

A Study on the Historical Origins and Artistic Form of Tengxian Rod Puppetry

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Abstract: Tengxian Rod Puppetry, a core branch of rod puppetry in Eastern Guangxi and a product of Lingnan's multi-ethnic cultural fusion, was inscribed on the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region-level intangible cultural heritage list in 2016. Based on field investigations and historical analysis, this paper systematically delineates the historical origins of Tengxian Rod Puppetry, positing its introduction to Tengxian from Yulin and Beiliu during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. It clearly outlines its distribution pattern across southern and northern Tengxian and its four-generation inheritance lineage. The study provides an in-depth analysis of its distinctive artistic characteristics, focusing on the portable performance format centered on a "2-3 person division of labor" and "manipulation from below" operation, the localized vocal system marked by "dialect recitative singing" and the core melodic tones "re, do, la," the repertoire transmission method characterized by "oral transmission and mental comprehension" and "improvised scenes," and the primitive puppet crafting technique represented by "blue wood carving" and the "six-step process." This research aims to systematically present the complete form and core value of Tengxian Rod Puppetry as a local folk art, establishing a solid academic foundation for confirming its cultural identity and informing subsequent conservation studies.

Keywords: Historical Origins; Artistic Characteristics; Performance Form; Vocal System; Puppet Craftsmanship

1. The Research Significance of the Rod Puppetry in Tengxian

Within the pluralistic yet integrated framework of Chinese civilization, local operas, as living

cultural traditions, bear the collective memory, aesthetic tastes, and values of specific regional communities. Eastern Guangxi, situated at the confluence of Lingnan culture and ethnic minority cultures, has nurtured a rich variety of folk opera forms, among which rod puppetry is a particularly distinctive branch. Rooted in the soil of local Wu culture and incorporating artistic elements from local mountain songs and Tea-Picking operas [1], Tengxian Rod Puppetry flourished from the Ming and Qing dynasties through the Republican period. It became an integral performance element in folk activities such as town celebrations, weddings, and ancestral worship, possessing profound historical depth and distinct artistic identity. However, amidst the rapid onslaught of globalization and modernization, traditional local operas like Tengxian Rod Puppetry, which rely on agrarian civilization and clan-based societies, face an unprecedented crisis. Their historical context is fading, and their artistic uniqueness has not been fully recognized or documented. Therefore, systematically combing its historical origins and deeply analyzing its artistic features is not only an urgent requirement for the salvage preservation of this endangered intangible cultural heritage but also a significant academic endeavor for understanding local socio-cultural changes and enriching the study of Chinese opera history. Relying on first-hand data obtained from in-depth interviews with the Tengxian Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Sports, and Tourism in May 2024, and supplemented by literature such as the "Tengxian Intangible Cultural Heritage Records" and "Scattered Essays on Guangxi Opera Historical Materials," this paper attempts to systematically reconstruct the historical origins, inheritance lineage, and regional distribution of Tengxian Rod Puppetry. It further focuses on a micro-level analysis of its artistic characteristics across four dimensions:

performance form, vocal music, repertoire system, and production craftsmanship. The objective is to construct a relatively comprehensive "cultural archive" for Tengxian Rod Puppetry, providing a solid theoretical basis for its subsequent transmission, protection, and academic research.

2. Historical Origins and Regional Distribution of Tengxian Rod Puppetry

The historical development of Tengxian Rod Puppetry can be examined through three dimensions: "Origin and Introduction," "Inheritance Lineage," and "Regional Distribution." Its trajectory, pieced together from limited historical records and highly dependent on oral histories from veteran practitioners gathered during field investigations, allows for a reconstruction of this folk art's century-long evolution within the Tengxian region.

2.1 Origin and Introduction: Disambiguation from 'Manipulating Kuilei' to 'Kuileixi' and Establishment of Ming-Qing Introduction

Regarding the origins of Tengxian Rod Puppetry, two primary theories exist in academia and among local communities, which require careful examination. The first is the "Tang Dynasty Origin Theory." This view is often found in the oral traditions of local elders, who cite that "puppetry originated in the Tang Dynasty." This assertion aligns with the record of "Guilin garrison soldiers performing Nong Kuilei" found in the "Scattered Essays on Guangxi Opera Historical Materials." Both the "Old Book of Tang", compiled under Liu Xu, and the "New Book of Tang", compiled by Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, document the event in the ninth year of the Xiantong era (868 CE) where "Guilin garrison soldiers performed 'Nong Kuilei'" [2]. In the sixth year of Xiantong, the Tang court organized military support from the Xusi region to quell rebellions in the south, with eight hundred soldiers garrisoned in Guilin. When the court failed to rotate them on schedule, it triggered a mutiny and northward return. As the soldiers passed through counties, they first sent men disguised as "Nong Kuilei" performers to scout and prevent suppression by local forces—this is the general context of the "Guilin garrison soldiers performing 'Nong Kuilei'" record. However, the author argues that this record cannot serve as evidence for the origin of

Guangxi puppetry as a theatrical form, because "Nong Kuilei" and "Kuileixi" (puppet theatre) represent distinct concepts. Ye Mingsheng, a leading expert in Chinese puppet theatre research, defines Kuileixi in his work "History of Chinese Puppet Theatre" as: "Kuilei refers to the puppet forms and performance styles predating the Tang Dynasty that were capable only of simple song, dance, and comic performances, lacking complete narratives and not yet incorporating stylized role types. Kuileixi refers to puppet theatre genres, including string puppets and, from the Ming Dynasty onward, rod puppets and glove puppets, that developed vocal melodies, roles, storylines or librettos, and could perform stylized acts and full plays" [3]. Thus, "Nong Kuilei" resembles a variety-show style puppet performance, whereas the mature theatrical form of "Kuileixi" emerged later. Consequently, the record of "Guilin garrison soldiers performing Nong Kuilei" can serve as evidence for the early existence of puppet activities in Guangxi but is insufficient to prove that rod puppetry as a genre had already formed and been introduced to Tengxian during the Tang Dynasty.

The second theory is the "Ming-Qing Introduction Theory." This view finds support in both documentary evidence and field investigation results. According to the author's 2024 interview records with the Tengxian Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Sports, and Tourism, Tengxian Puppetry "was introduced from Yulin and Beiliu during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, first arriving in the southern Tengxian areas of Jinji Town and Tongxin Town, before gradually spreading to northern towns like Heping Town and Dali Town" [4]. Information gathered during field investigations further indicates that rod puppetry in Eastern Guangxi was established during the Tongzhi reign of the Qing Dynasty by artist He Shier (also known as "He Shier Gong") and his son He Xushan from Guiping [5], spreading from Guiping to Beiliu and Yulin, and subsequently radiating to Cenxi and Tengxian, forming a clear transmission chain: "Guiping → Beiliu → Tengxian." This transmission path aligns with the overall historical evolution of rod puppetry in Eastern Guangxi. Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that Tengxian Rod Puppetry, as a mature theatrical form, was introduced from external sources during the late Ming and early Qing period.

The successful introduction and rapid establishment of Tengxian Rod Puppetry during this period were underpinned by specific socio-historical conditions. Tengxian is located in the hinterland of Eastern Guangxi, bordering Guilin to the north and Guangdong to the east, making it a "transitional zone" for Guangdong-Guangxi cultural exchange and receptive to external cultural influences. Yulin and Beiliu were early centers of rod puppetry in Eastern Guangxi, providing the source for its dissemination. Furthermore, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Tengxian's agricultural economy was relatively developed, with frequent town temple fairs, clan sacrifices, birthday celebrations, and weddings, creating robust demand for folk performing arts. Rod puppetry, with its "portable" characteristic—requiring only 2-3 performers

and no complex stage, capable of performing in any open space—perfectly matched the performance conditions and folk customs of Tengxian's villages, thus enabling its rapid localization and vigorous development.

2.2 Inheritance Lineage: Skill Transmission and Evolution Across Four Generations of Artists

The inheritance lineage of Tengxian Rod Puppetry is clearly traceable (Table 1). Based on the "Tengxian Intangible Cultural Heritage Records" and oral accounts from inheritor Huang Shining, it can be divided into four generations. The primary mode of transmission is "master-apprentice inheritance," with a single case of "family inheritance" appearing in the third generation, reflecting the "skill-first" logic prevalent in folk art transmission.

Table 1. Inheritance Lineage of Tengxian Rod Puppetry [4]

Generation	Name	Gender	Nationality	educational background	Year of Starting Training	Means of inheritance
First	Wang Shier Gong	Male	Han	Old-style private school	Unknown	Apprenticeship
	Zhou Yecai	Male	Han	Old-style private school	Unknown	Apprenticeship
Second	Huang Changhe	Male	Han	Old-style private school	Unknown	Apprenticeship
	Zhou yewang	Male	Han	Old-style private school	Unknown	Apprenticeship
	Lin zhucheng	Male	Han	Junior High School	1954	Apprenticeship
	Zhou fachang	Male	Han	Primary School	1958	Apprenticeship
Third	Hang shining	Male	Han	Primary School	1970	Family inheritance
	Huang peiying	Male	Han	Primary School	1970	Apprenticeship
	Huang guirong	Male	Han	Primary School	1987	Apprenticeship
Fourth	Huang qiyong	Male	Han	Senior High School	2002	Apprenticeship

An analysis of the lineage characteristics reveals: The first-generation inheritor, Wang (He) Shier Gong, as the "founding figure," has specific training dates and technical details that are difficult to verify. His core contribution lies in establishing rod puppetry in the Southeast Guangxi region and training numerous professional puppeteers, laying the foundation for its dissemination and growth. Zhou Yecai's training records are not found in Beiliu City's puppetry lineage; the author infers that Zhou Yecai was likely a first-generation artist in Tengxian itself. Placing him alongside Wang (He) Shier Gong in the Tengxian lineage acknowledges and respects his historical status within local puppetry. His core contribution was integrating the Yulin/Beiliu style of rod puppetry with Tengxian's local culture, for instance, incorporating the Tengxian dialect into lyrics and adapting local mountain songs into puppetry melodies, thereby laying the foundation for its localization. Among the second generation, Lin Zhucheng holds a particularly prominent

position. He was not only an accomplished performer but also a master of puppet craftsmanship. The puppets he created were known for their "exquisitely carved heads and flexible joints," setting the technical standard for Tengxian puppets that persists today. Third-generation inheritor Huang Shining is one of the current core practitioners. He formed a troupe in 1977 and actively promoted commercial performances during the 1980s "golden age" of Tengxian puppetry, partially shifting it from purely ritual folk activities to "paid services," thereby expanding its social influence. Fourth-generation inheritor Huang Qiyong is the youngest member in the lineage, but his current status is concerning. Due to meager performance income, he rarely participates in activities, indicating a severe "generational break" crisis facing the lineage.

2.3 Regional Distribution: Divergent Styles in Southern and Northern Tengxian

The distribution of Tengxian Rod Puppetry

exhibits a "dispersed" pattern centered around the county seat, divisible into Southern and Northern Tengxian regions. Due to differences in geography, migrant origins, and folk customs, these two areas have developed slightly distinct performance styles. Southern Tengxian, with Jinji Town's Dafen Village as its core, covering Tongxin, Xinqing, and Tianping towns, was the "first stop" for puppetry's introduction to Tengxian. It retains a deeper influence from the original Yulin/Beiliu style, leaning towards "traditionalism" and "conservatism." Repertoire content primarily consists of historical romances like "The Tale of Judge Bao" and "The Generals of the Yang Family," and the vocal melodies preserve more characteristics of Yulin mountain songs. Dafen Village in Jinji Town still adheres to the ancient custom of "staging puppet shows for every temple fair," specifically inviting troupes to perform for three to five days during the annual Beidi Dan celebration on the third day of the third lunar month. This stable folk demand provides a crucial niche for the survival of Southern Tengxian puppetry.

Northern Tengxian, centered on Heping Town and Dali Town, covering Mengjiang, Taiping, Dongrong, and other towns, represents a "secondary diffusion zone" after the initial introduction. Geographically closer to Guilin and influenced by Northern Guangxi culture, its performance style tends towards "flexibility" and "eclecticism." Beyond traditional historical stories, the repertoire incorporates more mythological themes, and the vocal style blends the "recitative" flavor of Northern Guangxi's Tea-Picking opera, with a freer and more relaxed rhythm. Its performance contexts have also expanded from temple fairs to "leisure entertainment during agricultural downtime," where villagers pool resources to invite troupes, using the performances to relieve fatigue. Notably, the puppetry in Heping Town, Northern Tengxian, retains a strong tradition of "improvised adaptation." For instance, if a performance is for a birthday celebration, artists can spontaneously create and insert congratulatory lyrics into the plot, exemplifying the "improvised scene" characteristic typical of Western Guangdong and Southeastern Guangxi.

3. Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Tengxian Rod Puppetry

Through its localized transmission, Tengxian Rod Puppetry has gradually developed

integrated artistic characteristics encompassing a "portable performance form, localized vocal system, folkloric repertoire content, and primitive puppet craftsmanship." These features represent not only adaptive strategies for surviving in Tengxian's rural environment but also core cultural markers distinguishing it from other rod puppetry traditions in Eastern Guangxi.

3.1 Form of expression: The "All-in-One" 2-3 Person Division of Labor and "Manipulation from Below" Operation

The performance form of Tengxian Rod Puppetry centers on "portability and efficiency" as its core competitive advantages. A full performance requires only 2 to 3 people. This "small and refined" team model was key to its widespread dissemination in rural society. Before a performance, a simple stage booth, approximately three square meters, is erected. The lower part of the booth is tightly enclosed with cloth curtains, slightly taller than the puppeteers, creating the unique "manipulation from below" performance layout: the actors manipulate the puppets inside the booth, while the audience watches the puppet performance from outside. This design cleverly conceals the manipulation process, focusing the audience's attention entirely on the puppets themselves, creating the stage illusion and immersion of "autonomous puppet performance." The interior is compact, containing gongs, drums, prop chests, stools, with weapons, headdresses, and other necessary props hanging on the booth walls for easy access, demonstrating highly efficient space utilization.

The division of labor is clear and emphasizes "multiple roles per person." In a 2-person troupe, one person is responsible for keeping the rhythm (percussion) and playing the drums and gongs for accompaniment, while the other must handle puppeteering, singing, and performing the speech, acting, and fighting for all role types (Sheng, Dan, Jing, Chou). In a 3-person troupe, an "assistant" is added, dedicated to changing puppet costumes and handling props, thereby alleviating the puppeteer's burden. This "all-in-one" division of labor demands extremely high comprehensive skills from the performers. Taking inheritor Huang Shining as an example, he can use a rough, husky voice to portray the boldness of a Jing role, instantly switch to a delicate, soft falsetto for a Dan role's

tenderness, while simultaneously using both hands to precisely manipulate the puppet through demanding actions like weapon combat, kicking, and somersaults, truly achieving "one person playing multiple roles, one position requiring multiple skills."

Furthermore, the performance content exhibits strong "folk custom adaptability." The selection of plays is not fixed but flexibly adjusted according to the occasion. Temple fairs typically feature themes like "The Tale of Judge Bao" or "The Generals of the Yang Family," which align with the moral edification function of such events. For birthday celebrations in homes, performers must first improvise a segment of auspicious congratulations before the main play. For weddings, plays celebrating happy love stories like "The Dragon and Phoenix Destiny" or "White Jade Frost" are preferred to convey blessings to the newlyweds. This "on-demand customization" performance strategy deeply embeds Tengxian Rod Puppetry into the fabric of local folk life, transforming it into a living cultural vehicle carrying people's emotions and wishes, rather than merely a stage art for appreciation.

3.2 Vocal Music and Accompaniment: Dialect Recitative, Core Tone Dominance, and "Portable" Instruments

The vocal system of Tengxian Rod Puppetry possesses distinct grassroots and localized characteristics, centered on dialect singing, a free recitative style, and percussion-dominated accompaniment [6]. Dialect singing forms the "root" of its vocal style. All lyrics and dialogue are delivered in the authentic Tengxian dialect. This genuine local vernacular feels intimately familiar and natural to the local audience, especially the elderly, greatly enhancing comprehension and emotional resonance with the plot. The recitative style is the core expressive form of its vocals. Unlike the strict metrical system of professional operas, it lacks fixed scores; the melody progresses entirely based on the performer's feeling and experience, with free and flexible rhythm. Its melodic structure relies primarily on unison repetition and stepwise motion, with core melodic tones being "re, do, la," giving an overall modal color close to the traditional Yu mode. This simple, unadorned melodic structure facilitates memorization and improvisation for the performer while lowering the threshold for

audience participation. Despite its simplicity, it effectively conveys emotion and evokes deep resonance among the common people. Accompaniment instruments consist solely of "portable" percussion: a small drum, small cymbals, a small gong, and a wooden fish. The percussion patterns vary widely according to the character's identity and the plot's mood: male roles (e.g., generals, Jing roles) often enter to fast rhythms like "Dong dong qiang, dong dong qiang" to project power and grandeur. Female roles (Dan) are accompanied by slow rhythms like "Dong--- qiang---" to express tenderness and sorrow. Righteous characters might enter with dense drumming to create a solemn atmosphere, while clown roles are accentuated with jumping, humorous rhythms to enhance comic effect. Conventionally, a passage of percussion precedes the singing, serving both to set the key and to gather the audience and quiet the scene. In open village squares, the piercing sound of percussion can carry for miles, naturally serving as an effective auditory advertisement.

3.3 Repertoire System: Oral Transmission and the "Improvised Scene" Mode of Inheritance

The repertoire of Tengxian Rod Puppetry is rich and varied, focusing mainly on three categories: historical romances, mythological tales, and folk stories. The themes largely revolve around "encouraging virtue and teaching wisdom [7]," aligning closely with the traditional values of the Tengxian people. However, the mode of repertoire transmission is extremely fragile, relying primarily on "oral transmission and mental comprehension" and "improvised scenes" (extemporaneous creation), which places a vast number of plays at risk of being lost. According to the "Tengxian Intangible Cultural Heritage Records," its commonly performed plays are largely adapted from Chinese classical novels and folklore, predominantly set in the Tang and Song dynasties. Representative works include series based on Xue Rengui's campaigns east and west, General Di Qing, the Generals of the Yang Family, Judge Bao, as well as "The Dragon and Phoenix Destiny" and "White Jade Frost." These are often serialized plays, with each performance session frequently concluding with the formulaic phrase "If you want to know what happens next, tune in next time." This

"chapter-based" structure shares a direct lineage with ancient Chinese storytelling traditions, perfectly suited to the rural society's demand for "lengthy, continuous" entertainment.

"Oral transmission and mental comprehension" constitutes the core mechanism of repertoire inheritance. There are no fixed written scripts; performances rely entirely on the veteran artists' memorized story outlines. During actual performances, specific lyrics and dialogue are improvised by the artists based on these outlines. This method of "improvised scenes" severely tests the artist's knowledge of history, mastery of the dialect, and ability to think on their feet. Highly skilled veterans can, upon request for specific occasions like birthdays or weddings, instantly compose and sing lyrics fitting the scene. However, the drawbacks of this method are equally apparent: significant variations arise between different artists' improvised versions, easily leading to the "mutation" of plays. More critically, once a veteran artist passes away, their unique improvisational techniques, rich detailing, and story outlines vanish with them. According to elder artists' estimates, while about 50 plays could be performed in the 1980s, only around 20 remain performable today, with nearly 30 already lost, highlighting the urgency of repertoire preservation [8].

3.4 Production Craftsmanship: The Six-Step Process and Primitive Stylistic Features

As the core vehicle of performance, the production of Tengxian rod puppets is itself a valuable intangible cultural heritage. This craft was systematically summarized and standardized primarily by the second-generation inheritor Lin Zhucheng, forming a rigorous six-step process: "Wood Selection → Sanding → Base Coating → Face Painting → Costuming → Assembly." Creating a puppet, typically about 50 cm tall, requires approximately 10 days, representing a concentrated embodiment of folk carving, painting, and sewing skills. The craft's core principles are "selecting premium materials, creating vivid designs, and employing ingenious mechanisms." Materially, it strictly uses local, easily carved, and warp-resistant blue wood or pomelo wood. The craftsman first carves the wood into components for the head, torso, and arms. After natural drying away from direct heat, the pieces are repeatedly sanded with sandpaper until smooth. Coloring follows, first applying an overall flesh-toned base coat,

then meticulously painting the facial makeup using fine-brush techniques according to the personality traits of the different role types (Sheng, Dan, Jing, Chou). The puppet's costume and headdress also strictly adhere to traditional opera conventions, tailored and embroidered based on the character's identity. Finally, the puppet is fully dressed, and the manipulation system—comprising the "head stick" (connected to the head), the "main control rod" (for main manipulation), and the "hand rods" (controlling the arms)—is installed. Only then is a puppet, that combines performance function and artistic appreciation, complete.

However, compared to some modern puppet schools that pursue high realism and complex articulation, Tengxian rod puppets display a marked primitive quality. Their form is extremely concise, strictly divided into three basic parts: head, torso, and limbs. The head is carved from a single piece of wood, with eyes and mouth statically carved, lacking dynamic functions like blinking or opening; only the entire head can rotate limitedly via the main rod. The torso is a fixed block of wood, and the limb joints are simple, allowing for relatively restricted movement. This ancient and slightly "naive" design, is not a sign of technical deficiency but rather a hallmark of its origin within a specific historical period and cultural ecology [9]. It provides a precious "living fossil" specimen for studying the form and aesthetic orientation of early Chinese rod puppets. Encouragingly, the Tengxian puppet production technique was inscribed on the municipal-level intangible cultural heritage list in 2022, and a corresponding inheritor system has been established (Table 2), providing institutional safeguards for the continuity of this craftsmanship [10].

Table 2. Representative Inheritors of Tengxian Puppet Production Craftsmanship [4]

Level	Name	Gender	Year of Birth	Time of Certification
Municipal	Lin zhucheng	Male	1946	2023
County	Mai puren	Male	1956	2019
County	Huang guirong	Male	1961	2019

4. Conclusion

Tengxian Rod Puppetry, a folk art treasure deeply rooted in the folk soil of Tengxian in

Eastern Guangxi, constitutes a complete and self-consistent cultural system through its historical origins and artistic form. This study has clarified its historical path of introduction from Yulin and Beiliu during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties and outlined its distribution pattern, which varies between Southern and Northern Tengxian according to local customs, along with its clear four-generation inheritance lineage. More significantly, this paper has systematically analyzed its artistic characteristics: the performance form centered on "portable division of labor" and "manipulation from below"; the vocal system marked by "dialect recitative" and the core melodic tones "re, do, la"; the repertoire transmission method defined by "oral transmission and mental comprehension" and "improvised scenes"; and the puppet production technique characterized by the "six-step process" and "primitive styling." These artistic features are creative adaptations made by Tengxian Rod Puppetry to suit the specific regional folk demands, material conditions, and aesthetic habits. Collectively, they endow this folk art with unique historical, artistic, and cultural identity value. In-depth research into its history and artistic essence forms the academic foundation for understanding local socio-cultural contexts and promoting the scientific conservation and living transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Only by first clearly understanding "what it is" and "how it came to be" can subsequent preservation efforts be targeted, safeguarding its core cultural genes and artistic spirit in an era of transformation.

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