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## A Comparative Study on the Character Modeling of Chinese Shadow Play and Malaysian Wayang Kulit

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### Abstract

The shadow play cultures of China and Malaysia have a long history and rich cultural connotations, both of which belong to folk art forms. Due to the origin of shadow play culture and the differences in cultures between the two countries, the character designs of shadow play have formed unique regional cultures. This article mainly compares the character styles of shadow play between the two countries, summarizes the similarities and differences in artistic forms of shadow play, and showcases the beauty of different styles. In Chinese shadow play culture, the modelling of characters is usually related to historical stories or myths and legends. The modelling of characters includes the modelling techniques of Paper Cuttings and the colour shading of New Year pictures. In Malaysia's shadow play culture, shadow play is called "Wayang Kulit" and was introduced in Java, Indonesia. Generally, it portrays mythological stories about Hinduism, which is closely related to Java, Indonesia, which originated mainly from Hinduism. Regardless of the culture, the unique shapes and characteristics of shadow play characters can attract the audience's attention, show cultural value in character design, and help the audience better understand and feel the meaning of the characters in shadow play. Finally, through research, promote cultural exchange, dissemination, and promotion of shadow play between the two countries.

**Keywords** Chinese shadow play; Malaysian Wayang Kulit; Character modeling; Comparative Analysis

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## Introduction

Shadow play is a folk art that has been passed down for a long time in Central Asia, with a long history and rich connotations. Although it has gradually declined, it is still worth studying and appreciating. Shadow play is an ancient traditional folk-art form in China, with a history of over two thousand years. The Central Plains shadow puppetry of the Song Dynasty is the earliest record in the history of Chinese shadow play (Wang, 2021). In addition, there are also theories about the origin of shadow play related to the death of Lady Li of Emperor Wu of Han, as well as theories about the Zhou, Tang, and Five Dynasties, as well as numerous folk legends. Due to the similarity between this ancient technique of shadow play and theatrical performances, it is considered by many scholars to be the precursor of shadow play art. In 2011, it was included in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Shadow play also has a long history in Malaysia, originating from the puppet style of Wayang Kulit. This culture is also listed as a national cultural heritage. There is a certain connection between Chinese shadow play and Malaysian Wayang Kulit in terms of artistic expression. However, due to the differences in geographical location and culture between the two countries, there are also significant differences in the character designs of shadow play. Both countries attach great importance to the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, and both have high academic research value.

This article mainly compares and analyzes the typical character designs of Chinese shadow play and Malaysian Wayang Kulit, summarizes the characteristics of representative shadow play character designs in the two countries, and promotes cultural exchange between the two countries through comparative analysis. The structure of this article is as follows: In Section 2, I introduced Research Methodology, mainly conducting theoretical analysis through literature review, and drawing conclusions through comparative analysis of the character designs in shadow play between the two countries. In Sections 3 and 4, the character design characteristics of shadow play in the two countries were analyzed respectively. Chinese shadow play was mainly studied based on the character design of Shanxi Xiaoyi shadow play, while Malaysian Wayang Kulit mainly analyzed the character design of Kelantan, laying a good foundation for the comparative analysis of character design in Section 5 between the two countries. In Section 6, the symbolic significance of

representative character designs in Chinese and Malaysian shadow play was discussed. Finally, draw a conclusion.

## Research Methodology

The research method mainly adopts a combination of traditional investigation practice and theory, focusing on the careful reading of shadow play works, audiovisual materials, and related text theories from both countries, and conducting detailed research on classic shadow play character designs. The research method is adopted from the theoretical model of comparative analysis based on the Lehman Formula model (2023). It consists of five stages of the process, which is defining the scope and objectives, collecting data information, analyzing the data, conclusion and finding (Figure 2). The information was identified from secondary data sources including journals, articles, cultural websites, and the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur. In terms of data collection and analysis, literature review is the main method, supplemented by online search methods. In the discussion, I focus on theoretical analysis and establish a theoretical exploration based on empirical. Focusing on on-site investigation methods, conducting investigations and research on the inheritors and performing artists of shadow play in both countries, and integrating the collected materials and personally experienced cultural atmosphere and ideas into the article, striving to achieve the integration of knowledge and practice. Based on carefully studying existing works and viewpoints, actively thinking, and independently innovating one's own viewpoints.

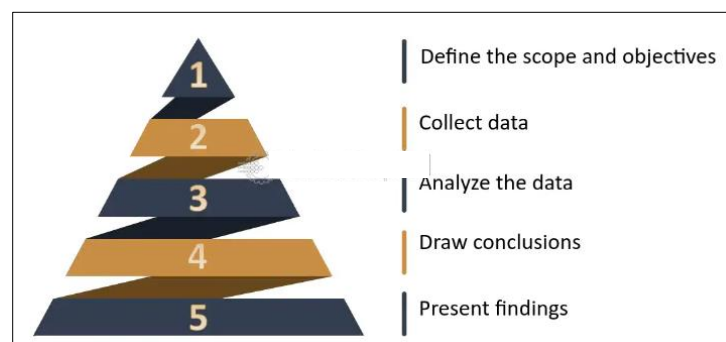


Figure 1 Comparative Analysis Process Method Adopted from Lehman Formula (2023)

In the middle and later stages, visual and comparative analysis is carried out to determine representative character design samples of Chinese shadow play and Malaysian Wayang Kulit performances. Through visual and cultural analysis, geographical differences and historical periods are considered for comprehensive analysis. Consider elements such as

size, proportion, details, and symbolic significance to compare the character designs of Chinese shadow play and Malaysian Wayang Kulit, and identify similarities and differences in story, mythology, and cultural expression through character designs. Finally, summarize the main characteristics of Chinese shadow play and Malaysian Wayang Kulit, and draw conclusions about the shape of the characters, providing suggestions for further research or potential cooperation between the two traditions.

## Chinese Shadow Play Character Modelling

Chinese shadow play is a traditional art form with a long history and rich cultural connotations. Due to its widespread in China, shadow play has formed different schools in the long-term evolution process of different regions, such as Shanxi shadow play, Longdong shadow play, Shaanxi shadow play, Hebei shadow play, etc. Each reflecting its unique style and characteristics. The Xiaoyi shadow play in Shanxi is one of the important branches of Chinese shadow play, named after its popularity in Xiaoyi City, Shanxi Province (Han, 2022). This section focuses on the character design characteristics of Xiaoyi shadow play. Character design is one of the core elements of shadow play, exquisite and delicate, and full of unique charm.



Figure 2 Chinese Shadow Play Character Modelling

The character design of Shanxi Xiaoyi usually features a large forehead, garlic nose, and a receding headdress. The technique of using yin and yang carving is complex but not

chaotic, simple but not sparse, with sharp knife techniques and concise colours. It is not affected by dramatization or facial makeup, and highlights the sincere temperament of ancient art. It has the charm of Han stone carvings, forming a unique form of beauty for paper window filmmakers.



Figure 3 The Image of a Warrior in Xiaoyi Shadow Play (Han, 2022)

The external contour of the character design of Xiaoyi shadow play is relatively simple compared to other schools, and it succinctly and clearly summarizes the image expressed, And the internal depiction can still show a combination of form and spirit without any ink decoration, thanks to the hollow craftsmanship. The image of a warrior in Xiaoyi shadow play was once recognized by people across the country as a stamp pattern. There are two main techniques for hollow carving of character shapes, called yin carving and yang carving. Yin carving involves removing lines and leaving skin for internal carving, while Yang carving follows the rule of removing skin and leaving lines (Han, 2022).

The figure modeling of Chinese shadow play has strong decorative characteristics, such as the trend and organization of lines, decorative graphics, and the use of colours. As the decorative elements of the shadow play, patterns are mostly themes with strong flavor of life and folk characteristics. Influenced by the Han Dynasty brick figure modeling, Paper Cuttings figures, New Year picture figures and other arts, Chinese traditional auspicious

patterns are integrated into the Character modeling of shadow play, The organizational form is rich in rhythm and charm, forming decorative and orderly pattern styles. The overall shape of the characters is clear, with full and even colours, strong decoration, and a strong sense of art.

## Malaysian Wayang Kulit Character Modelling

Wayang Kulit or ‘shadow play’ was once a famed traditional culture in the 1960s for entertainment purposes in Malaysia (Khalis & Mustaffa, 2017). Wayang Kulit in Malaysia includes four styles: namely Wayang Kulit Jawa, Wayang Kulit Gedek, Wayang Kulit Melayu and Wayang Kulit Kelantan. The selected character modeling samples for this study are based on the famous characters of Kuantan Wayang Kulit. The Kelantan State Museum Corporation (2020) mentions that the story it presents is “based on the story of Sri Rama saga adapted from the holy book of Hindu epic, Ramayana saga. The statue was made inside lying form and mostly standing on a something as though the character of the statue stands on a vehicle such as a dragon, snake or flowers. Most of the sculptures can move only one hand which is the front hand. While the other hand is holding a weapon behind.

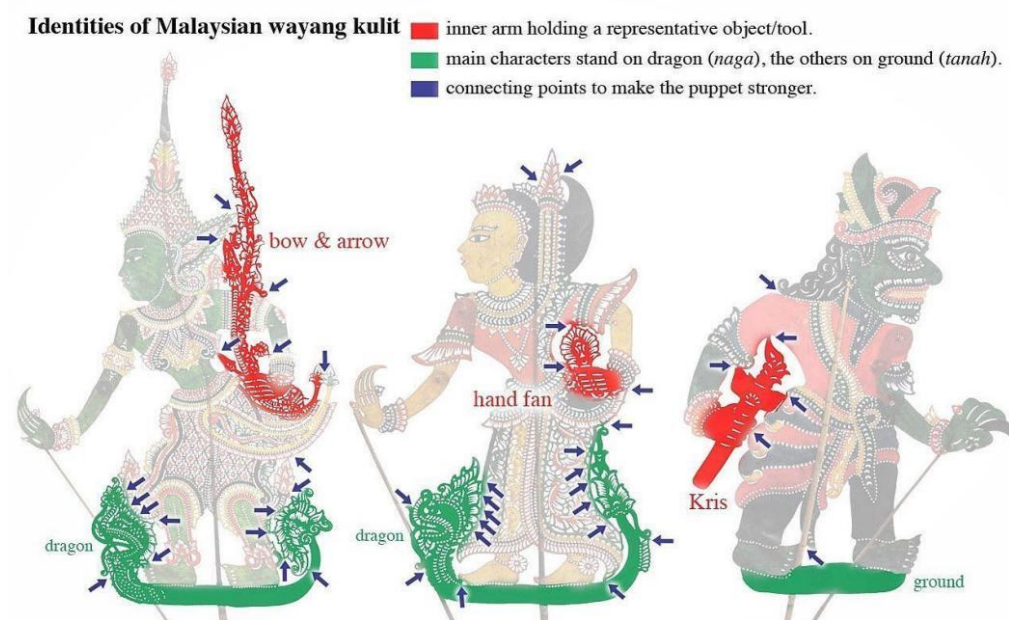


Figure 4 Identities of Malaysian Wayang Kulit

The red colour is used to fix representative objects and tools on the inner arm. For example, warriors will hold swords or weapons, archers will hold bows and arrows, farmers will hold agricultural tools or knives, princesses will hold fans, and so on. Green indicates that the main character is standing on a dragon shaped pedal, while other characters are standing on the ground. This is to show the status of the character, so the main character will stand on the dragon while the other characters will stand on a piece of ground. As for puppets, this will connect their legs, so they will not move too much or swing.

The connection point indicated by the blue arrow makes the puppet stronger. Designers always draw puppets by connecting and touching their surroundings with extended body covers, weapons, faucets, and tails, so that they still adhere to each other like a large piece of leather. This will make the puppets stronger and reduce the chance of entanglement with other puppets.

## **Analysis**

### *Similarities*

Chinese shadow play and Malaysia's Wayang Kulit are both traditional forms of folk art, both of which belong to intangible cultural heritage. The character design is based on the side, with flat features. The character modeling designs are exquisite, and the materials used to make the characters are selected from animal skins. The making process including repeated soaking and scraping, the rough skin material becomes even, thin, and transparent, suitable for carving; Based on the portrayal of the characters and scenes in the, a map is created, and various vivid character images are combined through techniques such as depiction, carving, and colouring.

The character designs of shadow play puppets have dynamism, and they need to be performed on stage, just like a drama, with coherence in interpreting the story plot. Therefore, in the production process of the shapes, it is important to highlight the design style of block combination character designs. The structure of the character design is very sturdy to prevent the body components from falling off during the stage performance.



## Differences

Table 1 Comparison of character modelling in Chinese and Malaysian shadow play

Differences		
Compare content	Chinese shadow play	Malaysian Wayang Kulit
Origination	It began in the Western Han Dynasty, flourished in the Tang Dynasty, and flourished in the Qing Dynasty.	The origin of Wayang Kulit Kelantan has been debated, could have possibly derived from the pre-Islamic or archetypal prototype of Wayang Kulit Purwa of Java.
Materials	Before the Ming Dynasty, it was made of sheepskin, and since the Qing Dynasty, it is generally made of cowhide. The back skin of a three-year-old bull is of high quality.	The puppets are carved out of cleaned and dried cow (cow, buffalo) skin.
Shape	Most rely on the image of traditional Chinese opera.	The portrayal of characters in traditional Indonesian and Malay dramas is an important theme in the use of Islamic literature.
Structure	A complete character design is usually divided into 9 or 11 parts.	From the perspective of character movement, it is generally divided into three parts.
Colour	The colours absorb the characteristics of folk New Year paintings, embroidery, and are mainly used in four colours: red, yellow, green, and black.	Colour symbolism is used within the puppet design, especially in the case of noble characters: - Seri Rama is always painted in green; Laksamana pink or orange (Kia & Chan, 2009); Sirat Maharaja is yellow while Hanuman is white. These colours are derived from Hindu religious symbolism.
Decoration	The decorative patterns are quite diverse, including herringbone patterns, auspicious clouds, fish scale patterns, and patterns.	The principal noble characters are carved so that they stand upon a boat-or-dragon-shaped "vehicle".
Manipulation method	Flexible operation, usually equipped with three control rods, one of which is fixed on the neck of the character called the "main rod", and the other two are installed on the hands with one each called the "hand rod".	Wayang Kulit's character mainly has two joysticks. One is on the head, controlling the body, and the other is on the wrist, controlling the movement of one arm, with overall movement restricted.
Similarities		
1) Intangible cultural heritage. 2) Flat features with one side character. 3) Animal skins. 4) Process making of material & structure: repeated soaking, scraping, even rough skin, thin, transparent, carving. 5) Dynamism character designs.		



Figure 5 The Weaver Girl in The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl



Figure 6 Sita Dewi/ Siti Dewi

The character design of Chinese shadow play consists of three joysticks, with Wayang Kulit's character having two joysticks, one arm fixed, and also carrying symbolic props or tools. The legs of Chinese shadow play characters are freely separated and flexible, while the legs of Wayang Kulit's character are fixed and have a certain degree of dragon shaped prop symbolizing identity. The hollowed-out patterns on the characters of the two countries are different, both with cultural characteristics and different costumes. Chinese character modeling costumes are generally similar to those in traditional Chinese opera.

## Discussion

This article compares and analyzes the basic characteristics of shadow puppetry character designs between the two countries, from seven aspects: origin, materials, shape, structure, colour, decoration, and manipulation method. It is found that there are significant differences in character designs, which are closely related to their origins and culture. Through comparative analysis, showing some major facts. Firstly, through the cultural differences, way of life, demographics and beliefs greatly influence the character of shadow play design in terms of colours, shapes and materials used. It carries the original identity of the object. While its function as a community entertainment as well as a similar basic structure of the shadow play shows the existence of a cultural movement between the two countries. It is

either through trade or the migration of people who bring with them the cultural values of the local community.

## Conclusion

By examining these aspects, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse and rich artistic form languages embedded in Chinese shadow play and Malaysian Wayang Kulit. The comparative analysis sheds light on the cultural nuances, historical evolution, and unique expressions that define these traditional shadow play forms. Shadow play represents the community culture from the past. It was the primary entertainment medium before the modern digital screen era. The medium, story theme and storytelling style need to be further developed to attract new generations and enhance local identity into global.

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