

# Shadow Plays and Puppetry

## Píyǐng hé mùǒuxì 皮影和木偶戏

**Puppetry began as a performing art in ancient China. Its high point was the Qing period (1644–1912). Although puppetry survives in the twenty-first century, it has declined in recent decades. Several different forms exist, including rod puppets, marionettes, and shadow plays. Some features differ according to region, but the stories tend to be the same across China.**

**S**hadow plays are among the large array of ancient performance arts using artificial figures in Chinese puppetry. Despite earlier prototypes, the first confirmed reference to manipulated puppets in theater performance is to the debauched Emperor Gao Wei (reigned 565–576 CE) of the short-lived Northern Qi dynasty (550–577 CE), who is said to have loved puppet performances; according to the marionette specialist Robin Ruizendaal, Gao was himself ridiculed in later puppet performances as “Baldy Guo.” The Tang emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–756 CE) included puppetry in his Imperial Academy of Music (established 714 CE), and puppet shows were popular in the marketplaces and even with officials under the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

Puppet shows reached a height of popularity in the urbanized and sophisticated culture of the Song dynasty (960–1279), with some puppeteers achieving considerable fame. Writings about the Northern Song dynasty

(960–1126) capital Kaifeng and about Hangzhou, the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) capital, attest to various kinds of puppets. These included water puppets (*shui kuilei*), which have died out in China but remain popular in Vietnam, rod puppets (*zhangtou kuilei* 杖头傀儡), manipulated from below, marionettes or string puppets (*xuansi kuilei*), and shadow puppets but not yet glove puppets.

The Qing dynasty (1644–1912) represents the acme of China’s puppet theater. Rod puppets were spread virtually all over the country, while glove puppets flourished in Hebei, Henan, Hubei, Sichuan, Hunan, and Fujian Provinces and marionettes in Shaanxi, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Guangdong, Hunan, and Fujian provinces, the latter being home to several particularly ancient and famous forms of puppetry and theater.

## Shadow Puppetry Origins and Development

The earliest definite references to shadow plays date from the Northern Song dynasty, just before the earliest authenticated human-acted dramas. In the capital cities of the Song dynasty at least thirty-three troupes existed, and many Song shadow play performers were female, probably the earliest female puppeteers in history. Shadow puppetry was found in the entertainment quarters, public spaces, private houses, temples, and even the imperial court.

Although the Song dynasty was a great age of shadow theater, the highpoint was the Qing dynasty. By that

time a substantial range of shadow puppet traditions had emerged, perhaps the most important being those of Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces. According to the theater scholar Chen Fan Pen Li, Shaanxi shadow puppetry “spans the widest area of influence and features the largest number of minor traditions” (2004, 5). By the Qing dynasty all puppeteers were male.

Shadow plays (*yingxi* 影戏) combine “design, carving, and painting with music, song, dialogue, and manipulation of the shadow figures” (Chen 2004, 1). The shadows that distinguish this form of theater from other puppetry result from “pierced, painted, and jointed leather puppets, cast onto lamplit screens” (Liu 1988, 4), these translucent parchment screens being usually made from the hides of domestic animals such as oxen, donkeys, and goats. In the earliest shadow plays some puppets were made of paper or cardboard, and nowadays some are made of celluloid.

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**A Children’s Puppet Show, a painting by Liu Songnian. Puppetry has traditionally been a popular rather than an elite art.**



## Shared Features

Chinese puppet shows are generally like regional operas in that the role types are the same, and song and instrumentation are of vital importance, within regional variations. The plots of the plays derive mainly from the oral tradition of the storyteller; the authorship of almost all puppet plays before 1949 is anonymous. During the centuries a great commonality has developed in the stories of the various puppetry forms and the regional operas. Chen stresses the role that women warriors played in the plots of the shadow plays.

## Social Context

Puppetry in all its forms is intrinsic to Chinese society. Although some among the educated classes, and even emperors, have loved puppetry, it has mostly been a popular rather than an elite art. Puppet performances are a natural part of festivals, including those marking deities’ birthdays. Spring performances ask the gods for good harvests, while those in autumn give them thanks. Because puppeteers are much cheaper to hire than whole troupes of human actors—sometimes just one or two people can manipulate the puppets and sing the various roles—puppeteers have often been invited to private houses for weddings, birthdays, or other family occasions. Puppetry is part of the secular entertainment of the cities, but its role in religious ritual should also be recognized. Writing of one form of puppetry, Chen says: “popular religion informs the traditional shadow theatre and has been a major underpinning of this performing since the Yuan dynasty [1279–1368]” (Chen 2007, 15). Ruizendaal (2006, 2) describes the marionette theater of Quanzhou (now Fujian Province) as “still an intrinsic part” of regional religious culture.

## Modern Change and Survival

Although change followed the fall of the Qing dynasty, puppetry did not experience the same radical transformation as did human-acted theater. Because of puppetry’s religious connections, the antireligious movements of the twentieth century negatively affected it. On the



**Historical illustration of a “Chinese Shadow-Show.” A shadow play manipulates light and movement to conjure the “characters” who will enact the plot.**

other hand, intellectuals introduced various reforms in Shanghai, including: the use of modern spoken plays for puppetry; other Western-influenced phenomena such as using scenography (the art of perspective representation, especially as applied to the design and painting of stage scenery); and having scripts written by individual playwrights.

Under the People’s Republic of China (1949) the government professionalized the folk puppet arts. It took over and controlled most of the puppet troupes, founding others at public expense. In 1955 the Ministry of Culture set up the China National Puppet Arts Company (*Zhongguo*

*muou yishu jutuan*). In the 1950s a modern puppetry developed, using animal fables and revolutionary stories as well as revised traditional plays. The government organized the first puppet festival in Beijing in 1955, and puppet performances took place in theaters, restaurants, or teahouses more often than before. Trainees included girls as well as boys.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) suppressed all traditional themes. Surviving puppetry followed the party-sanctioned themes of the model operas. The traditional puppet forms largely revived in the 1980s. But the troupes tended to dwindle in number in the 1990s. The state has given less money to puppetry in a commercialized age when organizations are mostly expected to keep themselves alive by making profits. Theaters and restaurants remain the preferred venues for urban performances. Rural outdoor puppet shows are still common, however, and folk puppeteers still perform at festivals or occasions such as banquets and weddings. Although in decline, puppetry is not dying out.

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## Further Reading

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