

The Social and Cultural Functions and Religious Cultural Connotations of Contemporary Chinese Glove Puppetry

LIU Haichao

Associate professor, Li Jinhui School of Music, Hunan University of Science and Technology, No. 1 Taoyuan Road, Yuhu District, Xiangtan City, Hunan Province, MD 411201, China. *Orcid:* <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2505-3929>

*Corresponding Author: LIU Haichao

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>Some Chinese scholars believe that contemporary Chinese glove puppetry is still religious, and it shows a certain religious connotation in its performance. While the recent studies on glove puppetry in China academic community have mainly focused on its inheritance, artistic noumenon, industrialization and so forth, few scholars have published the research results on the religious aspect. This has prompted the author to reflect on the social functions of contemporary Chinese puppetry: (1) What are the main social functions of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry? (2) Does contemporary Chinese glove puppetry still have religious nature and connotations? This study mainly uses empirical analysis and literature review methods, based on field investigations, combined with multiple observations of puppetry and existing literature to discuss its main social functions in the current social and cultural environment. The conclusion is that the religious characteristics of this art are gradually weakening, and the recreational and educational functions are gradually increasing.</i> Keywords: Chinese glove puppetry; socio-cultural functions; religious cultural connotations.
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Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited. Citation: Liu, H. (2026). <i>The social and cultural functions and religious cultural connotations of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry</i>. UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (UKRJAHS), 2(7), 53-61.	

1. Introduction

Chinese glove puppetry is a small theatrical art that has been passed down from the Chinese folk for thousands of years. It originated from ancient Chinese puppet opera and gradually evolved into a new important branch of art. In the previous studies on Chinese glove puppetry by contemporary Chinese scholars, few have discussed its religious nature and connotations, but there are still a few mentions of religion in their research, especially in the study of glove puppetry performance. They believe that the emergence of puppets is closely related to religious customs. Even though puppet performances have developed into folk dramas, their original sacrificial functions and religious connotations still exist in the performance of puppetry plays (Xiaoshan Wang, 2008). Chinese glove puppetry, as an important branch of puppetry, also has the same sacrificial function and religious flavor in its performance.

Based on sorting out and analyzing the published research of domestic scholars on Chinese glove puppetry, the author finds that the current research has mainly focused on four regional genres and five research perspectives. Among

them, the four regional genres are glove puppetry of Taiwan Province, Jinjiang and Zhangzhou in Fujian Province, and Shaoyang in Hunan Province. The research in Taiwan mainly gives first place to Pili glove puppetry, and mostly focuses on the industrialization field after the transformation of glove puppetry, followed by the study of its historical origins and its inheritance of traditional Taiwanese puppetry. As for Jinjiang and Zhangzhou glove puppetry, the existing research has mostly concentrated on its performance styles and characteristics of different genres, including the study of its singing and music, as well as the study of artistic ontology such as puppet making techniques. And the research on Hunan Shaoyang glove puppetry has mainly focused on historical tracing, inheritance protection, and artistic style. Certainly, Chinese scholars have also conducted some research on the genres of glove puppetry that have been passed down in other regions. However, compared to the research on the four regional genres of glove puppetry mentioned above, their quantity is relatively small and therefore research works in this field are not listed.

At present, Chinese scholars mainly focus on the “five research perspectives” on Chinese glove puppetry: firstly, research on the history and traceability of glove puppetry. From this perspective, research mainly sorts out the historical origins of different genres of Chinese glove puppetry, especially the introduction, communication and development of regional genres related to the researchers (Lina Huang, 2019; Wu Yao & Ganghua Long, 2009; Shijian Hong, 2006). Secondly, research on the industrialization of glove puppetry culture, which was mainly involved in the study of Pili glove puppetry in Taiwan. Pili Glove Puppetry is the most outstanding TV puppetry play company, which is very representative. Therefore, it is regarded as a successful case of glove puppetry art industrialization transformation for research (Xiaojie Du, 2018; Yiling Shen & Xinyuan Wu, 2021; Wei Liu, 2013). Thirdly, research on the glove puppetry production, craftsmanship and so forth, which mainly focuses on the glove puppetry production, character modeling, clothing and other aspects of Zhangzhou glove puppetry. The content of this kind of research is relatively scattered, a few about the production of other regional genres. Some research on craftsmanship is about stage design and stage art (Yilin Wang, 2015; Hui Yu, 2020). Fourthly, relatively scattered research on the inheritance, protection and development of Chinese glove puppetry, involving different regional genres, which mainly centers on its inheritance and protection policies, and development strategies (Shu Gao, 2016; Bin Wang, 2014). Fifthly, research on the ontology involving a variety of performance genres, with diverse and decentralized content, including performance techniques, accompaniment, singing style, recitation and so forth (Mei Chen, 2020).

In fact, although the phenomenon of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry being performed in front of temples is rare, Chinese puppetry shows still retain their religious connotations in their performances. According to Wang Xiaoshan, an associate researcher at the Fujian Academy of Arts, during an interview with Wang Hua, the leader of the Grand Tune Puppetry Wanfu Hall, in July 2008, there are still some rituals in the puppetry performances of Wanfu Hall, such as divining disasters for the victims, seeking happiness, finding medical treatment, and driving away evil (Xiaoshan Wang, 2008). ¹Based on this interview, Wang Xiaoshan also wrote “The Transformation of Performance Field, Repertoire and Function in Puppetry Plays: A Study of Baisha High Tune Puppetry in Shanghang, Fujian and

Yong'an Grand Tune Puppetry”, which was published in the journal *Fujian Art* in 2008.

Due to the fact that this study employed a research method combining field investigations with literature review. Therefore, the author also collects the inspection and research perspectives of Chinese scholars on Chinese glove puppetry at home and abroad to support the viewpoint upheld in this study. In current research on Chinese glove puppetry, there have been few studies directly mentioned the religious aspect, especially on the performance of glove puppetry in China and even less research on religious content. Thus, only limited literature on religious studies of similar art in puppetry can be used as supporting materials. Currently, the phenomenon of Chinese puppetry being performed in front of temples is rare. However, Chinese glove puppetry has spread overseas and is performed in front of temples in some Southeast Asian countries, which is also a continuation of its religious social function.

According to Cai Zongde's book *The Cultural Context and Performance Forms of Discrepancy, Identity, and Integration of Indonesian Chinese Performance Art*, he interviewed Wang Qinjian, the general secretary of the Chinese Glove Puppetry Troupe Society, at Hall called “Feng De” in Surabaya on January 31, 2013, and learned that Chinese glove puppetry still has long-term performances in temples abroad. The Troupe has been performing in Indonesia for 35 years and has signed a long-term contract with the temple to perform three times a day in front of the temple without interruption. One of the performances was voluntarily paid by the local Chinese, while the other two were fixed and paid by the temple. If no one paid for one of the performances voluntarily, all three performances would be fully paid by the temple (Zongde Cai, 2021).²

As for the account of the famous Chinese entrepreneur Zhou Yingnan who came to Indonesia on December 19, 1963, the first time he saw a Chinese glove puppetry show abroad was in front of the Dajue Temple in Sanbaolong, Indonesia. He also stated that the glove puppetry show there was different from the one he saw in his hometown of China in terms of performance venue and stage arrangement (Jianping Tang, 2001). ³Combining early relevant information on Chinese glove puppetry and comparing it with current performances, it is found that the art form of glove puppetry in China is relatively well preserved.

¹Xiaoshan Wang. (2008). The Transformation of Performance Field, Repertoire and Function in Puppetry Plays: A Study of Baisha High Tune Puppetry in Shanghang, Fujian and Yong'an Grand Tune Puppetry. *Fujian Art*, (06), 29-32.

²Zongde Cai. (2021). The Cultural Context and Performance Forms of Discrepancy, Identity, and Integration of Indonesian Chinese

Performance Art. *Contemporary Performance Forms of Chinese Glove Puppetry* (pp.145-153): Culture and Art Publishing House.

³Jianping Tang. (2001). Yilan's Grand Gathering - Zhou Yingnan Collection. *On Glove Puppetry* (pp.335-336): Xiamen University Press.

2. Research Question

The reason why Chinese glove puppetry has become a folk opera is that it must have the usual artistic attributes of folk art, especially the popularity, aesthetics, entertainment, and folk customs of glove puppetry, which is also a key area of its research. In fact, Chinese glove puppetry also belongs to the category of puppetry art, and it is an important branch of puppetry. According to historical records, the art of Chinese puppetry originated from music of ancient funerals and used to be a form of entertainment for people in the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. As a result, the art of glove puppetry has been passed down to this day. It still vaguely reflects a trace of religious and folk characteristics in the contemporary performances. But these characteristics are rarely mentioned in the Chinese academic research works on glove puppetry. Thereout, it also triggers the author's thinking about this phenomenon and questions about the social functions of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry are raised: (1) What are the main social functions of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry? (2) Does contemporary Chinese glove puppetry still have religious features?

3. Methods

This study mainly used field investigation and observation methods to obtain relevant information and evidence. The author has been conducting 13 years of research on Chinese glove puppetry. In order to carry out this research, the author has conducted field investigations and observations on different regional glove puppetry genres, recorded multiple performances of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry of different regional genres, as well as the differences in the artistic ontology, and interviewed folk performers, thus obtaining first-hand information as the research basis.

In addition, this study also utilizes literature research method. The author obtains knowledge and perspectives from relevant research literature on Chinese glove puppetry, analyzes and sorts them out, and demonstrates this research by combining with field investigation.

Fieldwork and Investigation

During the 13 years of conducting research on the art of Chinese glove puppetry, the author has investigated many regional genres of glove puppetry, met many inheritors of these genres, and recorded relevant survey results. The purpose of the author's field investigation on Chinese glove puppetry is to complete academic projects such as "Research on Hunan Shaoyang Glove Puppetry", "Research on the Inheritance, Development and Evolution of Chinese Glove Puppetry" and "Research on Glove Puppetry Assisting Rural Revitalization". The author has investigated glove puppetry in Neihuang County of Henan

Province, Ningjin County and Wuqiao County in Shandong Province, Jinjiang County and Zhangzhou City in Fujian Province and so on. This study only lists field investigations of a few regional genres of glove puppetry as supporting materials for this research, as well as corresponding analysis.

On March 5, 2020, the author conducted a field survey on single stage glove puppetry in Pingyang County and observed the performance of Pingshan glove puppetry at the Pingyang County Single Stage Glove Puppetry Art Base in Zhejiang Province. The topic of this play is "Eliminating the Epidemic", and the performer is Ye Haiwei, the inheritor of Pingyang glove puppetry. Based on the dialogue between the character "Zhu Bajie (Pigsy)" in *Journey to the West* and the contemporary character "epidemic prevention personnel", it is a new adaptation "Publicity against COVID-19 Epidemic". The plot revolves around the story of Zhu Bajie visiting his wife in Gao Lao Zhuang, where he meets epidemic prevention personnel and receives epidemic prevention publicity from them. This play shows the COVID-19 and epidemic prevention at that time, preaching the harm of COVID-19, reminding everyone to prevent COVID-19, and encouraging human beings to be able to defeat the virus. After watching the play, the author had a conversation with the inheritor Ye Haiwei. And Ye introduced that the current single stage glove puppetry performance in Pingyang is not targeted on a certain topic, Such as repaying gods, fulfilling vows, etc. Facing the public, the plays are no longer conservative and will be created based on the current social and cultural situation. Nevertheless, some characters from mythological stories can still be found in some of the current plays of glove puppetry, which is called "inheritance" for its inheritor Ye Haiwei. That is to say, although single stage glove puppetry is no longer specifically performed for activities such as offering sacrifices and fulfilling wishes, the elements in traditional plays will still be inherited and adopted. Ye Haiwei said that the current puppetry is mainly focused on entertainment, aiming to enrich people's spiritual and cultural life, and the religious elements in drama are also decreasing.

The author also had a field investigation on Shaoyang glove puppetry in Hunan Province from July 15th to 23rd, 2013. Shaoyang glove puppetry is inherited in Baizhu Village, Shaoyang County, Hunan Province. This village is located in a small hill surrounded by mountains on three sides, and is locally called "Yanwo Ridge". Shaoyang glove puppetry has been passed down from generation to generation for hundreds of years by the Liu's family of the village, and it adheres to the ancestral instruction of "passing down to sons but not daughters, within families but not to outsiders". During the investigation, the author watched performances

by representative inheritors of Shaoyang glove puppetry, Liu Yongzhang and Liu Yong'an, as well as performances by other folk performers such as Liu Wenwu. Liu Yongzhang performed traditional plays such as "Yang Xiao Beats the Tiger" and "Zhu Bajie Carries His Bride", while Liu Yong'an performed traditional plays such as "Entering the Palace from the South" and "The Battle of Guan Yu at Changsha". The traditional repertoire of Shaoyang glove puppetry is diverse with various themes, including folk stories, historical dramas, and mythological dramas. And the content mainly promotes bravery, filial piety, virtue, loyalty and justice, and there are many characters such as demons, ghosts, and immortals. During the investigation, the author interviewed multiple folk performers such as Liu Yong'an, Liu Yongzhang, and Liu Wenwu to understand the history and performance environment of Shaoyang glove puppetry, as well as the repertoire often performed, most of which are historical dramas, mythological dramas, and comical dramas. Among them, comical dramas are mainly used to attract children from rural areas; historical dramas are mainly targeted at elderly people who enjoy listening to stories in rural areas; and mythological dramas always perform when rural hosts request puppetry performers to "invite deities", "reward deities", "make wishes", and "redeem wishes". According to the inheritor of Shaoyang glove puppetry, the previous performances were mainly "The Mulian Play (an ancient drama with religious connotations)". Later, with the development of society, more novel plays created from historical stories and some comical and ridiculous plays were also added.

The author conducted field research on Sichuan glove puppetry from August 21 to 26, 2014. Sichuan glove puppetry is still passed down in Donglin Village, Suishui Town, Mianyang City, Sichuan Province, which is commonly known as "Cloth-Paneled Puppetry" in the local area. Its inheritor named Pi Zhengquan introduced that Sichuan puppetry originated in Luoyang, Henan Province. He believes that glove puppetry is a traditional play that uses puppets to "showcase the past through the curtain", mainly performing traditional plays such as "Rebellion of the Son", "Yang Xiao Beats the Tiger", "Zhu Bajie Carries His Bride" and so forth. Pi Zhengquan said that the current puppetry is mainly aimed at entertaining the audience and educating them to do more good deeds. The author went to Sichuan again during the summer vacation from July 10th to 15th, 2023 to conduct field research on glove puppetry. Chen Yuanli, another inheritor of Sichuan glove puppetry, was visited in Shihe Village, Guangji Town, Mianzhu City. Chen Yuanli believed that the main content of Sichuan glove puppetry is to promote positive thoughts, mostly to encourage people to do good deeds, prioritize filial piety, and accumulate the principles of interpersonal conduct. Though without discussing the religious feature of Sichuan

glove puppetry, he still mentioned mythological themes in his performances such as "Zhu Bajie Carries His Bride" and so on.

4. Research Results

Based on the recent research of Chinese scholars on glove puppetry, as well as the sorting and comprehensive analysis of relevant literature, combining with the data obtained from the author's field investigations on different regional genres of glove puppetry in recent years and other scholars' field investigations on the performances spread abroad, this study has drawn the following research results. Firstly, the social function of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry is shifting towards entertainment, and the academic community is also providing theoretical guidance for the development of Chinese glove puppetry in terms of "recreational" and "educational" social functions. Secondly, the religious features of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry are gradually weakening and being replaced by recreational and educational functions. Thirdly, the inheritance of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry still inherits mythological elements in the performances, making it still contain certain religious connotations. Fourthly, contemporary Chinese glove puppetry is less frequently performed in front of temples in China, and the repertoire also presents diverse themes rather than a single mythological drama. Moreover, it has a deep connection with the Chinese performance "The Mulian Play", which is an ancient drama with religious connotations. On the basis of the religious story of "Mulian rescues his mother", it advocates "filial piety" and is therefore loved by the general public, especially the elderly in rural areas. This is an important reason why contemporary Chinese glove puppetry still contains certain religious connotations to this day.

5. Discussion

The discussion of the above results in this study is necessary and indispensable, including the author's original intention for conducting this study and two important issues of this study. Therefore, the discussion part in this study will be divided into two aspects. First of all, the main social functions of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry will be discussed. Then, whether contemporary Chinese glove puppetry still has religious connotations and whether its performance can be recognized as still having certain religious connotations will be discussed.

A Discussion on the Primary Social Functions of Contemporary Chinese Glove Puppetry

The prominent performance of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry highlights its recreational and educational functions, and its research results from contemporary Chinese scholars also play a clear theoretical guiding role

in these two functions. Certainly, Chinese scholars have also carried out research on Chinese glove puppetry with a pragmatic and rigorous academic attitude. Through field investigation, it was found that contemporary Chinese glove puppetry has indeed demonstrated its recreational and educational functions, which is closely related to the development of Chinese society and the progress of the times. With these changes, people's ideological consciousnesses have been continuously improved, and their aesthetics will also change accordingly. Entertainment is also the spiritual need of the people, and education is also the demand of contemporary Chinese society and the times.

As early as the *Supplement to the Book of Han: The Five Phases Record*, there were records about Chinese puppetry, which were believed to be music of funeral and mourning. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, puppetry was used for occasions such as weddings and celebrations, indicating that Chinese puppetry had recreational functions as early as that time during the reign of Emperor Ling of Han. Originating from traditional puppetry, Chinese glove puppetry is the main branch of it, and has inherited its recreational functions. Moreover, as a traditional folk art with its own repertoire and vocal music, Chinese glove puppetry has demonstrated that it has the same "recreational" and "educational" functions as other local dramas.

Contemporary Chinese glove puppetry performances are often seen in events such as birthdays, celebrations, and festive ceremonies, with the main purpose of bringing joy to the audience. Its entertainment-oriented nature leads to a diverse range of performance settings, which can be held in the homes of those celebrating birthdays or holding ceremonies, as well as on the streets, in the fields, and villages. During festive celebrations, glove puppetry performers may even proactively go to places where crowds gather to perform, even without being invited. The portable and easy-to-set-up glove puppetry stages allow for performances to take place anywhere, and after the play, the performers may ask for some money from the audience as a reward. During this period, humor and amusement are often emphasized to entertain and attract the audience.

In addition to festive occasions, folk glove puppetry performers often go out to perform during periods of agricultural downtime. Whenever they arrive at a village and there are spectators, they start their performances accompanied by the sound of gongs and drums. The purpose of these performances is clear - to earn a living. As described by Wang Xiaoqian in *A Popular Introduction to*

Intangible Cultural Heritage in Taizhou, these performers carry their equipment on a shoulder pole and perform on the streets, in the alleys, small towns, or villages. Glove puppetry performances are popular among the general public because they depict worldly affairs and are closely related to people's lives (Xiaoqian Wang, 2016).⁴

Among the various genres of Chinese glove puppetry, the majority of folk performers are also engaged in farming. They have to take care of their agricultural work while going out to perform puppetry. The arrangements of performances by farmers are relatively free, and they decide whether to perform based on their own ideas during agricultural downtime. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, people in rural areas enjoyed watching glove puppetry performances due to poor living conditions, underdeveloped economy and limited entertainment options. Folk performers took this opportunity to earn food or money to support family by performing.

Contemporary folk glove puppetry performers in China have more freedom in choosing their repertoire for independent performances. They attract audiences of different ages in rural areas with mythological plays, historical plays, comedy, and fight scenes. According to Chen Yuanli, a Sichuan glove puppetry inheritor, the content of these performances mainly promotes positive values, encourages kindness and virtue, filial piety, and proper conduct. This demonstrates that Chinese glove puppetry has a certain educational function for the social mass. Generally, glove puppetry performances with educational functions are mostly mythological and historical plays. As for Chen Jintang, a glove puppetry inheritor from Zhangzhou, traditional glove puppetry performances used to mainly take place in rural areas. Since the elderly in rural areas enjoyed listening to the storylines of the plays, traditional performances paid great attention to the plot. Chen believes that the puppets used in Chinese glove puppetry performances are small (only 30 cm), which does not interest the elderly in rural areas. Therefore, the performances require intricate and extraordinary plot, with a focus on storytelling behind the scenes (Shu Gao, 2016).⁵ There are fixed contents, storylines, events and characters in the behind-the-scenes. These storylines often incorporate traditional virtues, including Chinese moral etiquette, respect for the elderly, cherish for young and good behavioral norms, as well as stories about patriotism, bravery, loyalty, and filial piety. As a consequence, contemporary Chinese glove puppetry performances not only provide entertainment but also have a certain

⁴Xiaoqian Wang. (2016). *A Popular Introduction to Intangible Cultural Heritage in Taizhou. Monodrama Glove Puppetry* (pp.170-171); Zhejiang Gongshang University Press.

⁵Shu Gao. (2016). *Oral History of Zhangzhou Glove Puppetry Inheritors. Talk about acting* (pp.159); Jinan University Press.

“educational” function.

A Discussion on Whether Contemporary Chinese Puppetry Still Retains Religious Connotations

The topic of whether contemporary Chinese glove puppetry still has religious features and whether its performances still retain certain religious connotations is a key issue that needs to be discussed in this study. In the analysis of field investigations and relevant literature in the previous text, we have concluded that “contemporary Chinese glove puppetry performances still contain certain religious connotations”. However, it is still necessary for us to discuss it.

Chinese glove puppetry originated from ancient puppetry, which was originally music of funeral and mourning, providing a certain theoretical basis for the religious nature of Chinese glove puppetry. According to The Supplement to the Book of Han: The Five Phases Record, puppetry is a form of funeral music, which has been proven to be related to religious sacrifice. Sacrifice is not only a form of folk customs, but also a concrete manifestation of religious nature in the folk. Although it was already used for “wedding ceremonies” during the reign of Emperor Ling of Han at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, there were still religious elements that persisted in its development and evolution. For example, in Taiwan, glove puppetry is often seen at temple ceremonies (Xuewen Zeng, 2012).⁶ On October 18, 2012, *Taiwan Strait Network* reported that according to Taiwan’s *China Times*, “Acting in Honor of God” has become one of the characteristics of temples in Taiwan. However, the show in Chen Fu General Temple in Caotun Township, Nantou County has been uninterrupted for more than 30 years. Except for the seventh lunar month, glove puppetry is performed every day, and this year is even more special. By the time of the Lunar New Year, nearly 700 performances of “Redeem Wishes” have been arranged. It is interesting that the stage of matshed theater is bustling with activity every day, while the off-stage is often empty. The temple chief Li Chaohua said, “The play is performed for gods.”⁷

In contemporary Chinese glove puppetry performances, the purpose is an important factor to drive the transformation of the social function of glove puppetry. The different performance purposes determine the different performance areas, content, and social functions. Especially for social function, it is directly related to the performance purpose of

glove puppetry, aiming at seeking wishes, praying for blessings and warding off evil spirits, and then naturally giving rise to the religious nature. For instance, a glove puppetry performance with the aim of eliminating disasters and illnesses must include the performers’ witchcraft. As for performances with the purpose of entertaining the gods, they will be conducted on a fixed stage in front of the temple, with the puppetry troupe as the unit, and the repertoire will be equivalent to regular performances. And as for performances aimed to praying for blessings, receive auspiciousness, make wishes, and fulfill wishes, they will be performed in a collaborative form, and singing is only one part of the ceremony, not the main ceremony. This type of performance has a process of “invitation” - that is, the host “writes the play” or “invites the play”, and performs the corresponding plays according to the requirements of the host. By the way, the length of its performance time is specified, which leads to changes and adjustments during the puppetry performance.

The religious connotations of Chinese glove puppetry vary depending on the genres in different regions. In some places, the religious connotations of glove puppetry are more evident, especially in remote rural areas. Wang Xiaoshan thinks that in some areas of Fujian Province, puppetry and religious rituals have a high degree of overlap, retaining religious implications and even many ancient witchcrafts and legal disciplines. Puppetry performers also have a certain range of religious and legal functions. She also listed the religious manifestation of the puppetry troupe in her article *The Transformation of Performance Field, Repertoire and Function in Puppetry Plays: A Study of Baisha High Tune Puppetry in Shanghang, Fujian and Yong'an Grand Tune Puppetry*, especially the names of the troupes with “Tang (hall)”, “Tan (altar)”, “Tai (stage)”, and “Buddhist names” used by some performers and so forth. An example of puppetry performers engaging in Taoist activities outside of performing puppetry shows was presented (Xiaoshan Wang, 2008).⁸ Fujian Province is one of the most popular provinces for puppetry, with various types of puppetries gathered, the most famous of which are the Jinjiang and Zhangzhou genres of glove puppetry. And many regions and counties have different genres of glove puppetry. There are no specific rules between these different troupes, and they act and perform independently. Therefore, it is not surprising if there are individual troupe engaged in religious and legal affairs.

⁶Xuewen Zeng. (2012). The Inheritance of Folk Arts across the Taiwan Strait. *An Overview of Cross-Strait High Jia* (pp.82): Xiamen University Press.

⁷Swallow (2012). The puppetry show at Taiyi Temple was not photographed by the audience. The temple chief said, "It's for the gods." (N) Taiwan Strait Network, 2012-10-18 17:08.

<http://www.taihainet.com/news/twnews/twsh/2012-10-18/963888.html>

⁸Xiaoshan Wang. (2008). The Transformation of Performance Field, Repertoire and Function in Puppetry Plays: A Study of Baisha High Tune Puppetry in Shanghang, Fujian and Yong'an Grand Tune Puppetry. *Fujian Art*, (06), 29-32.

In his book *Prototype Interpretation of Mythologies and Rituals*, Hu Zhiyi considers that dramas and rituals have a close relationship, which is mainly reflected in the theatrical performance activities in festival celebrations (Zhiyi Hu, 2001).⁹ Many scholars have also mentioned the close relationship between festivals, celebrations, and other folk activities with art. The existence of various forms such as singing, dancing, and traditional Chinese opera in performances during folk festivals demonstrates that folk festivals are the effective carrier of art. At the same time, the inheritance of folk festivals also showcases the value and social functions of many arts, including Chinese glove puppetry. In the book *Secular Sacrifice: The Religious Spirit of Chinese Opera*, Guo Yingde also believes that no matter what kind of folk sacrificial activity, it is necessary to perform various music, dances, or dramas to entertain both gods and people, which has been the case throughout history. This is because the people live in hardship, work hard all year round, only have enough to eat, and have limited leisure time. In order to entertain themselves, they often take this opportunity to celebrate (Yingde Guo, 1988).¹⁰ The viewpoint that dance and other performing arts are related to sacrificial rituals and festive celebrations has existed in ancient China. In folk rituals, singing, dancing, and drum music are inevitably performed to bring joy to immortals. Therefore, traditional Chinese opera is also seen as a "secular form of ritual", and its performance venue can be found in any folk ritual occasion, especially at folk temple fairs.

Temple fairs are also the effective carrier of folk art and culture, playing a good role in promoting the collection and dissemination of ethnic art and culture. Temple fairs are specific manifestations of the existence and dissemination of religion in society, and their religious and folk characteristics cover eternal themes. Chinese glove puppetry, which has been passed down for thousands of years, has been active as a form of offering sacrifices to gods in folk temple fairs for a long time. This also indicates that the religious nature of Chinese glove puppetry occupies an important position in the minds of the people, and it also presents the folk, popular, and entertaining characteristics of glove puppetry. In her book *General Theory of Ethnomusicology*, Yang Hong elaborated on the relationship between the River God Temple and drama and other folk arts, believing that "religion" and "secularity" are the two fields perfectly combined together. She used the

"Hequ Ancient Ferry River Lantern Festival" held in front of the "River God Temple" at the Hequ Ferry as a representative example to prove that the art in folk festivals is a combination of "religion" and "folk customs". Relying on the River God Temple (which used to be the famous Zou Xikou Ferry Crossing), the festival is to worship the river god Dayu and pray for peace along the river. This is an important folk festival in the local area of Hequ west pass, which gathers various social and folk activities such as religious worship, theatrical performances, and entertainment activities. In the sacrificial activities of the festival, the ceremony of "releasing river lanterns" and the singing of Jin Opera, Er-ren-tai, and traditional rural tunes ensembles are covered (Hong Yang, 2020).¹¹ Professor Yang Hong's statement and discourse on the Hequ Ancient Ferry River Lantern Festival provide a theoretical basis for the religious analysis of traditional Chinese opera and other similar arts.

The religious nature of Chinese glove puppetry is not only reflected in its purpose of dispelling evil and diseases, but also manifested in the performance activities of praying for blessings, receiving auspiciousness, making wishes, and fulfilling wishes. For instance, Wang Xiaoshan, an associate researcher at the Fujian Academy of Arts, interviewed Wang Hua, the leader of the Grand Tune Puppetry Wanfu Hall in July 2008, introducing the puppetry performance at Wanfu Hall. She showcased the medical treatment for the masses in the form of religious and legal affairs: folk performers use eggs to roll a few times on the patient's eyebrows, open the eggs to see the protein, and then divine misfortunes and good fortune, as well as treat illnesses for the masses, and so on (Xiaoshan Wang, 2008).¹² From the content of Wang Xiaoshan's observation of religious rituals, it is evident that this kind of performance does not belong to the conventional performance of Chinese glove puppetry, but is a religious ritual behavior that goes beyond the performance of Chinese glove puppetry. Certainly, this approach may be a form of spiritual comfort for patients, but it does not truly achieve the goal of dispelling diseases. The real reason for emphasizing that the religious nature of Chinese glove puppetry is not reflected in its true purpose of expelling evil spirits and diseases. In fact, the religious nature of Chinese glove puppetry is more reflected in the performance activities of praying for blessings, receiving auspiciousness, making wishes, and fulfilling wishes for the

⁹Zhiyi Hu. (2001). *Prototype Interpretation of Mythologies and Rituals. The Relationship Between Drama and Ritual* (pp.8): Xuelin Publishing House.

¹⁰Yingde Guo. (1988). *Secular Sacrifice: The Religious Spirit of Chinese Opera. Meet the gods* (p.34): International Culture Publishing Company.

¹¹Hong Yang. (2020). *General Theory of Ethnomusicology. Hequ Ancient Ferry River Lantern Festival* (pp.263-265): Central Conservatory of Music Press.

¹²Xiaoshan Wang. (2008). *The Transformation of Performance Field, Repertoire and Function in Puppetry Plays: A Study of Baisha High Tune Puppetry in Shanghang, Fujian and Yong'an Grand Tune Puppetry. Fujian Art*, (06), 29-32.

people, which is a kind of longing for the people, especially for farmers living at the lower levels of society. As they need psychological support and spiritual comfort, and then “deity” becomes the object of their seeking. In addition, the performance activities of Chinese glove puppetry and religious rituals are two different social and cultural phenomena. The latter one is a type of folk activity with a religious nature, which has its own legal procedures. And the legal procedures of religious rituals may include the stage of glove puppetry performances, but the latter cannot completely replace the former. Although some glove puppetry troupes may also perform puppet actions and chants such as “inviting deities”, “offering sacrifices”, and “sending deities off” during performances, those cannot truly replace religious rituals.

In fact, the religious connotations contained in Chinese glove puppetry mainly stem from the fact that many genres of glove puppetry initially performed “The Mulian Play”. “The Mulian Play” is one of the ancient Chinese opera genres, which is based on the religious story “Mulian rescues his mother” with a strong religious connotation. It respects Chinese Taoism, advocates morality, imitates nature, and deals with the belief in ghosts and deities based on the principle of non-action. The meaning of “Taoism” is the education or preaching of “Dao”, or in other words, the religion that believes in “Dao” and “becomes immortal and obtains enlightenment” through spiritual and physical cultivation. Due to the family inheritance of many genres of Chinese glove puppetry, the religious elements in “The Mulian Play” have been inherited in the repertoire of Chinese puppetry. This is also an important reason why Chinese glove puppetry still contains a large number of themes of deities and ghosts. During interviews with folk performers of Shaoyang glove puppetry, the author found that the folk performers of this genre still refer to puppets as “bodhisattvas”, which also reflects the rich religious connotations of this art. From this, it can be seen that the religious connotations implied in contemporary Chinese glove puppetry are more often presented through plays based on mythologies and legends, which are mainly manifested in preaching morality and emphasizing virtues, following the principles of “filial piety to parents”, respecting the elderly and loving the young, and worshipping gods and exorcism.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study concludes that the most significant social function of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry is entertainment and education, and it still has religious characteristics and connotations. However, its religious social function is gradually being replaced by entertainment and education. Due to the fact that this study only explores the social function of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry

and whether it still has religious significance, and only uses empirical analysis and relevant literature analysis methods, it does not clearly place this study within a specific theoretical framework, making the theoretical foundation of this study slightly weak. The discussion of the religious social function of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry is also limited to a specific perspective, and there is still more content to be explored. Especially the future development trend of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry is particularly noteworthy for scholars. With the development of Chinese society and the improvement of people’s ideological awareness, as well as the development of Chinese glove puppetry performances towards cities, its recreational and educational functions will become the main development trend of this art in the future. The two functions of its performances will further enhance with the development of contemporary culture. In consequence, the inheritance of the religious characteristics of contemporary Chinese glove puppetry can no longer be presented as “ritual”, but can only be inherited in the content of performances.

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