the natural state instead of deliberately acting when manipulating puppets. The more you learn, the more you know, the more things you can express from the interior. Puppeteers do not need to think too much about how to act, instead, they should have many motions in mind and convey them to puppets. In other word, they can put life into puppets with hands and things in

⁹ Wrist skill is to control puppet's waist by wrist, to make puppet breathing and complete the movements of chest and hip through wrist's movement.

their mind. That's why I said a puppeteer's performing is a revelation of the natural state, e.g. I once performed in Japan. After the performance there were talks, in which mothers and kids often asked me questions, "What did you think when performing?" I answered that "I did not think about anything and only followed my sense." Puppeteers are supposed to express the characters' personality and they should present the characters' feelings to audience. They should convey the interior to puppets to animate them. Because puppeteer and puppet are in one.

Part Three: Cultivation of Puppet Talent

WANG: Please introduce the basic situation of talent cultivation of rod puppet art. As far as you know, how many generations have learnt rod puppet techniques? Please mainly talk about your experiences of talent cultivation in China National Puppet Arts Troupe as well as the other organizations in Beijing.

TAN: The China National Puppet Arts Troupe was established by our predecessor. They prepared the work for its establishment in 1953 and officially established it in 1955. I entered the troupe in 1960. In 1961, the troupe sent 6 young trainees to Hunan province to learn rod puppet art of Hunan style and another 6 trainees to Shanxi province to learn rod puppet art of Shanxi style. After the study, we got back to the China National Puppet Arts Troupe and later established a youth team. This can be considered as the first generation talents cultivated by China National Puppet Arts Troupe.

Actually, when I teach students rod puppetry, they should keep pace with each other. If there is a student who stands out above the rest, I'll ask him to wait and try to push the one who falls behind. When everyone goes hand in hand, the good student will get better naturally. This situation goes back and forth. All of the students in that batch could keep an eye in a play. Their abilities were compatible. That's why they could establish the second team of China National Puppet Arts Troupe. And they are still acting as backbone of the troupe until now.

Although China National Puppet Arts Troupe exists in name only today, its productions and performances were inherited and protected thanks to talent cultivation and training courses. For example, *Campo Hero Sister*, which represents the highest level of Chinese puppet art, does not have any videos or pictures left. I rehearsed and taught a dance of *Little Pine* (a part of *Campo Hero Sister*) when training young generation of puppet talents. Performing skills of that dance are very characteristic. All of the actions start once without any interruption. It keeps chasing after turning over. Up to now, only the dance of *Little Pine* is preserved due to my teaching.