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Chinese Shadow Puppetry

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01

Introduction to Shadow Puppetry

Core Definition

Shadow puppetry (皮影戏 píyǐngxì), alternatively termed "Silhouette Theater" or "Lamp Shadow Play," is a traditional folk drama utilizing articulated figures crafted from animal hides or cardboard. Performers manipulate these figures behind an illuminated white screen, synchronizing regional musical dialects with percussive rhythms and stringed accompaniments to evoke rustic charm.



“Have you heard the historical stories of shadow puppetry?”



皮影动画王 bilibili



Characteristics of Shadow Puppetry

Thematic Characteristics of Chinese Shadow Puppetry



● Historical Epics: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*(《三国演义》), *Water Margin*(《水浒传》), *Journey to the West*(《西游记》)
● Folk Legends: *White Emperor City Entrustment*(《白帝城托孤》), *Farewell My Concubine*(《霸王别姬》), *Legend of the White Snake*(《白蛇传》)
● Mythological Fantasies: *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*(《八仙过海》), *NeZha Conquers the Dragon King*(《哪吒闹海》), *Cowherd the Weaver Girl*(《牛郎织女》)

Chromesthetic Features of Chinese Shadow Puppetry

The color characteristics of shadow puppetry are primarily reflected in the richness and contrast of hues. Following the traditional "Five Elements and Five Colors" principle, the five primary colors of red, yellow, green, black, and white are interwoven and juxtaposed, creating a vibrant and colorful display. These highly transparent pigments are seldom blended, producing opulent and visually striking color combinations. The intentional separation of these pure, saturated colors enhances dramatic contrasts, resulting in a dazzling aesthetic that embodies both traditional cultural symbolism and folk artistic charm.



Red



Yellow



Green



Black



White

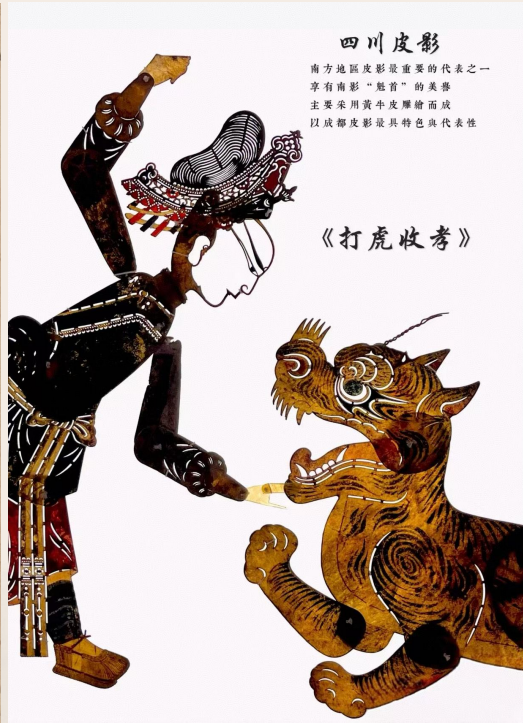
"What are the schools/styles of shadow puppetry?"

Beijing
Shadow Puppetry



Delicate carvings, royal themes, opera-inspired music, refined color symbolism.

Sichuan
Shadow Puppetry



Semi-transparent leather, humorous folk tales, exaggerated motions, Sichuan opera rhythms.

Tangshan
Shadow Puppetry



Intricate knife techniques, donkey hide material, complex patterns, northern folk tunes.

Shaanxi
Shadow Puppetry



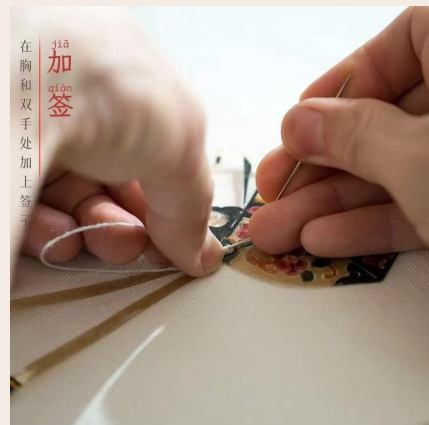
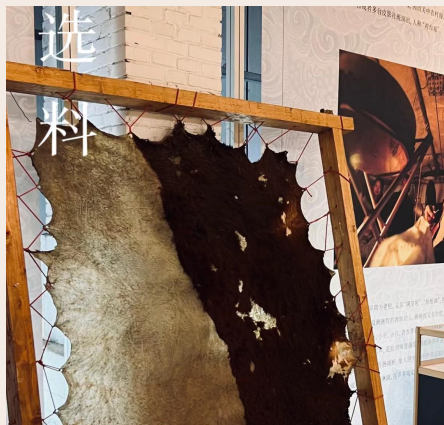
Bold lines, historical sagas, rustic aesthetics, Qin腔 (Qinqiang) musical influences.

Hunan
Shadow Puppetry



Colorful dyes, Hunan opera fusion, mythological themes, dynamic shadow transitions.

Production Process Flow



Selecting hides

Smoothing

Cutting

Transferring designs

Piercing carving

Hand-painting colors

Heat-pressing

Adding control rods

Assembling joints





南极仙翁身边的仙童



水漫金山——龙王



戴五凤冠的皇帝

皇帝身边武士



南极仙翁身边的仙童



金剛神

皇帝的仪仗





How do shadow puppets move?

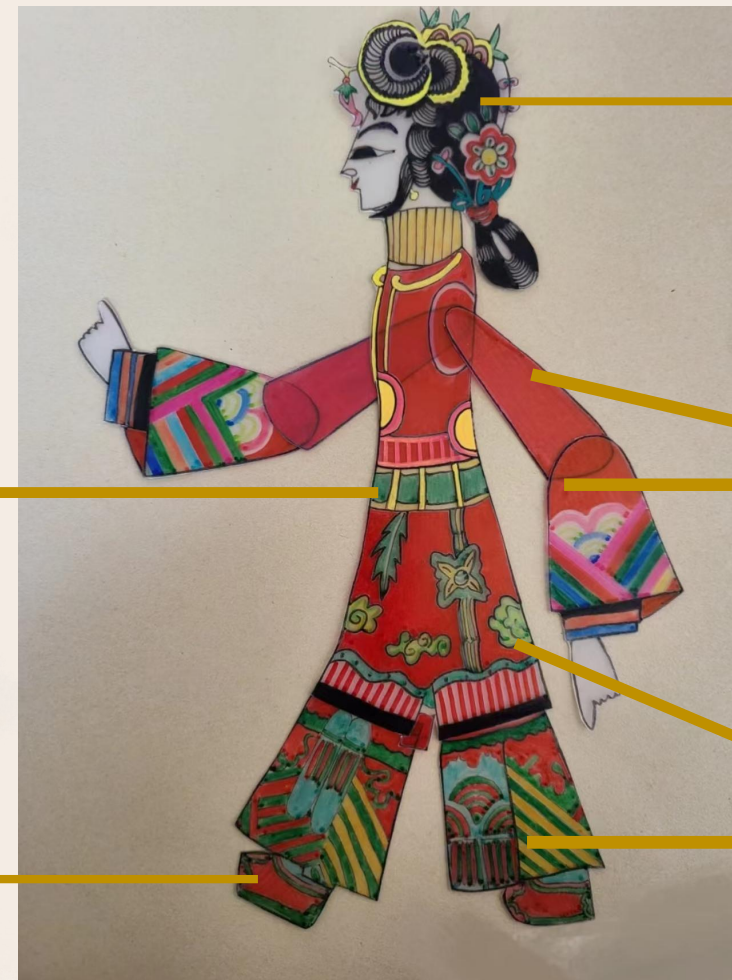
Components of shadow puppets



Joints
(Knuckles)

Body
(Mainly side view)

Shoes



Head
(Mainly
side view)

Hands

Legs



Translation Perspectives on Shadow Puppetry



A. White Bone Demon?

B. Calcified Femme Fatale?

C. Bone Spirit?

D. Lady White Bone?



'red-faced Guan Yu'
from Shaanxi shadow
puppetry



VS

the Western heroic expression
of 'the warrior in red' from
Disney's Mulan

When the 'red-faced Guan Yu' from Shaanxi shadow puppetry—a symbol of Chinese loyalty and bravery—encounters the Western heroic expression of 'the warrior in red' from Disney's *Mulan*, which translation strategy would you choose as a translator: **literal rendering of the color code (red=heroism)** or **annotating cultural origins (red=Chinese historical loyalty)?**



Legend of the White Snake

Chinese Serpent
Theology
(中国灵蛇观)

Ophidiophobic
Ontology
(西方蛇魔论)



Wisdom

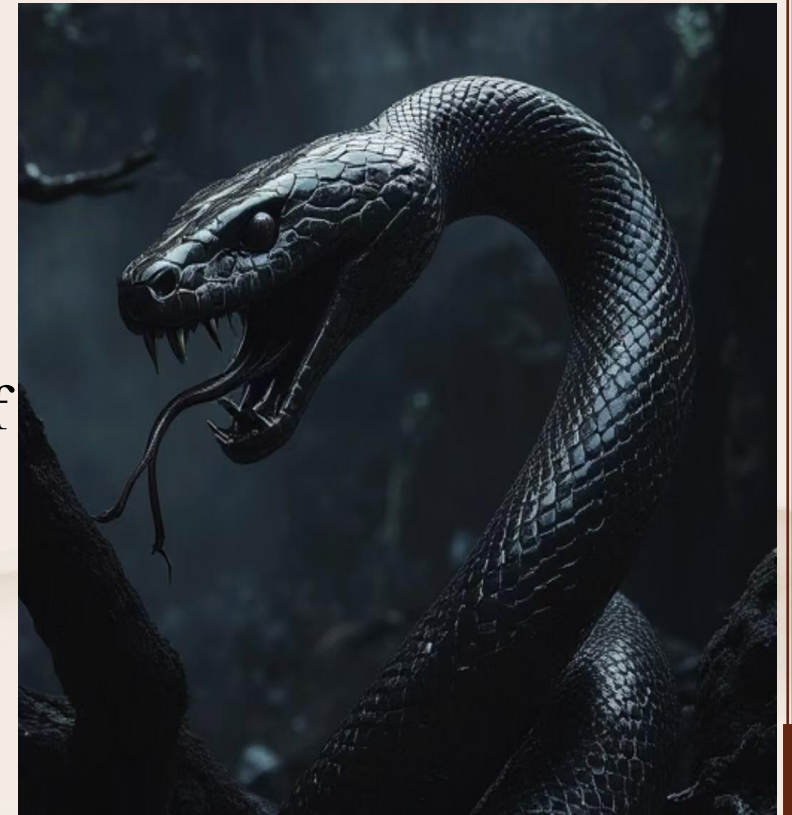
Evil

Longevity

Temptation

Spiritual
Creature

Incarnation of
the Devil



Thanks

