

# Taishan's one-man show

While other regional puppet shows employ an entire troupe, in Shandong, it's one man's talent that drives the entire performance. **Zhang Zixuan** goes behind the scenes.

The show starts and gongs and drums sound backstage. Other instruments join the chorus, each different but all in harmony. The shadow puppets appear next, and fierce fighting and acrobatic moves earn applause from the audience.

With such action on stage and a coordinated orchestra backstage, it's natural to assume that there are several performers backstage making it all work.

But this is a one-man show.

The only hero backstage is Fan Zheng'an, a sixth-generation practitioner of the Shandong, Taishan art of solo puppetry. The uniqueness of this art form is best summed up by its other moniker: *shi bu xian*, literally "busy doing 10 things at once".

"There are two ways to count the '10'. There are the eight percussion instruments, the singing and the puppetry, or it can mean the five senses, all four limbs and the brain," Fan explains.

The gongs, drums, cymbals and wooden knocker are combined into a music machine that can be operated by one man. It is self-made, and people who wander backstage to take a look are often amazed by the ingenuity.

The 67-year-old puppeteer says he was first captivated by the art when he saw his first shadow puppet show at the age of 8. At that time, shadow puppeteers from different regions in China had gathered at the foot of Mount Taishan. They would perform in sheds built from sorghum stalks.

As a child, Fan was a regular guest of one shed. The shed owner was Liu Yufeng and the young Fan thought he was the most magical man in the world. He could make the Eight Immortals in the classic tale *Journey to the East* come alive on stage.

But the young boy could not afford to buy the tickets which cost 5 fen (less than 1 cent). He sneaked into the performance by hiding among adult legs or making a hole in the sorghum walls. When he got caught, he would linger outside and listen through the walls.

Four years later, when Fan was 12, he dropped out of school and joined Liu on the road as his apprentice.

"Taishan puppetry is especially good at fighting scenes, and its most representative play is about a Taishan hero named Shi Gandang, who captured a lot of evil spirits," Fan is always enthusiastic about his favorite subject and he says he can talk about it for three days without stopping.

"The singing is strongly flavored by the Shandong dialect. And just as Shandong people never hesitate to show their true nature, Taishan puppets are very close to life."

## Refining tradition

For many years, Fan had been bothered by the deficiencies in the traditional one-man performance. He had promised the old master he would study and improve the techniques.

Traditionally, drums and gongs were hung by the sides of the canvas. When the puppets were being manipulated, the instruments stayed silent, and when they were being played, the puppets had to stay still. Only the wooden knocker, operated by the feet, could be played while the puppets were moving.

Fan's teacher, Liu, always had one or two assistants helping him and he had felt guilty about not being truly a one-man show. In 1999, on his deathbed, he had made Fan promise to recover the spirit of the solo performance.

"My teacher had eight apprentices, but he passed down all his puppets to me and only my name was engraved on his tombstone," Fan says, tears gathering in his eyes. "That was a huge trust."

In the years following, Fan devoted himself to finding the best solution. Inspired by the modern car's clutch and gears, he finally worked out a mechanical device that can connect all the percussion instruments, and can be operated by footwork.

"I did not add or remove any instruments — I simply moved them from above the table to below the table," he says with pride.

"Fan's innovation follows the traditional spirit and maintains its original matrix," says Wei Liqun, renowned shadow puppet expert. "It makes the performance richer and more dynamic."

"It's a fragile transition when many troupes bring shadow puppetry to a modern place that almost takes no roots from the traditional form. What Fan has done sets a good example of looking back to traditional form, design and engineering," says Annie Rollins, an American scholar of shadow puppetry who had watched Fan's performance during her 10-month field research in China.

## Keeper of the legacy

In 2009, Fan was recognized as a State-level inheritor of Taishan solo shadow puppetry. He has been invited to perform in many foreign countries and in September 2010, he brought the art form to the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

Just as like the other guardians of traditional heritage, Fan faces the problem of finding the right inheritors. There's a fine line between protecting the art heritage and making a decent living.

In 2009, Fan opened a teahouse where the public pays to see shadow puppet performances. Besides his 35-year-old son, he is also training three other apprentices and he pays them salaries.

"It's unreasonable to force young people to learn something that they cannot make a living from," he says.

But Fan also performs for free at benefit events at orphanages, nursing homes and schools and he is now working on a new play to publicize traffic safety regulations for Shandong province.

"I think now my teacher can rest in peace," he says.

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One man's talent steers the designing and making of the puppets, the singing and playing of the instruments and making the puppets come alive on stage.

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## REPORTER'S LOG / ZHANG ZIXUAN

### NOTES FROM BACKSTAGE

- When Wei Jinquan, master puppeteer of the Huaxian shadow puppets told us he was going to perform, we did not realize it was going to be at someone's funeral. Many rural areas in China still keep the tradition of having opera or puppet performances on special occasions such as wedding, funerals and house-warmings.

- A new apprentice needs at least three years to grasp the basics in puppet manipulation, singing or instrument playing. Many students do not last that long and even if some do, there are not enough to make up the troupe of five.

- Master Wei and his peers have broken the mold to ease the situation. They no longer pass down their craft only to male disciples. They now teach girls, and even foreigners — in fact to anyone willing and determined to learn.

- Pan Jingle, the oldest living master of Huaxian shadow puppetry at 83, considers himself lucky. He has experienced the art in its heyday and he has seen it survive the transitions to the modern day. He is just too old to think about it, he says. He has even forgotten which song he sang in Zhang Yimou's film *To Live*. But when you ask him to sing one or two of his favorite pieces, he bursts into song, recalling his lyrics perfectly.

- Huaxian shadow puppet troupes have as many as 247 handwritten scripts that are passed down through generations. Most are four-hour plays. Each troupe may own as many as 140 handmade shadow puppets with more than 500 changeable heads. For funerals alone, the more solemn repertoire has about 20 choices available.

- The puppeteers adhere strictly to the guidelines handed down by their masters and would not dream of altering anything, be it the stage setting, props or length of the play, which are often several hours long. There's no break, not even for the toilet.

- The worries facing the puppet masters these days are many. They fret about who to pass their craft to, and they are fearful that one day, no one will want to watch these traditional shadow puppet shows anymore.

- The rural audience still enjoys the live performances, sitting out in the freezing cold, ignoring the little imperfections from the low-quality speakers, and the occasional interruptions from barking dogs or crying babies.

But China's population shift from rural to urban is taking place at a faster pace than ever before, and the crowd in front shrinks every year.