



Types of Handicrafts

Shadow Puppets hammer Leather hammer



Shadow puppet hammer is the wisdom of “Shadow puppet play” or “Nang Talung” which is the traditional uniqueness reflecting the way of life through the white screen for 200 years. The “leather” used to perform the show exhibits the science and arts skills to create the liveliness and aesthetic quality to the audience as the show must be coupled with the beautiful wording. Therefore, to create the “leather” it requires the skillful and proficient artisan to select the hide, tan leather, draw the leather with a stylus, and engrave and hammer the leather by the looking at the light shining through to create the impressive aesthetic (if the leather is hammered for decoration, the deliberate engraving and hammer technique is used and the shape will be more actual than the

leather for the shadow puppet show as it is the short-range sight.) Individual artisan has their own identity. In the past, color painting was created by the artisan such as black color from carbon and the viridian green. Although the shadow puppet is developed and the tanned leather or food coloring is used for the convenience and facilitate the new generation to learn how to make shadow puppet, the traditional features and identities are reserved. The aesthetic of shadow puppet in front of the white screen is another context influencing the fondness of the shadow puppet group. Thus, the skills in engraving and leather hammer are the valuable and cherished handicraft inheriting from generation to generation to conserve the conventional custom.



Identity reflecting wisdom and engineering skills

Wisdom of engraving or “Khud Rup Nang” in local dialect contains details and the delicacy in creating work process. In the past when the tanned leather from the factory did not exist, the ancient leather engravers were very wise and smart to prepare the shadow puppet characters to play with the light and shadow beautifully.

It begins with leather selection. In the old day, the cow was chosen to make different character. The leather for making male and female character was made from the leather of calf or the mature cow with the maximum weight of 16 kg. as the thickness was suitable. In the other hand, the leather of ox or old cow was popularly used to make the clown. Furthermore, the color of cowhide is another choosing criteria. The black pelt gives the white and clear hide for making male and female character while the red pelt gives brown hide for making the skin of aged character. Sometimes, if the character has similar skin color to human skin, white hide may not be required but the yellow hide is needed because its thickness and durability, such as ogre and servant, or the main male character who lives a simple life. The leather for making the character of master and hermit is the tiger skin. Some believe that the magical leather such as the hide from the cow or the white buffalo died from the thunderbolt or the naturally dead striped cow is used to make the Shiva or hermit character, including the extraordinary cow such as the cow with spotted paw or tail, white hump, or Bodhi-shape face.



To prepare the hide stretch it tightly, rip out the fascia, and bury in the sand (of the canal) for two nights. Observe and test whether it softens with nail; do not leave it too long as it may be rotten. Wash out with water, dry in the sun for a while to avoid the rugose, and let it air dry under the shade.

In the past, the leather was tanned by soaking in the water boiling with Senna or sour fruits for 1-2 nights to allow the leather to absorb the vinegar. Wash out, stretch, and let it dry in the air. At present, the vinegar is used for tanning so the leather does not get too soft and is more durable. The dry leather should be rolled to store for year.

The engraver soaks the leather in the water to soften it and make it easy to engrave. Then, stretch it and process the next step when it dries.

To create the design of shadow puppet the engraver uses the stylus to draw on the leather which is erasable with water. In the old day, the leather was engraved in the ogre, monkey, or deva because the show mainly depended on the epic of Ramakian. The human, inhuman, and ogre characters wore the ancient costume and crown, holding the weapon, a sword according to Brahmanism belief. Later, when the Ramakian had less popularity, the shadow puppet had changed as well. The king and the queen wore the crown without the strip whereas the main male and female characters had a tuft.





Some craftsmen still keep the model of the ancestors to use for making shadow puppet character presently. They copy the model on the paper and put on the leather, or put the leather on the new leather for engraving. It can be said that making the shadow puppet is one of the key components exhibiting the craftsmanship and it shows the beauty and grace of each leather. In the past, the craftsman draw the pattern with stylus without drafting the pattern.

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The most outstanding feature of the shadow puppet is the shape of the shadow puppet which is imbalanced when having a look closely; the bottom part from the waist is short, which is different from painting. The old craftsman foresaw that when showing the shadow puppet on the white screen, only the top part was visible, while the bottom part was 75° away from the screen. Thus, the shadow range reflected the extension of the short leg. If the leg was balanced, when lighting reflected on the screen, it gave the abnormal range of the shadow puppet's leg. This is the wisdom of the ancient craftsman who gave the importance to the details. Similarly, the hands of the main male and female character, and the clown had imbalanced length. The craftsman conceived the showing method that the main male and female characters always in the middle of the screen which was close to the light. Therefore, their hands were in knee-length. On the other hand, the clown's hand, who always on the edge of screen, was at shin-length so it would be at the appropriate length when shining through the light. If the shadow puppets are made in the actual ratio, the shadow would be at the costa border-length which made the strange figure. Nowadays, shadow puppet becomes less popular so the main purpose of making shadow puppet is for decoration and presenting as the souvenir. Thus, making the shadow puppet for the short-range sight requires the smaller details with the most actual ratio.



The specific skills that make the imitation is more difficult is the leather engraving and hammer. The thickness of a piece of leather is uneven. Therefore, the craftsman chooses the thinner part to engrave the top part of the shadow puppet while the thicker part is used for engraving the bottom part. The craftsman applies the engraving technique by using the carving knife to engrave the pattern with a big hole, the main structure, or main pattern. The old craftsman made the blade from “Kae Keb Khaw” (people in the south use it as a sickle). They file the cut of the Kae and put the handle to fit with the craftsman’s hand. Start engraving from the inner by putting the leather on the cutting board made from Agarwood and Tung wood. Use the sharp point knife to engrave the face because the leather is thin while use the unsharpened knife to engrave the thick leather.

For leather hammer, this technique is used to make a line on the cloth to divide the parts such as the shirt, pants, necklace, brace lace, feet, and loincloth in order to strengthen the leather and maximize its durability. Moreover, it beautifies the details of the pattern when the light shines through. The main line pattern for leather hammer is dotted line which is hammered consecutively and it must be torn in one cut for the clear and sharp pattern. In the past, a punch did not exist so the engraver used the flat rolled steel to hammer on the cutting board. The top parts of the puppet, such as from the face to the waist, the small-size pins are used while the bottom parts use the bigger one. This is because the bottom part is far from the screen which needs the bigger gap.

In the old day, to paint the puppet the rattan was used as the brush as this material crunched the color to absorb into the leather easily. Only few colors were used in the past; black color from the carbon or lacquer vanish, the viridian green from the rust, and red from cinnabar. Currently, poster color and food coloring are widely used because they provide variety shades. Lacquer coating is also applied for more durability.

For making Mai Tub, it is made from the well-matured bamboo; the young bamboo is not flexible when pulling and the weevil eats it. However, the puppeteer soaked the bamboo in the mud for 15 nights so the mud replaced the water in the bamboo tube. This made the bad smell so the weevil would not eat the bamboo. It was the wisdom to prevent the weevil. To sharpen Mai Tub for the male character, make it with slender end so it will be flexible when pulling. On the other hand, Mai tub for the clown has the unsharpened end on the top so the mouth will not bend when pulling. On another end, it should be the unsharpened flat in order to stick on a banana stalk tightly and easily to take off. If it is rounded, it will be difficult to pull.

The hand pulling-stick should be in rounded shape and has the same length with Mai Tub to facilitate the pulling. The bamboo should have the appropriate strength to fit with the weight of the leather.

For Khun Yuk using for controlling the mouth, it was made from the bamboo bending in the fishing stick shape which puts on the eyelid level so when pulling the mouth, the eyes blink. Some shadow puppet makers still use the bamboo while some use round shape plastic. The rubber band is used which easily tear comparing to the piece of leather used in the past.





Background of Shadow puppets

Shadow puppet or “Nuang Talung” is called “Nang” by people in the south, as they say; “Pai Lae Nang Nora” (I got to see the shadow puppet show). Thus, it is presumed that the word “Nuang Talung” was first used when the show was introduced to the people in the central region to distinguished it from the word “Nang Yai”, which formally called “Nang” as well. The first performance of the shadow puppet play in Bangkok, at Nang Lerng, was in the reign of King Rama III by Phraya Pattalung (Phuek). At that time, the puppeteer was from Pattalung so people in Bangkok called it “Nang Pattalung” and later became “Nang Talung”.

It is a belief that shadow puppet play was first emerged in India as one type of performances of Brahmanism-Hinduism. Afterwards, it was widespread to Southeast Asia, especially to Indonesia which accepted the shadow puppet play culture from India completely.

It I presumed that the shadow puppet existed in Thailand for 200 years. The story narrated that Thong Gon rode an elephant to Indonesia and met one of Muslim who was playing with Wa Yang (Wayung Kulit, one of the Indonesian plays) at a bonfire. He reflected the bonfire light through the leather to project the silhouette. Wayang show in Indonesia based on Ramakian (Ramayana). After watching the ply, they applied it to the context of the southern region of Thailand by using Thai language instead of Indonesian language. Moreover, they also applied the use of white screen to project the silhouette of the small size of shadow puppets, as same size as Wayang show. For this reason, the shadow puppet show expanded to other region in the south, from Chumporn to Narathiwat, particularly in Songkhla, Nakhon Sri Thammarat, and Pattalung where the play was very popular.

The shadow puppet is the traditional uniqueness of people in the south reflecting their old way of life through the white screen. The story is narrated as a novel singing in local dialect, called “Wa Bot” which involves the narration and conversation, mostly a Thai octameter poem. Originally, the play based on Ramakian only. However, the puppeteer chose other stories from the folk tale or Jataka such as Kra Thong, Chaichet, and Kaew Na Ma, or the popular drama of that period of time in order to make the show more interesting. The design of shadow puppets is beautifully designed, including the shape, dress, and the decorations.





Belief and story about way of life

Apart from being the entertainment, there are some superstitious beliefs embedded in the shadow puppet show as following details.

Belief in the master, who is the master and the ancestor that each puppeteer inherited to. It is believed that those masters still committed to the puppeteer. If the puppeteer worships them, they are blessed, if not, they may get punished. Therefore, all puppeteer set up a shelf (a wooden hanging shelf on the high wall panel) for the master to dwell. The worship ceremony or Wai Kru will be held every three years, or once a year depending on the agreement with the master.

Belief in leather puppet. It is believed that all the puppets with hands and eyes binding with Mai Tub have magic so those who do not pay the respect to them may have a bad fortune. Further, each puppet holds different prestige and is classified in rank, therefore, the storage should be arranged in category and put the high rank puppet on top.

Furthermore, there are beliefs in the sacred puppet which normally made from the hide of animal died with unusual cause such as from thunderbolt and birth-giving. The best selection of the hide to fit with the puppet figure maximizes the magical power such as the clown puppet made from bear skin and the hermit puppet made from tiger skin.



Belief in traveling. Prior to traveling to perform the play, the worship ceremony should be organized by playing short musical instrument while the puppeteer prays for blessing and success from the master. During the journey, the group may stop by the sacred place or ancient temple and play the musical instrument to offer to the holy item. Arriving at the host, the charm is given to the host (the spirit protecting the house) and play music instrument for a short while, called “Tang Krueng” (some groups may play music before the ceremony).

Other beliefs concerning with black magic to protect the bad luck and bless for success. For example, the ceremony to drive bad luck before get into the theater (by walking around the theater) and tie the last string of the screen (Phuk Nuad Kram) to attract people.

There were various beliefs in the shadow puppet show. In the past, the best performance solely did not enough. The superstition was believed as one of the science all puppeteers had to learn to survive themselves. However, this belief does not strictly practiced.





How to make leather hammer

Materials and equipment

Cowhide or buff

Square wooden frame for hanging the leather

Pattern model

Tools for leather engraving and hammer i.e. cutting board, Tung wood cutting board, sharpened knife, punch, hammer, and candle

Food coloring or chemical paint

Clear rubber or lacquer

Steps of leather hammer

Writing pattern In order to write the pattern, the engraving leather or the leather with the master pattern is put on the drawing leather. Use the stylus draws along the pattern. The engraver should have an insight in the figure and the characteristic of the character they are engraving.



Hammer the pattern Special carving knife that suits each individual engraver is used for engraving the leather. Some use a scraper to engrave the drawing pattern.

Punch the leather in the desired pattern. In the past, a metal rib was rolled with the nail and burnt to form the punch. Today, there are variety patterns and sizes of punch such as in square-shape, heart-shape, and flower-shape. Punch on the wooden cutting board which normally made from the hard wood such as velvet tamarind because the wood is had and does not have dust. The cutting board for hammer the leather should have smooth surface to make the even pattern.

The most important technique of leather hammer is using the punch with big hole to create a clear pattern from the far sight. To beautify the pattern the engraver should hammer the leather evenly. The patterns may be different such as club, the heart, or the red Bodhi pattern with the dotted line.



Painting the puppet It depends on the figure and the usage. The leather is made for the performance purpose so the color should be bright to make it outstanding. Thus, the flashy or contrast colors which are the translucent color are used to prevent the pallor.

Tie the puppet To tie the puppet the bamboo or Thung stick is knotted with the string to pull the puppet; it is called “Mai Chi Mai Tub”. Chop it apart and put the leather in the middle, string with the thread that has the same length with the puppet. Cut the thread with flame. Then, tie the stick with the puppet; the tradition is start with the odd number, to end with the odd number. In other words, it is “Good start is good end”





Characters in shadow puppet show

Puppeteer is the terms for the person who runs the shadow puppet show. Before the reign of King Rama VI, there were two puppeteers in one group; one narrated the story and performed the male and female characters while another narrated and performed the ogre, clown, and extra character. Both were called “Hua Yuak Plai Yuak”.

The puppeteer should have nice and loud voice in variety tone and pitch. He should be able to switch the voice depending on the character they are representing immediately and naturally; it is called “*Kin Rub*”. Moreover, he must have the insight in science and arts, both secular and religious aspects to entertain and give knowledge to the audiences. Intelligence, wisdom, problem-solving skill, and good expression are also required.

There are various characters in the shadow puppet show which play the different roles. For example

Hermit is the sacred puppet. *Ok Ruesi* or *Chuk Ruesi* (pulling the hermit puppet) is the most elegant performing art. Performing the hermit puppet represents how good the shadow puppet group can perform other characters.

Male character is the moral character who has supernatural power and his magical weapon given by the hermit or deva.

Female character is very kind and has beautiful figure. She is honest and loyal to her husband.

Clown is the representative of the local people which imitate the characteristic and personality of the people in the southern region. Each puppet has different figure and characteristic. **The attribute of the clown** is the moveable two arms. Each arm is divided into three parts and string with the small rounded wood stick with the back of the hand to move the puppet’s hand



Value of shadow puppet

The shadow puppet has been the famous entertainment for a long time, especially when the electricity did not available. The shadow puppet show is performed in religious ceremony and funeral, including the significant festivals. Therefore, the shadow puppet creates value to Thai society in different contexts.

Shadow puppet hammer is the ancient art that has been inheriting from generation to generation. However, this art and its popularity is faded and replaced by the modern performances. The new generation and the youth do not value it as in the past. Therefore, the artists start looking for creating its value to preserve this artistic work. They develop the products by adjusting the pattern and design to serve the decoration purpose rather than to perform in the show solely. As a result, the product processing is acceptable and the volunteer group is formed to demonstrate the products from leather hammer in order to inherit this prestige wisdom.





Sources and references

Kru Suan Nudlah and Kru Kij Kacharat