



ENTER THE DRAGON

STORY *Cheng Wanli*
PHOTOGRAPHS *Ben Quinton*

Shadow puppet theater is beloved in China, telling stories as old as time. As a master puppet maker, Wang Tianwen creates the fabulous “actors” who stalk the stage – and he’s training a new generation to help those characters take flight



Previous pages: the maestro Wang Tianwen with his daughter just outside their studio. Wang is known for his animal characters; this dragon puppet still roars with life despite being 40 years old. Above: the character of a general, complete with a real hair beard, articulates his disdain. And so does his horse. Above right: the figure of a bird, completely translucent before its paint, is held up to the light as a fine knife sculpts its details



another step forward. In the past, most puppets were no more than two feet tall, but these reached a height of up to sixteen feet, and it was necessary to join together several pieces to make the whole.” That truly would be a mammoth figure. “We also had to confront the problems of shrinkage and expansion caused by a change in the climatic environment,” he explains. “China has a much drier climate, so the cowhide used to make the puppets remains taut, but when it got to Venice, it expanded.” He shakes his head with a grin. “Finding a way around these problems was a process of constant exploration.”

Shadow puppet theater – *piying* in Chinese – is also known as *dengyingxi* (lantern shows) or *yingxi* (shadow plays), but it always involves objects and human figures carved from animal skin in a performance projected onto an illuminated cloth. It’s one of China’s oldest forms of theater, first appearing during the Western Han dynasty (which began in 206 BCE), flourishing throughout the Tang and the Song, and continuing exuberantly as a folk form all across China.

And Wang Tianwen, who has been carving the puppets now for more than 50 years, is China’s only living master of the art. He remembers when he first learned how to “push the leather and walk the knife” (the left hand pushes firmly against the hide to guide it while the right grips the carving tool, the key point being that it is the leather, not the knife, that moves).



The process of carving the design onto leather is far from easy, and of those who began learning at the same time as Wang, most have now quit. Only Wang has persevered to an elite level, sticking it out when times were financially hard and eventually perfecting the art, attaining the status of “top carver,” and going on to establish the highly influential creative team known as Wang Family Shadow Puppetry. Elegant, graceful shapes borne out of meticulous attention to detail and the sprightly application of vivid color are the distinguishing characteristics of his style.

To conform to its valuable cultural heritage status, Wang’s leather puppet carving must be produced by means of a comprehensive set of strictly observed craft processes. From choosing the leather to forming the shape of the human and animal figures, this particular art comprises some 24 steps. Of these, eight are considered the most important: selecting the hide; preparing the leather; drafting the design; checking the proofs; engraving; applying the pigment; pressing and expelling moisture; and final assembly. It is by these time-honored methods that the complexity and originality of each of the puppets comes through, as Wang emphasizes.

“None of this can be replicated by any mechanized process – no mechanized process could accommodate the craftsman’s feeling for what he does. Handicrafts, by their nature, have to be produced by hand.” The



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team can also mitigate the problems of shrinking and expansion through improvements in their methods of soaking, polishing, and stretching the cowhide.

Any artistic work is a spiritual creation, tightly bound up in the character and drive of the artist. Wang Tianwen is mild-mannered, sincere, and unpretentious, a plain, imperturbable man of few words. It is only when one listens to him talking about shadow puppets that one can truly appreciate the fiery blast of his passion – one that is as resounding and enduring as Shaanxi opera. He is steeped in the origins and history, tradition and development of the puppet theater, its characteristics and style. Its ancient texts and even its professional codes and customs are carved into his heart.

His achievements are without parallel – both in his devotion to the techniques, the traditions and the innovations of “pushing the leather and walking the knife,” and also in his diligent organization and recreation of lost patterns, as well as the appraisal

Above: the master shows his daughter a coloring detail. The work of Wang’s creative team is unmatched, so you can almost hear that burning-bright tiger snarl. Below it, a phoenix takes on flame as Wang Haiyan paints contours, bursting into blossom-bedecked beauty. Above right: knives of varying widths. Overleaf: an intricate scene from a folk story about a wood-cutter and a rotten axe



and tender restoration of many fragile older puppets. “Leather puppets have gone from serving in theatrical performances to being displayed in exhibitions of traditional arts and handicrafts – and this is all the result of historical change. For that reason, one must not be so inflexible as to have no means of adapting to changing times – otherwise, one will find that society has left one behind,” Wang observes. “If we want the puppet theater to develop and be handed down to future generations, then we need to promote it by wrapping it in a cloak of modernity.” This is how Wang has sought to popularize the form over all these long years, whether it be through film, television, or art exhibitions.

As the custodian of a profession whose history reaches back more than two thousand years, Wang Tianwen puts a very special emphasis on those younger generations. “As long as they show a liking for the craft, I will be more than happy to teach them all,” he says. That’s the reason that the large troupe that is Wang Family Shadow Puppetry now has nearly three hundred craftspeople on its books. His daughter, Wang Haiyan, is the one leading this army of new recruits. At the age of just 14, she began learning, under her father’s instruction, how to construct these delicate puppets, and now she’s a full-fledged *piying* puppet carver with a style and original expression all her own.

“My father’s expectations are extremely high,” she says with a certain pride, “and he made no concession

to me just because I am his daughter. In order that my left hand would become more flexible, more able to acquire the technique of ‘pushing the leather and walking the knife,’ in the early days weights were actually attached to my arms while I worked.” Now, that’s bordering on Olympic-style training. “I was on no account to untie them. In the eyes of my father, whatever was necessary for the sake of *piying* just had to be endured.” She shrugs, clearly equally committed to achieving perfection. “Now I can appreciate his motivation,” she goes on. “He was afraid that the techniques of shadow puppetry might die with him, or that standards might slip. His desire is that every single one of his students should surpass him; his wish is that the puppet theater may go on to even greater things.”

On hearing this, Wang Tianwen’s face breaks into a broad, warm smile. ♦
Translated by Ruth Herd

